



Maragatham Ramaswamy
Director, Ragamalika



My guru - Tanjore S.Kalyanaraman (1930 - 1994)



Maragatham Ramaswamy and Brinda Venkataramanan (disciples of Tanjore S.Kalyanaraman)

Tanjore S.Kalyanaraman - A Musical Genius

“Quote”

*“The best respect to a guru is to follow his style in total.
The best tribute to a guru is to embellish a style of your own.
My dear boy... I am proud you are... indeed your own”.*

Sri GNB to Sri SKR

Tanjore S Kalyanaraman popularly known as SKR was one of the leading disciples of Sri G N Balasubramaniam (GNB). SKR's musical acumen was way beyond the ordinary and within less than a year of receiving training under GNB, he was providing vocal support to his guru Sri GNB. SKR gave his first carnatic concert 1949 at Gokhale Hall Chennai. After one of SKR's concerts, GNB remarked “What's there for me to teach, you are already singing so well”. In a short time , both he and his guru became contemporaries.

Sri S. Kalyanaraman's rise in Carnatic music was phenomenal. He emphasized on artistic individuality and won acclaim as a great artiste in his own right. His musical acumen transcended Carnatic music and when he gave concerts with Hindustani singers he also showed his knowledge of Hindustani clasical .He would sing aptly with the Hindustani touch when rendering Hindustani ragas. His climb to the 'A' Top rank in All-India-Radio (AIR) was meteoric. In his later years, Kalyanaraman gave some whistle concerts whistling away compositions of the Trinity, an art that he learnt with passion.

As a performer he planned his concert items differently, often singing rare compositions while keeping popular numbers to a minimum, specializing in vivadi (dissonant) ragas rarely attempted by most popular musicians of his time and was full of musical complexities. He became a specialist in the handling of vivadi ragas and popularized the Śruti bhedam technique (modal shift of tonic note) introduced by his guru. “GNB himself had high regard for Kalyanaraman's original approach to raga exposition and other musicians, including M.L. Vasanthakumari, have spoken very highly about him.

All of his concerts were well thought out. It was not in his elements to simply recite a song. He always added an alapana or a swaraprastara, or neraval to every song. His manodharma was unlimited. He once said: “When you get there in a raga, you only see more of it.”

Kalyanaraman can be credited with the introduction of the ‘taan’ concept in rendering Carnatic compositions, in ashtapadi-s, Meera bhajan-s, and to an extent, in regular alapana-s. In the alapana-s, he used the concept in a manner that can be called the “ kalapramana briga-s”, that is, briga-s with a certain number of akshara-s per beat. He used 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10 akshara-s to produce zoom and unzoom effects in alapana-s. He extended these to swara singing also. He liked his own “ tirugu’ or (spiral type) briga-s.

Kalyanaraman didn't completely ignore the legacy of his guru to forge that of his own, he popularized the GNB bani (style) of singing and also immortalized his guru's hallmark ragas like Shanmukhapriya, Kalyani (raga), Dheerasankarabharanam, Kapi Narayani and many more.

SKR was a very humble person. I have heard some of his students tell me that he would not just discuss the compositions that he was going to sing with his accompanying artists but also give them enough practice so they can play better (if the accompanists very not very experienced). A rare quality amongst the singers in the carnatic field. SKR always set very high standards for himself. He would make sure to listen to his concerts if he had a recording of it. His student Smt.Brinda Ramanan accompanied and recorded most of his concerts and SKR made it a point to listen to his concerts when ever he got an opportunity.

His teaching techniques were systematic and organized. He expected perfection from his students. He was one of the few musicians who was able to notate songs. He always taught kritis with notations written by him and expected the students to strictly stick to it. He believed that once the student has reached a certain level of maturity he/she could embellish the sangatees accordingly. Until then they had to follow the notation given by him. While teaching he explained every detail – like the anuswara-s.

“SKR insisted that even alapana had to have an inherent metre,that the speed could not be ad hoc. He gave us excercises to help us get a grip on the right Kalapramana” Brinda Ramanan.

His patience and level of tolerance with his students while teaching was something commendable. He would make sure that the entire essence of the ragam is grasped by the student not only through the kriti but

also through the creative aspects of carnatic music. He set very high from his students. He emphasized on akaram's being crisp and clear. Proper production of voice and control over the voice were 2 things he considered very important in order to bring the right feel and essence of a composition. "Place this between your lips and practise akaara," he commanded thrusting a three-inch long stick into his student Brinda's hands. And come back only if you can produce a neat one."

Brinda Ramana.

He stressed on singing with an open throat and mouth and singing from the stomach. Kalyanaraman was an expert on voice culturing. Realising that traditional methods would not work for him, and given his congenital heart and respiratory problems, he developed a style of his own. More than most, he understood the mechanics of producing vocal shruti suddham. As a teacher, he could teach the ways of doing that. He analysed the voice culture of several

musicians of his time and studied its influence on their singing styles. As a by-product, he could mimic the voice and style of most of them precisely. SKR believed that singing with a chest voice results in a lot more spilling. He believed in not using syllables like 'ra' while singing ragam.

There were many students who could not cope up with his strict ways. He would say: Carnatic Music is not easy. It will take time to gain maturity. Do not commercialise your music. He not only taught music but also taught high principles in life, morals and values by example.



