

Evolution of Carnatic music- a series

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, for this month's column, I would like to take up the subject of patriotism and the role that Carnatic music and musicians played in India's quest for independence. Carnatic music and its compositions are for the most part *Bhakti* (devotional) oriented and even though there are compositions that deal with other themes, devotion has always been the main theme of most Carnatic music compositions. However, patriotism emerged as a theme with composers such as Subramanaya Bharathiyar, Periyasamy Thooran among others as India fought for independence from British rule.

Perhaps, the most famous of patriotic composers was the poet-composer Subramanya Bharatiyar (1882-1921). His compositions emphasized nationalism, unity of India and equality of mankind and appealed to the liberty and strength of people- he sang these compositions at Congress meetings. His writings earned him the title of *Mahakavi* or great poet while his patriotic songs earned him the title of *Desiya Kavi* or National Poet. The government wanted to arrest Bharatiyar for his writings and so he was forced to escape from Madras to Pondicherry (under French rule); there he continued to publish a weekly magazine "India".

Carnatic musicians also did their part to promote national integration and emphasized the need for freedom. Foremost among these musicians was Smt. D.K. Pattammal (1919-2009), who popularized several patriotic songs of Subramaya Bharatiyar. She was one of the earliest Carnatic musicians to sing in films and even though she received many offers to sing in films, she accepted to only sing songs that were either devotional or patriotic. Several of the films in which she sang highlighted the freedom movement and became extremely popular. As a result, both the films as well as the songs sung by Smt. Pattammal were banned by the British government. Her signature song "Shanthi Nilava Vendum" called for peace in the world, reiterating Mahatma Gandhi's ideologies. Many people still remember the Bharatiyar songs that she sang over AIR (All India Radio) at the stroke of midnight on August 14, 1947 when India attained freedom.

Till we meet next time, do listen to the song "Shanthi Nilavavendum", in *Raga Tilang*, by Smt. D.K. Pattammal. You will be able to find a recording on the popular music website www.raaga.com.

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