

INTERVIEW WITH MADURAI MANI IYER

Contributed by Srinidhi Pichumani

Following is a free-running translation of a conversation between Madurai Mani Iyer and an All India Radio interviewer (AIR-I). The date and time of the recording is not clear, but my guess is that it is sometimes in the late 1950s or early 60s, by which time Madurai Mani Iyer (MMI) was a very famous and well-established vidvaan with many accolades and awards to his credit, including the title of Sangita Kalanidhi which was bestowed on him by the Madras Music Academy in the 1959 music season. Madurai Mani Iyer answers the interviewer's questions with frankness, clarity, and a marked self-assuredness. His idiomatic speech, and the quaint style in which he responds - repeating the question many a time - adds spice to the conversation and makes it all the more interesting. So, here we go -

AIR-I: Mani Iyervaal, namaskaaram. I would like to record your reminiscences about your gurukulavaasam. Whom you did study with at the very beginning ?

MMI: In Madurai, there was someone called Rajam Bhagavataarvaal... I learnt under him.

AIR-I: Whose sishya was he ?

[The English "he" hardly does justice to the Tamil "avA", "avAL" etc which includes a good measure of respect, as well as a touch of the colloquial as opposed to the formal literary "avar", "avargaL" etc.]

MMI: He was a disciple of Ettayapuram Ramachandra Bhagavataarvaal. My Chittappa, that is Madurai Pushpavanam Iyer, was also a disciple of the same person. Madurai Ponnuswami Pillai was also a disciple of the same Bhagavataarvaal.

[Pushpavanam Iyer was a very famous vocalist who shot to prominence in the early decades of this century, surpassing famous vidvaans like Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar, who was Ariyakudi's guru, in popularity. But he died, whilst very young, in 1917 or so. Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer in his heydays was supposed to have reminded his listeners of Pushpavanam, and when GNB came on the scene, his incomparable voice was compared favorably to that of Pushpavanam !

Madurai Ponnuswami Pillai was a very famous naagasvara vidvaan who also took a very uncompromising stand on the 72 melakarta issue, decrying it as an artificial theoretical construct imposed by musicologists. Instead, he subscribed only to the 32 melarkatas that are devoid of the "vivaadi dosham"...

Semmangudi has remarked on this position of Pillaivaal, quite approvingly !]

AIR-I: How long would you have learnt from Rajam Bhagavataarvaal ?

MMI: I learnt for 2 years... we lived in a portion of his house itself on rent. So, it was very convenient.

AIR-I: After that ?

MMI: After that, Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavataarvaal established a music school in Madurai in which Rajam Bhagavataarvaal was appointed as a teacher. So I happened to join that school.

AIR-I: You learnt there too.

MMI: I learnt there too... for about a year and a half.

AIR-I: After that, you started performing in concerts.

MMI: After that I started performing in concerts.

[This is the quaint style I refer to, wherein MMI almost repeats the question intact in his answer. In fact what makes a phrase seemingly a question, or an answer, is just the stress. Such nuances are of course totally lost in my translation.

Another interesting aspect of this interview is the gentle style in which the interviewer slowly but surely gets MMI to remark on various aspects of his musical development, musical instincts, and contemporary musical practice. No in-the-face style, it is somewhat similar to the interviewing style on the NPR program "Fresh Air".]

AIR-I: Can you recollect your very first concert - where ?

MMI: My very first concert... I had been to the Sivagiri area then... my father had friends there and hence our trip... there, in a place called Alavaakottai, during the kumbhaabishekam festival, my first concert was held. Since the organizers of that festival were well-known to my father, my first concert occurred !

AIR-I: Who played pakkavaadyam (accompaniment) ?

MMI: Nattam Seetharama Iyer, who lived in Kumbakonam, played fiddle. Tiruvaarur Kunju Iyer alias Rajagopala Iyer played mridangam.

AIR-I: How old were you then ?

MMI: 12 years.

AIR-I: 12 years... so you performed many concerts at that age itself.