Singing the Classical Voicing the Modern

THE POSTCOLONIAL POLITICS OF MUSIC IN SOUTH INDIA

amanda j. weidman

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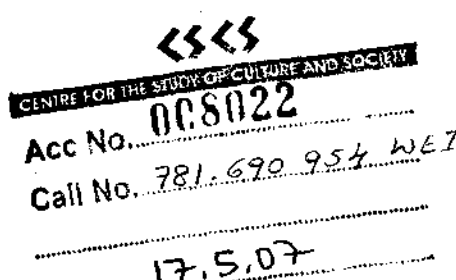
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3 ❁ Gender and the Politics of Voice

It is always the body social that is enunciated in and through the voice.
—Steven Feld, Aaron Fox, Thomas Porcello, and David Samuels,
"Vocal Anthropology," in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*

As a music student in Madras, I spent the better part of every day engaged in music lessons at my teacher's house. Since she, having never married, had few conventional household obligations, these music lessons, liberally interspersed with periods of conversation, usually lasted the whole afternoon. The conversations often moved from music to marriage, and she was decidedly ambivalent on this point. At times, she attributed her failure to live up to her potential to the fact that she was a non-Brahmin woman without even a husband to help her. Every now and then a visitor would stop by, perhaps someone who had been a fan of her father's. On one such occasion, the visitor was a lawyer who lived on the next block, who happened to be passing by as I approached the gate of the house. My teacher came out to greet me, and the lawyer stopped to introduce himself to her, to say how much he had enjoyed her father's music. After a few words about the greatness of her father, she turned to her own story, speaking in English, as she felt the presence of a lawyer called for. "I sacrificed everything—marriage, children, money—for the sake of music. I am a helpless lady," she told the lawyer, a perfect stranger, who was listening seriously and compassionately. The idea of an unmarried woman who has "devoted" herself to music has great appeal in South Indian classical music circles, and my teacher was convinced that her "sacrifice" had brought her closer to the divine. Telling of her sacrifices often brought tears to her eyes. However, although she spoke wistfully about how other female musicians got chances to perform because their husbands acted as managers, she believed that music and marriage were basically incompatible.

She herself cultivated disorder both in her personal appearance and in her household. The house—a large old-style building with front arches, verandahs, and a courtyard—had fallen into a state of decay in the years since her mother's death in the mid-1980s, but signs of its former illustriousness were everywhere, piled in corners and festooned with cobwebs. Most fellow musicians thought my teacher highly eccentric, and a few speculated to me that she might have psychological problems. She, meanwhile, admitted that her life and personality were out of the ordinary but attributed this to the effects of "Madras politics," which had forced her to the margins of the music world. For others—friends and family members—her eccentricity was thought to be explainable by the fact that she was a musician, a true artist. Her cook, who had worked in the house for more than forty years, would roll her eyes at my teacher's perversities but, when pressed, would claim, "Avakiṭṭe kalai irukke" (There is art in her).

A Music Lesson

One day in June 1998 my teacher had decided to teach me the well-known kriti "Rāma nannu brōva rā" (Rama, come save me). Fingering through a crumbling book of compositions her father had kept, she commented on the aptness of the words to her own life, offering me a colloquial translation of the Telugu lyrics in mixed Tamil and English: Thyagaraja asks Rama, "Rāma! Enakku show, fraud, gossip, putting soap, wrong ways-um teriyātu. Eṉkiṭṭe nī vara kūṭātā?" (Rama, I don't know show, fraud, gossip, putting soap, or wrong ways. Why do you not come to me?) Perhaps it was the quietness of the mid-afternoon lull, or the physical act of going through one of her father's old books that brought out a flood of associations; in the words of the kriti lurked voices other than her own. The first was that of an American student who had come to learn Karnatic music from her father perhaps thirty-five years before. She remembered sitting in the corner of the room while her father sang the words and the student repeated them in flat, operatic syllables: RAA-MA-NAA-NU-BRO-VA-RAA. In stark contrast was the second voice, that of the celebrated vocalist M. S. Subbulakshmi (often referred to simply as "M.S."), who had made this composition famous. My teacher recalled that M.S. used to sing this song with so much emotion that there would be tears rolling down her cheeks. That, my teacher said, was because the song related to a period of unhappiness in M.S.'s life.

It was astonishing to hear something unharmonious about the life of M.S., who has been celebrated almost universally as the "greatest female vocalist of India," as the woman who broke the male stronghold of Karnatic music, as the "only Karnatic musician with a national image" (Indira Menon 1999, 134). At one point, T. T. Krishnamachari, one of the founders of the Madras Music Academy, called M.S.'s voice "the voice of the century" (quoted in ibid., 132). A Tamil biography of M.S. entitled *Icai Ulakiṉ Imayam* (The Himalaya of the music world), speaks of M.S.'s voice as the voice of god, claiming that "if music can be said to have a form it is M.S. herself. . . . Her life *is* the history of music" (Sarathy 1997, 5). Born into the community of devadasis, lower-caste women who performed music and dance in Hindu temples and by the late nineteenth century were branded as prostitutes, Subbulakshmi married a prominent Brahmin man of letters, T. Sadasivam, who brought her talents out into the middle-class Brahmin music world of Madras. Her life seems to represent the success story that everyone wants to hear about. What discordant note was there in the life of a woman who, coming from a devadasi background at a time when devadasis were being disenfranchised, was able, by sheer force of talent, to become universally accepted in the Karnatic music world?

My teacher's answer to that question can be understood less as a truth about M.S.'s circumstances and more as a sample of discourse about her life, which has been the subject of much speculation both inside and outside the Karnatic music world. My teacher claimed that M.S. sang the song with such emotion because of the difficulties of her marriage, that she was mistrusted by her husband, that he accused her of infidelity. While the present generation may be unaware of such speculations, at that time—my teacher was referring to the late 1950s—it was the talk of musicians and *rasikas* (connoisseurs). Sadasivam had fallen in love with the idea of a woman vocalist, and he made M.S. into the first really celebrated vocalist the Karnatic music world had known. However, he became envious of her popularity and, paranoid that her admirers might be lovers, began to fear that she was a "characterless lady" (my teacher's expression). After all, he was a Brahmin, and she was from the caste of devadasis. But, my teacher wondered, how could he fear such a thing about M.S.? *He* was the characterless one to even think such things. He controlled M.S. so absolutely that if she sang something he did not like he would call out to chide her in public. How could an artist flourish with this kind of husband? "I would rather stay in a hostel than be at the mercy of a husband like that," she concluded.

This led her off into a more general discussion of the difference between

men and women. It was okay for a man to "wander" with ten women, but a woman could not do likewise, she said, as if to criticize the unfairness of society. Sensing a familiar sentiment, I was about to join the critique when it took a sharp turn toward something else. That double standard, she continued, was as it should be, because there was an essential difference between men and women. Women were a special birth (*vastiyāna jaṉmam*); there was so much power, honor, and dignity (*kauravam*) in a woman's body that it was important to control it; otherwise it would be too dangerous.[1] "Men?" My teacher spat out the word, as if the very idea was a joke. "Who cares? Let them go have ten wives; it doesn't make a difference."

This music lesson was, in fact, a lesson in the complex ways that classical music is implicated in present-day discourses about marriage and womanhood.[2] Most striking here is the way a remembrance of M. S. Subbulakshmi provided the occasion for reasserting a particular notion of womanly virtue. My teacher had used Thyagaraja's lyrics, presumably composed in an attitude of humble devotion to Rama, to signify a specifically gendered position: that of a virtuous woman rebuking society. Sung in her own voice, the lyrics outlined the ambiguity of my teacher's position. As a woman who had remained unmarried and "devoted herself to music," thereby embodying the nationalist ideal of a woman who devotes herself to the preservation of Indian tradition, she invited admiration; at the same time, her unmarried state, her lack of domesticity, aroused accusations of eccentricity and suspicions of abnormality. Sung in M.S.'s voice, the lyrics outlined the contradictions of M.S.'s position: as an internationally known artist, she belonged to her public, to her audiences. Her appearance in public, however, depended on her enactment of virtuous womanhood during performances and on having a husband who acted as her manager.

Also striking is the way the story about M.S. juxtaposes several conflicting ideals of marriage. My teacher was convinced that a traditional arranged marriage had been impossible in her case because a traditional husband would have expected a wife who would bear children and do housework and not pursue a career as a professional violinist. In M.S.'s case a traditional marriage would not have worked either; it was her "love marriage" (and all the implications of social mobility, companionship, and modernity that such a term carries) that had enabled her to pursue a performing career by allowing her to appear in public as a traditional Brahmin woman. Finally, the shadow of the devadasi, a woman outside the bonds of conventional marriage, hung over the conversation, not as an indigenous version of liberated womanhood but as an almost unspeakable contrast against which any female musician had to place herself. The sense of outrage that my teacher expressed, that Sadasivam could suspect M.S. of infidelity, indicates the distance she placed between herself and those "characterless ladies."

That afternoon we eventually got back to the music "itself." But I was astonished at the distance we had managed to cover, moving from music to ideas of womanhood, to marriage, and finally to a discourse on the essential difference between men and women. What history made possible such a chain of associations?

A Politics of Voice

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when older temple- and court-based forms of patronage ceased to be viable in the late colonial economy of South India, musicians moved in large numbers to the colonial city of Madras; there, music organizations, concert halls, and academies were established by an upper-caste, largely Brahmin elite interested in what they called the "revival" of Karnatic music and its transformation into the classical music of South India. At the heart of the revival of Karnatic music was the notion that it could serve as a sign of tradition and Indianness, as one of the trappings of an emergent middle-class modernity. Just as particular notions of female respectability and ideal womanhood played a crucial rôle in defining the aims of anticolonial nationalism, they were also central to the project of defining middle-class modernity.[3] While devadasis came to be regarded as prostitutes and their opportunities to perform gradually diminished, upper-caste women were encouraged to learn, and eventually perform, music and dance. Indeed, for many Brahmin elites, the sign of the successful classicization of music and dance from the 1920s to 1940s was the transformation of these forms into "arts" fit for upper-caste, middle-class "family women."

My teacher's comments fit into this larger story of how music became available to "respectable" women as a vocation and sometimes a career, and the particular kinds of performance practice, discourse about music, and notions of ideal womanhood engendered by this newfound respectability. Classical music in twentieth-century South India helped constitute a private or domestic sphere at the same time as it participated in the production of a new urban, modern public sphere through the establishment of institutions for teaching and disseminating music. Beginning in

the 1930s, the classical concert stage provided a public arena in which the sound and image of Indian womanhood could be constructed and displayed.[4] Connections emerged between the way music was placed and discursively imagined by the newly developing middle-class and what was happening in terms of actual performance practice onstage. The literal *domestication* of music as a sign of bourgeois respectability—its connection to a discourse about family values—parallels music's progressive *interiorization* within the body in terms of performance practice. The notion of the artist that underlay the revival of Karnatic music as the classical music of South India depended on this new sense of interiority.

A certain politics of voice emerged in the moment that upper-caste women began to sing in public, a politics that involved both privileging the voice itself as Karnatic music's locus of authenticity and valuing a certain kind of voice. By midcentury, the ideal of a voice that came naturally from within, unmediated by performance of any kind, a voice that seemed to transcend its body, came to be valued as the true voice of Karnatic classical music. A number of circumstances enabled the emergence of this politics of voice: a social reform movement that stressed the virtues of domesticity and female chastity; the rise of an urban middle class, defined in part by an ideal of traditional Indian womanhood; and, crucially, the development of technologies of recording and amplifying the voice, such as the gramophone and microphone. This politics or ideology of voice emerged, then, not only in live performance but also in moments of sonic communication mediated by technologies of sound reproduction and the cultures of listening associated with them.

Social Reform and the Emergence of "Art"

Comparing M.S.'s life to the history of music is quite apt, since her conversion from devadasi to married Brahmin woman mirrors the reforms that were effected on music and dance in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. At the end of the nineteenth century, the devadasi "system"—a generalized term referring to a variety of economic, religious, and political practices through which women of the devadasi community were employed by temples—became the object of social reform. The campaign to end the practice of dedicating girls to a life of service in temples as dancers and musicians attained success in 1947, when the practice was legally abolished.[5] The debates surrounding the issues of how devadasis were to be defined and whether or not their activities in the temples constituted prostitution, and the controversy over the bill to outlaw their practices, had crucial effects on the idea of "art" and conceptions of women's relationship to it.

