

## From Music Magazine Discernment. Online 12 November 2005

*(Note: With due respects to the author, this article has been edited and covers only the points on MS.Amma and Sudha.)*

For decades it was MS. Now it's Sudha Raghunathan who commands star attention. Is this good music, or just good packaging? A look at the women singers on the Chennai music circuit

As news that M S Subbulakshmi was singing in the Nanganallur Anjaneya Temple in a corner of Madras spread through the city, it seemed as though all roads led to the small and crowded area. So rare were her public appearances that no one wanted to miss the opportunity to hear her sing.

As I reached the temple, I found all seats taken and a huge crowd surrounding the hall. For a minute I wondered whether to go back home, but then I decided to stay on, a decision I have never regretted.

For that was MS's last public concert. Her husband T S Sadasivam died soon after, shocking the music world, and everyone knew that MS would never sing again.

That evening however, as she sang O Rangasayee, Bhaja Govindam and Bhavayami Raghuramam, the delight of the listeners increased to near saturation. And as her voice lifted to Kurai ondrum illai, the rains came down as though the very heavens were listening to her.

"She is truly divine", said many members of the audience, as they dispersed slowly, unwilling to let the magic of the music go away.

Another occasion: It was the inaugural day of the Tirumala Tirupathi Devasthanam's special Sunday evening programme, Sravanam, which is dedicated to concerts replete with bhakthi. The small hall and courtyard were full and people were outside on the road, listening on the loudspeakers installed by the organisers. I was lucky to get some room inside the hall and as MS was about to conclude, a man came to the door, pushing his way through the crowd, his wife holding on to his hand. Seeing his agitation, one of the organisers opened the door a crack.

"Please, please she just wants to see Amma for a second, please allow her", he begged again and again. The crowd parted in response to her plea and she could get what she wanted -- a darshan of MS.

Yes, a strange word to use for a human being. Normally associated only with a deity. But so was MS looked on where ever she went. As a manifestation of Goddess Saraswati, as someone whose feet should be touched and blessings sought at any opportunity.

About 1,800 concerts are scheduled in Chennai this season. Coming back to the women Karnatak musicians, who today can be said to be a star?

If the definition of a star can be someone who draws crowds to a concert based on the strength of her name alone, today there can be said to be only one star. That, of course, is Sudha Raghunathan. A star pupil of a star singer, M L Vasanthakumari, Sudha is the only one whose concerts are packed however frequently or where they are held.

During the music season last year, she had the maximum number of concerts, beginning before the others did and ending after they had finished their round. Her Music Academy performance was scheduled a little late in the season, and as she started, it was obvious that her voice was tired. But she was not. As she sang on, it picked up in strength, and it became vintage Sudha as she continued singing well past the appointed time to please the large audience which had come to listen to her.

I asked Sudha once how she managed to sound effortless in every concert she gave. She answered that the reason was "the dedication to the art".

And this is what marks her out as a star. It is not glitzy packaging, using films as a springboard to achieve popularity, or good grooming, which go into making a star. It is sheer weight of merit coupled with single-minded dedication.

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