

Evolution of Carnatic music- a series

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, over the past few columns we looked at the role of women, mainly composers, in Carnatic music. In the next few columns, we will look at the role of women performers in the field of Carnatic music.

One of the most famous Carnatic musicians of all times was the renowned vocalist Smt. M. S. Subbulakshmi (1916-2004). Along with her contemporaries Smt. M.L. Vasanthakumari and Smt. D. K. Pattammal, they formed the trinity of female Carnatic vocalists; each of these women has made significant contributions to Carnatic music in general and the role of women performers in particular.

M.S. Subbulakshmi was born in 1916 in the city of Madurai. Her mother was a *veena* player and her grandmother a violinist; thus M.S. grew up in an environment where she was constantly exposed to music and started learning both Carnatic and Hindusthani music. Right from a very young age, M.S. Subbulakshmi performed concerts at a number of prestigious venues, including the Madras Music Academy. She was a trailblazer for women since performance at concerts was, for the most part, reserved for male vocalists. M.S. Subbulakshmi sang compositions in a number of different languages including Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Gujarathi and Marathi. As a cultural ambassador, M.S. travelled to numerous places around the world exposing various audiences to Carnatic music. Perhaps her most prestigious concert performance was in New York for the UN General Assembly in 1966.

M.S. also acted in a few movies early in her career. Her role of the *bhakti* saint Meera in the movie titled 'Meera' earned her national recognition. She rendered a number of Meera *bhajans* in this movie; these days, Meera *bhajans* are popularly included in a number of Carnatic concerts as *tukkadas* or lighter pieces. Readers may also remember the discussion from previous columns about M.S.'s rendition of Mahatma Gandhi's favorite *bhajan*- 'Hari Tum Haro.

M.S. was awarded the *Sangitha Kalanidhi* award in 1968- she was the first woman recipient of this prestigious title, one of the highest awards in Carnatic music, awarded by the Madras Music Academy. Her other prestigious titles include the Magsaysay award and the *Bharat Ratna*, India's highest civilian award. M.S. donated most of her award money to charity and even performed a number of charity concerts.

Till we meet next time, do listen to the song *Kurai Ondrum Illai* from M.S.'s UN concert on the internet- this is one of the most popular songs rendered in the concert circuit.

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