

Palghat K.V. Narayanaswamy (1923-2002)

Sangita Kalanidhi Palghat K.V. Narayanaswamy's death anniversary was observed on 1 April. Of the music of this extraordinary disciple of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, it could be said without fear of contradiction that it was loved by musicians and rasika-s alike. Here is a brief recollection of KVN's life in music.

Born at Chandrasekharapuram, Palakkad district, Kerala, in a family of considerable musical ancestry, on the auspicious Friday of 16th November 1923, KVN showed early musical promise. Initiated into classical music by his violinists father Kollengode Viswanathayyar, and grandfather Narayana Bhagavatar, he later came under the tutelage of mridanga maestro Palghat Mani Iyer, Sangeeta Bhushanam C.S. Krishna Iyer, and violin vidwan Papa Venkataramiah. He eventually became Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar's prime disciple (The story is told in *Sruti* 212).



An exemplary disciple (in his own words)

"My guru's music will remain everlasting and full of life. The experience with him enlightened all his sishya-s. All those who had the privilege of learning under Ariyakudi were very fortunate."

"The sishya's voice in vocal accompaniment should only be audible to the guru. He must not raise his voice in an attempt to display it. When the guru sings the pallavi, the sishya should avoid certain portions of it in order for the guru's voice to be heard better. In one concert, when my guru (Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar) was singing the kriti *Kandu dhanyanade*, I chose not to sing with him. He looked at me and asked me why. I still did not sing. Assuming a valid reason for my silence, I think, my guru did not insist. In fact, my guru was singing so beautifully that I felt he should be heard without any interference. I resumed singing at the tillana. In a concert, silence is of paramount importance. A sishya should know when to sing and when to be silent. Such knowledge is gained only through gurukulavasam."

"The greatness of a kriti lies in its kalapramanam. If you change it, your singing becomes worthless. Bhava is more than words. The words are but an instrument. The raga has its own bhava. You can melt someone's heart through

raga; you can also make him happy. All our kriti-s are about God. The feelings come spontaneously when we sing of Rama, Krishna, Siva or Ambal. We must enunciate the words clearly. In Iyengarval's music, this was always there. The words always blended with the song, whether in Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu or Kannada. Even if we don't know the language, we can get the bhava right by absorbing its meaning. I like Musiri's niraval singing. He never transgressed the rules of niraval. I am very interested in the Dhanammal school of music. When Jayammal was living in Purasawalkam, I learnt a few kriti-s from Viswa. We polished the song *Devibrova*, repeatedly singing it together. Songs of that school like *Gopalaka pahimam* and *Mayamma* are of very high quality. Bala sang them superbly, which is why her dance was superior."

"When I look back, I marvel at the things that can happen in your life. I had the great good fortune of learning from a maestro like Ariyakudi. Palghat Mani Iyer was responsible for that. I also had a mridanga vidwan (Mani Iyer) and a violinist (Papa Venkataramiah) for guru-s. How fortunate I was, and am! Endaro mahanubhavulu, said Tyagaraja. How true!"

An exceptional guru

Tributes by his disciples. Edited excerpts from the book K.V. Narayanaswamy – Foremost Disciple of 'Ariyakudi' published in 2001.

H.V. Srivatsan

KVN Mama, like his guru Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, is blessed with an uncanny ability to read the collective mind of his audience after a mere glance towards them. It appears that during the brief respite between pieces, he decides the appropriate next item that would maintain the momentum of the concert, thus leaving his listeners both surprised and thrilled. His aesthetic sense is unparalleled. No sangati of Mama's is prosaic or frivolous. It would appear that every sangati is a paradox: well thought out, yet spontaneously charged with the feeling of the moment. A concert of Mama's is akin to a medley of chocolates, each piece sweet, yet enchanting in its own way.

REMEMBERING

“An alapana should be like an essay. It should have a meaningful introduction. It should have different types of sentences, with full stops and commas, and with question marks and exclamation points. And it should have a proper conclusion,” KVN Mama said.

Prashanth, Balaji Shankar, Pattabhiraman, Karthik and Sudhir

It all seems so easy when Mama teaches you music. He can break down the most complex sangati into portions, swara by swara and teach us so that anyone can sing. Even to watch him teach others is quite an experience. We can recognise some of the mistakes other students make, in ourselves.

He is very patient, very tolerant. He does not get angry when we produce a sangati different from what he has taught us. “Think about it!” he tells you, instead. He corrects us when we go out and perform. He does not believe in high praise. It takes him four or five days of persuasion to comment on recordings of our concerts. He can imitate the smallest errors we make. He will then proceed to sing the same phrase or song in the proper manner.

Mama’s bani sounds great when you listen to it, very sweet. Only when you sing in that style, do you realise how difficult it is. Mama quickly identifies the strengths and weaknesses of a pupil, but he won’t straightaway tell the student. He never compares one with another. He teaches each according to his need.

Sruti is paramount to him. He teaches you how to hold the sruti, how to cultivate your voice. When you have an off day, he will give you an irritated look as if to chide you, “How can you sing off key without even being aware of it?” He banned you from the class on such days.

A class may last an hour or it may go on for three hours. We students come in the morning and stay on all day long. This is no gurukulavasam, it’s actually sishyakulavasam. We come here, eat heartily, make merry. The class may start at 3 pm and go on till 6.30 pm.

The teaching is not confined to the classroom. Mama talks music a great deal, tells us stories from the past. Our parents too do not badger us with questions on why we spend so much time with the guru. They too encourage us to soak in the music and drink deep of it. We are practically members of the household.

The worst Mama scolds one of us is to say, “Chump, can’t

you get even this right?” When he gets very angry, his ears go red. When we express regret for giving him undue trouble in class, he comforts us by saying, “Don’t worry, I am okay now.” He gets restless on days when the students don’t turn up.

Padma Narayanaswamy, wife

KVN’s music constantly rings in your ear. Once you listen to it, your mind does not seek any other.

He taught for twenty years at the Music College. Students used to wait for his class. There was about every composition he taught, a certain permanence. We’d never forget any of those songs.

Today, every student comes to him as a son to his father. For every student, he has an individual approach, he goes to his level, teaches him in a way he will understand.

Musiri Mama used to say that you need a pure heart to be a good musician. KVN’s childlike heart keeps his voice so youthful. He teaches with great transparency, with generosity. He works very hard to ensure perfect sruti and laya. His guru bhakti is extraordinary.

As his thoughts are always of music, he has not needed to practise hard for concerts for many years now. He hums a few lines to himself as he leaves for a concert. The music is now part of him. He doesn’t like impromptu requests at concerts, because they may not suit the flow of the concert.

When he ascends the stage, all of us treat him with guru bhakti. We become one with his divine music.

Rama Raghunathan, daughter

I play the violin in Carnatic music. Sruti and tala are paramount to Appa, my guru. He is very strict about that. “First, learn to keep the talam properly for the song, before you start playing it. How can you miss the talam, are you so unmusical?” he would berate me. Today, when I think of all that, I realise how right he was. If I play the violin with fidelity to tala, I must give my father credit for that.

Anuradha Suresh Krishnamurthi, daughter

He is a very patient teacher. I learnt from my mother, too. Both are strict, but Amma is stricter than Appa.

Appa is a natural, emotional vidwan. His instincts are pure, and they show him the right direction, I believe. Also, he has met the right people in life, and they have shown him the right path, too. ■