Kalpana Kannabiran traces the origins of the devadasi abolition movement in the Madras Presidency to the social-reform movement started by Kandukuri Veeresalingam in what would later become Andhra Pradesh, in the 1830s. Focusing on women's emancipation, Veeresalingam was concerned with social hygiene: conjugality and sexual relationships, education, religious practices, as well as government corruption. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, not only such social reform movements but also colonial ideas about prostitution combined to make the devadasi issue prominent in the agenda for social reform. The Social Purity movement, begun in 1880 in Madras by Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu, was influenced by the Purity Crusade in England and America. As Kannabiran writes, one of the crucial elements of the crusade was the broadening of the term "prostitution" to refer not only to sexual intercourse for monetary gain, but also as a metaphor for social depravity and moral corruption in general (1995, 63).[6]

The development of a discourse about prostitution determined the way family women were differentiated from devadasis. In a detailed article on Anglo-Indian legal conceptions of dancing girls between 1800 and 1914, Kunal Parker traces the process by which dancing girls came to be criminalized as prostitutes. Crucial in this process was the representation of dancing girls as a professional group rather than as a caste, which might have its own laws concerning marriage and property inheritance. The representation of dancing girls as a professional group characterized by the activities of dancing and prostitution brought them under the purview of Hindu law and led to a public perception that they had fallen from caste because of their practice of prostitution (Parker 1998, 566). Ruling that their singing and dancing were merely "vestigial" and that their true source of income was from prostitution, the Madras High Court denied dancing girls status as artists (607). Placing prostitution in opposition to legal Hindu marriage, Parker states, the legislation was "directed explicitly towards the valorization of marriage, the construction of a Hindu community organized around marriage, and the sanitization of Hindu religious practice" (632).

The devadasi abolition movement came to a head under the leadership of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a medical doctor, legislator, and member of the Women's India Association, who was herself born to a devadasi

mother. Beginning in the 1920s, Reddy launched a campaign against the practice of dedicating minor girls to temple deities. "I want the Honorable members of the House to understand that these [devadasis] are neither descended from heaven nor imported from foreign countries," Reddy began a speech to the Madras legislative assembly in 1927. "They . . . are our kith and kin." "At an age when they cannot think and act for themselves," she continued, these girls were "sacrificed to a most blind and degrading custom." The crime of it was that the innocent girls, if only left alone, would become "virtuous and loyal wives, affectionate mothers, and useful citizens" (1928–1931, 3). Reddy implied that girls who became devadasis were lost to society, that they were useless; their "sacrifice" made them undependable subjects. In a series of appeals, each with affecting signatures like "By a Woman" or "From One that Loves the Children," Reddy drummed up support for her bill. "The dedication of a girl to a life of vice is a heinous crime—is it not a worse form of Sati? A hygienic mistake? A moral monstrosity?" (5).

Reddy was helped in her efforts by caste associations of Icai Veḷḷālars and Sengundars, castes from which devadasis generally came; male members of these castes saw the abolition of the devadasi system as a matter of retrieving the honor and dignity of their caste (Anandi 1991, 741). In 1936 Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, a devadasi from the Icai Veḷḷālar caste who had rebelled against the system, married a music teacher, became a political activist, and published a novel in Tamil, *Tācikaḷ Mocāvalai Allatu Mati Peṟṟa Mainar* (The treacherous net of the devadasis, or a minor grown wise).[7] The novel, a mixture of autobiography and propaganda, follows the lives of several devadasis who come to the realization that the system is exploiting them and mobilize to effect legislation.[8]

Many devadasis opposed abolition, claiming that they were being unfairly grouped together with common prostitutes. Others claimed that the men of the Icai Veḷḷālar caste were supporting the abolition because of ulterior motives; they were jealous of the wealth and status that some devadasis had obtained (Kannabiran 1995, 67). The Madras Presidency Devadasi Association and the Madras Rudrakannikai Sangam issued statements to counter the abolitionists in the late 1920s. Bangalore Nagaratnammal, a prominent devadasi who led the protest against male and Brahmin domination of the Thyagaraja festival at Tiruvaiyaru (and later commissioned the building of the shrine where the festival now takes place), spoke out against the legislation, claiming that it denied devadasis not only their right to own and inherit property but also their status as artists (67).

Indeed, and perhaps most crucially, the campaign against the devadasi system helped redefine the status of art, particularly music and dance. If the official debate about devadasis came, by the early decades of the twentieth century, to center on devadasis' property rights and alleged prostitution, it is because the matter of their music and dance had been effectively removed from the discourse on devadasis and relocated to a realm now self-consciously referred to as "art." Separating the woman question from the question of what constituted art enabled art to have a trajectory apart from its practitioners' lives. It was precisely because revivalists like E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi considered the music and dance of the devadasis to be part of an ancient tradition that extended far beyond the lives of specific devadasis that these practices could assume the status of art. In the 1920s and 1930s, at the height of the campaign to end the devadasi system, both Brahmins and non-Brahmins involved with the Tamil renaissance began to speak about the revival of India's classical arts. They used the English word *art* or the Tamil term *kalai* to signify a generalized concept of art, rather than a particular practice like music or painting. In this discourse, the distinction between art and craft was essential. Where craft implied hereditary practitioners who worked repetitively and unthinkingly, art implied an individual artist, a subject who made choices, was original, and somehow expressed herself through her art.[9]

In the early 1930s a number of prominent members of the Congress Party in Madras, including E. Krishna Iyer, Tirumalayya Naidu, and T. Prakasam defined their position bluntly as "pro-art," maintaining that the extremity of Muthulakshmi Reddy's anti-nautch movement was killing the art of the devadasis.[10] In a pamphlet entitled "Music and the Anti-Nautch Movement," written circa 1912, Tirumalayya Naidu, an advocate by profession, stated that the anti-nautch movement had been negative in character, set up to demolish the "long-standing institution" of the art of the devadasis (6). E. Krishna Iyer represented the pro-art position most vociferously. He was born in 1897 in Kallidaikuricci, known then for its lavish musical and dance events in connection with weddings. While completing his law degree at Madras Law College, Krishna Iyer acted female roles in dramas and studied Karnatic music on the violin. He later joined the Suguna Vilas Sabha, a prominent theatrical group in Madras, and received formal training in *sadir*, the dance form of the devadasis. Committed to reviving the dance, he was instrumental in starting the Madras Music Academy and in bringing dancers, first devadasis and then Brahmins, to its stage. In a series of letters against Muthulakshmi Reddy's con-

demnation of all public performance of nautch published in the *Madras Mail* in 1932, Krishna Iyer mobilized public support for his pro-art position. In addition, he was behind the Music Academy's 1932 resolution to rename the dance "Bharata Natyam," or "Indian dance." The word *Bharata* gave the dance an image of national importance; at the same time the use of the Sanskrit word *natya* suggested its origin in the Sanskrit treatises on dance.

The idea was not necessarily to help the devadasis continue to practice their arts; it was rather to rid music and dance of their impure associations. Music and dance had to be rescued from the hands of degenerate devadasis and taken up by women from respectable (that is, Brahmin) families. The most prominent upholder of this idea was Rukmini Devi, one of the first Brahmin women in the twentieth century to perform South Indian dance and the founder of Kalakshetra, one of the first institutions to teach dance and music in Madras. Devi stated that her goal was to prove that "girls from good families" could dance and that they no longer had to depend on traditional dance teachers (Allen 1997, 64). Influenced by Theosophy and the idea of the original devadasis as a "band of pure virgin devotees," Devi reconceptualized the dance to stress its religious and spiritual aspects, presenting the dancer as a chaste and holy woman.[11] Importantly, the shift from devadasis to Brahmins involved not only a new kind of woman but also a new kind of artist, one who was an individual interpreter, rather than merely a hereditary practitioner of the art. In a pamphlet entitled "The Creative Spirit," written in the early 1940s, Devi described the shift as an awakening from the merely physical level of the "acrobat" to the "meaning" and "expression" conveyed by the slightest movements of the dancer.[12] "A tiny finger lifted with meaning," she concluded, "is far more thrilling than all the turns and gyrations and tricks of the circus performer."[13] Notions of chaste womanly behavior here converge with the idea of an art whose basic currencies are "meaning" and "expression."

Amrit Srinivasan notes that although the devadasi abolition legislation was not officially passed until 1947, the combination of social reform and purification involved in transforming music and dance into classical arts in the first three decades of the twentieth century had already effectively prevented devadasis from continuing their traditions. The bill, she writes, "seemed to have been pushed through not so much to deal the death of the Tamil caste of professional dancers as to approve and permit the birth of a new elite class of amateur performers" (1985, 1875). Matthew Allen has noted that "in the face of overwhelming social pressures, a significant number of women from the traditional dancing community [stopped dancing but] nevertheless continued in the profession of musical (most often vocal) performance," but that since the 1990s very few of the female descendants of this community have chosen to go into musical performance (1997, 68). Many Brahmin women did not perform onstage in the 1920s and 1930s for fear of being mistaken as devadasis (Bullard 1998, 128). By the 1950s, after the passage of the Devadasi Dedication Abolition Act, more and more Brahmins were taking up music and dance; both arts became desirable talents for women of marriageable age. The entry of Brahmin women as singers onto the concert stage solidified the developing caste rift: many felt that female Brahmin singers in particular could not sit next to Icai Veḷḷāḷar accompanists on stage (ibid., 128, 263). The rise of Brahmin women as performing musicians thus served as a catalyst to the Brahminizing of music as a profession. Since the 1980s, Karnatic music and Bharata Natyam have become almost exclusive markers of middle-class English-educated Brahmin identity.

The Voice of the Century

In 1933 E. Krishna Iyer wrote of the "sweetness of natural music, as found in the voices of women, young boys, and singing birds" (xvi). If the listening public, or the "democracy," as he called them, seemed to be taking a new interest in such sweet sounds, it was because Karnatic music had lost its sweetness. "It is but natural," he wrote, "in the general dearth of good and well-trained voices, and scared away by the excesses of dry acrobatics of the musical experts," that the public should desire music that was pleasurable to listen to (xvi). Women inherently possessed the raw material of music. In a sketch of Saraswati Bai (1894–1974), the first Brahmin woman to sing on the concert stage, he wrote that "women vocalists are found to possess certain desirable advantages over men. They have pleasant voices to begin with and none of the contortions of the struggling male musicians. They do not fight with their accompanists, who usually follow them closely. They are free from acrobatics of any kind and they seldom overdo anything" (46). Krishna Iyer wrote of the discrimination Saraswati Bai faced from a Madras sabha where she had been scheduled to give a kalakshepam performance: "The music world then [around 1910] was not as liberal as it is now," he remarked (49). The boycott of Saraswati Bai's performance by her male accompanist at the Madras sabha stands in contrast

to the enthusiastic reception she had at a wedding performance several years later, where the audience was attracted by the novelty of hearing a "lady bhagavatar."

> It was one of the marriage seasons at Kallidaikurichi—the Brahmin Chettinad of the Tinnevelly District as it then was—notorious for the lavish expenditure of its fortunes on spectacular marriages and choice musicians. A huge concourse of people were hovering in and about a pandal [enclosure with a makeshift stage] to hear the beginning of a Kalakshepam—the daring feat of a new fledged lady bhagavatar—and then to decide whether to remain or disperse. . . . Scarcely did the frail form of a young girl of fifteen or sixteen years of age sound her jalar [small metal cymbals] and go through her opening song when the scattered crowds closed into the pandal to its full with barely standing space for the musician herself. The organisers had no small difficulty in accommodating the vast crowds that sat through the performance with eager interest. . . . Her performances invariably draw crowded houses and the ladies' section of the audience is generally overfull. (47)

What accounted for such excitement about a female musician? While Krishna Iyer suggested that women's music, without the competition and "acrobatics," had a more "natural" feel, he also implied that the rising popularity of female vocalists was in part due to the explosion of gramophone recordings. In the early years of recording in South India, more records were made of female vocalists than male vocalists (Indira Menon 1999, 74). Gramophone records, made to be played in the home, needed a different kind of appeal than concerts; the competition and the acrobatics that might make a concert exciting would be lost on a gramophone record, where anything that did not go as planned might later simply sound like a recording glitch.