*Jaishree Krishnamoorthy -
Carnatic Vocalist and Playback singer*

“Kanda Naal Mudhalai Notation - A song tuned and popularized by Sri Tanjore S.Kalyanaraman”

"Kanda Naan Mudhalai - notation (contd.)"

|| ;, dp n̄ s̄ mā ḡ ā ā | ; n̄ s̄ ḡ R̄ | r̄ s̄ s̄ ; is̄ nd || P,
 ... van. dishai paa-dum ezhil ... vasaNtha poo ngaa... vil ...
 || P, - dp n̄ s̄ mā ḡ ā ā | ; n̄ s̄ ḡ R̄ | r̄ s̄ s̄ ; ; s̄ ||
 ... van. dishai paa-dum ezhil ... vasaNtha poo ngaa... vil
 || ḡ m̄ p̄ mā R̄ r̄ s̄ , n̄ r̄ s̄ n̄ D̄ | P̄ M̄ d̄ p̄ pm̄ m̄ ga ||
 van.. dhu. sukaM.. than.. dha. ... kan. dha nai yen. kaa... n tha..
 || & R̄ (Kandanaal) charanam

{ || ;, s̄ ḡ r̄ N̄ S̄ , dd p̄ M̄ | ;, p̄ i n̄ D̄ | p̄ P̄ ā m̄ P̄ ||
 ... Nee. la mayil. than.. nai ... nen. jamum- marakeka villa:
 { || ;, m̄ ḡ m̄ P̄ N̄ , - n̄ s̄ N̄ , | ; n̄ s̄ no | p̄ P̄ m̄ d̄ p̄ m̄ a || ; r̄
 ... Ne. sha mudan. - kalantha. ... paashashamum- maraiya vil. lai. ...
 || ;, P̄ n̄ s̄ ā Ḡ Ḡ - , s̄ ā T̄ s̄ ḡ m̄ p̄ m̄ ḡ R̄ | s̄ s̄ s̄ s̄ ||
 ... ko la ku maran - . manak ko. ... yilil niraindu vitta:n
 || ;, n̄ ā r̄ s̄ n̄ r̄ s̄ , n̄ D̄ P̄ | ; m̄ N̄ d̄ P̄ | m̄ d̄ P̄ pm̄ ā gg || R̄,
 ... kuru nagai thanai. kaa. thi -. naru malar - choo.. tti. vitta..n.
(kandanaal)

|| ;, S̄ s̄ m̄ a , ; , m̄ P̄ P̄ | ;, S̄ s̄ m̄ ḡ | m̄ a , , m̄ P̄ P̄ ||
 ... kanda naal .. mu dhalaai ... kanda naa --- l. . mudhalai
 || ;, S̄ s̄ m̄ m̄ ḡ a m̄ P̄ P̄ | ;, D̄ D̄ n̄ d̄ | d̄ p̄ P̄ , m̄ a , , M̄ || P̄
 ... kanda naa -- l mu dhalaai ... kaadhal pe. ru. gu. dhadi

— + —



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Maragatham Ramaswamy

"Without music, I cannot live."



Mrs. Maragatham Ramaswamy hails from a family of well-distinguished musicians. She grew up listening to music flow through every corner of the house. At a very young age, her parents introduced her to the intricacies of Carnatic music. Attracted by the lure of classical music during her childhood, she began vocal training under 'Maestro' S. Kalyanaraman, a disciple of G.N. Balasubramaniam, whom she would credit as her inspiration. She began learning violin from Trivandrum V. Harihar Iyer. When asked what has made her pursue this hobby as a career, the answer is just

simply a passion. A strong, undying passion for the notes and innumerable ragams is her motivation to continue singing and training young musicians around her. Mrs. Maragatham's devotion and quest for musical perfection found herself as a disciple under many legends in the field. At Carnatic Music College, she was fortunate to receive vocal training from legendary musicians such as Palghat Sri K.V. Narayanaswamy, Sri T.M Thiagarajan, Sri Ramnad Krishnan, and Sri B. Rajam Iyer. During this time, she also received violin training from Professors Sri Varahur Muthuswamy Iyer, Sri T.N. Krishnan, Sri M.S. Anantharaman, and Sri Lalgudi Jayaram.

Mrs. Maragatham was awarded the Gold Medal for Outstanding Achievement from Carnatic Music College of Madras. Since then, she has received many other awards from the Music Academy, Chennai, Krishna Gana Sabha, Chennai, and other prestigious institutions for her vocal and violin performances. Mrs. Maragatham is a profound All India Radio artist of her age in vocal and violin. Recently, she was honored with the Best Teacher Award from the Sivan Arts Academy, Chennai and featured by the Washington Post as an acclaimed artist. Mrs. Maragatham has also been involved in the propagation of Carnatic music to western audiences in several forums such as The Smithsonian, US Army Base at Fort Belvoir, Takoma Park Music Festival, and Terrence McNally's Play *The Perfect Ganesha* at the Arena Stage in Washington D.C., for which she was a music consultant and performer.

Where words fail, music speaks...

At the age of 20, she gave her first Kacheri at the R.R. Sabha in Calcutta. Within a short span, she performed at major cities in India including Chennai for which she received rave reviews from famous critiques like Sri Subbudu (P.V. Subramaniam), and the Hindu critic N.M. Narayanan (NMN). She was featured as a well-rounded vocalist and violinist in the Hindu, Indian Express, and other Tamil newspapers. Soon after, her passion and love for teaching overtook her aspirations as a performer. Mrs. Maragatham has been teaching Carnatic music to young artists for more than 35 years. As a teacher, her proudest moment occurred as her first student, her niece, Srimathi Varalakshmi Anand Kumar, (a seasoned Carnatic vocalist and an A-Grade AIR artist) brought home

her first award. "There is not an award that she hasn't received," she said. Her students make her proud by winning prizes at competitions such as the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana Festival, Chicago Music Festival, Simana, and other competitions. As a guru, Mrs. Maragatham teaches not only singing, but also the nuances involved in a composition, as well as concert performance structure. Equally important is knowing the audience for whom you are performing. The one piece of advice Mrs. Maragatham would like to give her students is to listen to good music. "It is the most important thing in addition to regular practice. Sing courageously and without fear." --*Music is her passion and her pride is her students.*

Written by Priya & Priyanka Raju
Students of Mrs. Maragatham



Maragatham Ramaswamy - Aunt and Guru

When a family member doubles as a guru, it is commonly believed that the teacher student relationship is always a casualty. But either this axiom is a myth, or else exceptions prevail everywhere.

