

MAHARAJAPURAM SANTHANAM THE MESMERIZER, A MAN WITH A MASS APPEAL

"It was the decency of Death that he should come unheralded with face covered and hands concealed, at the hour when he was least expected. He should come slowly, softly, like his brother Sleep-or swiftly and violently...so that the moment of surrender would be a stillness and a satiety instead of a wrenching separation of spirit and flesh" (a passage from the novel "The Devil's Advocate" by Morris L. West).

Maybe the swift and violent way Mr. Maharajapuram Santhanam was taken by Death did spare him the pain and torture of old age, but the questions "why this way, why now, why at all" were on most people's minds as they were hit with the shocking news of his tragic auto accident that claimed his life. The accident occurred in the early hours of June 24, '92 between Villipuram and Tindivanam on the GST road, as his car driven by one Mr. Alex hit a tractor-trailer while Mr. Santhanam was travelling with his family from Kumbakonam to Madras. Reports reaching us here said that the accident injured his wife Mrs. Gnanam Santhanam seriously and took the lives of his cousin Mr. K. Ramanathan and a 9-year old grandniece Akhila, a budding Carnatic musician herself.

On behalf of members of CMANA and other music lovers who called us in NJ to express their shock and grief, we wish to convey our condolences to his wife, Mrs. Gnanam Santhanam and two sons Mr. Ramachandran and Mr. Srinivasan and wishes for a speedy recovery to Mrs. Gnanam. A Times of India report had quoted Mr. Santhanam as saying that his first and foremost *rasika* was his wife. Mrs. Gnanam Santhanam, a musician in her own right, was his constant companion, travelling with him everywhere and reportedly evaluated his concerts and composed the music for many songs.

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Maharajapuram Santhanam will probably go down in the history of Carnatic Music as one of the few men who took the art to the common man, made it accessible and appealing to him. His fans all over the music world will miss his mesmerizing voice and renditions of a variety of songs; but, the fans will continue to devour them, thanks to the innumerable audio cassette and disc recordings available in the market.

Mr. Sundaram Sankaran, who writes to SRUTI, (Madras), India Globe in Washington D.C. on musical matters, (a founding CMANA member) wrote in 1989 after Santhanam's concert in the Siva Vishnu temple of Washington area, " Often times, musicologists in Madras

dismiss musicians with a popular following as "untouchables". Anything that is simple and appealing is considered bad. Anything that is seemingly difficult and fails to attract a following is considered as pure music...Santhanam has established beyond reasonable doubt that classical music, if properly presented, can attract large audiences...With the dominance of film music in India, music organizers in Madras often complain about the difficulty of attracting people to classical music concerts. Santhanam is one of those rare exceptions. He can pack the hall. This is due to a combination of factors. He is a traditionalist, who applies a modern approach to music. He can be appealing to both the "intellectuals" and the "lay man". He pays particular attention to audience response. He brings a tremendous degree of enthusiasm and vigor, often infectious, to his concerts..."

Mr. R. Rameshan, wrote in the Indian Express Sunday magazine of 7/5/92, " Santhanam appeared to resort to populism with the conviction that there was but no other way to instill an appreciation of classical music among the masses. To this end, he constantly strove by releasing the pre-recorded cassettes and albums. Almost every Tamil and other S. Indian homes have his recordings. Santhanam's unstated logic clearly seemed to work. Belying all common perceptions, the constant flow of pre-recorded cassettes only increased the strength of the audiences to his concerts. For *Sabhas* he was the most dependable artiste to be billed for ensuring a big draw and a good revenue needed to help the concert activity going... at a time when film and television have become the mainstay of popular entertainment, Santhanam's contributions in terms of weaning away the audiences from the to Karnatak Music concerts cannot be underestimated.

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Titles and Awards which came to Maharajapuram Santhanam were many indeed and some are listed below:

YOGAM NAGASWAMY AWARD AND SANGEETA KALANIDHI BY THE MADRAS MUSIC ACADEMY, SANGEETA CHOUDAMANI BY SRI KRISHNA GANA SABHA, ASTHANA VIDWAN BY TIRUPATI DEVASTHANAM, KANCHI KAMAKOTI PEETHAM AND SRI VENKATESWARA TEMPLE OF PITTSBURGH, KALAIMAMANI BY THE TAMIL NADU EYAL ISAI NATAKA MANRAM, BHARAT SANGEETA RATNA FROM THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SANGHEET NATAKA AKADEMY AWARD GANA KALANIDHI, GANDHARVA, GANAMRUTA VARAHI AND MANY MORE.

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