

SRUTI BOX - 393

Ghantasala Venkateswara Rao

Ghantasala Venkateswara Rao, the highly talented musician, playback singer and film music director, was my good friend. He was a very nice person. He came to Tiruvaiyaru during the Tyagaraja festival with Patrayani Sangeeta Rao and we used to spend time together at Tanjavur after attending the festival. We used to discuss music.

In Chennai I often called on him at his house on Usman Road, and he would say, “Whatever music we compose, it should be in some way based on classical music— be it Carnatic or Hindustani”. Once he unexpectedly asked me to play the harmonium for his concert organised on the occasion of the grihapravesam of actress Rajasulochana on G.N. Chetty Road.

As a music director, he was very strict and careful in maintaining classicism; he played the role of preserving our culture. Today many in the film industry may not even know what culture is— truly a pathetic state! I appreciate V.A.K. Ranga Rao for his wonderful comments, by way of reviewing a book on Ghantasala. Also he has rightly pointed out facts regarding some north Indian film music directors.

*B.M. Sundaram
Pondicherry*

Dance tribute to Ghantasala

Kalapradarshini, a centre for performing arts and cultural activities, was celebrating its tenth anniversary, and I wanted to do something different, drawing upon our cultural heritage. I realised I had a treasure chest in the music of my beloved father-in-law Ghantasala Venkateswara Rao. It was my dream to pay my tribute to a person I loved, revered, held in awe for his gifted musical talent. My way of showing respect to his music would be to try to recreate the magic through my dance.

“My father is a legend. His music is not only celebrated but revered. Unless you can add to it, don’t try working with it”. This is what my husband Ravi Ghantasala told me thirty years ago when I wanted to work with Ghantasala Venkateswara Rao’s music for my dance production. As he warned me about what I was getting into, it became a challenge. I had to prove that I had immense respect for Ghantasala’s work and I put my heart and soul into choreographing for his music. For this was no ordinary feat, his music was world famous, his audience worshipped him like God and they would not accept any compromise on the standards of the production. So, when I staged my first “Samarpana” to Ghantasalagaru at the Music Academy, I was not only nervous but excited. It was a magical day, when I saw the number of Telugu cinema lovers present in Chennai and their love for Ghantasala. The show was a resounding success, with appreciation pouring in from all quarters. I was really thankful and felt that I had my father-in-law’s complete blessings to continue his legacy in my own small way. I cannot but share the commendation of Shoba Naidu, the famous Kuchipudi dancer: “It is impossible to recreate the magic of Ghantasala garu, but Parvathi has done it. She has made him proud and has brought out the family’s love for the legend”.

I owe much my success in the field of performing arts as a dancer, teacher and organiser, to the blessings of my father-in-law. The article in *Sruti* 391 (April 2017), brought back these golden memories, and I felt obliged to share my thoughts about carrying forward the Ghantasala legacy. I thank *Sruti* for remembering the legend. Every year, as part of the dance festival I pay tribute to him by dancing to many of his eternal numbers (see photo). Recently, I was privileged to stage *Gana Gandharva Ghantasala* in association with the Telangana government. We paid our tribute by bringing veteran dancers from all over India. They performed to his compositions in various dance forms, proving the versatility of his music and its ability to touch hearts even after so many years.

My father-in-law believed that music is divine and art should be accessible to everyone. At Kalapradarshini, which has more than 250 students studying

Bharatanatyam, our aim is to promote talent without any form of discrimination. I strongly believe this is the best way to pay respect to my father-in-law.

*Parvathi Ravi Ghantasala
Chennai*

Acrobatics in music

I had known *Sruti* Founder-Editor N. Pattabhi Raman since long and on many an occasion he would chat with me on many subjects—especially, of course, on music and musicians. He once requested me to help in the Samudri project but I was otherwise engaged and could not accept his offer.

Apart from the excellent articles and the readers' views—many of them thought-provoking—I particularly never miss the last page containing the editor's candid and unbiased but correct views on music, musicians, and their performances, especially, the mathematical acrobatics indulged in by many of them, sacrificing the bhava in the process. I am mentioning this because, these are exactly the views and advice my guru always used to give me during practice sessions. He would say, "Stop even thinking of kanakku or the lack of it in your music. I will not teach you this. Imbibe the bhava and the spirit behind these wonderful compositions and enjoy them. Never bother if you do not get opportunities to perform because that is not the aim with which I am teaching you." It is true that this happened in my long career but I never for once sought opportunities from anybody or any institution during my over-50 years stay in Chennai. Today I remain contented with whatever I have tried to achieve and will continue to do more. Well, is there any limit to what we can do in our music?

*T.P. Vaidyanathan
Bengaluru*

Disquieting trends

I was very glad to read the editorial in the March issue (*Sruti* 390). For some time now, I have been wondering what has gone wrong with our young and not-so-

young musicians. They spend too much time on swara-singing and exchanging sounds with the percussionists. When a person not familiar with the recent kutcheri trends approaches a hall, he hears noises that sound like a lion and tiger or other animals fighting or preparing for a fight while growling at each other. In recent times, I had to leave the hall when the programme reached a stage like that.

There should be a difference in the amplification level when the hall is small as compared to big halls like the Music Academy, Narada Gana Sabha and Vani Mahal in which there is a greater distance between the artists and the audience. Such is not the case in smaller halls like Raga Sudha, Sastri Hall and the Arkay Convention Centre.

