

NEW INITIATIVE

Superb addition to Chennai's assets

Expected to be launched in March 2009, the Music Academy TAG Digital Listening Archives is a public-spirited and well-conceived initiative towards the preservation for posterity of Carnatic concert music. It is the brainchild of R.T. Chari, a member of the present executive committee of the Academy, and already well known for the monthly southern heritage lectures he has been conducting for a number of years under the auspices of his family trust Ramu Endowments.

Chari had never before held any office in any of his non-business activities but Music Academy President N. Murali persuaded him to stand for election as a member of the executive committee at the 2008 elections of the Academy. Though Chari believes he was inducted with his music collection and his efforts to archive it in mind, Murali denies any such premeditation on the Academy's part. "Fortuitously, the lease for space we had rented out expired and we repossessed it just around the same time," he said. "The archival project had been on our radar for a while, but no headway was made because we were preoccupied with other priorities in our modernisation programme since 2005. We needed trustworthy people with knowledge of music to handle it, and Chari was the perfect choice, as he was already into his own personal mission of digitising his entire collection acquired over the years."

Once it was decided to get the archives ready for a trial run by the time the 2008 season came around, it was time for Chari to swing into action. In a record two months' time, he digitised nearly 1,500 hours of music.



Dr. Pappu Venugopala Rao, N. Murali and R.T. Chari at the archives

The result of Chari's hard work on the project will be there for all to see, when the archival centre is formally launched. Some 1,000 visitors had a glimpse of it during the recent December season, when its doors were temporarily opened to offer them a sneak preview. The centre has ten computers in a spacious, air-conditioned, spotlessly clean, aesthetically appointed room. These are clients in a network whose server in the adjoining room – both physically and electronically locked to prevent any abuse of the contents – stores all the music available for listening.

"Such an experience of listening to a vast collection of music on a touch screen facility is unique in India", says Dr. Pappu Venugopala Rao, one of the secretaries of the Academy. "With a one-track mind, Chari went

about discussing his idea with many knowledgeable people, before arriving at this model for the archives. He thinks two steps ahead and cannot easily be convinced about anything. He must find the answers himself. He bought this device in Korea which enables a cassette recorder to be inserted into the CPU from which the music can be directly transferred to the computer. CDs and DVDs can be externally plugged into the computer for transfer of their contents."

No attempt has been made to clean any of the recordings. Murali, Chari and Venugopala Rao are convinced that faithful reproduction of the original concert, ambient sound and all, is the best way of presenting archived music. "Otherwise, you will end up offering synthetic music as recorded in a studio," said Murali. All



Lining the wall are the photographs of all the Sangita Kalanidhis and a grand painting of music composers, Indian and Western, by S. Rajam

the recordings are free of any copyright problems, with pre-recorded music completely kept out. The archives will include the private collections of the late G. Narasimhan (editor, *The Hindu*, and Murali's father), Chari's own collection, the contributions of about 40 individuals he involved in the project, and the late S. Natarajan, former Music Academy secretary, among others.

The first objective of the archives programme is to transfer all available material as soon as possible, rather than try to improve the quality of the recordings. The Music Academy's own collection of recordings, which could be in excess of 10,000 hours of music (subject to elimination of duplication by the other donors), will be added. The whole process may take a couple of years.

The immediate plan is to open for the public as soon as "a critical mass" of recordings is reached. The visitor to the archives will then be able to listen to his favourite musician, in whole concerts, or by preferred composer, raga or composition. Accompaniment details are also being compiled wherever not already available. An ambitious effort under way is to make it possible to access the lyrics to the songs.

Chari has contributed the entire initial capital of Rs. 30 lakh through his family trust Ramu Endowments and his company TAG Corporation. He has also underwritten the maintenance of the centre for the first five years. Carefully handpicked people will be trained to run it thereafter.

Future plans include so-called

heritage concerts of the old masters to be played to a live audience at the Centre, accompanied by suitable introductions by experts and visual displays. Lecture demonstrations of the Academy may also be played. Lecture demonstrations organised a decade ago by Chari will also be available – including some comparing Hindustani and Carnatic raga-s. Those of Semmangudi and MS singing together and 10-year old T.N. Seshagopalan singing bhajan-s accompanying himself on the harmonium are a couple of interesting examples of the rare recordings available.

The Music Academy TAG Digital Listening Archives is a superb new addition to the city's valuable assets, something of which its promoters can be rightly proud.

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