Gramophone records also provided a solution to the problems faced by female musicians, whether from the devadasi community or the Brahmin community: recording presented a way for women from both communities to be heard without being seen, to escape association with their bodies. A social reform movement that stressed the virtues of marriage and domesticity and referred to the activities of devadasis as "debauchery" and "prostitution" left female musicians of the devadasi community with few traditional performance venues and almost no opportunities to perform in the newly built concert halls of Madras. Gramophone companies, however, initially run not by Brahmins but by Americans and Europeans, actively recruited devadasi women for their first recordings.[14] Unlike All India Radio, which was founded in the 1930s as a vehicle for the nationalist project of making music respectable (thus denying broadcasting opportunities to devadasi women), the gramophone companies were purely capitalist enterprises. Between 1910 and 1930, their best-selling recordings in South India were of Dhanakoti Ammal, Bangalore Nagaratnammal, Bangalore Thayi, Coimbatore Thayi, M. Shanmughavadivu, Veena Dhanammal, and Madras Lalithangi, all women from the devadasi community (Indira Menon 1999, 74–75; Kinnear 1994).

Meanwhile, for Brahmin women, recording provided a way to sing for the public without appearing in public and jeopardizing their respectability. In the early 1930s Columbia Records "discovered" a girl genius, the thirteen-year-old D. K. Pattammal (b. 1919). Many years later, in a speech given at the Madras Music Academy, Pattammal stated that her success, in the absence of a family connection to music, was due to the gramophone. As a Brahmin girl growing up in an orthodox family, she was unable to undergo the traditional gurukulavasam, which would require leaving home to live with a male, non-Brahmin teacher. Instead, she supplemented her brief periods of learning from various teachers with listening to gramophone records. When she was ready to perform, the gramophone, as an interface between private and public, provided her with a way to sing without being seen. The radio, similarly, provided Brahmin women an opportunity to perform without emerging in public; a woman described to me how in the 1930s, as a girl in her late teens and twenties, she was forbidden to sing concerts, but her father would chaperone her to the Madras All India Radio station each week for a broadcast.[15]

The gramophone companies sought out novelty and found a ready source of it in girl singers. By the 1920s, recordings of them were so common that G. Venkatachalam, a patron of many artists and musicians at that time, referred to them with distaste as "baby stunts." Of his first meeting with M. S. Subbulakshmi in 1929, he wrote, "She was 13 when I met her. Subbulakshmi came to Bangalore to record her songs by His Master's Voice (HMV) Company. 'We are recording an extraordinarily talented girl from Madras. Would you care to listen to her and tell us what you think of her?' was the cordial invitation from my friend, the manager. My first reactions were: 'Ah! Another of those baby stunts!' I went, however, and met not a fake, but a real girl genius" (1966, 65).

The idea of novelty, so crucial to the gramophone companies' success, was intimately tied up with notions of the child prodigy.[16] If earlier dis-

course on Karnatic musicians stressed the importance of seasoned experience and long years of discipleship, the figure of the prodigy stood in stark contrast. The prodigy was independent of the traditional gurukula system in which the student lived in the guru's household. The figure of the prodigy suggests a preternatural ability or gift, an element that goes beyond nature into the realm of the supernatural. It implies a certain isolation or protection from the world, an incompleteness compensated for by a larger-than-life voice and a selfless devotion to music. The notion of the prodigy complicates classic formulations of agency: the prodigy does not sing because she desires to, but because a voice sings through her—her body is merely a vessel. As Felicia Miller Frank has pointed out, the association between women, the voice, and the artificial or technological has a long history in European discourse on the arts. Female prodigies, in this discourse, are represented as sexless or artificial angels, emblematic of the sublime and of artistic modernity (Frank 1995, 2). Among the elite of twentieth-century South India, who borrowed much of this European discourse about art, it is no coincidence that the word *prodigy* was first used with regard to female musicians and that the prodigy's first vehicle was the gramophone. In South India the female voice, disassociated from its body, came to be thought of as the essence of music itself.

Of the female musicians that the gramophone companies popularized, M. S. Subbulakshmi became by far the most famous. What made hers "the voice of the century"? M.S. was born in 1916 in Madurai to a veena player from the devadasi community named Madurai Shanmughavadivu.[17] In her memoir of a childhood steeped in music M.S. recalled, "I was fascinated by records—gramophone plates, we called them. Inspired by the gramophone company's logo of the dog listening to his master's voice, I would pick up a sheet of paper, roll it into a long cone, and sing into it for hours" (Ramnarayan 1997, 10). Shanmughavadivu was ambitious for her daughter and brought her to her own recording sessions in Madras, where she persuaded the HMV company to record the thirteen-year-old Subbulakshmi. The records sold well and M.S. began to get concert opportunities in Madras. In the early 1930s she and her mother moved from Madurai to Madras for the sake of M.S.'s career. Her concerts attracted the elite of Madras at that time, a group of Brahmin or other high-caste men who considered themselves aestheticians, journalists, and freedom fighters. Among them were Kalki Krishnamoorthy, journalist for the Tamil weekly *Ananda Vikatan*, who later started his own magazine called *Kalki*, in which he wrote a weekly column on music and dance; "Rasi-

15 M. S. Subbalakshmi record jacket (1945).

kamani" (Gem among connoisseurs) T. K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar, aesthetician and man of letters; the director K. Subramaniam, who became known for his patriotic films; and the journalist and freedom fighter T. Sadasivam.

Sadasivam, a widower with two daughters and ten years older than M.S., married her in 1940. He became not only her husband but also the manager of her career, overseeing her acting in films such as *Shakuntala* (1940) and *Meera* (1945), and coaching her in what to sing on the concert stage.[18] It is said that he would sit in the front row of the audience during her concerts and plan every detail of her concert programs (Sarathy 1997, 169). As her public-relations man, Sadasivam introduced her to Gandhi and Nehru and a host of other political figures. M.S. became a larger-than-life presence not simply by her musical talent but also by Sadasivam's careful cultivation of her persona as a singer of pan-Indian and international ap-

peal. If the nation had a voice, Sadasivam at least thought he knew what it sounded like.

Not only the gramophone but also the microphone shaped M.S.'s voice. The beginning of her public singing career coincided with the establishment of large concert halls in Madras. Essential to these halls was the microphone, which began to be used in South India in the 1930s. The microphone allowed Karnatic vocalists and instrumentalists to concentrate less on projecting volume and more on shifts in dynamics and speed. It also allowed those with softer voices (including many women) to sing to large audiences. As noted in chapter 2, many musicians attribute changes in vocal style in Karnatic music in the twentieth century to the use of the microphone, particularly the shift from an earlier, higher-pitched style of singing accompanied by more gesturing—often referred to today as "shouting"—to a lower-pitched, more introspective style. The microphone also narrows the physical range of a performer, serving as a kind of ballast for a singer or violinist, limiting the distance he or she can move. At the same time, one of the microphone's most prominent effects is the projection of intimacy to vast audiences.[19] As one listener said of hearing M.S. in a concert hall, "It seemed like we were overhearing a conversation in which a devotee spoke intimately to her God."[20] M.S.'s voice and career, notes Indira Menon, were products of the microphone: "The greatest gift to the world of this little instrument of the technological revolution is M.S. Subbulakshmi. The innumerable nuances of her multi-faceted voice can be captured by it. . . . She is truly the product of the modern age—of the sabha culture, teeming audiences, and large halls where her voice can soar—thanks to the mike" (1999, 89). It is crucial to note that the voice with "innumerable nuances" is itself a product of the microphone; as the microphone makes these nuances audible in a physical sense, it also makes them available to an aesthetic discourse about music.

By the 1940s, M.S. and D. K. Pattammal had come to dominate the market for female voices and would do so until the 1970s. Both sang in films as well as recordings and classical stage performances, but their personae were quite different. The two singers had essentially different audiences, as one older concertgoer told me. Pattammal was "dependable, intellectual," her voice had a "weight" to it, and audiences who prized these characteristics would attend her concerts. After M.S.'s concerts, however, audiences came away ecstatic, raving about the fine qualities of her voice and her expression. According to her fans, M.S. concentrated on conveying bhakti (devotion) and *bhāvam* (emotion) through her singing, always paying great attention to the pronunciation of lyrics and singing not only Karnatic compositions but also Hindi bhajans and Sanskrit chants. Only after Pattammal released a record with a pallavi did M.S. begin to include more "intellectual" items in her concerts. "Natural" music was considered the opposite of intellectual feats. It is worth noting Venkatachalam's description of M.S.:

> Her voice has the rich cadence of a mountain stream and the purity of a veena-note. . . . She takes the highest notes with the effortlessness of a nightingale's flight to its mate. This is an art by itself. And when you consider how even some of the great *vidwans* and *ustads* [the Hindu and Muslim terms for "artist," respectively] contort their faces and make ridiculous caricatures of themselves in such attempts, it is some consolation to see a natural face for once. Women (because of their innate vanity, I suppose!) avoid that exhibition of agonized looks and tortured faces! Her recitals have not the long drawn out boredom of the ordinary South Indian cutcheries [Tamil *kaccēri*]. . . . It is the art of music she wishes to display and not its mathematics." (1966, 66–67)

What emerges in writing and talk about M.S.'s voice is a new discourse about the natural voice; constantly remarked on are her genuineness on stage, her complete emotional involvement as she sings. Recent biographies play up M.S.'s personal humility and innocence, opposing it to the "grandeur" and "majesty" of her voice, noting that she "knows nothing but music" and when offstage is a simple housewife like any other (Indira Menon 1999, 141).[21]

Many descriptions of her voice use the metaphor of flight, implying at once an escape from the body and an association with nature: "the effortlessness of a nightingale's flight to its mate." Reviews of M.S.'s records are replete with metaphors of bodilessness or dissolution of the body. Good music should "melt" (*kēṭṭavarkaḷai urukki*) the listener, make the mind "swoon" (*uḷḷam māyaṅkum*), or the listener "forget himself" (*mey marantu*: literally, "forget the body"). In a 1942 review, after remarking that the gramophone record "captures" the range of M.S.'s voice from its lowest to highest notes, Kalki Krishnamurthy comments, with regard to a particular line of a song, "If you hear it once, you'll have the desire to hear it again and again, a thousand times. Good thing this is a music record and there is no problem hearing it again and again!" (75). It is as if the ideal listen-

ing experience had come to be identified with listening to gramophone records; the recognition of the perfection of M.S.'s voice is linked to its disembodiment and mechanical repetition on the record.[22]

Comments on the naturalness of M.S.'s voice found their way into a discourse about art as well; reviewers slipped easily from descriptions of her performances or recordings to ideas about what art should be. The letters of Rasikamani T. K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar from the 1940s are laden with references to M.S.'s performances. After hearing one of her radio concerts, he wrote that her rendition of a song had "melted the listeners. That is art, is it not? It must make our feelings mingle with Truth [*tattuvam*], and make us into different beings [*vēṟu vastuvāka akkiviṭavēṇṭum*]" (Maharajan 1979, 136). However, as Venkatachalam noted, art was also for more mundane purposes.

> "What six singers would you select from India to represent this country in a World Music Festival?" asked a well-known European impresario not long ago, and I had no hesitation in suggesting Roshanara and Kesarbai for Hindustani music; M.S. Subbulakshmi and D.K. Pattammal for the Carnatic; Kamala Jharia and Kananbala for popular songs [all women artists].
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Two points warrant attention here. First, it is female vocalists, not male, who are thought to represent not only India but also art itself in the new global market; Venkatachalam implies that although the male vocalists had a local following, they would not be able to travel as representatives of India. Second, art—here, the art of music—is identified with a naturalness that is gendered as female.[23]

By the 1940s, the connection between women and music had ascended to the level of an assumption. In a series of essays written in English and published by the Theosophical Society, Rukmini Devi elaborated on the special connection that she felt existed between women and the fine arts. "The spirit of womanhood," she wrote, "is the spirit of the artist."[24] Women possessed an "innate refinement" which made it incumbent on them to take up the revival of Indian art: "Innate as this refinement is, the study and practice of such arts as dancing, music, and painting can distinctly help in its development. . . . Without the expression of the arts in life, in the very home itself, there can be no real refinement and of course no real civilization."[25] To be an artist meant not necessarily *producing* music or art but *being* art itself: "It is necessary that in her walk, in her speech and her actions she should be the very embodiment of beauty and grace."[26] In learning the arts, what was necessary was "rigorous work, the complete subjugation of all other personal desires and pleasures, the abandonment of one's being to the Cause."[27] The success of the Indian nation, as well as the Indian arts, depended on restoring woman from her degraded position to that of "a divine influence rising above the material aspect of things."[28]

Devi imagined the relationship between voice and body to be analogous to the relationship between music and dance. Although she could not completely efface the physicality or eroticism of dance, her writings point to the necessity, in her view, of putting its physicality to some higher use. Music was, for her, the divine influence that would insure this. In her essay "Dance and Music" she wrote that music, "the basic language of Gods," was what saved dance from being "mere physical acrobatics."[29] It was the "universal language of the soul," the "saving grace of humanity."[30] In such a conception the materiality of music is effaced. Instead of being seen as social, something which comes into being through performance and the mediation of human actors, it is seen as a kind of pure voice from within, a voice deeply contained *within* the body, but neither connected to nor manifested on its surface.

