Sweet Soul of Song
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M.S. Subbulakshmi, 87, has dominated music in India for 70 years with genius, devotion, purity and humility. A dear friend shares the making of her legend.

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Subbulakshmi sang beautifully at my dance recital for graduation from Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts back in the forties. By this time she had become quite famous and could have politely declined my request to perform. No one would have been surprised. But she did not. Those who knew her understood. Such was her way. She was and still is uncommonly humble. Even when her name was a household word in South India, we called her kunjakka, which means "little sister."

It is not easy to write about this great artist, who has become such a legend within her own lifetime, even though she is a friend of mine. It would also be impossible in the space of this entire magazine to summarize her many accomplishments or give even a brief synopsis of her long life story. So I will just tell you what inspires me.

Some 50 years back, M.S. Subbulakshmi became known as the singer with the "golden voice." Publically venerated as one of the twentieth century's finest South Indian classical musicians in the Carnatic tradition, she was privately adored as an example of piety, humility, devotion and uncommon marital loyalty. She and her husband, T. Sadasivam, were unfalteringly dedicated to each other. As people continued to flock to her concerts year after year, her esteem as a musician grew in both North and South India, where customs in music and life contrast drastically.

This was a rare accomplishment attained only by a very few.

Born in Madurai in a family of performing artists--her mother was a celebrated vina player--Subbulakshmi's exceptional talent was recognized and cultivated early. By the time she and Sadasivam were married in 1940, she had already performed as an actress and singer in two successful films, Seva Sadasivam and Shakuntala. In the 1930s, songs were an integral part of movies in Tamil Nadu, and musicians were often cast as heroes and heroines. Although Subbulakshmi was strikingly beautiful and naturally gifted as an actress, it was her remarkable voice and music that made her irreplaceable in films. All her songs became hits in those days.

About this time, Sadasivam and a close friend named Kalki Krishnamurthi wanted to launch a Tamil magazine entitled Kalki. To help produce the needed capital for this publishing venture, Subbulakshmi accepted an offer to perform the part of Sage Narada in a film called Savitri. Although she had already played the part of Shakuntala, a saintly heroine, portraying the male role of Sage Narada would prove far more challenging.

Bolstering her courage, she took on the role and measured up to the task beautifully. I will never forget how the audience applauded when Subbulakshmi as Narada appeared singing in the sunset sky with a small tambura, a simple stringed instrument, in her hands. Under the spell of her mesmerizing music, no one cared that a female was portraying Sage Narada. Her performance was simply too enchanting.

Although Subbulakshmi's portrayal of Sage Narada was magnificent, it was the film Meera which bestowed upon her the image of a saintly musician. This movie was about a Rajasthani Princess who gave up everything to search for spiritual union with Lord Krishna. The emotion-filled songs of Meera suited Subbulakshmi eminently. She easily identified with the story because she was herself very much like Meera--a pious woman who prayed and worshiped fervently. Because of her devotion, she had an almost mystical ability to stir listeners into the revery she herself was experiencing. That was the magic of her soulful music.

Mahatma Gandhi, a few months before he was assassinated, sent a message to Subbulakshmi lamenting how much he would like to hear her sing his favorite

bhajana, "Hari Tuma Haro Janaki Bhir." Subbulakshmi humbly submitted that she didn't know the song. But Gandhi replied, "I would rather hear 'Hari Thuma Haro' spoken by Subbulakshmi than sung by anyone else." That same night Subbulakshmi set the words to Darbhari Kanada Raga (A South Indian classical music scale), recorded it and had the tape flown to New Delhi the next day, October 2, 1947, just in time for Gandhi's birthday. When Mahatma was assassinated on January 30, 1948, All India Radio broadcasted that song repeatedly. Touchingly, its lyrics were written to alleviate the burdens of mortal life.

All through the 1940s, Subbulakshmi gave benefit concerts for innumerable institutions, schools, colleges, hospitals, sanatoriums, memorials and temples. Still today, proceeds from the sale of many of those records continue to finance the same causes.

From 1950 onward, Subbulakshmi and Sadasivam were among Tamil Nadu's leading philanthropists. Kalki had become a tremendously successful household magazine by that time, earning respect throughout India for its sophisticated perspective and unbiased journalism. As publisher of such a trend-setting publication, Sadasivam had gained a measure of distinction himself. Together, he and his illustrious wife were an impressive pair.

