

Musician of many dimensions

Madurai T. N. Seshagopalan was conferred Padma Bhushan on June 30.
LAKSHMI DEVNATH profiles the vocalist.

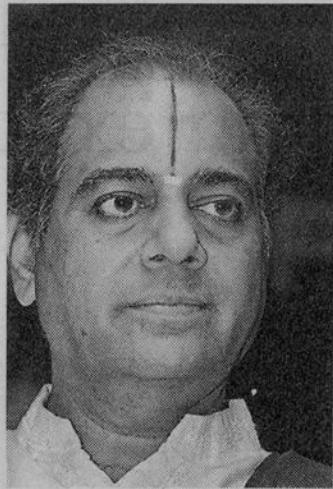
DRAMA, BOTH in the literal and figurative sense, has been a part of Seshagopalan's life and at times even of his music. The announcement of the Padma award that he received a couple of days ago was actually made in the middle of a concert, taking him and the audience by surprise. Avid listeners of his music have always been prepared to expect the unexpected from him. He is an artiste who can convey a range of emotions, right from the soulful to the sensational, through his music.

When Seshagopalan renders a kriti like Dikshitar's "Ranganayakam" in Nayaki or a swarajati of Syama Sastri, his fidelity to the nuances of the raga and the slow and majestic tempo of the composition can lull a listener into deep reverie.

On the other hand, he is also capable of raising the adrenal levels of the audience when he embarks on brigha phrases *a la* the nadaswaram or indulges in kalpanaswaras and pallavis that combine mathematical formulae and supersonic speed with musical values.

Seshagopalan has an enviable voice along with musical skills, but they are not in isolation. He is a cerebral musician and the proof of that is his music that seems to be the product of a highly trained mind. And he owes that training to his guru Ramanathapuram C. S. Sankara Sivam, foremost disciple of the famous musician, composer and Harikatha exponent, Harikesanallur Muthaiah Bhagavathar. A genius, Sivam was the principal of the College of Music, Madurai Kamaraj University. But it was not until he was 16 years old that Seshagopalan began his formal training with Sankara Sivam.

The initiative was taken by Kodur Rajagopala Sastri of Rameswaram, who saw talent in Seshagopalan. Sankara Sivam assessed the young boy's potential and started the work of strengthening the musical foun-



ation already laid by Seshagopalan's mother, Tiruvenkatavalli, a traditional housewife. She had, by her own efforts, acquired knowledge of Sanskrit and the Grantha script amongst other literary skills. And above all, she was a good musician with an enviable repertoire. Namasankeerthanam or singing bhajans was Tiruvenkatavalli's forte. Seshagopalan's father, Nambi Iyengar was a schoolteacher in Nagapattinam and it was here that Seshu was born. Seshu had a keen ear for

music. Identifying this, Tiruvenkatavalli showered him with plenty of music. By the time he was seven years old, in the year 1955, he gave his first concert of what can be termed as devotional music.

When he was five years old, the family shifted to the culturally rich Madurai. Seshagopalan gave a number of devotional music concerts and often provided his own accompaniment for his music. For young Seshu was an expert harmonium player. It is significant that even at that age, he was a preferred accompanist for Pudukottai Gopalakrishna Bhagavathar, the doyen of Namasankeerthanam tradition. Against this background, the training imparted by Sivam proved the culminating point in Seshagopalan's tenure as a student of music. This was also the beginning of the next phase of his life — that of a concert artiste.

Within a year-and-a-half of enrolment under Sankara Sivam, Seshagopalan made his bow as a classical concert musician. His success can be measured by several yardsticks.

Top accompanists have provided him instrumental support

right from his early years, a hoard of awards adorn him; the audience eagerly lap up his music, he has been the first Indian vocalist to perform at international festivals like the ones at Adelaide, Perth and New Zealand.

His contribution to Tamil Isai has been noteworthy when measured by the sheer quantity and variety of verses he has set to tune.

TNS is an A grade veena player, a Namasankeerthanam Bhagavathar, an amateur flute player, a keyboard artiste, a composer and so on. In February last, he stood on stage dressed grandly in brocade and zari and looked every inch a Bhagavathar. Yes, Seshagopalan has now revealed another aspect of his multifaceted personality — that of a Harikatha performer.

His narration of the Tyagaraja Charitram, wherein he correlates the message of the saint's songs with quotations from the "Kamba Ramayanam," Sanskrit slokas and other texts leave the audience soaked in amazement and appreciation. But, by now, haven't the audience learnt to expect the unexpected from T.N. Seshagopalan?