The Limits of Performance

In her article on the agenda of the Madras Music Academy between 1930 and 1947, Lakshmi Subramanian states that the reorientation of music and dance—performance style, repertoire, and the performers themselves—toward an urban, largely Brahmin, middle class was part of a "sanitizing" mission that emphasized the spirituality of Karnatic music and Bharata Natyam over their sensual aspects (1999a). On the dance stage, this meant that "spiritual love" and "restrained devotion," rather than "sensual experience" and "raw passion," had to be projected (82).[31] On the music stage,

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the sanitizing project produced a distinction between "classical" and "light classical" music; the compositions of the trinity of composer-saints came to be considered the central repertoire of Karnatic music, while padams and javalis (associated with the devadasi tradition) were considered "light classical" (83).[32] The compositions of the trinity, which expressed spiritual devotion to Rama, were seen as the appropriate subject matter for classical music. This reorientation of Karnatic music toward the spiritual realm was accompanied by the changes in infrastructure discussed in chapter 2—the establishment of concert halls, music sabhas, and music-teaching institutions—that created a public sphere distinctly different from the temple and courtly milieus in which Karnatic music had flourished in the nineteenth century.

A central effect of the shift from these settings to the public concert hall was that music and dance were separated from each other, physically and conceptually.[33] Under the reforming eye of Rukmini Devi, musicians—who had previously accompanied dancers by moving with or behind them on stage—were seated at the left end of the stage, presumably to give them more respect. However, musicians who performed for dance never got as much respect as concert musicians; their music was seen as somehow not pure or classical enough (Allen 1997, 66). E. Krishna Iyer, in his 1933 sketch on the dancer Balasaraswati, wrote that the art of Bharata Natyam needed to be "overhauled if it should have any real appeal in these days" (98). Changing the character of the accompanying music could, he suggested, bring about the desired change in atmosphere. "If possible the vociferous clarionet will have to be substituted by the flute or other more agreeable and indigenous instruments. The noise of the jalar [small metal cymbals used to beat the tala] in the hands of the nattuvans [musicians who keep the tala with these cymbals] will have to be controlled and reduced considerably so as to allow the beautiful sound of the ankle bells to be heard" (98). "Noise" implied a spectacle, an excess of performance and an unruly audience, while "beautiful sound" evoked the image of a silent audience appreciating an aesthetic production.

Perhaps more important, dancers stopped singing. Unlike traditional devadasis, who sang as they danced, the Bharata Natyam dancers trained at Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra not only did not sing but did a minimum of *abhinaya* (facial gestures and/or mime, often contrasted with "pure dance"). Krishna Iyer suggested that the "low atmosphere" of nautch performances was due to a kind of overperformance of abhinaya: "The over-developed technique of the art, admirable as it is in much of the details of abhinaya . . .

has to be kept within limits and desirable proportions so as not to obscure or interfere with the natural grace of movements and poses" (1933, 98). If respectable dancers no longer sang, it was perhaps because the sound of their voice would add a kind of unseemly interiority to the performance. On the music stage, the reverse was true: respectable musicians did not dance when they sang, for this would interfere with the singer's projection of interiority. The association of dance with something improper in music can be seen in a 1941 article in *Nāṭṭiyam* entitled "Apiṉayam Vēṇṭām" (We do not want abhinaya). The author, Gottuvadyam Durayappa Bhagavatar, turned the meaning of the verb *apiṉayi* from the rather neutral idea of miming or "showing in gestures" to the negative connotation of "imitation," suggesting that many young musicians, instead of developing their own original style, were simply imitating others. A term from dance became a metaphor for imitation, a kind of excess of performance that would be unseemly on the music stage.

What were the implications of this separation for the performing subject? For female musicians in particular, a convention of music performance developed in which the body was effaced; too much physical movement or "show" on the stage was seen not only as extraneous to the music but as unseemly. In 1939 the violinist C. Subrahmanya Ayyar wrote that excessive gesturing by singers had become so prevalent that there were special Tamil terms coined to describe them: *iyantiram araikkiṟatu* (a phrase suggesting the motions of a machine hulling paddy) and *mallayuttam* (wrestling). "Sometime back," he noted disapprovingly, "the Tamil weekly *Ananta Vikatan* published photos of such ugly poses of several vocalists, but the satire was lost on them; for they deemed the photos as a matter of advertisement for their renown in music" (1939, 45).

The ideal became a kind of performance of nonperformance: nothing visible was supposed to happen on the music stage. Until D. K. Pattammal began singing *ragam-tanam-pallavi* (a highly intellectual type of improvisation) onstage in the 1940s, and even after that, women musicians had confined themselves to performing only compositions; their only improvisation was a small raga alapana.[34] Singing compositions was not really considered to be performance. Women's voices, it was said, were not suited to the competitive type of music that men sang, where they tried to upstage each other in improvisatory virtuosity. In the late 1930s a reviewer in the Tamil magazine *Bharata Mani* wrote that "women's music needs to have its own character; women's concerts should not just be a copy of men's concerts. We do not need pallavis and elaborate raga alapana from women.

Padams and javalis are being forgotten as we speak. It would be good for women to give importance to them" ("Cennai cankīta vitvat capai: 12-āvatu mēlam" 1938, 372). Women's activity on the stage, suggested R. Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, a prominent male musician from the 1940s to the 1970s, should be akin to housekeeping. "The craze for *sahitya neeraval* and *swara prastara* [two types of improvisation] as a prestige symbol detracts from the inherent charm of a lady's voice. Lady musicians can resuscitate values . . . if they concentrate on repertoire. Hundreds of classical compositions need to be revived. The Hindu housewife has a reputation for keeping alive religious traditions" (quoted in Indira Menon 1999, 102–3). By such logic, family values are indistinguishable from the values of classical music.

The effacement of the female musician's body on the concert stage is accomplished not only by a lack of gesture but also by an implicit dress code that ensures that all female musicians look the same. Unlike Western concert black, which is supposed to make the musician's body symbolically invisible, Karnatic concert attire makes female musician's bodies visible as a certain type: a respectable family woman.[35] Whereas men's appearances on the Karnatic concert stage vary—pants, *veshtis* (cloth worn by men over the legs as a long skirt), silk *jibbahs* (tunics), Western-style button-down shirts, hairstyles from topknots to short haircuts—women's appearances have changed little over the years. All female musicians wear a fairly lavish (but not too lavish) silk sari and have their hair pulled back in a neat, tight plait or bun. Whereas male musicians who present an eccentric appearance are often thought to be geniuses, female musicians whose appearance differs from the norm provoke negative comments; their appearance is considered extramusical excess, an unseemly element. My violin teacher, whose unkempt appearance was a source of anxiety to her family members, often received advice about how she might improve her appearance so that she might be called for concerts more often. She compared her own "fate" to that of a male flutist she had accompanied many times when he was drunk and disheveled on stage; his eccentricities, however, were universally hailed as a sign of his genius. Eccentric women, my teacher pointed out, were not likely to be taken as geniuses.

The association between female respectability and classical music is so strong that metaphors of dress often motivate conversations about music. For several months in 1998 I took lessons with a female vocalist in her fifties. Her persona in the Karnatic music world was one of intellectual musicianship, a rigor devoid of the show or gimmicks often associated

16 Women's clothing and classical music as interchangeable signs of tradition. Binny Silks advertisement (1994). Photograph by Amanda Weidman.

with younger male performers. In a sense, this "intellectual" image was the only one available for a female musician of her age, neither old enough to be a pioneer nor young enough to be a rising star. On one occasion she remarked to me that if she had been born some twenty years earlier, she would have been M. S. Subbulakshmi, as if M.S. had simply occupied a slot that had become available in the public world of Karnatic music in the 1930s. Although she did indeed put emphasis on elements usually described as intellectual, such as pallavi and a ganam style of singing alapana, more important was the way *intellectual*, in critics' and audience members' descriptions of her music, serves as a code word for a female musician whose music is without "feminine" charm. The opposition between showiness and intellect is much less stark for male musicians, if it operates at all.

After our strictly timed one-hour lesson, she would, depending on her mood, ask me personal questions. One day she asked me why I always showed up in a sari, while other young women my age were wearing *salwar kameez* or even "jeans" (the summary term for all Western dress). I replied that by wearing the sari I got more respect and was even, on some occasions, able to pass as some kind of Indian. The conversation then turned to music. She expressed her distaste for many current trends in Karnatic

17 Sari advertisement in *Sruti* (January 2003).

music performance, its so-called innovations. Traditional music and traditional dress were unassailable signs of Indianness; despite the fact that one was intangible and the other quite literally material, they were often used as signs for and of each other. "You tie a sari and you get respect," she told me. "That is sangitam." Advertisements for saris often play on the same slippage between music and clothing as symbols of tradition. In an advertisement for Binny Silks, shown on a billboard in Madras in 1994, a woman dressed in a lavish, decorously draped silk sari sits with a veena, with the caption "Traditional beauty made to grace any occasion." In 2003 a newspaper advertisement played on the word *sari* and the musical syllables *sa* and *ri* to suggest that the vendor's saris were the most traditional ones available.

The metaphoric opposition between prostitution and chastity, between uncontrolled female sexuality and domestic womanhood, continues to determine the definition and limits of performance in Karnatic music.[36] During the period in 1998 when I had daily violin lessons with my teacher in Madras, I was always impatient to do swara kalpana, a type of improvisation that takes place within the tala cycle after a composition. My teacher was generally uninterested in it. "It is not really music," she would say. "Just calculations." Raga alapana (also called *ragam*) was the most important thing. She remembered as a young woman also having had a "craze" for swara kalpana. She asked a male musician she accompanied at the time to teach her some of his kalpana tricks. He had berated her: "Paittiyam poṇṇu! [Crazy girl!] You play such beautiful ragam. Why do you want to ruin it with this cheap stuff?" She had come to agree with him. "All this is just kavarcci [attraction; also, sexual attraction], just feats with the tala, like a characterless woman. But ragam—that is like your mother." Ragam, she explained, should be born within: first you enjoy it inside yourself, and then it comes out for others. Swara kalpana, for her, could not claim the same purity of origin; calculation [*kaṇakku*: the same word as that used for accounting, giving it a businesslike connotation] gave it a kind of external, unseemly quality.[37] To imitate certain vocalists doing swara kalpana, she began to slap her leg loudly in mock tala-keeping and barked out an unmelodic string of swaras. Then, to demonstrate raga alapana, she assumed a posture of utter stillness, turned her palms upward, closed her eyes, and began to hum.[38]

