

A Birth Centenary Tribute

Prof. V. Lakshminarayana (1911 – 1990)

His life

Lakshminarayana was born a hundred years ago, on 11 January 1911, in Alleppey (Alappuzha) in Kerala. His parents, Vaidyanatha Iyer and Brihannayaki, were good singers. Besides Lakshminarayana, the couple had two daughters and five more sons.

Lakshminarayana had his schooling in Alleppey till matriculation. Even as a boy he showed interest in music. He had a melodious voice and a passion for music. Noticing his interest, one Gopalakrishna Bhagavatar of the town came forward to teach him. In course of time, Lakshminarayana learnt a large number of compositions, including Tiruppugazh songs. He gave his maiden vocal performance in the famous Mullakkal Bhagavati temple (Alleppey).

The family migrated to Madurai where Lakshminarayana had a chance to listen to the redoubtable Naina Pillai. It kindled his desire to take up music as a career. From Madurai he moved to Ramnad to join the service of the Raja of Ramnad. He initiated his brothers into music; later, he entrusted the teaching of one of his brothers, Krishnan, to his friend at the palace, Ramnad Sankarasivam, a disciple of Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar. As the family stayed in Ramnad for a long time, his brothers came to be known as the Ramnad Brothers.

Besides vocal, Lakshminarayana also learnt to play the violin. He had further



training from T. Abhiramasundari, granddaughter of Veena Dhanammal, and from Tiruparkadal Srinivasa Iyengar, a disciple of Naina Pillai.

Lakshminarayana married Seeta lakshmi in 1933. She had learnt to sing and play the veena from her childhood. They were blessed with three daughters – Brihannayaki, Subbulakshmi and Ganaraswathy, and three sons – Vaidyanathan, Subramaniam and Shankar. Lakshminarayana trained all of them in vocal music as well as violin playing.

In 1936 he was appointed professor of music in Jaffna College, Ceylon. After completing that assignment, he came to Madras in 1945. While in Ceylon he presented many concerts



as a vocalist, solo violinist and as an accompanist for visiting musicians from India. He also organised a concert in Colombo for his brother Krishnan, with the legendary Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai (violin) and brother Easwaran (mridanga). The two brothers' names appeared with the prefix 'Ramnad'.

Lakshminarayana again went to Jaffna in 1952 to teach and returned to India in 1958 and settled down in Chennai. During his second stay he arranged a concert for his eldest son Vaidyanathan with maestro Yazhpanam Dakshinamurthy playing the tavil. Vaidyanathan was only eight years old then.

Lakshminarayana was a Visiting Professor in Val Arts University Valencia, California. He participated in the World Music Festival at Los Angeles where he played on the double-violin (invented by his son L. Shankar). The Indian Music Circle (U.S.A.) conferred the title 'Sangeeta Chakravarty' on him.

Prof. Lakshminarayana passed away on 4th December 1990 at the age of 79. In 1992 the Music Academy, Chennai, honoured him by placing his portrait in the Hall of Fame. The Department of Posts issued a five-rupee commemorative stamp in his honour on 14 April 2004.

Teacher and composer

Lakshminarayana was better known as a teacher. He has taught music to a large number of students, Indian and foreign. He also com-

posed some keertana-s, namavali kriti-s, and ragamalika-s. They are in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Mani-pravalam.

His playing technique has been described in the folder issued by the Department of Posts, along with the stamp. It states: “What sets Professor V. Lakshminarayana apart is the introduction of playing and bowing techniques wherein all four fingers of the left hand are used, playing and plucking the strings simultaneously. The vigorous right-hand techniques introduced and taught by him intrigued some of the greatest musicians like Lord Yehudi Menuhin and Stephanie Grapelli. He was the first person to attempt to play ‘varnams’ in five speeds (pancha nadai) which earned him the sobriquet ‘Panchanadai Lakshminarayana.’”

A musical patriarch

Lakshminarayana initiated his five brothers, three daughters and three sons into music. He also trained and guided them. All of them attained

phenomenal proficiency in music as teachers, performers, composers and/or conductors. As a detailed account of their accomplishments is beyond the scope of this article, we would just mention their names and the most important of their attainments.

Most well known among his brothers are Ramnad Krishnan (1918-1973), vocalist, and Ramnad Easwaran (1913-1985) and Ramnad Raghavan (1927-2009), both mridangists. Ramnad Venkatachalam followed his eldest brother and became a violinist. They all became highly accomplished in their chosen area of music. The last brother was Ramnad Subramaniam. Rasika-s of the last generation are quite familiar with the names of Ramnad Krishnan, Easwaran and Raghavan.

Lakshminarayana’s daughters Brihannayaki, Subbulakshmi and Ganasaraswathy are also musicians but, like their father, they too chose to teach.

The violin trio

His sons are the distinguished violin maestros L. Vaidyanathan (1942-2007), L. Subramaniam (b. 1947) and L. Shankar (b. 1950). They attained proficiency of a high order as accompanists and soloists. They have given innumerable solo, duo and trio concerts. Double violin is their forte. They have also excelled as music directors, conductors, producers and prolific composers, and have brought out a number of albums. Thanks to their collaboration with masters of world music, they attained international fame as well.

Lakshminarayana’s granddaughters, Dr. Lalitha and Nandini (daughters of Subbulakshmi and Muthuswamy), play violin as a duo. These versatile sisters have followed in the footsteps of their celebrated uncles, and have won international acclaim for their performances in Carnatic, Fusion and Western classical music.

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