The couple were also a model of hospitality. Today, there is not a spiritual leader, politician, great musician, or Sanskrit or Tamil scholar who has not visited their home. Pandit Nehru often stayed with them. Rajaji, the first Governor General of India, was their guest often. One of South India's most famous priests, Anantharama Dikshitar, gave a discourse on the Ramayana, an important Hindu epic, for 40 days in their garden. Indira Didi, recognized by many as a reincarnation of Meera, stayed in their home. There, Didi would compose bhajanas in Hindi while in a trance, and Subbulakshmi would set these songs to tune and sing them.

When the governor of Madras wanted the famous spiritual leader, Mata Anandamayi, to reside in his residence, Anandamayi Ma replied, "I will stay in the house of Subbulakshmi. She is Meera to me." Within two days, Sadasivam had special quarters built in their garden for Mata to give darshan and arranged for a new well to be dug nearby for fresh drinking water. Every evening thousands of people gathered there.

When C.V. Narasimhan from the United Nations arranged for the artist to perform at a UN conference, Subbulakshmi sang a song she composed especially for the occasion. The late Pontiff of Kanchi Mutt, Sri Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swami--Subbulakshmi's spiritual mentor--composed a benediction for the historic conclave, and Subbulakshmi set it to music. When she performed her rendition of his benediction during the concluding ceremonies, the audience was spellbound. From then on, Subbulakshmi sang that song at every one of her concerts. The lyrics begged people to give up war and live in peace.

Sadasivam's mission in life was preserving his wife's musical gift. He would sit faithfully through every one of her performances like a man enchanted. So deeply involved was he in her music, he knew all of her songs by heart. He was the one that arranged the concert programs. He was the one that personally saw to it that Subbulakshmi had a quiet place and time to rest and prepare in seclusion before each and every performance.

Through her long career, Subbulakshmi performed in every state of India. During each one of these concerts, she would sing one or two songs in the state language, which would thrill the audience. In preparation for these concerts, Sadasivam would be sure she learned, practiced and studied the languages she would be singing so that her pronunciation was perfect. Each time she prepared to sing a song in a new language, an appropriate linguistic scholar would be invited by Sadasivam to their home as a guest. She would sing for that scholar, and he would check and recheck her pronunciation.

Sadasivam was very particular about the emotional content of each song. If there was even the slightest erotic content, he would not allow it to be included in her repertoire. Today, Subbulakshmi is held in high esteem by people throughout India and around the world to a large extent because of the unceasing efforts of Sadasivam, working constantly behind the scenes.

After the tremendous success of the Tamil film, Meera, Subbulakshmi never acted again. However, Sadasivam did arrange for his wife to dub the songs of Meera for a Hindi version of the film in North India. For this, all new musical arrangements had to be composed in the Hindi language. Subbulakshmi diligently learned them all, and the dubbing went flawlessly.

Just as the Tamil Meera was a smash hit in South India, so was the Hindi Meera a huge success in North India. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru brought British friends Lord and Lady Mountbatten to the screening of the film in New Delhi. After the showing, he said to Subbulakshmi, "Who am I, a mere Prime Minister, to say anything about a queen, the queen of songs?" When Sarojini Naidu, a great Hindi singer famous as the "Nightingale of India," saw Meera, she was so inspired that she took it upon herself to personally introduce Subbulakshmi, a resident of South India, to the music-loving public of North India."I commend Subbulakshmi of the South to the people of the North," she said in a now-famous statement."Whosoever comes under the enchantment of this singer's great gifts, will agree with me that she is not an interpreter of Meera, but Meera herself. Take her into your hearts and cherish her. You will be proud that India in this generation has produced such a supreme artist." After this, Subbulakshmi became a musician respected almost like a saint all over India.

In 1986, the Madras Music Academy conferred upon Subbulakshmi the title of Sangeetha Kalanidhi. Not only was this one of the greatest honors a South Indian classical musician can receive, it had also never been given to a woman. When she was presented with the title at that precedent-setting Music Academy conference, she said, "My husband has been my friend, my guide and my philosopher. I lay all recognition I have received as a musician at his feet."

Whether Subbulakshmi is singing a South Indian classical composition, a popular Hindi bhajana or a Sanskrit sloka set to music, her voice is so filled with devotion listeners can't help thinking she must be a saint. The words of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, former President of India, come to mind."It is a great joy to listen to Srimathi M.S. Subbulakshmi," he said."She brings us into great exaltation. Her music is the gift of Gods."