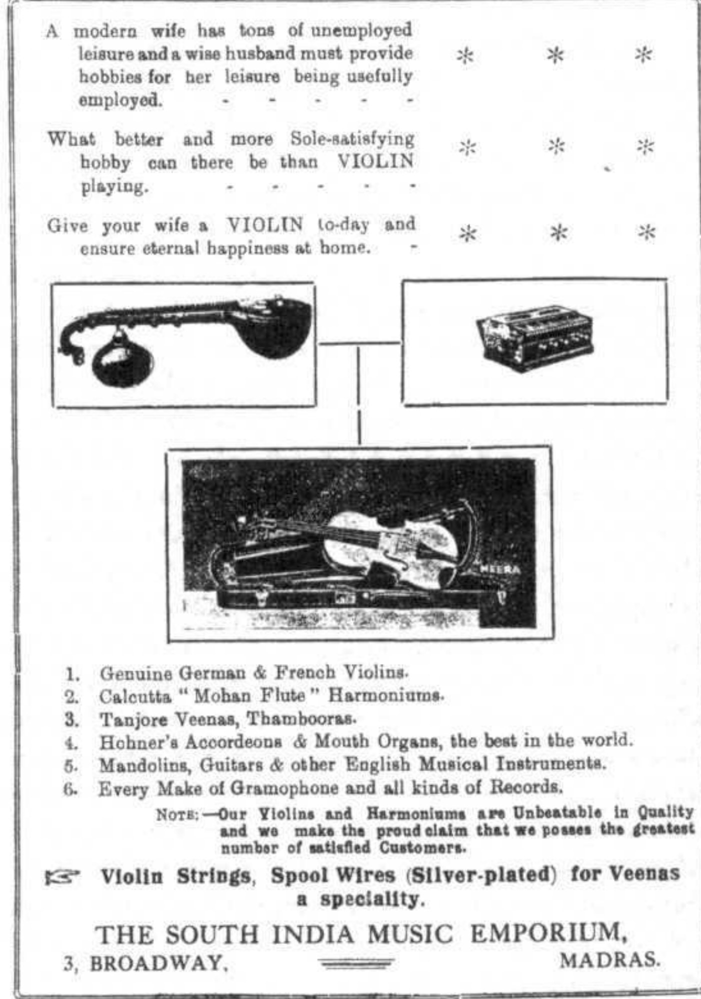
Such restrictions might seem antiquated, yet they continue, perhaps in subtler form, in present-day conventions of Karnatic music performance. In 1998 I attended a concert by the immensely popular young vocalist Sowmya, who was accompanied by M. Narmada on the violin. Both women were dressed, as usual, in appropriately lavish silk saris. The concert was uneventful. However, it is precisely the uneventfulness that is part of the aesthetic production: nothing out of the ordinary is supposed to happen. During her raga alapana, Narmada played with closed eyes, face screwed up perhaps in concentration, perhaps to avoid the gaze of the audience. Meanwhile, during the tradeoffs in swara kalpana, when the concert would presumably reach a fever pitch of excitement, Sowmya, waiting for her turn to come around, adjusted her sari, refolded the handkerchief in her lap, and checked her watch, as if nothing exciting were happening. The more classical the music, the less there is to watch on stage; if anything, musicians perform a kind of interiority through bodily posture.[39]

Family Values . . .

Notions of classical music and musicianship became conflated with notions of ideal womanhood in twentieth-century South India through a particular model of domesticity. The Tamil nationalist poet and essayist Subramania Bharatiyar wrote in 1909 of the need for *kutumpa strīkaḷ* (family women) to take up music. His essay "Caṅkīta Viṣayam" was concerned with the problem of what he conceived of as a loss of musical sensibility

among Tamils. The best way of stemming this loss, he suggested, was to improve women's music in the home—a kind of trickle-up approach that tapped the natural musicality of women. If family women could be given a proper grasp and appreciation of music, the rest of society would improve. For women, he stated, "have an especial connection to music" (1909, 222); if one prohibited women from singing, one would find that one had not only no music but no life at all (221). If women could just be taught to sing correctly what they were already singing in the home as folk ditties and lullabies, the connection would be realized. Bharatiyar offered several practical suggestions. First, women must acquire *tāla ñāṉam* (a rhythmic sense, literally, knowledge of tala). Some said that women innately lacked tala sense, but Bharatiyar maintained that it was a matter of practice. To those who objected on the grounds that family women were not *tācis* (devadasis) and did not need to sing concerts, he responded that singing incorrectly, without regard for the tala, sounded *virācam* (vulgar) (221). For those women who wanted to sing, Bharatiyar recommended that they hire a teacher to teach them proper voice culture and that they stay away from *nāṭaka meṭṭu* (drama tunes), cheap songs with *koccai moḻi* (slang), and, most of all, English and Parsi songs (227–28). For family women interested in learning an instrument, Bharatiyar recommended the veena, with its calm, soft sound, as being particularly appropriate. "If more women played on the veena, there would be a greater appreciation of aesthetic beauty and the niceties of life [rācapayircci, vāḻkkai nayam]" (224).

Through its literal domestication, then, music would produce domesticity; classical music was seen as the soundtrack for the modern marriage and the modern home. In 1894 a letter in the *Mysore Herald* declared that the publication of Karnatic music compositions in European notation, released a year earlier, "must be introduced to our girls." The writer remarked excitedly that, with such a system of notation, "songs could be mastered from mere books" (Chinnaswamy Mudaliar 1892, 208–9). The effect would be a double solution to the "anti-nautch-girl question": it would spare girls from respectable families from having to go to less respectable types to learn music and would provide "respectable musicians who could socially mix and move with us, on social occasions like marriages and similar gatherings where we have been [hearing] the prostitute's music" (208–9). Meanwhile, music would become the agent, or vehicle, of the kind of noncorporeal, spiritual love that should exist between a husband and wife: "There must be a unity of feeling in all pursuits, . . . emphatically so in a Hindu home where the tie is not of the senses but of



18 South India Music Emporium advertisement in *Madras Music Academy Souvenir* (ca. 1935–1940).

a sacred character, emblematical of the eternal wedding of souls together in harmonious fusion" (209). The lofty musical metaphor of harmony was thus used to characterize marriage. At the same time, music domesticated the private space of the home. The writer of the letter, as if to make things clear, concluded that "music preparation for our future wives is to secure pleasant households after the day's weary life-struggle is suspended" (209).

Essential to domestication of private space was the domestication of free time, particularly the time now possessed by the modern wife who had been freed from menial tasks and chores. A 1930s advertisement for the South India Music Emporium addressed young husbands as the ones responsible for buying the trappings of domestic life. Appearing in the concert program of the Madras Music Academy, the ad counseled male concertgoers on how to connect the bourgeois public sphere of the classical concert hall with its domestic equivalent. "A modern wife has tons of unemployed leisure and a wise husband must provide hobbies for her leisure being usefully employed," suggested the ad. "What better and more soul-satisfying hobby can there be than violin playing. Give your wife a violin today and ensure eternal happiness at home." For "modern wives" who found themselves with too much time on their hands, music could serve as a spiritually uplifting domestic activity that would convert free time into spiritual capital. If modernity produced an excess of free time, music could expand as necessary to fill it; if this free time had revealed that the new Indian woman had a soul, music could satisfy it. Music became the bonding agent in a new type of ideal marriage; unlike caste or religion, it had the advantage of being able to appear both voluntary and deeply traditional, private as well as public. In one biography of M. S. Subbulakshmi, a photograph of her and her husband, Sadasivam, places them within this type of ideal marriage through its caption: "Icaiyil iṉainta uḻḻaṅkaḷ" (Souls joined in music) (Sarathy 1997, 43).

The private space of the home, however, was differentiated from the private space of the salon. In 1932 a letter to the *Madras Mail* responded to the anti-nautch movement, particularly its opposition to public performances of nautch, with this bit of reasoning: "If the dance is to be free from its less respectable associations, the encouragement of public display appears to be the best way to do it. Private parties tend to encourage the notion of lack of respectability. Public functions, on the other hand, show the dance for what it is" (*Sruti* 1997, 5). The private space of the salon was considered unseemly and deceptive, while the concert hall allowed room only for clear observation and not for illusion; any identification

with the performer would not be felt as personal attraction but would be mediated by the language of art. The concert hall, unlike a private salon, ensured a respectable distance between the performer and the audience, not only physically but also psychologically; in public, the performer performed for no one in particular. Such a shift was accomplished not only by the rise of concert halls but through the music itself. The repertoire of public concert-hall music featured the devotional compositions of the "trinity" (the composers Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar, and Syama Sastri), which eschewed all reference to human patrons. This form of spiritual devotion came to be thought of not as an extramusical element, as was thought of the human love expressed in padams and javalis (musical compositions for dance conveying the meanings of sensuous love), but as the essence of music itself.[40]

How did such notions affect conventions of music performance and the way music was thought of? Music's relationship to notions of public and private space was determined by the kind of ideological and practical domestication of music that was taking place. By "domestication" I do not mean just that music was brought into the home but also that its relationship to notions of public and private changed. The "respectability" that music gained in the 1930s and 1940s was in part due to its peculiar ability to mediate between public and private. Music brought women into the public sphere in a particular way, as the voice of tradition. They were not perceived as innovators, much less as performers; rather, a woman was to sing as though music were a natural property of her voice. To ease the problem of women appearing on the concert stage, they often appeared (and continue to appear) in duos; sisters performing together imparted a very different aura from a woman performing solo. Many women who played accompanying instruments like the violin were allowed to accompany only their brothers or other family members onstage, as if their entry into public could be thus controlled.

Meanwhile, in many upper-caste families, women became musicians because it was something they could do without formal school education and because it did not necessarily require them to leave the house; it was a vocation that could be learned and practiced in the home.[41] Indeed, many of the interviews with female musicians in a volume entitled *The Singer and the Song* (Lakshmi 2000) convey a sense of how music has been practiced as a means of compensation for the frustration of other social, familial, and professional desires.[42] Some of the women interviewed speak of their devotion to music in particular as a kind of strategy for coping with the

oppression of family obligations. On the other hand, careers as professional musicians have allowed many women to escape marriage entirely. In a society where remaining unmarried is, for a woman, practically unheard of, there is a disproportionately large number of unmarried female musicians who are "devoted to music." If my teacher spoke wistfully about female musicians who had husbands to help them, other female musicians often remarked to me that they didn't understand why my teacher was unhappy and why she moped around and refused to practice. "She has no obligations to a husband," said one. "She could be devoting herself to her music."

. . . *And Their Limits*

The public face of such "devotion" may be very different from its private motivations, however. One afternoon, my teacher, whose stories usually managed to disrupt the platitudes of the Karnatic music world, launched into a telling of how she became devoted to music. She was about seventeen years old, her sister thirteen or so. There were brothers older and younger. She had been playing the violin for years, sitting in the corner of the room and listening while her father's students came to learn. Her sister had not shown as much interest but was more studious in school, so their parents decided to send the sister to a boarding school to prepare her for college. My teacher, who had had only a tenth-standard education, felt slighted.

She got to thinking: why should only her sister have the opportunity to become educated, go to college, and eventually work outside the home? How could they have been born of the same parents and be treated so unequally, one kept at home in the bonds of hereditary musicianship, while the other was sent away to get a college education? She began to doubt she was her father's child after all. In anger and protest, she retreated to the upper verandah of the house, refusing to eat, talk, or play the violin for two weeks. Her father, who was almost blind, and absorbed in his music anyway, did not notice until her mother said something. Then he came up the stairs to where she was sitting. She had expected harsh words, but instead, as if reading her mind, her father had gently said, "So, you are doubting whether you are really my child or not?" But rather than simply laying her doubt to rest, he had said, "You play your violin. Listen to that sound. And you will know." From that moment, she said, her resentments had melted away, and she became aware that musical ties were as strong as ties of blood.

In this scenario music again restores domestic tranquility, but in the interest of a very different set of family values: one based on hereditary musicianship rather than bourgeois middle-class family arrangements. As classical music came to be a respectable art for upper-caste women, it took its part in a larger imagination of ideal womanhood that included ideas of the artist (as opposed to the hereditary musician) and the natural voice, on one hand, and companionate marriage and domesticity, on the other. But for female musicians from non-Brahmin families these ideals seem to be much more difficult to achieve. These women must negotiate the contradiction between the modern notion of Karnatic music as a secular art music, presumably without specified gender roles, and the nonbourgeois contexts in which they have become musicians.

In 1996 I sought out M. S. Ponnuthai, one of the first women to become a professional nagaswaram player. Nagaswaram (also called nadaswaram), a double-reed instrument, is associated almost exclusively with musicians from the Icai Veḷḷāḷar caste. Until the 1940s, when Ponnuthai began to play in public, the instrument was played exclusively by men, as it was believed to be too strenuous for women. Although much of its musical tradition is shared with Karnatic music, it remains to this day on the fringes of what is approved as classical, having only marginal status as a concert-hall instrument. Its traditional role has been to provide music for auspicious occasions, such as temple rituals and weddings.[43]

Ponnuthai, who was in her mid-sixties at the time I met her in Madurai, had had an illustrious career as a nagaswaram player for temple and political processions, as well as on the concert stage; one of her distinctions was that she had made concert audiences appreciate the nagaswaram. As I made repeated visits to her house, however, it became clear that she was uninterested in talking about her life. My attempts to steer the conversation in that direction on several occasions ended in our watching televised cricket games. On other occasions, instead of talking, she would play at great length, taking obvious delight in my inability to keep up with her virtuosic raga alapana as I struggled to accompany her on the violin. I thought that these sessions would eventually soften her resistance, but on my last visit to her house I found that she had invited her grown son to answer my questions instead. While this was an ironic comment on the ethnographic project of finding authentic voices, it also revealed much about the politics of representation regarding the life of a woman who had led a very public life and then retreated.