Be that as it may, my ten year learning experience with Maragatham Chiti, my lovely aunt and guru is not only evergreen in my memory but perhaps chartered a whole course in my life.

Getting into her fold was a stroke of destiny.

Chiti was always the gifted singer of the family. I as a ten year old was spending a two month holiday at my granny's place with my parents, where Chiti lived with Chitapa and little Rajesh, then an impish delight all of 1½ years.

Chiti used to put Rajesh to sleep with a melodious rendition of the shloka "Lokabhiramam" in Vasantha ragam. So haunting were the melodies that without even knowing it, I was humming the song wherever I went, a fact noticed by Chiti.

With her uncanny knack of unfolding talent, she soon had me firmly under her wing. At that moment, I little knew that my friendly Maragatham Chiti with whom I would get tips on what frocks to wear was now going to give me lessons that would be the firm foundation to a journey in music.

Since I had already learned the basic music lessons in my very young days, Chiti thought I could pass all that. I thus jumped into my first kriti: Gajanana Yutham in Chakravagam.

For those who know Chiti as a pleasant person, always free with her smiles, never unruffled, soft spoken and a heart sea deep with compassion, let me tell you that as a teacher, she was nothing short of military!

Every line was taught (by her) and learned and repeated (by me) again and again till it had been memorized, assimilated and subsequently polished.

Chiti was born to teach. She loved teaching. And she had patience in lorry loads. I often wondered how she could remain unruffled as she corrected the same line 200 times with me doggedly persisting in singing it wrong. Like the Anupallavi line of the Khamboji piece 'Kailasa Nathena'. Where anyone else would perhaps have thrown something at me, all she said was : "this is a tricky song", and went on repeating the line!

And finally, she had the 'musical stuff' in bountiful quantity. Her repertoire was formidable. Small wonder, for a disciple of S.Kalyanaraman who was also a gold medallist at the Music College, at a time when the staff there boasted of the likes of TMT, Musiri, TKGovindarao, KVN, Rajam Iyer to mention a few.

Unlike most of us in our family who have thicker, deeper voices, Chiti was endowed with a sweet voice that tinkled without being shrill. This prompted renowned critic Sri NMN to speak of her 'sonorous voice' that contoured the swaras with effortless ease.

Her raga alapanas were vintage GNB, inherited, of course from SK sir. Those who had not heard her Reethigowlai or Simhendra madhyamam were missing something. Her 'kalpanai' or imagination was awesome. She was truly a spring of ideas. The day she showed me the first step towards 'manodharma' (creative music) is unforgettable in my life. The kriti was 'Ganapathey Mahamathey', in Kalyani. A simple (supposedly) Muthuswamy Dikshitar piece, in the elementary Roopaka thala, with the song taken up at the beat itself. An ideal piece, in short, to start off with.

Chiti took off on the Charanam line 'Soma Suryaagni Netra', with swaras in the slow speed.

What patience she showed! And what dexterity, what insight into a student's abilities and shortcomings! Starting with the basic step of how to land at the correct place, she went on to guide me through the various combinations of 3 and 5 swaras that would give the correct landing, proceeded to show me how to prepare to launch these patterns, and finally gave me tips on how to render varieties in swaras. Her tip of developing permutations and combinations taking just three swaras at a time has stood me throughout my music life.

But be it swara rendition, or alapana, Maragatham Chiti was persistently emphasizing about the importance of raga swaroopa. She constantly urged me to learn as many kritis as I could in each raga so that I could imbibe the best prayogas and give the essence of all that was beautiful. When she was singing a rakti raga like say, Rithigowlai, she would stop at a certain sanchara and point out how it brought out the raga's beauty.

A good teacher teaches. An exemplary teacher reaches, so goes the saying. And Chiti certainly reached. Every note she has taught me remains etched in my

mind. How can I forget the ‘Sujana Jeevana’ (that she herself learned from D.K.J sir) which she advised me to sing wherever there was a music knowing listener. Or the way she could make the most difficult thing look easy. Like the formidable Ganamurthi with its tricky vivadhi gandham that she skillfully showed me how to navigate such that it became child’s play. Or the way she would look out of her compound wall and force me (just then in the midst of a rollicking time with my friend) to come and learn the massive Shankarabaranam Navarathri Kriti. Or the way she went about preparing me for competition after competition, very often seeking out her own hidden treasures and often even trying to pick up pieces from the radio herself just to enhance my repertoire.

To talk about ‘Maragatham Chiti preparing Varalakshmi for Competitions’ would be an epic in itself.

First the lists of sabhas organizing these. Then the lists of songs to submit. And finally the list of songs to be learnt in preparation. And in all that, Chiti was fighting a lone battle. Though I was fond of singing, I was so laid back that unless Chiti had adopted the bulldog stance to get me to compete, in all probability I would have just attended the Thyagaraja and Dikshitar competitions and stayed at home. I would never have brought home three tambura prizes if it had not been for her caring guidance.

But Chiti was not one to sit back with competitions alone. The next step came when I was given my first concert, at the Varasiddhi Vinayakar Temple in Besant Nagar.

Words cannot explain the way she prepared me for it. From arranging the list of songs, to fixing the accompanists she took care of every detail. To give out a secret, she even prepared a set of ‘swaras’ for me to render at the Bilahari song Kamakshi Sri Varalakshmi, a set that I remember to this day... and still use sometimes!!!