Another disquieting trend is that some artists sing swaras in high pitch and booming voices. The percussionists too rise to the occasion and the noise level becomes unmusical, but there is applause from the audience.

Nowadays there are hardly five or six songs in a two-hour concert. Some artists do not develop the skill to sing in different languages, by different composers and different tempos. They tend to repeat what got them applause in earlier performances.

When I read your editorial in the March issue, it was good to see a kindred soul in action or rather in writing. I endorse your views but is free admission to kutcheri the culprit? It is better that music is made free rather than ticketed. The kutcheri must be a wholesome experience with proper acoustics, proper control of the AC and amplification level and seating comfort. With a little thought the listening experience can be made more appealing to the audience.

After all music is an experience which must be elevating and a source of solace which will leave the audience with a sense of well being and peace.

*N. Subramanian
Chennai*

READERS WRITE

Honour or dishonour?

"A person with a small physique can have a great stature," this famous proverb is apt for a true mahavidwan in the Carnatic music field – T.K. Murthy.

The Government of India recently honoured him with Padma Shri. At the award ceremony, the President of India came forward to honour the 93-year-old mridanga legend – he took a few steps himself to present the award to the senior percussionist. This respectful gesture of the President was a touching moment for art lovers.

All said and done, does this mahavidwan deserve just a Padma Shri for his monumental musical contribution of over eight decades?

T.K. Murthy has played for almost six generations of musicians, including great Harikatha vidwans. He is considered the "Bheeshma Pitamaha", a parama-acharya to every percussionist today. He has nurtured and encouraged vocalists, violinists and other artists over the years. He is one of the very few vidwans of that era, who never hesitated to play for women vocalists, at a time when his fellow counterparts and juniors refused to play for them. Affectionately called Chittu, he is a popular mridanga vidwan, who played for doyens as well as up-and-coming musicians.

Laya suddham is his landmark. His kalapramana suddham – maintaining the tempo/speed is next only to a metronome or a talameter. On innumerable occasions, after providing accompaniment for a kriti, he has played for the niraval, kalpana swarams and taken up the tani avartanam in his famous "karvai korvais" style. After showcasing several brilliant rhythmic patterns in different nadais, and finally, after playing the mohara/korvai, he would maintain his "gun like kalapramanam" and get back to the same speed at which the kriti was started by the vocalist or the instrumentalist. This is quite a feat as we know that two talas cannot sync perfectly for long. Such is the greatness of vidwan T.K. Murthy.

Amathardhu is the speciality of his bani; it is difficult to translate it into English or any other language other than Tamil. When a composition is sung and a mridangam vidwan starts accompanying it, there are some specific *sollus* which are played at appropriate intervals with much *gattram* or intensity, and Murthy has mastered that art; it is hence known as “Murthy Mama bani”. Creating a bani of one’s own is a great thing as only a few vidwans have accomplished it. Bani is not a synonym for style. Many percussionists have their own style of playing, but the nonagenarian has established his own exquisite bani which has evolved over several decades of observation of top percussionists. Several percussionists adopt it in a rhythm, phrase, pattern or korvai in every concert.

He has witnessed the concerts of greats like Dakshinamurthy Pillai, his own guru Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer, and his contemporary Palghat Mani Iyer. He accompanied stalwarts like Muthiah Bhagavatar, Ariyakudi, Chembai, Flute Sanjeeva Rao, GNB, Alathur Brothers, Madurai Mani Iyer, and Semmangudi. He played for M.S. Subbulakshmi all over the world for more than six decades, including the famous concert at the United Nations. Even today, many musicians and rasikas talk about his brilliant accompaniment for MS and other great artists in innumerable cassettes, CDs and DVDs.

He has directly trained a large number of students, many of whom are top performing percussionists today. He has also trained several female aspirants in the male dominated field and one such product of his training is Aswini, a promising talent. When I moved from Bengaluru to Chennai in 1995, mridanga vidwan J. Vaidhyathan, took me to T.K. Murthy. He taught me the nuances of the khanjira and explained the way stalwarts used to handle the instrument. Since then it has been my fortune to learn from him. He does not expect any monetary benefits from his sishyas. It is this ‘vidya daanam’ and his great devotion to Raghavendra Swamigal that has helped him survive various surgeries. In fact the neurologist B. Ramamurthy was taken by surprise when he saw T.K. Murthy playing the mridangam just a few days after a major surgery.

Even now, at 93, T.K. Murthy majestically sits with the mridangam, in the perfect posture, even as younger musicians employ easier techniques. Recently, he stunned the audience by playing for nearly three hours at the wedding reception of his disciple.

And now, after having achieved so much for more than 80 years, the Government of India honoured him with the title of Padma Shri earlier this year. I wonder whether our responsibility ends with just listening to vidwans like T.K. Murthy? There are many vidwans who have not been honoured with the Padma awards. It is high time we speak about the injustice to musicians. The social media had been active in propagating information about programmes all around the world, but I could not find a single post commenting on Murthy being given the Padma Shri. The great artist has served and contributed to classical music in an admirable and exceptional way.

So, does he deserve only a Padma Shri? Is it an honour or dishonour?

My humble pranams to the 'universal gem' – the amazing percussionist who has conquered unseen heights with his mesmerising mridangam playing, to the one who has always stuck to tradition and created a bani of his own.

*B.S. Purushotham
Chennai*

Sruti Web - June 2017 Sruti Box - © All Rights Reserved