From Ponnuthai's son I learned that her father, a government servant

with progressive ideas, was inspired by the essays of Subramania Bharathiyar. Having decided that his daughter should take up the nagaswaram, Ponnuthai's father apparently groomed her for a public life. After her debut at age thirteen, he resigned from his job in order to escort her to performances and also began collecting concert reviews and other press releases about her. Indeed, among the many clippings her son showed me were reviews of her performances in Ceylon, Singapore, and elsewhere, which her father had neatly preserved by mounting on paper. Ponnuthai married a prominent citizen of Madurai who served as a representative for the Congress Party, and she herself served as the head of the Madurai Icai Veḷḷāḷar Sangam, an organization that served the welfare of nagaswaram musicians, from 1953 to 1963. In 1972, after her husband died, she stopped playing in temples and gradually retreated from public view. Among the clippings were several magazine articles written about her in the early 1990s. I asked her which she thought was the best, and she pointed to the cover story in *Ananta Vikatan*, "Maturai Poṉṉutāy: Oru Kaṉṉīr Katai" (Madurai Ponnuthai: A sad story) (Saupa 1990).

The article begins with an imagined scene of Ponnuthai's *araṅkēṟṟam* (debut), panning through the astonished crowd listening on the banks of the Vaigai River. After describing Ponnuthai's fame and success in hyperbolic terms, it notes her "sudden" disappearance from public life in 1972. "We wondered what had happened to her, and searched for her. . . . Some people told us that she had passed away. We were surprised by that, since just last month the Tamil Nadu government had announced that it was going to award her the title of 'Kalaimamani' [Great Jewel of the Arts]. We resumed our search with more urgency . . . and finally found her living a life of misery in a small house in an out-of-the-way part of Madurai." The narrative then cuts, cinematically, to the scene at the house, where Ponnuthai's "still majestic" look contrasts with the poverty of her circumstances. She goes next door to fetch the nagaswaram, the only place it can be kept safe from rats, and returns wearing earrings. "I had more than a hundred pounds of jewelry and gold medals," she laments. "Now it is all lost." Presumably prompted by the writer, she describes her meteoric rise, against the odds, and her ability to play for all-night temple functions even while pregnant. She describes how, after her marriage, her husband "never interfered" with her career, and how their large house, in the center of town, was always full of distinguished guests. Then, comments the reporter, "for a few moments, the great nagaswaram artist was silent. Her eyes welled up with tears." Ponnuthai goes on to say, "My husband died in 1972. With that, my musical life was finished." The reporter feigns an innocent question: "Why? Couldn't you continue playing?" And the article moves to what is obviously the clincher. "Nagaswaram," Ponnuthai explains, "is an auspicious instrument. After my husband's death I became an inauspicious woman [*amaṅkala peṇ*] and could no longer play in temples. People talked behind my back. I stopped playing for radio, too. There was no income, and I was too proud to ask for any help." The reporter comes in for the fadeout: "Wiping the dust from the nagaswaram, she raised it to her lips. What dignity! What majesty! From her unhesitating fingers a shower of music poured forth" (Saupa 1990, 10–14).

What politics of representation are at work here? The article is meant to evoke sympathy, even outrage that society has allowed so distinguished a musician to sink into poverty and oblivion.[44] It invites the reader—given this journal's readership, most likely a housewife reading in her leisure time—to witness the conflict between modernity, signified by Ponnuthai's emergence into the public sphere, and the views of a tradition-bound society that still believes that women become inauspicious when they are widowed. Modernity, here, is articulated in the voice of the narrator, whose reportage is mixed with exclamations—"What dignity! What majesty!"—that indicate a subject able to appreciate good music no matter who or where it is coming from. By melodramatically staging Ponnuthai's problem as a secret that must be revealed, the article assumes a "modern" reader innocent of such antiquated conflicts; the unspoken comparison is to the middle-class, Brahmin music world of Madras in which it is a modern discourse on family values, not traditional religious values, that both makes possible and sets limits for women's professional musicianship.

What is striking, then, is the discontinuity between Ponnuthai's career as a professional musician and the careers of women in the middle-class music world of Madras. In a conversation in 1997 Bhairavi, a professional musician from an Icai Veḷḷāḷar family, then in her early thirties, spoke of a similar discontinuity.[45] Although her great-grandparents had been musicians, neither her grandparents nor her parents had continued the tradition; she herself had made a conscious decision to become a professional flutist. She had recently been married, but the match had taken a long time to make, since she was in an anomalous category: not only was she a professional musician, but she played the flute, an instrument that has not been taken up by non-Brahmin women since the beginning of the twentieth century.[46] It was rare for women of her caste to take up music at all, much less as a profession. She remarked to me that young musicians from

Brahmin families were increasingly engaging in love marriages but that this was not possible for her; for someone of her caste, music did not provide the same kind of avenue toward bourgeois, middle-class sensibility. For a husband and wife of her caste to have their "souls joined in music" was not an option. At the time of our conversation, Bhairavi's husband, who was not a musician, was having trouble finding employment, so Bhairavi was supporting the family by giving music lessons and had applied for teaching positions in schools. I asked if such an arrangement would be acceptable. "That's how it used to be in our caste anyway," she replied. "The ladies were all dancers and musicians and they supported the men." For her, the irony was that the very transformations in the music world that had in the name of respectability taken professionalism away from female musicians of her caste in the early twentieth century now made it possible for her to earn a living as a professional musician.[47]

Stage Goddesses and Studio Divas

I have dwelled on the lives and commentary of these two women because they occupy the fringes of a dominant discourse that links classical music, ideal womanhood, and domesticity in a particular way. In doing so, they clarify the contours of this discourse and the kinds of exclusions on which it is built. For both Ponnuthai and Bhairavi, the dilemma has been how to create a life for themselves as women musicians who are neither from the Brahmin, middle-class music world of Madras nor from conventional hereditary musical families. For both, much of the discourse linking classical music, ideal womanhood, and the nationalist aspirations of an urban middle class had been enabling: it had enabled Ponnuthai (through her father's desires) to take up the nagaswaram and to travel widely, setting an example for many younger female musicians aspiring to become professional; it had enabled Bhairavi to pursue music as a career, something that the women in generations preceding hers could not have respectably done. At the same time, Ponnuthai and Bhairavi were also alienated, as was my violin teacher, from the subjects of this discourse. Much of the irony of Bhairavi's comment comes from the realization that the profound discontinuity effected by the emergence of classical music in the twentieth century made possible a strange kind of continuity.

In the century or so that separated Bhairavi's life from the lives of her female ancestors, tremendous changes had taken place in the way music was conceptualized and practiced—including infrastructure changes like the building of concert halls and music schools, and technological changes like the emergence of gramophone recording and radio—which engendered a new kind of discourse about music. Not only did music become available to "respectable" women as a vocation and sometimes a career but it became available in particular ways. If my teacher found the transition from music to the topic of marriage to the essential difference between women and men "quite natural," it is because twentieth-century discourse about music was connected, metaphorically and quite literally, to a discourse about family values.[48]

In the 1930s and 1940s ideals of chaste womanly behavior—not drawing attention to one's body or relying on physical charms—became a metaphor for a new kind of art that privileged meaning and naturalness over cleverness and acrobatics. In that sense, classical singing was refigured as a natural expression of devotion. A woman was expected to sing music as though it were a natural property of her voice. The natural voice and the chaste female body were thus linked. By the 1950s, the adjectives *natural* and *artificial* had come to be used to contrast female voices singing classical music and film songs, respectively. Kalki Krishnamoorthy, the same reviewer who had raved about M.S.'s voice, wrote disparagingly of the "insipid" and "artificial" sweetness of the renowned film singer Lata Mangeshkar's voice. Kalki used the Tamil word *vacīkara*, meaning attractive or alluring, with distinct sexual connotations, to describe the film voice, warning readers not to get infatuated with film music and forget the natural beauty of classical singing (Kalki 1951).

In this discourse on classical music, performance that drew attention to the body came to be associated with the artificial; good music was not something to be performed but rather was simply "expressed." The "voice of the century" referred not only to M. S. Subbulakshmi's sound but to a particular kind of voice that was imagined to come naturally from within, unmediated by performance of any kind, a voice embodied in a distinct way. The notion of "expression," as Webb Keane has written, is predicated on a particular linguistic ideology that separates form from content and in which the voice merely "refers to" other sites of action or "reflects" a prior, interior self but is not considered to have a role in *creating* that self (1997, 684). In tracing the development of the modern notion of self in European thought Charles Taylor suggests that the notion of expression is itself a modern idea very much linked to the imagination of the self's

interiority; the concept of art, as he notes, relies on both the rejection of an outwardly oriented mimesis and the embrace of an inwardly oriented expression (1989).[49]

Indian nationalist discourse linked the notion of an "inner voice" with the "inner sphere" of the Indian nation, imagined to be India's uncolonized interior and often equated metaphorically and literally with the domestic sphere.[50] Indeed, Mahatma Gandhi linked "good music," "harmony," and the concept of an "inner voice" in a series of nationalist writings from the mid-1940s. For Gandhi, who was a great admirer of M.S., singing classical music was a metaphor for leading a moral life.[51] "As I am nearing the end of my earthly life," he wrote, "I can say that producing good music from a cultivated voice can be achieved by many, but the art of producing that music from the harmony of a pure life is achieved only rarely" (Gandhi 1958, 132).

The "voice of the century" was as much a product of the technologies that mediated it as it was a product of individual ability or genius. In a very real sense, the gramophone and the microphone created the "perfection" and "nuance" of M. S. Subbulakshmi's voice for the listeners who heard her through these media. The idea of perfection is only possible when a piece of music becomes an object to be contemplated over and over again rather than heard in a single live performance. Nuances become audible and locatable in a voice only when the voice is amplified—separated, in a sense—from the body that produces it. In twentieth-century South India, the female voice, disassociated from its body through these technologies and through a particular way of performing interiority, came to have a certain ideological significance.

The purity of this voice was maintained by a careful maintenance of its boundaries; it was not a "disembodied" voice that could travel freely but a voice that was embodied in a particular way. By midcentury, Tamil films began to feature female dancing bodies that were, by the standards of the time, decidedly immodest; the voices with which those actresses sang onscreen became another foil for the respectability of classical music and its prodigies. Although many successful classical musicians, including M. S. Subbulakshmi and D. K. Pattammal, gained considerable fame through their acting and singing for films, the limits of their participation in the cinema world were carefully defined. M.S. stopped acting in films after 1945 in order to devote herself to classical performances; apparently, it was not possible for her to do both. D. K. Pattammal, on the other hand, remained active in the Tamil cinema world as a playback singer on

the carefully observed condition that she sing only patriotic songs, never love songs, as if she could ensure the authority, and fidelity, of her voice by making sure its referent was Mother India and not her own or any other actress's body.

M.S. and D. K. Pattammal were an inspiration to numerous playback singers, women who recorded their voices for actresses' characters. Three playback singers I spoke with—women in their sixties and seventies in the early 2000s—all spoke of wanting to be "just like M.S." when they were young but being forced by economic necessity to sing for films. Interestingly, while the *younger* female playback singers I spoke with talked about changing their voices depending on the character they were portraying, the *older* singers insisted that they did not change their voices for different characters. In the words of one, "God has given you one voice. If you start changing it around, it stops being singing and turns into mimicry."[52] Value and authenticity were thus attached to singing, in contrast to mimicry. Indeed, maintaining one's status as a playback "artiste" required an insistence on having "one's own voice," which remained constant. Another playback singer described how in order to sing playback for films one had to learn to "give expression just in the voice, not in the face," in order to channel all of one's expressive power into the voice, leaving the face and body neutral.[53] To demonstrate this, she sang in a range of voices, from little boy to young woman to old lady, while keeping her face and body utterly immobile.

