

Appreciating the feminine notes in Carnatic music

Written by - Dr Vasumathi Badrinathan -

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The earliest women I saw and heard in music and who marked my memories profoundly were M.S. Subbulakshmi and D.K. Pattammal. They were iconic figures then already, when I discovered them in my childhood. While they enjoyed much in common, they were also sharply in contrast. Both were towering and well respected women on the music front. Both enjoyed large and faithful audiences, sang to full houses. Both shone in their brilliant diamonds and Kanchipuram silks. They remained all through loyal to the traditional Tamil-lady look, their sarees drawn over the shoulders. Pattammal was pleasant looking while MS was strikingly beautiful. MS had her faithful retinue on stage till the end. Pattammal had her devoted brother and outstanding musician in himself, D.K. Jayaraman with her in their duet performances, till his death separated the pair. Pattammal's spouse obliged her by granting her permission to carry on her career. MS' spouse went out of his way to chart his wife's course. Both lent their voices to films and immortalised several classical lyrics. While MS became an emblematic figure worldwide synonymous with her nightingale-like voice and the trance that she spun her audience into with her soothing bhajans and multilingual compositions, Pattammal remained the unchallenged goddess of laya, of emotion-laden singing, of a clarity and articulation hitherto unmatched and her devotion to Tamil lyrics.

Through several long interactions and interviews with Pattammal that I had over the years, I discerned a woman who was both iconoclastic and conventional on many fronts. MS will be remembered as the voice of India, Pattammal will be remembered as the Carnatic diva. Perhaps, MS scored one above in being adorned with the Bharat Ratna. Pattammal, however, was honoured with the Padma Vibhushan. Interestingly, both women reigned in a man's world. They defied the norms that made most women of their time home-bound and reclusive. There was no mechanism unlike today that worked ceaselessly for their career. They occupied centre-stage while still significantly being an epitome of humility and modesty. They were not alone. They were countless more who slowly tilled the soil, nourished the world of music, like the much spoken about but never acclaimed devadasi. Many women who silently encouraged their children towards music, mothered their passion and saw them through, while remaining in the shadows.

This year's coveted Sangitha Kalanidhi award of the famed Music Academy of Chennai went to

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Sudha Raghunathan, much in her prime, rather young for the honour, according to many. It raised many brows; many lamented, many cheered. It still remains that a woman raced past many of her male counterparts. I do not have statistics to prove my point. But, my perception and understanding of the field shows that there are as many women as there are men and probably even more women than men. And successful too. Its clearly a woman's world in music ! Then, of men who won't play for women in concerts, is another story, but I think, they would rather provide other pretexts than loudly voice the real one. I am sure they are doing that, if they haven't quietly changed already. In saying all this, let me also acknowledge the many men and women who quietly contribute every single day to making a difference in the world. Whether it's the husbands, the wives, the friends, the children, the parents or just another nondescript face. For, they also serve who only stand and wait. Milton's telling verse needs to be revisited today. For no woman, nor man, can be entirely successful without support, solace and comfort of another, be it music or otherwise.

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