The tips she gave me to enhance my creativity could be put into a booklet as a ready - reckoner. Listen, listen and keep listening to music, she would say. When the Music Festival approached, she would fervently urge me to attend every single concert I could go to. She would ask me to be glued to the radio and to listen to every possible concert recording. All this to absorb subconsciously the aesthetics of this most beautiful of

fine arts- Carnatic music. These practices have stood me in good stead and I rarely miss an opportunity to attend a concert when time permits, while an old fashioned transistor jostles for shelf space with my salt and turmeric bottles!

Not many know that Chiti was also a talented violinist regularly performing at the Chennai station of All India Radio. I was a full participant in this process right from sitting with her at the practice sessions to keep the ‘thala’ to accompanying her to the radio station for the same purpose.

What a glutton for self punishment she was! Every line would be repeated untiringly till it was perfected – by Chiti’s stringent standards. Her bowing techniques and haunting raga alapanas won her appreciation from everyone right from the artistes at the AIR to the listeners who wrote in their views.

But music was not the only thing I learnt from Maragatham Chiti. As a person, she was a rarity. In charge of old parents and the bank accounts of a host of NRI siblings for many years, she showed her meticulousness in every aspect of her life. In dress, she was taste and neatness personified. In cleanliness she was uncompromising, even the smallest speck of dust came in for a wipe. In accounts, an auditor could have taken lessons from her. Her care for Madras Amma and Thatha could teach many a lesson to today’s generation. Thatha’s ayurvedic medicines were carefully lined up (in a neat row of course) in a cupboard and handed out with clockwork precision. The way she hung out Madras Amma’s 9 yard sari was a feast to the eyes, not a fold out of place. Not a drop of spilt water would go unheeded, for fear of tripping over the elderly couple.

Yes, Maragatham Chiti is an institution in herself. If you are looking for a person who is talented and at the same time intensely humane -there she is- Maragatham Ramaswamy.

Long live Chiti- long live her family and long live Ragamalika -her brain child all of 25 years!



Article by Varalakshmi Anandkumar

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Maragatham with vocalists Bombay Sisters



Maragatham in conversation with
Bhushany Kalyanaraman
(wife of her guru S.Kalyanaraman)



Maragatham in conversation with her guru violinist M.S.Anantharaman
at her residence



An interview session - Maragatham with Ranjani Gayathri



Maragatham getting recognized by former Under Secretary of the United Nations, Padmavibhushan Shri C.V. Narasimhan



Vocalist Charumathi Ramachandran and Maragatham catching up with old times at her residence in Alexandria, VA



Maragatham with legendary music critic
Shri Subbudu on his visit to her residence in Alexandria, VA



Maragatham with her family along with Padmashree Dr.K.J.Yesudas and his wife Prabha



Maragatham with Adyar K. Lakshmanan in Toronto,
Canada



Maragatham getting the "Best Teacher" award from Ashok
Ramani (Sivan Fine Arts Academy, Chennai)



Maragatham, her niece violinist Meera Sivaramakrishnan along with vocalists Priya sisters



Maragatham Ramaswamy with violinist Narmada Gopalakrishnan



Maragatham with Sri Yegnaraman of Krishna Gana Sabha, Chennai



Maragatham with her niece vocalist Varalakshmi Anandkumar and Violinist T.Rukmani



Maragatham along with her students after their performance at the Smithsonian Institution, USA



Maragatham with vocalist Sowmya



Maragatham receiving an award from D.K.Pattammal at Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, Chennai



Musiri Subramaniam Iyer presenting a prize to Maragatham



Maragatham with Dr.M.Balamurali Krishna at her residence in Chennai



Maragatham alongside Shri Natarajan of The Music Academy, Chennai alongside her sister
Kalaimamani Radha Narayanan

Maragatham Aunty-My guru

Music has always been a motivating passion in my life. I was introduced to Karnatic music very early in my childhood. I immediately took to the sounds of this Indian classical style of music, with its intricate beats and melodies. This form of music, was by no means easy to learn, but it was the way in which Maragatham Auntie taught it which made it easier to grasp. Her unique methods of teaching, earnest dedication to her students, perfectionism, with a kind personal touch, are what set her apart and make her so special. I have much to be grateful for.

One of the ways that Maragatham auntie's methods of teaching are so unique, is her ability to break down this style of music into the absolute basics. This in turn allows the student to develop a deep understanding of the very concepts behind this artform. When you learn a song, you will learn every last detail, understanding the exact beats, and swaras. Because of the conceptual understanding developed via her methods of teaching, learning to sing the songs becomes more and more effortless with time.

Another great quality about Maragatham Auntie is her patience when teaching. She has full faith in each and every student, and is so diligent. Karnatic music is so intricate, that to teach it to the level of detail which she does, requires a great deal of patience. Anyone who has been to class knows just how patient, and encouraging she is as a teacher.

In addition to her detail oriented teaching, patience, and diligence, anyone who has been to music

class with Maragatham Auntie, always knows that they will have a good time. Maragatham auntie is always with a pleasant demeanor. If you make a mistake in class, she has a way of correcting you, but always with a pleasant smile, and makes you laugh. This always makes you happy, encouraged, and excited to come back and learn more.

Overall, Karnatic music class with Maragatham Auntie, has been a unique experience where I have not only been able to learn a beautiful timeless artform, but it has shaped me into who I am today, in many ways. By learning to be so detail oriented in singing these songs, I have carried those qualities of patience, perseverance, and diligence, in other aspects of my life, both personal and professional. In addition, being of South Indian descent though being born and raised in the United states, holding onto ones culture can be difficult at times. Having ties with my heritage via music has helped me build a stronger sense of who I am, and my culture. But the most special gift in all of this are the bonds built through the years of class. She is not only a teacher, but someone who I can say is family. Thank you Maragatham Auntie for everything you have given me!



