

Music: India's Best Woman Singer

S RIMATI M. S. SUBBULAKSHMI is not well known in this country. She hasn't toured here since 1966, and her records are only Indian imports. That explains why, except for the entire Indian diplomatic community from Washington and New York and such Indian celebrities as Ravi Shankar, Miss Subbulakshmi's recital Wednesday night at Carnegie Hall was sparsely attended. But for those who were there, it was one of the finest concerts in recent memory.

Miss Subbulakshmi is considered to be the best woman singer in India today; it would be interesting to hear any male singer who is better.

Her excellence is built upon every attribute of artistry you can think of. The style of music she sings is the Carnatic, from South India. There are many similarities to North Indian music, the type most familiar to Westerners. The ragas and talas have other names, and the instruments are somewhat different. More crucially, the South Indian culture in general is more fixed in its ways. The basis of the music is less luxuriously improvisatory than in the north, with a greater predominance of set songs and chants.

This listener can only take it on faith that Miss Subbulakshmi is a conscientious upholder of Carnatic tradition, and a sensitive exponent of its traditions. In more absolute terms, however—in her ability to communicate emotion through musical means—she is a great artist for any sympathetic listener.

Her recital on Wednesday lasted two and three-quarter hours, without an intermission or even a break in the drone—a particularly rich one performed by three women on what looked like two tambouras and a tiny reed organ pow-

ered by a bellows. The songs, in a variety of languages, were mostly in praise of various Hindu deities, and ranged from pieces with a wide range of melismatic ornamentation on single syllables to strict devotional chants.

Even at their most austere, however, these songs have a wonderful sensuousness about them, and Miss Subbulakshmi never failed to project the emotional complexity of the music. It is a rare art and a rare artist that can simultaneously seem happy and sad, contemplative and yearning, and Miss Subbulakshmi and her music encompassed those supposed opposites effortlessly.

She does this with a singing voice that is remarkably pure—not "white" or vibratoless, really, so much as exactly focused. The production is supremely relaxed, yet the control of ornamentation—the characteristic semiyodelling shimmers that are the basis of Indian vocal fioritura—is breathtaking, as is her teasing exactitude of pitch and rhythm.

She does not work alone. Foremost among her accompanists was Srimati Radha Viswanathan, her daughter, whose voice is slightly lighter in timbre, making for magical echo effects. And when they sing in unison duet, as they often do, the synchronicity is miraculous, as they execute complicated roulades and every breath exactly together.

Beyond them were Sri K.S. Alagiri-swamy, a fine violinist in the Indian manner, and Sri Guruvayur Dorai, who played the principal Carnatic drum, the mridangam, with exhilarating sensitivity and excitement. But ultimately it was Miss Subbulakshmi's recital, and she didn't disappoint.

JOHN ROCKWELL