

THE HINDU

Online edition of India's National Newspaper

Friday, Apr 14, 2006

Strong and silent champion of Carnatic music

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So modest he was, few realised the greatness of Dhandapani Iyer, who passed away recently.



HONOURED: Dhandapani Iyer receiving the Kalaimamani Award in 1971 from the then Governor K. K. Shah.

On the afternoon of March 20, G. N. Dhandapani Iyer, veena vidwan, passed away at the age of 89. He was born on February 17, 1917, in an orthodox family to Natesa Iyer and Madurambal at Ganapathy Agraharam, near Tiruvaiyaru. His home was filled with devotional music, as it was part of his father's lifestyle. He had his early training in music under Sama Bhagavatar and Thanjavur Kalyanarama Bhagavatar, veterans in the field of `Sangita Upanyaasam.' He got a diploma in Sangita Bhushanam from Annamalai University and also learnt music from T. S. Sabesa Iyer and Ponnaiah Pillai.

Prompted by vidwan Harihara Sharma, he started his music career as a vocalist in Pudukkottai. Guided by Varadiah of Cuddalore, he turned to the veena.

The position in AIR as a veena artiste (1941-1977) offered Iyer the right environment for growth. His superiors, G. T. Shastri and T. Sankaran, gave him great support.

Iyer totally dedicated himself to AIR's projects such as the musical extravaganza on 75 ragas with a huge orchestration of instruments (1944), `Jantara Sammelan,' and `The Vocal Refrain' when the greatest of Carnatic musicians were part of the productions. He volunteered to supervise the orchestral projects and offer his services unconditionally, which earned him the sobriquet *meistry*.

He moved closely with Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Madurai Mani Iyer, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, G. N. Balasubramaniam, Semmangudi Sreenivasa Iyer and others who outlived them. S. Rajam, painter-musician, was a special friend.

Taciturn, Iyer was more at ease with his disciples while a respectful distance was maintained between him and his family members.

Iyer seldom talked ill of others. He only saw the positive aspects in other musicians. He appreciated but never flattered anyone. Nor did he encourage flattery. The interest he showed in their welfare endeared him to his students. R. Shankaran and Meena Vaikuntam, who belonged to the early batch are noteworthy.

Dhandapani Iyer's regard for Lalgudi Jayaraman made him entrust his grandchildren S. P. Ramh and Pavitra Mahesh to the maestro's care.

Iyer was innovative and simple in his ways of teaching. For example, to inculcate in the pupils a feel for the ragas and a basic knowledge of `sarva laghu' he would start his lessons in Mohanam. He composed jatiswarams, varnams and set Tiruvagasam verses to tune. His tenure with AIR gave him the capacity to notate any song precisely, in a simple and direct manner. Iyer had an open mind to different styles of veena music. He enjoyed Dhanammal, Karaikkudi Sambasiva Iyer, Kalyanakrishna Bhagavata, K. S. Narayanaswamy Iyer and S. Balachander.

However, he had firm convictions beyond compromise. For example, although he took active part in honouring S. Balachander for his efforts in bringing the 72 melas on the disc, he did not subscribe to his charges against Maharaja Swati Tirunal.

When the Tamil Nadu Government honoured him with the Kalaimamani Award in 1971, he accepted it more for his respect for the Government than as a mark of his achievements.

His respect for his mentors was the foremost in his mind at anytime. In memory of his guru Sabesa Iyer, he instituted the `Bodhaka Award' to be given away by the Music Academy. Open-minded

It was Iyer's unique capacity to balance his personal opinion with the talents he came across and his love and respect for all those around him that made him an outstanding personality. So self-effacing he was that not many knew about this great artiste.

The music community should remember him for his significant contributions in silently nurturing refined students, rasikas and patrons.

A Shradhanjali is being conducted by Brhaddhvani, Research Training Centre For Music of the World, 28/41 IV Main Road, R.A. Puram, on April 16 at 4 p.m.