Article by Kripa Sundararajan



**With humble Pranams to
Their Holiness Kanchi Shankaracharyas**

**Best wishes to Ragamalika on its 25th
Anniversary**

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Guru Smarana

Guru. The word is singularly responsible for evoking a sense of respect in the heart of a true shishya (disciple/student). Most eastern traditions place great importance in the way a Guru is treated and respected because they are considered to be a reflection of the Divine. As indicated in the Sanskrit Slokam:

Gurur Brahma

Gurur Vishnu

Guru Devo Maheshwara

Guru Saakshaath ParaBramha

Tasmai Shri Gurave Namaha

The slokam can be translated to:

The Guru is Brahma (The God of Creation)

The Guru is Vishnu (The God of Sustenance)

The Guru is Shiva (The God of Annihilation)

My Salutation to such a Guru,
who is verily the Supreme God

Maragatham Aunty is my Guru, and there isn't a day that goes by when I do not consider myself lucky to have someone as genuine as her to guide me. What makes Aunty so special is the fact that she not only teaches me how to be the best musician I can be, but also the best person I can be. She has been my strongest moral support during the highs and lows of my life while reminding me how to maintain dignity, grace and gratitude.

Although I began learning music at the age of 3, it wasn't until I was 18 that I became Aunty's student. 15 years had passed with me parroting exactly what my teachers sang without ever knowing what note or swaram was behind the tune. Ragams melded into one another and sangathis were learnt based on what I could emulate. All that changed when I began learning music from Maragatham Aunty.

As my music mentor, she has trained me to use my ear from day one. To listen to the notes resounding from the shruthi box. To hear the melody within myself as I sing. To intricately decipher the discrepancy between the two.

Music has always been a spiritual experience for me. I believe, for most genuine musicians, their journey begins with singing to bring others happiness but eventually transforms into a transcendental joy for themselves. Over the years, not only has Aunty been

my musical mentor, but also my spiritual guide. She has fueled my spirituality in many ways, such as teaching me how to unravel a particularly hard gamakam. Aunty says "picture the statue of Vishnu and how He is bejeweled from head to toe. Think of how that beautiful sight brings a smile to your face and your voice will follow suit". Lo and behold, unknowingly by combining the spiritual with the physical realm, I mastered the gamakam that seemed impossible to conquer just a few minutes ago!

Regardless of one's musical experience, Aunty's strict enforcement of first teaching the swaram and then the saahithyam is one that has allowed me to be successful in singing other genres of music as well. Precision in a song can only be achieved when one knows the swaram that lies behind a melody or a gamakam. A trained ear can easily distinguish between a decent emulation and a deep understanding of the melody. With knowledge of the swaram comes the benefit of being able to delve into a ragam, allowing the mastery of any song.

Another facet of Carnatic music that is seldom enunciated are the Anuswarams. Needless to say, Maragatham aunty introduced me to a whole new world of understanding music through anuswarams and the depth that lies within it. The graceful expression of these oscillating notes is only achieved if one understands the swaram behind each gamakam, sangathi and alaap. All of these integral parts of Carnatic music have helped me improvise within different of genres of music, be it a ghazal, film or western song; aiding me in putting my own stamp on any song I sing.

Just as each ragam is unique in its own way, so is Maragatham Aunty's way of teaching. She tailors her approach to every individual student, which is one of many qualities that make Aunty an effective and brilliant teacher! I hope one day I can make her a proud Guru and become at least half the person she is.

Congratulations Aunty for 25 beautiful years! I am truly blessed to be your Shishya.



Article by **Rohini**

My Musical Journey

I started my first lesson with Mrs. Maragatham Ramaswamy when I was 5 and a half years old, in October, 1997. From the first lesson, I have always enjoyed aunty's unique teaching style. Since I was very young at that time, aunty never gave me notations to read and learn from. She taught me SaraliVarisai using costers, pens, pencils and even the staircase. Her unique style of visualizing each note has been imprinted in my heart til today. The famous saying "tell me you don't get it, and I will make you get it" from her mouth, has never been disproved. She makes us do the most impossible, or so it seems. Of course, nothing was easy. I have been scolded many times for not listening to the shruthi, for not putting thaalam right, for not practicing properly. But hey, who hasn't been?

It's been a pleasure to see my journey from those days to now. Listening to old performances still put a smile on my face. The memories of practices before each performance flood my mind, as Aunty corrected me every time I sing the song to her. And each time, there would be a different correction. But in the end, all she wanted was perfection. Even today, aunty lives by being a perfectionist. She shows all her students it can be done and it will be done.

I realized that such perfection was necessary to move on. I have noticed the importance of each and every correction she has made. Of course, had I noticed at that time, she wouldn't have scolded me so

much. Right now, I am captain of an A Cappella team, Purdue Taal. A Cappella is a form of singing with no instruments. All instrumental music is sung and beats are also replicated by mouth. Even though the songs we sing are not Carnatic, the notes have to be perfect, everyone has to stay in the same shruthi as well as beat. It is hard to manage a team of 12-14 people with different backgrounds in music. Some don't know the concept of shruthi, some don't know how to maintain beat. It's difficult to maintain consistency in a group, but Aunty does it really well with all her students.

To maintain such consistency, one needs to have a lot of patience. We can all pride on aunty's patience level. Her ability to cope with each and every student, every group, every performance, and still maintain such high standards in music is incredible.

Maragatham Aunty has been a great inspiration for me since I have been learning from her. Her dedication in teaching is inexplicable. Her excellent knowledge in Carnatic music is nonetheless shining in each and every student of hers. I congratulate her on maintaining high excellence for the past 25 years and I am thankful to be a part of Ragamalika for such a long time.



