

Looking back...

THIS INTERVIEW done by **Lakshmi Devnath** three years ago gives an insight into the Patriarch's attitude to life, people, and above all Music that he worshipped. Excerpts:

Can you recount to us your first concert?

(Hmmm)... It was at Kumbakonam in 1926. I was playing the Thambura for Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer's concert. My brother Narayanaswamy Iyer was on the violin and Azhaghanambi Pillai on the mridangam. After the concert, the latter requested the seniors that I be allowed to sing in a festival conducted by him at the local Nageswaraswami temple. They agreed. As I sang, it started raining, and the ten or fifteen people in the audience couldn't go out even if they wanted to. (Laughs).

Did you, at any stage, feel like shifting to instrumental music, because of your voice problems?

Never, but I certainly considered giving up music altogether. You know, in a concert in Salem I got on stage, and after half an hour, no sound came out of my mouth... only air. I was desperate and requested Shri Mannargudi Rajagopala Iyer, who was present there, to help complete the concert. The organisers, graciously agreed to even pay me, but I refused. It was not fair, when I had not done my work. I had my septum corrected, my tonsils removed in the hope of finding a solution to my problems. I personally regard it as a great achievement, that I not only sang, but continue to sing to this day at 92.

Do you think there is a distinct 'bani' nowadays?

See... earlier, people used to learn directly from a guru (gurumukham) for such a long period of time, that they unconsciously imbibed even their guru's mannerisms. Talking about mannerisms, you know Subbudu (the critic) had a jibe at M. D. Ramanathan's gestures.

But I counselled M.D.R. not to change. "If you change your mannerisms, your music would go along with that." I told him.

The absence of 'Bani' today is because one learns from different teachers, and even tapes. But even then, you do have distinct 'Banis' like the Lalgudi Bani, The Maharajapuram Bani and so on.

Today there is an amazing amount of brainpower displayed, when you see new krithis presented in rapid succession, in almost every concert. But how healthy a trend is it?

I personally feel that you have to do archanai (prayer) to a krithi by singing it over and over again. Youngsters sing very well nowadays. I guess, I would just have to close my eyes, when they keep the notation in front of them.

How important is theory for practising musicians?

Lakshanam (theory) is as important as lakshya (practical). Ours is a vainika sampradaya, and the right usage of gamakas is very important, otherwise you would sing like a street singer.

Also, these different lakshana granthas talk about different aspects.

I wish there was one comprehensive grantha, summarising, and presenting everything clearly, but this has not happened so far.

Gone are the days when sabhas went in search of vidwans, either for performances, or giving titles. Today it is the reverse trend. Please comment?

How can I answer this? Today there is a proliferation of artistes. Everyone has a desire to get titles, awards and so on. Hereafter, to find great artistes like Tiger (Varadachari) or Poochi (Srinivasa Iyengar) is going to be difficult.

We pay North Indian artistes much more than we pay our own people. Being in such an influential position in the academy, why haven't you done anything about it?

I can only say, that our music doesn't come with a price tag. We don't have a tradition of asking. Also, these artistes come all the way from the North. And have to be compensated adequately.

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