

Semangudi R Srinivasa Iyer

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Semangudi R Srinivasa Iyer - Doyen of Carnatic Music



Semangudi R Srinivasa Iyer or simply Semangudi to his fans was one of the greatest singers of the last century. Indeed to the entire generation that was born in 1960 and later. He symbolized Carnatic Music in all its traditional Glory. His immense talent, his boundless imagination and his early years of hard grind, helped him over come a most recalcitrant voice and remain at the top of the carnatic charts for most of his long life spanning 95 years.

Srinivasa Iyer was born to Radhakrishna Iyer and Dharmambal of Sempongudi village, Tanjore District on 25th Jul 1908. The family boasted of great musical lineages with Dharmambal's brother Tirukkodikaval Krishna Iyer being one of the greatest violinists of his time. Yet another illustrious violinist of the family was Dharmambal's nephew Semangudi Snarayanasami Iyer. From very early age, seen as he was called was therefore exposed to the finest music. He also had the opportunity to listen to the great Nagaswaram artists whenever they performed in the temples festivals in the neighborhood. He absorbed all their music and was later acknowledged that his music was influenced by the Nagaswaram tradition.

Seeing his sons musical inclinations, Radhakrishna Iyer approached Semangudi Narayanasami Iyer to teach him music and formal lessons began on 1917 on Vijaya Dasami day. But with the guru soon shifting to Kumbhakonam, the search for yet another Guru and soon seen was sent off to be a student in residence of the renowned Gottuvadiyam exponent Thiruvaidaimarudur Sakharama Rao. Seen learnt vocal music from Rao and continued his silent learning from the Nagaswara artists who came to that famous temple town to perform. In 1920, Rao fell seriously ill and lessons were stopped. Seen was sent off to Kumbhakonam where his brothers lived. He however never forgot his happy years at Thiruvaidaimarudhur and kept up a life long pension for his guru's wife till her demise.

He now apprenticed under Umyalpuram Swaminatha Iyer. He also resumed lessons under cousin Narayanaswami Iyer. In 1924 however his voice broke and found it very difficult to bring it under control. By then his lessons under both his gurus were stopped for various reasons and he began practicing by himself often singing for hours on end and shouting himself hoarse. In the process while he did manage to control his voice. He also irretrievably damaged his vocal chords. At this point in time, the well known Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer took him under his own wings and made him his vocal accompanist as well. In concerts, Semangudi first independent concert opportunity came about in 1926 at the Nageswaraswami temple in Kumbhakonam. In 1927, Semangudi gave his first concert performance in Madras at the All India Music Conference which saw the establishment of the Music Academy. By 1930, he had also made his debut at the Thiruvaiyaru Thyagaraja Aradhana and in 1931 cut his first 78rpm record.

Semangudi's music was marked by powerful shades of the Nagaswara bhani. He believed in full throated singing. His concerts saw wholesome balance of raga alapana, good selection of songs, imaginative neravals and kalpana swarams in the sarva laghu mode. He dwelt long and lovingly on raga thanam pallavis and also rendered some of the most evocative shlokas as ragamalikas. A past master in concert planning and in understanding audience moods, he was perhaps one of the few artists of who it can be said that there was no concert which was below par. He sprinkled his concerts with liberal doses of humor which were also loved by fans. Forgetting his troublesome voice, which after three unsuccessful operations resulted in singing nasality, they flocked to hear in concert after concert. Soon making him a top ranker in the profession. There are songs such as Maarubalka (Raga: Sranjani) and Ksheenamai (Ragam: Mukhari) where Semangudi was appalled separately at the conclusions of the pallavi, the anupallavi, the charanam, the neraval and the swarams.

In 1941, Semangudi was invited to join the faculty of the Swati Tirunal Academy of Music in Trivandram, where he assisted Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar (later we will read about him also), then the principal of the academy, in resuscitating the songs of Maharaja Swati Tirunal and setting many of his lyrics to music. When Muthiah Bhagavathar retired in 1942, Semangudi succeeded him as principal and under his supervision; a compilation of the Maharaja's songs was released (refer to www.swatitirunal.org.in) in 1947. The Royal family of Travancore, in recognition of his services, conferred on him the title of **Raja Seva Nirata**.

Through out the period Semangudi continued to pursue his career as a concert artist. He also maintained a large retinue of disciples at his residence, all whom he taught free of cost, and who were all treated with great love and affections by his wife Thaiyamma. The couple was also blessed with five children, all of whom though talented in music, were not allowed by their father to take it as a profession.

Semangudi served the Swati Tirunal Academy till 1963. In between during the years 1956-1959, he served as the chief producer, All India Radio in Madras. Following his retirement in 1963 he moved permanently Madras where his house in Lloyds Lane became a famous landmark. He had the knack of making friends at high places and soon a popular figure in the city's social circuit. As well. Many considered his presence at weddings and inaugurations to be auspicious augury and he was in much demand as a concert performer, a friend, a valuable advisor. His 60s and 80th birth days were great events in the social history with many dignitaries attending and taking his blessings. He continued as busy guru., imparting his knowledge to all who cared to come and learn. He was also invoked in setting to tune works as the Thiruvembavai, the Ashtapadhis of Jayadeva and also the songs of Ambujan Krishna.

A man of extremely discipline habits, Semangudi's health stood in good stead, for he outlived almost all his contemporaries. He remained a performing artist till 2000. When he gave his last concert performance at Music Academy, Madras. Awards came to him in full measure. He was the youngest singer to be honored with Sangita Kalanidhi of Music Academy. Receiving it in the year 1947. Later he was to receive an honorary doctorate from the Kerala University. The Padma Bhushan and Kalidas Samman, besides a host of titles and honors from the Sabhas and other cultural institutions. Semangudi led a life of dignity till the end and passed away on the 31st October 2003. He was the last of a long line of giants who lived entirely for music.

Sites to learn more about Semangudi:

<http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/nic/semangudi/index.htm>

<http://www.udbhava.com/udbhava/songs.jsp?id=555>

<http://www.carnatica.net/artiste/semangudi.htm>