Female playback singers, much more than actresses, often become celebrities in their own right; many make frequent stage appearances in which they sing their hit songs with a backup orchestra for audiences of dedicated fans. For older female playback singers, their stage personae often contrast greatly with the lyrics they are singing; in these stage appearances, it often seems like they make a particular effort *not* to embody their voices, as if in doing so they might maintain greater control over them. I attended a wedding concert by the renowned playback singer P. Susheela in 2002, during which she sang a number of romantic duet songs. Throughout the performance, she stood close to the microphone, with one hand at her ear and the other carefully keeping the end of her sari draped over her shoulder in the style of a chaste classical singer. This purposeful dissociation of body from voice is, I would argue, part of the politics of voice inaugurated by earlier female classical singers, and further enabled by the technology of playback singing.

For the "voice of the century," then, the kinds of bodies with which it could associate constituted one limit; the ways in which it could be

heard constituted another. Although M.S. and D. K. Pattammal *sang* in public, they never *spoke* in public, an act more conventionally associated with agency and "having a voice." Whereas Bangalore Nagaratnammal and Vai. Mu. Kothainayaki, part of the previous generation of female singers, spoke in public on issues such as Indian independence and the betterment of Indian women, Subbulakshmi and Pattammal assiduously avoided public speaking.[54] Indeed, it seems as though the "naturalness" and "purity" of their voices could only be guaranteed by maintaining the idea that those voices expressed an interior self, an innocent self detached from the world at large, who knew "nothing but music"—except, perhaps, a little housekeeping. In this sense, the very *audibility* of their singing voices depended on the silence of their speaking voices in the public sphere.

Gender and the Politics of Voice

Agency, in Western philosophy, is linked to the speaking voice, a link that is embedded in the classic methodology of ethnography as well (in which the ethnographer seeks verbal explanations or "meanings" for nonverbal forms in order to fill them with referential content). The dichotomy often drawn between "having a voice" and being silent or silenced, however, leaves us with little way to interpret voices that are highly audible and public yet not agentive in a classic sense, such as voices that have musical instead of referential content or voices that circulate through technologies of sound reproduction.

M.S.'s voice, as revealed by the various discourses *about* her voice and persona, is as much a product of a particular historical and social moment as it is a vehicle of her individual expression. This is not to deny her status as a creative artist and a powerful persona on stage, but rather to suggest, as does Mrinhalini Sinha, that "a focus on the voice or agency of women themselves does not have to be opposed to an examination of the ideological structures from which they emerged" (1996, 483). In exploring the creation of a voice in which women could speak as the "Indian woman" in the 1930s, Sinha moves beyond notions of pure feminist consciousness to show how the creation of a voice is always a strategic maneuver within certain ideological structures.

The creation of *musical* voices by women in the 1930s and 1940s was equally strategic, even though these voices emerged in a part of the public sphere seemingly far removed from political or even social discourse. Indeed, it is useful to ask how the speaking voices of women who emerged

in the 1930s as public speakers on nationalist causes and the subject of women's rights, on the one hand, and the singing voices of M. S. Subbulakshmi and D. K. Pattammal, on the other, may have worked to shape each other. The nationalist and poet Sarojini Naidu's onscreen introduction to the Hindi version of M.S.'s film *Meera,* in which she introduces M.S. as "the nightingale of India," is a literal example of this. The fact that Vai. Mu. Kothainayaki was partly responsible for bringing D. K. Pattammal onto the concert stage is another.[55] But beyond such literal connections, the fact that these voices were heard side by side is important; their juxtaposition defined the possibilities for "respectable" women's participation in the public sphere, even as they defined the content of that respectability.

Once the voice becomes recognizable as culturally and historically constructed, it is possible to ask what new forms of subjectivity are enabled by changing ideologies of voice. The politics of voice that came to operate in the 1930s imagined the voice in a particular relation to the body, as something that transcended the body. This relationship was articulated by Rukmini Devi, among others, as the relationship between music and dance, where music was supposed to raise dance above the physical, to make it more than the sum of its gestures. In the process, music itself had to be purified; in order to be truly classical, the voice of Karnatic music had to be reconceived as an "inner voice."

By a synecdochic chain of associations, this newly conceived domain of interiority became connected with another domain newly conceived as an essential part of bourgeois modernity: the middle-class home. The female musical voice and the middle-class home together constituted and stood for the inner sphere of the nation, a construct central to middle-class nationalism. The interiorized conception of voice made possible the subject positions of both the "classical artist" and the "respectable woman"; the natural voice of the artist was—and still is—identified with the chaste body of the respectable woman. Thus, even now, when it is no longer a novelty for upper-caste women to perform publicly, singing on the classical stage involves engaging not just the conventions of musical art but also the conventions of female respectability.

3 *Gender and the Politics of Voice*

1 The concept of dangerous female power that needs to be contained is prominent in Hindu mythology and in religious rules regulating women's behavior (see O'Flaherty 1980). One of these rules is marriage. In Tamil tradition, auspiciousness—that quality which leads to or enables good fortune and success—is embodied in the figure of the married woman and is lost when the woman is widowed (see Reynolds 1980).

2 Regula Qureshi meditates on this set of issues at length in her article on Begum Akhtar, the North Indian singer active from the 1930s to the 1970s and known for her renditions of Urdu *ghazals* (poetic couplets). In some ways her life parallels that of M. S. Subbulakshmi. Born into a courtesan family near Lucknow, Akhtari Bai achieved fame as a courtesan singer while in her teens through gramophone recordings. In the 1940s she married one of her admirers and thus became Begum (Lady, Mrs.) Akhtar; on entering the domestic life of a respectable wife she stopped singing for a number of years, beginning again only in the 1950s. Qureshi explores the ironies and conflicts involved in the life of a woman who transformed herself "from a hereditary professional singer to a respectably married lady who even gave up her singing career, only to emerge into the public domain transformed into a national symbol iconic of the courtly musical culture which had shaped her" (2001, 97).

3 The significance of the ideal of womanhood to the consolidation of a hegemonic middle-class culture in India and the middle-class basis of the Indian nationalist movement have been examined by several scholars. Partha Chatterjee, in a 1989 essay on the nationalist resolution of the women's question in the 1870s, argues that the rearticulation of Indian womanhood was the foundation on which the notion of an "inner sphere" representative of Indianness was built. As Mrinhalini Sinha restates the idea, "The re-articulation of the Indian woman for the self-definition of the nationalist bourgeoisie provided the context for the 'modernizing' of certain indigenous modes of regulating women in orthodox Indian society" (1996, 482). Sumanta Banerjee, also in the context of nineteenth-century Bengal, argues that the creation of a new public space for the respectable *bhadramahila* (educated middle-class woman) was predicated on sharpening class differentiation, especially through the regulation of women's popular culture and the juxtaposition of this new woman with women from lower socioeconomic strata (1989). More recently, Mankekar 1999 and Hancock 1999 have explored middle-class constructions of womanhood in relation to nationalist discourses in North and South India respectively.

4 Before the 1930s, as Kathryn Hansen has noted, the popular theater and early cinema "created a public space in which societal attitudes towards women could be debated" (1998, 2291). "Through the institution of female impersonation, a publicly visible, respectable image of 'woman' was constructed, one that was of use to both men and women. This was a representation that, even attached to the material male body, bespoke modernity. As one response to the British colonial discourse on Indian womanhood—the accusations against Indian women on account of their backward, degraded females—the representation helped support men, dovetailing with the emerging counter-discourse of Indian masculinity. Moreover, women derived from these enactments an image of how they should represent themselves in public. Female impersonators, by bringing into the public sphere the mannerisms, speech and distinctive appearance of middle class women, defined the external equivalents of the new gendered code of conduct for women" (ibid., 2296).

5 According to Kunal Parker, the term *devadasi*, which literally means "servant of the gods" in Sanskrit, began to be used in Anglo-Indian discourse only in the second half of the nineteenth century. The colonial label "dancing girl" was used to refer to communities of women with and without temple affiliations in different parts of the Bombay and Madras Presidencies (Parker 1998, 567). The dance they performed was, in Tamil Nadu, variously called sadir, nautch, or karnatakam, before the "revival" of the dance form in the 1940s as Bharata Natyam.

6 See Ramakrishna 1983 and Venkarataratnam 1901 for further elaboration.

7 See Anandi 1991 for a detailed discussion of the novel.

8 The abolitionist cause was also helped by American writers like Katherine Mayo, whose books *Mother India* (1927) and *Slaves of the Gods* (1929) specifically concerned the supposedly degraded state of devadasis.

9 The Tamil term *kalai*—which, according to the Cre-A Tamil dictionary, has meanings of both "art" and "workmanship" (Subramaniam 1992)—moved decidedly toward connotations of high art (as opposed to craft) in this early-twentieth-century discourse. See, for instance, a 1928 article by C. Jinarajadasa in *Triveni* magazine: "In India, in all the arts and crafts there is a great sense of beauty, but it is now traditional, i.e., the craftsman works by rote, and does not sufficiently feel a true creative urge. . . . If only our artists will look with the eyes of the West on Indian scenes . . . they will find plenty to inspire them" (3–4). Oppositions between art and craft also come up in Rukmini Devi's essay "The Creative Spirit" (ca. 1940s).

10 See the E. Krishna Iyer Centenary Issue of *Sruti* for a more detailed account of the controversy about public performances of nautch (*Sruti* 1997, 6–9). Muthulakshmi Reddy was particularly opposed to the staging of nautch performances at government functions or celebrations.

11 See Amrit Srinivasan (1985, 1875) for a concise listing of some of the changes this involved; also Allen (1997). The idea of devadasis as "pure virgin devotees" was Annie Besant's phrase. "There was a band of pure virgin devotees attached to the ancient Hindu temples. . . . In those days they were held in high esteem and were very well looked after. . . . They would follow the procession of

Gods dressed in the simplest sanyasi garbs and singing pious hymns. . . . This is the history and origin of the devadasi class" (Besant, quoted in Muthulakshmi Reddy 1928–1931, 5). For more on the Theosophical Society, its role in the revival of Bharata Natyam, and its naming of Rukmini Devi as the World Mother, see Dixon 1999, Allen 1997, Weidman 1995, and Burton 1994.

The Madras Mahajana Sabha and the Indian National Congress were founded in 1884 and 1885, respectively, both with a predominance of Smarta Brahmins (Hancock 1999, 56; Suntharalingam 1974, 231). In the early twentieth century, many of these Brahmins associated with the political/cultural program of the Theosophical Society, the headquarters of which were located in Madras. Annie Besant, the society's leader, formed the Home Rule League, which espoused the cause of complete independence for India. Theosophy, with its universalist spiritual philosophy, blended with elite discourse of the time, epitomized by the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association (established 1892), which envisioned a new, reformed Hindu society based on supposedly universal principles of citizenship, rights, and religious belief (Hancock 1999, 56–7). Central to the project of both were the agenda of social reform and the claiming of regional traditions of art, music, and dance as elements of a universal, pan-Indian "culture."

12 Adyar Library, Chennai (Madras), "The Creative Spirit," undated pamphlet published by the Theosophical Society through Vasantha Press in Madras in the 1940s, 14–15.

13 Ibid., 15.

14 In North India, as Regula Qureshi points out, recording provided an opportunity for courtesans to continue as singers and entertainers even as their opportunities for live performance diminished. Many courtesans became singers for films. Interestingly, it was also sound recordings that facilitated Begum Akhtar's re-entry into the public domain as a singer after her marriage and her transformation from courtesan to respectable married woman (Qureshi 2001, 97).

15 S. Kalpakam, personal communication, Madras, July 2002.

16 Baby Kamala was a dance prodigy of the time, credited for popularizing Bharata Natyam among the Brahmin middle classes even more than Rukmini Devi. Baby Kamala gave her first performance in 1941 at the age of seven; the appeal of the child prodigy can be seen in the fact that she retained the title "Baby" well into her teens. In 1988 a writer in *Sruti* commented on her rise, "The timing was perfect. The conditions ideal. And her age was just right. She was still a child, a 'baby' and her innocence and charm endeared her to one and all" (quoted in Allen 1997, 80–81). The appeal of the prodigy continues today; one popular musician is known as "Veena Virtuoso 'Baby' Gayatri."

17 M. S. Subbulakshmi's devadasi background has the status of a public secret in the Karnatic music world; everyone seems to know about it but it is never discussed publicly or written about. For example, Sarathy's 1997 biography of M.S. skirts the issue by not saying anything about who her father was. He was a wealthy Brahmin patron of her mother.

18 M.S. acted in four films: *Seva Sadanam* (1938), *Shakuntala* (1940), *Savitri* (1941), and *Meera* (1945). Sadasivam was the producer or co-producer for all of them. *Seva Sadanam* was a "social" film that critiqued Brahmin orthodoxy and the dowry system; *Shakuntala* and *Savitri* were based on mythological stories. *Meera*, M.S.'s most popular role, was based on the life of Meera Bai, a high-born Rajput woman who lived in the early sixteenth century, who declared herself to be Krishna's bride and renounced her worldly existence to pursue life as a saint and mendicant. The film was so popular in South India that it was later dubbed in Hindi. Sarojini Naidu gave an on-screen introduction to this version in which she described M.S. as the "nightingale of India" (Guy 1997, 229). Naidu's introduction deftly combines praise of M.S.'s voice with the implication that a good voice transcends its body like a bird in flight; at the same time, it makes M.S. represent India.

19 On the effects of the microphone in western contexts, Simon Frith writes that "the microphone made it possible for singers to make musical sounds—soft sounds, close sounds—that had not really been heard before in terms of public performance. . . . The microphone allowed us to hear people in ways that normally implied intimacy—the whisper, the caress, the murmur" (1996, 187). According to Frith, the microphone also draws attention to the place of the voice in music, allowing it to dominate other instruments, to be the "solo" in a way it could not have been before (188).

20 Anonymous reader for Duke University Press, personal communication, October 2004.

21 Consider the following description: "As a celebrity she has moved with and played hostess to world leaders with gentle charm and dignity. At home she is the traditional housewife, stringing flower garlands for her *puja* (Hindu prayer ritual) room and decorating the floor with her beautiful *kōlam* (rice powder designs). It is on stage that she comes into her own—sensuously captivating, with an occasional lift of the eyebrow and a bewitching smile, not for the audience, but for the Divine" (Indira Menon 1999, 41). Statements like these reveal an insistence on separating M.S.'s stage persona from her everyday life.

22 In a review of the *Meera* soundtrack Kalki identified music as the most elevated of all pleasures and was particularly enthusiastic about a song sung in the voice of the child Meera: the "child" sang so beautifully that "even a person with a heart of stone couldn't be unaffected" (1946, 31). "And, thanks to the skillful recording, we hear MS' voice quite naturally," he concluded. The listener's pleasure is thus constructed through multiple senses of fidelity: the fidelity of the fan to his favorite star, the fidelity of M.S.'s voice to tradition, the fidelity of the child Meera to her beloved Krishna, the fidelity of the record to the original performance.

23 The discourse linking idealized female musicality with notions of naturalness,

as opposed to artifice, intellectuality, and virtuoso display, pervades Western art music. Richard Leppert (1993) and Judith Tick (1986) provide useful discussions of this in English and American contexts respectively. Such distinctions have their origins in a broader aesthetic discourse based on gendered notions of the beautiful and the sublime, as addressed by Paul Mattick Jr. (1995). These distinctions traveled to India as part of a colonial discourse about music but became specifically central to a nationalist discourse that associated "natural" female musicality with the essence of the Indian nation.

24 Adyar Library, Chennai (Madras), "Woman as Artist," undated pamphlet published by the Theosophical Society through Vasantha Press in Madras in the 1940s, 5.

25 Ibid., 2–3.

26 Ibid., 7.

27 Adyar Library, Chennai (Madras), "Dance and Music," undated pamphlet published by the Theosophical Society through Vasantha Press in Madras in the 1940s, 4.

28 Ibid., 14.

29 Ibid., 10–11. Devi's reference to music as the "language of the gods" also alludes to the Sanskrit language, which is referred to in Brahminical tradition as the language of the gods or the divine language. Much of the music that accompanies dance uses Sanskrit religious terminology. Devi's statement may also allude to the fact that the classicization of Karnatic music took place at the same time as the Hindu religious revival, which emphasized a classical Hinduism that was Sanskritic in emphasis. Several figures associated with the classicizing of Karnatic music in the mid-twentieth century, such as Kalki, were also part of the group that constructed classical Hinduism in contrast to Western materialism and lack of spirituality.

30 Ibid., 12, 16.

31 Allen 1997, Meduri 1996, Amrit Srinivasan 1985, and O'Shea 1998 provide more detailed descriptions of the ways dance performance became nationalized and "sanitized." The conflict between earlier dance styles practiced by those from the devadasi community and the reinvented Bharata Natyam popularized by Rukmini Devi was framed by Devi as a conflict between expressing *sringāra* (erotic sentiment) and expressing bhakti (devotion), two modes which she considered irreconcilable. Tanjore Balasaraswati, who came from a family of devadasis and was a contemporary of Rukmini Devi, would later insist that sringara and bhakti were one and the same (O'Shea 1998, 46–49).

32 Robert Ollikkala provides a critique of the gendered distinction between classical and light-classical music in the North Indian classical tradition. " 'Light,' " he writes, "consistently seems to imply 'lesser,' 'derivative,' 'secondary,' and 'feminine.' It is no coincidence that 'light-classical' music, sung by women of assumed dubious virtue (within a role they have inherited in a male-dominated social structure) is considered to be more emotional, . . . less technically demanding, less pure in terms of tala and raga" (1999, 35). Ollikkala suggests that there are "universal implications to the term 'classical,' implications that include, but reach far beyond, the musical" (36). Vidya Rao, herself a singer of *thumri*, one of the North Indian genres now labeled "light classical," critiques this distinction by embracing thumri as what she calls the "feminine voice," a genre capable of subverting the conventions of Hindustani classical music, providing an alternative to the virtuosic display that is part of classical genres like *khayal* (1999).

33 Jennifer Post has written of the separation of dance from music in the Marathi and Konkani region of Western India in the context of the late-nineteenth-century decline of courtesan traditions there. Many women, she states, began to restrict their performances to singing and avoided dance gestures, presumably in an effort to lend respectability to their performances (Post 1987, 104–5).

34 Ragam-tanam-pallavi was considered for a long time to be suitable only for men.

35 Compare Malathi de Alwis's argument that respectability operates as an "aesthetic" that "must simultaneously clothe a woman's body as well as accentuate it" (1999, 186–87).

36 See Anandi 1997 and Lakshmi 1990 for discussions of the way this metaphoric opposition has operated in Dravidian Movement politics in Tamil Nadu. In discussing the figure of Tamilttāy, or Mother Tamil, Lakshmi states that the "yardstick [mother vs. whore], deliberately nurtured and cultivated for the political advancement of a particular group of politicians . . . has now been turned into a 'truth' of culture, something inherent, natural, and unalterable" (Lakshmi 1990, 82).

37 The word *kaṇakku* also has caste associations in the music world. It is generally thought that the mathematically based, rhythmic aspects of Karnatic music, like swara kalpana and pallavi, come from the non-Brahmin, Icai Veḷḷālar (nagaswaram-playing) tradition. For respectable female performers, tala itself was considered a kind of excess; a female musician in her eighties told me that in her day ladies were not only not supposed to do swara kalpana, but even keeping the tala with one's hand was also considered improper (T. Mukhta, personal communication, Madras, September 1998).

38 Compare the interiorized conception of alapana, as elaborated above, with a much more externalizing discourse about tala. When I learned rhythmic aspects and special tala exercises from C. S. Palaninathan, a mridangist in Madurai, he constantly told me that in order to really get the rhythms right, I had to "make a sound," that is, clap louder or slap my leg more vigorously. "Tāḷam nalla pōṭuṅke [Put the talam well]," he commanded. He might sit in a relaxed posture and teach me rhythmic sequences that he had internalized, but if in

his recitation something went wrong, he would move from chair to floor, straighten up, and slap his leg resoundingly, as if the correct version could be arrived at from the outside in.

39 Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that in the Bengali context the notion of *pabitrata*, or purity, was crucial to the idea of a sphere of interiority that was autonomous from the physical body. Thus, one might think of performances of nonperformance as a "technique of interiority," as Chakrabarty suggests: a way of staging one's innermost emotions as 'pure' and thus helping them "transcend anything that was external to the subject's interior space—the body, interests, social conventions, and prejudices" (Chakrabarty 2000, 138–40). The concept of pabitrata, which emerges in end-of-the-twentieth-century Bengali novels that portray widows is, of course, highly gendered.

40 This distinction between extramusical elements and the "music itself" is crucial to the idea of secular art music, in which raga (melodic scale or mode) and tala are considered the major musical elements, whereas lyrics are appreciated for their aesthetic qualities and abstract meaning but are devalued if they convey sentiment or sensuality.

41 In order to remain respectable, women musicians in the 1960s and 1970s would often only take music students in their own home. My violin teacher recalled that her father would not allow her to teach a female student in that student's home or to play violin in the film studios, which would involve traveling, thus "cheapening" her music.

42 "I haven't gotten what I expected from my children. Now that they are grown, I would just like to have my own flat. Preferably I would like to die while teaching a music lesson," said one female musician (quoted in Lakshmi 2000, 208).

43 This is known as *maṅkala icai* (auspicious music). The category of auspiciousness applies also to women; devadasis were known as *nityacumaṅkali* (ever-auspicious women) because, being married to god, they could never become widows. For an explanation of this, see Kersenboom-Story 1987.

44 Speculations on Ponnuthai's actual motivations for retreating from public performances abound. Some suggest that she was not forced to retreat but chose to in order to validate her status as the respectable widow of her husband and to avoid being seen as a devadasi. Others suggest that her retreat was motivated by political reasons relating to the fact that the Congress Party, of which her husband was a member, lost power in Tamil Nadu in the early 1970s.

45 Her name has been changed to respect confidentiality.

46 See Bullard 1998 on the South Indian flute and women artists.

47 Bhairavi was quite critical of the notion that female musicians had been "liberated" by the pioneering efforts of older female musicians like M. S. Subbulakshmi and D. K. Pattammal. When I asked her what she would have asked them in an interview, she replied, "Whether they could have succeeded without their husbands" (personal communication, Madurai, July 2002).

48 "Quite natural" was one of her stock English phrases.

49 The connections between the "expressivist turn" and the notions of interiority and inner voice in European thought are discussed by Taylor (1989, 370–90). Raymond Williams, in *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, suggests that the notion of "art" and the romantic artist developed in the nineteenth century in Europe as "art became a symbolic abstraction for a whole range of general human experience. . . . A general social activity was forced into the status of a department or province" (1983, 47). In the new idea of art, an emphasis on skill was gradually replaced by an emphasis on sensibility, suggesting a kind of interiorization (ibid., 44).

50 On the idea of the inner sphere of the Indian nation, see Chatterjee 1993.

51 Sadasivam introduced M.S. to Gandhi, Nehru, and a host of other political figures. Gandhi is purported to have said, on hearing her sing, "I have no knowledge of music [*caṅkīta ñāṉam*]. But your voice and your song are extremely sweet" (Kalki 1946, 29).

52 L. R. Easwari, personal communication, Madras, June 2002.

53 S. Janaki, personal communication, Madras, January 2004.

54 Bangalore Nagaratnammal, a devadasi, spoke on the rights of devadasis during the devadasi-abolition movement; she also began a separate Thyagaraja aradhana for women at Tiruvaiyaru to address problems of exclusion. Vai. Mu. Kothainayaki (1901–1960), a Brahmin woman, lectured extensively on the nationalist cause and the betterment of Indian women. She composed songs, wrote stories and novels, and managed the women's journal *Jaganmohini* from 1925 to 1954. In fact, Nagaratnammal encouraged Kothainayaki to sing and provided her with concert opportunities in Mysore (*Sruti* 2001, 44–45).

55 Pattammal stated that even after she had made gramophone records, her father would not allow her to sing onstage. "It is Vai. Mu. Ko. who is responsible for my being amidst you as a musician today. I first met her in a gramophone company. I was 10 years old then. Those days everyone was so surprised that a 10-year-old could sing so well. Vai. Mu. Ko. was also impressed. She wanted me to enter the concert arena. Those days girls from Brahmin families were not encouraged to perform in public. It was a wonder that my father, who was an orthodox Dikshitar, permitted me to even cut a record. But Vai. Mu. Ko. was a tenacious lady. She made several trips to Kanchipuram to persuade my father. They had several arguments. My father tried to give all kind of excuses even stating that I could not sing with accompanists. She vehemently asked, 'What is wrong if a Brahmin girl sings on stage?' Ultimately my father relented and my first concert was held at Egmore Mahila Sabha [Egmore Women's Association in Madras]" (*Sruti* 2001, 41). Kothainayaki and Pattammal later made three 78-rpm records with songs on themes of social protest (42).