

Suchindram S P Sivasubramaṇiam

Suchindram S P Sivasubramaṇiam (1917-2003) was a multi-faceted genius who hailed from Kanyākumari District in southern Tamizh Naḍu. His life was one of complete devotion to music, and he was not only a brilliant vocalist and violinist and a dedicated guru, but also a highly inspired composer who gave to the world a great treasure of compositions in the classical and devotional, as well as Harikathā and patriotic genres.

Early Life

Sivasubramaṇiam was born on 12th September 1917 in Vagaikulam, Tirunelveli District, southern Tamizh Nadu. He was introduced to music at a young age by his mother, who was an ardent music-lover, and he developed a great passion for the art. He began his musical journey as a vocalist, and was self-taught; he learnt and practised entirely on his own, finding guidance and inspiration in the music of the great masters and striving tirelessly to follow in their footsteps. With his passion and hard work, he became a reputed performing artiste by his teenage years. Sivasubramaṇiam later came under the tutelage of the renowned musician and composer Aruṇāchala Annāvi of Boothappāṇḍi, Kanyākumari District, and under his guidance, Sivasubramaṇiam's knowledge and skills grew manifold. He soon established a school of his own, 'Sarasvati Gāna Vidyālayam', and trained many successful disciples over the years.

The Artiste

A rich voice, sensitive artistry, and a stunning spontaneity were the hallmarks of Sivasubramaṇiam's music. His soulful, bhava-laden style melted the hearts of the countless music-lovers who thronged to his concerts. He performed throughout southern India and Sri Lanka, and his concerts were regularly featured on All India Radio as well. Sivasubramaṇiam also had the unique gift of breathing music into any instrument he touched, be it the violin, vīṇā, harmonium, mṛdaṅgam, or even piano, and he even trained many disciples to a high degree of proficiency in these instruments. As chronic ill health began to affect his voice, he took up the violin as his main instrument, and with his characteristic genius and flair, he became a highly sought-after accompanist for many stalwarts of the era. He also became renowned for his solos, duets, and ensemble concerts. His love for music took him even to the realm of instrument craftsmanship, and he made many fine violins, along with elegant cases to house them.

The Composer

Sivasubramaṇiam was a master vāggēyakāra and created many gems of sublime musical and poetic beauty. An ardent devotee of Lord Murugan, he composed many masterpieces on him, as well as on other

deities, and on music itself. He also composed many pieces on social and patriotic themes filled with powerful and inspiring messages, one of the few Carnatic composers to do so. He had a great passion for the Tamizh language, and an eloquent, erudite Tamizh pervades his work. He worked extensively in the Harikathā (the narration of religious stories through interwoven song and discourse); his wife, R Sornambal, was a Harikathā artiste who, under Sivasubramaṇiam's guidance, became one of the leading exponents in the region. For each of her Harikathās, Sivasubramaṇiam did extensive research on the stories, drafted the discourses, composed the songs to be presented, and finally himself performed alongside her on the violin or harmonium. Their Harikathas include Āṇḍaḷ Kalyāṇam, Ayyappan Charitram, Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃār Charitram, Mīnākshi Kalyāṇam, Tirunāvukkarasar Charitram, Vatsalā Kalyāṇam, and many more. They even crossed cultural boundaries and presented a Christian Harikathā, Mātāvin Mahimai.

Some of Sivasubramaṇiam's masterpieces include 'Ānanda Tāṇḍavam' from the Harikathā 'Karaikkāl Ammaiṃār Charitram', which features a prayer to Lord Shiva in the charaṇam portrayed as being sung by the saint Karaikkāl Ammaiṃār as she walks on her hands towards the Lord's abode on Mount Kailāsa, not wanting defile the sacred ground with the touch of her feet. Each line begins with svarāksharam (coincidence of the lyrical and sol-fa syllables), starting from the middle-octave 'ga' (third), and advancing line-by-line up to the higher-octave 'pa' (fifth). Another composition, 'Pāḍum Paṇiyē' in the rāga Kalyāṇi, is a prayer to Lord Murugan composed in the format of Saint Tyāgaraja's Pañcharatnas, with its madhyamakāla charaṇams set to each of the six yatis (mode of rhythmic progression such as expansion, reduction, and so on). Another, 'Kēṭṭa Varam Taruvān', sings the glory of Lord Murugan in five stanzas set to each of the five ghana rāgas, with each rāga's name subtly embedded in the lyrics through wordplay. The song also has svara passages for each stanza, and a finale svara passage cascading back through all the rāgas to the pallavi. 'Kalai Amudam' in the rāga Nīlamaṇi is a piece on music itself praying to Goddess Sarasvati for the ability to sing music in its highest form. 'Amizhdinum Inidām' in the rāga Raṅjani is a composition on the Tamizh language featuring a beautiful madhyamakālam that mentions several of Tamizh's most eminent literary works from the Saṅgam Age up to the 20th century. He has also explored various gatis, rare rāgas, different compositional forms and styles, and so on.

Legacy

Having led a life of complete devotion to music, Sivasubramaṇiam passed away on 8th June 2003, leaving behind a rich legacy. His children and grandchildren, renowned musicians in their own right, have taken the name 'Akkarai' (the place where he had lived), and continue his work of selflessly sharing the divine art of music with the world.