Article by Sahaana Mukundan



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THE GENIUS OF SOUND AND SILENCE – PALGHAT SRI MANI IYER

How do you begin to understand, fathom and then set out to describe the musical phenomenon that Palghat Mani Iyer was and is even today ? Thirty or so years have passed since he moved on to another sphere but the sound of his mridangam, the perfection of his rythmscape and the force of his musical genius resonate like nothing else does in the world of Indian Classical Music.

Somebody asked me the other day as to who I think is the GOAT (Greatest Of All Time) of Indian Classical Music ? Considering that we have not heard Tansen or Tyagaraja, I said it was a toss up between three greats that I have heard (many thanks to the boon of recording technology) - Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Sri Rajarathnam Pillai and Sri Palghat Mani Iyer ! But then, How does a mridangam “accompanying artiste” figure in this shortlist you may ask. I shall elaborate.



Tomes could be written on Palghat Mani Iyer’s mridangam playing, his technique and style.

As Sri Muthiah Bhagavathar once said “Mani Iyer combines in himself the art of all the great Mridangam vidwans of earlier eras.” But this essay focuses on his ‘silent’ but epoch making contributions to the music field as a whole, two or three of which I put forward here.

It was in the late 1920s that at the wedding concert of Palladam Sanjiva Rao’s son, Palghat Mani Iyer accompanied Ariyakudi Iyengar for the first time. This heralded the beginning of an era of one of the greatest

collaborations in Carnatic music. The nearly five decades during which this combination continued unbroken is a watershed period in the history of Carnatic music.

In the performing arts, every innovation needs to be tested, tried, modified and then honed and presented with conviction if it is to leave a lasting impact on the field. Ramanuja Iyengar’s Kutcheri format did exactly that both overtly and intuitively. And in doing so it unleashed a revolutionary change in the performance of Carnatic Music. I daresay that this grand format of the Carnatic music concert introduced by Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, with its structural variety, proportional logic and overarching appeal would not have been possible but for the firmament that Palghat Mani Iyer’s unique style of accompaniment provided. It was Mani Iyer’s mridangam that held and cemented the disparate pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of the Kutcheri together. It was his skilful use of sound and silence that gave the concert a sustained and rapturous beauty. It was his brilliant percussive phrasing that lifted the compositions to levels hitherto unknown. It was his rhythmic improvisations that added five stars to the travels of the singer’s melodic ideas. And most importantly it was his merging of the mridangam sound with the sound of the voice and violin that created a gestaltic feel of a Wholesome musical experience.

The Place of the “accompanying” musician in Carnatic music is like in no other system of music. Both the violinist and the mridangist enjoy a high degree of freedom of musical expression. In a sense, the archetypical Carnatic music concert is more like a “special ensemble” comprising of the vocalist, the violinist and the mridangist (and the kanjira/ghatam/morsing artiste) rather than a “main” artiste and accompanying artistes. The mridangist is probably the “free-st” of them all. He does not need to keep prescribed rhythmic patterns (like a tabla artiste or drummer has to for the most part); he is free to foray and explore as he wishes in the percussive domain. While the vocalist and violinist are “bound” by the structure of the composed kriti and its “paadantara” of prescribed sangatis, the mridangist is free of even that. He could actually improvise throughout the concert!

Of course, with this overarching freedom comes the responsibility of the mridangist to embellish all parts of the concert with his percussive art, be it the kriti, niraval or svarprastaara. Palghat Mani Iyer came to be the absolute epitome of both this freedom and responsibility. He fulfilled this quintessential role of the mridangist in Carnatic Music like none before, none after. And in doing so he created a unique status for the “accompanist” not just as a sideman but as an equally valid musician. The violin and mridangam artistes of his generation and those later have much owed to him for this transformation of musical status.

How could one capture in words the vigour of Palghat Mani Iyer’s playing for Chembai’s madhyamakaala compositions and strident svarakalpana? or his uncanny anticipation and repartees for Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer’s niraval? Or the majestic gait he provided while accompanying Musiri Subramania Iyer’s vilamaba kaala kritis? Or his speed matching virtuosity while playing for GNB? or the smooth and effortless flow of percussive phrases while playing for Madura Mani Iyer ? or his mindblowing responses to the complex arithmetic in Alathoor Brother’s pallavis? It would not be an exaggeration to say that the trends and styles that these great vocalists came to set would not have come about without Palghat Mani Iyer’s brilliant accompanying art.

Built into the Carnatic kutcheri format are both transitory solo sections (korvais) as well as major solo sections (tani avartanam) for the mridangam. At the end of the pallavi, anupallavi and charana of each kriti the mridangist plays korvais (which are essentially short cadential/punctuative solos, giving both a sense of closure to the section just rendered and also serving to introduce the next). No doubt Palghat Mani Iyer excelled in the tani avartanam, but it was in the art and craft of these punctuative cadences that he remains non-pareil. Mani Iyer was of the view that the Tani Avartanam was not a big deal since the mridangist just presents and performs mathematical compositions pre-planned and well rehearsed at home. He eschewed the ostentatious showmanship of lengthy power play tani avartanams capped with mindless pharans. He

believed and epitomised rather the values of truth in art and team play – with the final goal of making the kutcheri a memorable experience for all. And what a mark he made for himself in the process!

Very little is known of the theory and practice of the mridangam before the 20 th century but one thing is for sure. In the course of the past eighty years or so (which is like the blink of an eye in music historical terms) the mridangam has evolved and risen to a status and position widely accepted as the unparalleled paradigm for all that is intricate, beautiful and creative in World Percussion. The Mridangam today is a World leader in the domain of percussion. In terms of compositional framework, embedded repertoire and design of the musical pieces, the mridangam has come to be the fulcrum around which the many genres of taalavaadya and World percussion ensembles revolve. This phenomenal achievement is in no small measure due to the genius of Palghat Mani Iyer’s “mridangam mind” and the infinite ripples that he created (and continues to do so) in the mridangam masters and world percussion performers who came after him. When we celebrate “Indian musical ambassadors to the world” Palghat Mani Iyer’s name needs to be in bold letters!

