

Celebrating Sampradaya

Ludwig Pesch

The centre appropriately named Sampradaya was inspired by the musical integrity and genuine affection of H. Ramachandra Shastry (my own teacher) and Savithri Rajan (the teacher of my associate, Michael Nixon). Neither is with us anymore, but happily both lived to a ripe old age and remained devoted teachers all their lives. Their memories are therefore vivid and precious even today. This has to do with their strong personalities and a boundless generosity that enabled them to make lasting contributions to the lives of all who came in contact with them. They shared everything they had acquired in terms of music, wisdom, humour, and especially the right contacts in the world of Carnatic music: the musicians, scholars and teachers without whom Sampradaya



Ramachandra Shastry with Varahur Muthuswamy Iyer (violin), Tinnayam Venkatarama Iyer (mridanga), Venu Naicker (khanjira) and Madras Parthasarathy (morsing) at the HMV recording studio in 1937

would not have grown and acquired the national and international reputation it enjoys today - neither in the sense of “great musical traditions”,

nor in the form of a modern music centre dedicated to such music. Both teachers were living encyclopedias of Carnatic music and enlightened us about the many personalities, past and living who had shaped this music and endowed it with such grace, depth, vigour, and enduring appeal.

Savithri Rajan and Jayalakshmi Ammal



It was this appeal which drew us foreign music students to Carnatic music. Did I say “enlightened”? