

# Simplicity was her hallmark

**LEGEND** Perfectionist to the core, M.S. was meticulous right from concert preparation to the way she draped her sari.

LAKSHMI DEVNATH

"S A ri ga ma pa dha ni sa. Sa ni dha pa ma ga ri sa. Sa ri ga ma...." This was no novice getting the rudiments of music straight. It was M.S. preparing at about 3 p.m. for her evening kutcheri. She would manipulate the seven notes in four speeds first in Mayamalavagowla and then in Sankarabharanam. When she was satisfied with her *sadhakam*, she would reverentially bow down to her *tamburas* (she had two of them that she fondly named — Lakshmi and Saraswati) and set about getting dressed for the evening's performance. This was her 'practice' till her last public performance. Perfectionism, traditionalism, devotion, divinity... M.S.'s music portrayed all this. Did her art reflect her personality?

"Avala pola oru manushiya paakka mudiyathu," (one can't find a lady like her) daughter Radha revealed with a lump in her throat.

K. R. Atmanathan, M.S. and Sadasivam's constant companion, adds: "It upset her deeply if anyone, even in passing, referred to the girls — Radha and Vijaya as her step-daughters."

The girls were less than five years old when M.S. stepped into their lives as their mother. Her career graph was rising like a meteor but to her that was no reason to shirk the responsibilities of motherhood. She revelled in spending time with them. Nobody remembers M.S. to have sung a harsh note; none recall her having spoken a harsh word.

## First offering

It was an unconditional devotion that she offered to all three — God, her husband and music! Every new song was first offered at the feet of the Sage of Kanchi before it was sung to the outside world. If there were no unbecoming phrases in M.S.'s music, unbecoming acts were also not part of her personality. During mealtime, the ubiquitous *kari-veppilai* would not be shabbily



**IN HARMONY:** Sadasivam and M. S. Subbulakshmi.

pushed to a corner of her plate. Rather, she would place them neatly in a cup. Punctilious as she was about the structure and order of the *sangathis* in kritis, she was equally adamant about having the same cup for her *shikakai*, the same piece of cloth for wiping her spectacles and the same four hairpins for keeping her hair in place!

## Symmetry

With a great sense of proportion she timed the duration of the *manodharma* elements in her performances and on occa-

presence. The *pottu* was a perfect round and remarkably would remain so even after a good night's sleep.

Her music portrayed the meticulousness that was so much a part of her nature. Returning home late after a concert, she would wipe her jewellery clean before placing them carefully in their boxes and would retire for the day but not before she fastidiously jotted down the day's happenings in a diary. The entries also detailed the songs she sang, the people she met and so on. It contained trivia too. But

**IT WAS AN UNCONDITIONAL DEVOTION THAT SHE OFFERED TO ALL THE THREE — GOD, HER HUSBAND AND MUSIC.**

sions has had even Mama secretly wishing that she could have sung just one more round of *kalpanaswaras*.

A similar attention to symmetry reflected in the way she draped her sari. She wore them ankle-length — neither a little high nor a little low with the pallu draped elegantly around her shoulders, the necklace just about marking its shimmering

they were all noted down diligently without a single day's lapse.

M.S. was a puritan all the way through. Her music shone with *madi* (traditional purity) phrases and at home? It had to be *sundal* for *Saraswati puja* and *Agathikeerai* for *Dwadasi*. It is said that an NRI youngster even changed her hairstyle from bob cut to the traditional long plait

because Amma said so! M.S. gave herself to music and offered her music to humanity. When it came to philanthropy both Mama and Amma lived with the idea that the sky was their roof and the entire earth their home. They never swerved from this ideal even in the most trying of circumstances. But when it came to perfumes? It was often remarked in jest that if Amma parted with a perfume bottle there could only be two reasons — "either she was very fond of the person to whom she was gifting it to or she disliked the perfume."

Over the years, M.S. attained the stature of an international celebrity but all who intimately knew her aver that she was almost apologetic about her prowess in music, charisma and resultant status. An innate simplicity nurtured by childlike innocence was a predominant trait of the person who was M. S. Subbulakshmi.

## Reverie

In her last years, she would often complain about her nagging leg pain with an unfeigned artlessness. In a bid to comfort her, her children would often tell her that it was a legacy she had inherited from her father and hence she should not complain. At the very mention of her father's name M. S. would immediately revert to her childhood and happily reminisce about how her father placed her in a cart, beside a picture of Rama and took them both on rounds through the streets.

Mama died in 1997 and that marked the beginning of the end of M.S. Like a withered flower shedding its petals she too wilted in grief.

When the nation consigned her mortal remains to flames with a 21-gun salute in December last they were paying homage not only to the musician with a string of awards to her credit but also to the person, Bharat Ratna M.S. Subbulakshmi.