I remember my father taking me to Mani Iyer’s home in Palghat to get his blessings. Being eight or nine years old then I don’t remember much of the meeting, but the image of him sitting and rocking on the swing in the “thinnai” of his spartan home is indelibly fresh in my mind! Having studied the mridangam for about seven years, and listening to Palghat Mani Iyer’s concert recordings later (I remember listening to him playing live only on two occasions in Mumbai), I have often wondered (somewhat like a great poet felt while describing the fearful Tiger) “What immortal hand or pen could essay thy magnificent wizardry?!”



Article by Sriram Parasuram

Saga of a concert hopper

Yet another music season is on its way out and the silk saris are going back into wardrobes after washing/dry cleaning/airing. Canteen chairs will slowly be stacked one over the other and the Music Dance Drama section of the Hindu will be slowly shedding its extra poundage. Musicians will be taking stock of their performances and the female members of the audience slowly reconciling themselves to home cooked meals.

And before the second chapter of the music season, albeit a watered down one, i.e, the Thyagaraja Aradhana starts, it would be well to think back over some of the constants that have been part of the season for years down the line.

Screechy mikes and thani exodus apart, one of the features that have become an inseparable part of the festivities is a phenomenon called 'concert hopping'.

Wikipedia or the Encyclopedia Britannica would perhaps define it thus: State of constant movement in concert auditoria caused by migration of audience from one music recital to the other.

Concert hoppers are neither hoppers nor concert attendees. They are generally there as part of the surroundings, like the chairs or the banners, mainly because they are never there, and yet always present! Like a vague perfume that permeates the air-conditioned halls at the evening concert at the Music Academy where the cream of society and the best in French perfumes converge, the Sabha hopper may not be an entity himself. It is as though there is one human being constituted by the sum total of walkers in and walkers out that constitutes this 'superman'.

It goes like this: afternoon concert A begins with a sum total of 6 members, maybe more if the singer comes from a large Chennai based family.

The two 'unattached' rasikas (those who are not bound to their seats by ties of blood) will manifest the following predictable behavior if they are seasoned Chennai Isai Vizha Rasikas.

They will listen to the first song. Politely applaud. The next, if it is a rare ragam will trigger off a flurry of book opening. Then comes the alapana. This is generally a signal for him to settle deep into his seat and catch up on the missed eight hours of last night, thanks to his nagging wife.

If he is considerate, he will not snore too loudly. Otherwise, the remaining audience of 5, is in for an uppapakavadyam as rhythmic gurgles and whistles emanate, in true mikeless spirit.

Generally the siesta concludes with the alapana if the fond parents of the young artiste have the energy to contribute generously to the applause and compensate for quantity by ample quality.

The kriti that follows the violinist's solo is generally the deciding factor. If it is a 'Banturithi', or a 'Anandamrithakarshini', the awakened rasika generally sits through, nodding his head appreciatively.

A 'Thyagaraja Yoga Vaibhavam' is generally a surefire anti-rasika cream that ensures that the first stage of concert hopping starts.

The rasika slowly makes the motions of departure: stirring in the seat, fumbling for rexine pouch, pulling stick out from front seat where it has been hooked, testing the knees gingerly, and slowly lifting oneself from the chair, generally maintaining the thala with one hand as if to say: You are singing well, but youknow..."

From where he slowly makes his way to the next sabha. For the next two songs. And then to the next, and the next. Until the stock of sabhas in the vicinity gives, or his tired frame decides that enough is enough or he remembers the vegetables he had promised to get for his wife on his way home.

And the cycle goes on. When he returns home, most probably the conversation with his wife will go on thus:

"So how was the concert today?"

Rasika (shaking his head vigorously as if to draw from the recesses of his memory): "Err.. very nice, I mean the one at ABC sabha was good, the one at DEF mediocre and XY vidwan was extremely bad at GHI sabha. I think the Shankarabaranam was ok, but the song that followed... I don't remember..."

Wife (helpfully) : Manasu Swadhina? Swararaga sudha? Endhuku Peddala? Akshaya Linga?

Sabha Hopping husband: " Just a minute... oh no, it was ... Pakkala Nilabadi.

And before his astonished wife can ask whether the artiste was doing a T.M.Krishna act by prefacing the chaste Karaharapriya masterpiece with a Shankarabharanam, the poor man concludes:"Oh, I'm sorry, I wasn't there. I went elsewhere. I was sabha hopping, you know. And here are the beans and tomatoes you asked for."



Article by Varalakshmi Anandkumar

Amma and Music

"Without music, life would be a mistake" said Friedrich Neitzche but my mother Maragatham Ramaswamy (Amma) would say "Without music, there is no life". Life is music to her and has been that way ever since I was born and more than likely before I was born. I recall with fond memories how every one of her students would love to attend her classes while we lived in India. Not much has changed today as I see kids and adults attend with the same enthusiasm to our home in Chantilly, VA. Amma has always had a passion for teaching. I can sum up her passion with one word that acts as a foundation to everything she does, "dedication". This dedication is behind all the corrections, rehearsals and "scolding" that take place during your music lessons.

Most of you only see Maragatham when you come for class and interact with her on social occasions. As someone who lives in the same household, I can share some details that most of you don't see. Amma spends quite a few nights staying up late and writing notations. If there is a program or an event, there is a lot of thought which goes behind it and she stays up or spends several hours planning every little detail about the event. For someone that puts in that many hours, she expects her students also to take every performance seriously. She is not one to give up on anyone easily and anyone that is learning or has had the opportunity to learn from her will attest to that. However, she is someone that expects a lot from her students as she puts in a lot into her lessons. Therefore a lot will be gained by meeting her expectations.

Right from childhood, I have seen Amma teach and she is someone who teaches everyone all that she knows. There are no "trade secrets". The faster one picks up what she teaches them, the more she will teach them. Rarely do you find someone who is willing to teach you all the tips that they know. Amma is one such person that will share all her knowledge. I say this not as her son but as someone who has watched her painstakingly teach the intricacies of carnatic music to scores of students. The expectation that she has is that anyone that she teaches will take each lesson seriously and will follow her guidance in order to attain perfection. While we all enjoy listening to great music, we often times forget that great music is a result of

perfect notes, beat, pitch and rendition. The path to perfect music can be difficult without a good teacher (guide). Each lesson that Amma gives is intended to take students a step forward toward this goal. Dedication is what Amma gives and perfection along with dedication toward music is what she expects in return from her students.

Amma wants her students to excel in music but she is also very proud when they excel in academics, sports or are in the media spotlight. She loves to see her "dedication" in her students in every aspect of their lives. Dedication brings about many rewards and those around us can also tell the difference when something has been done well. Therefore practice and practice again.

On the 25th anniversary of Amma's teaching here in the United States, I would like to thank those that have been here since the early days to help with the modest get togethers we used to have in basements, to those that helped by sharing their home stereo system and mic equipment for our very first Ragamalika in Sterling Community Center, to those that open up their basements to practices, to those that plan, organize and discuss every detail of events with Amma and to the many volunteers who help with parking, lighting, video, audio, seating, printing, food and all the other "behind the stage" activities.

Last but not the least, I would like to wish my dear mother many more years of continued success in molding youngsters through her music and in keeping Indian culture thriving through her dedication to music.

As you continue to attend class, just remember all the work that Amma puts in behind one music lesson which lasts an hour or more and all the lesson planning and thought which goes behind each and every one of you. Be dedicated to learning.



Article by Sankaran Ramaswamy



With Best Compliments from

Abraham Mathews



Purandara Dasa and Varnams

Saint Purandaradasa who composed thousands of songs, gltams and abhyAsa gAnams (musical exercises) has NOT composed a single vaRNam!

Number of compositions

Saint Purandara Dasa, in his kriti vAsudEvana nAmAvalia in ragam Mukhari, says that he has composed 4,75,000 songs

Saint Thyagaraja

Saint Thyagaraja makes a mention of his father Ramabramham in the composition, Dorakuna Ituvanti Seva in bilahari.

Muttuswamy Dikshitar and the ten gamakas

In the popular composition Meenakshi Memudham Dehi, dlkSitar refers to the dashavidha gamakaas (the 10 gamakAs)

The four deities common to the trinity

Devi Kamakshi (Kanchipuram), Sri Varadaraja (Kanchipuram), Devi Dharmasamvardhini (Thiruvayaaru) and Devi Niyataskhi (Nagapattinam) are the four deities in whose praise there are in Kritis by Saints Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri.

Best Wishes

on the 25th
Anniversary of Ragamalika

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My Puzzle

Q Y K M G I Q L L S N V L W F O Z K X A
B Y V W W E J E W V Z K W H M X O A O Y
K Y W N C W Z W Q F Q T P M S T Q P Q I
Q Q X X P A H A D I Z K B B Q E J I M R
H O X D W W Q Z Q Q F B V O Q F D G M P
H O K R W Q L Q E I E J P K T M D W W A
N X R K D S Z Q Z M M T L K Z J G X Z H
N S K L J Z G R T O E Z G P P P K F D K
W Q T D V S B Z M M O Z L Z W M K W L U
L K D M M Q J V A S A N T H A Q A W X M
J M M Q Q W Z Q Q Q C Q X X Q W L Z Z N
I V A R I A H B A D N A N A W Z Y U Z A
E Z W Z Z Z Z Q I Z Q W X W M C A X Z H
W A M I K I Z M X L W A C M Q X N X F S
Z E M W Z E Z T M M A Q M R X O I W C V
F V Y D Y T G M A Q O R C C F K Z F Y Y
M M Z W Z X Z Q Q X Q Z A E V Z O R O F
I K A R N A R A N J A N I V C S G Q S X
E W M Q W X W C C C C Z K Z R D W D G W
I Q K E K F B P S P X Y B Y M R J F D W

Word Bank

kapi, anandabhairavi, desh,
kalyani, karnaranjani, pahadi,
shanmukhapriya, varali, vasantha

My Puzzle

Y U J D U I G Q F P Q Y W T Z R B D W X
J G U Z W G O G T V W T Y P Y T B T X S
M X G I Z J B B S W Y Z Q K K E Z J J V
X I M E W M Z C B J X C Y Z G I K R L R
F F G I Z E Q Y M K Z Z J N M Z W K T
Z G Z N Z B Y P H B S V Z I F N Z M J H
I Q J A X J F Q K Q T J H J X P J D M I
R Z B W J T X J N G X S O Q N J Z K W L
E W Q H P V F P H Z R O Z P Z B A X J L
V B X D Q T Q S B A O H H H B A C Q J A
A Q C A Z O E Q V O O N Z Z N J E M O N
S Z Z S Q D Z A J X M G B A B K F Z O A
N C Q M J I T Z I F Z J D C J X K X J Q
D V B A Q I W F F G J A Q P S U R U T I
G N O H R G K I P G E B C F K W K D G X
B Z O M Y F V J I Z K M W W B K K N J W
T J A Z H F S P Q J X B B Z Z J G J B Z
Z Q B X M L X J I L A R A V U H T N A P
L F C B J Q Q J X X J O O X Z J F J X Z
P Q J A Y I R P A R A H A R A K Y N O M

Word Bank

amritavarshini, desh, hamsadhwani,
kaanada, karaharapriya, panthuvarali,
saveri, suruti, thillana, thodi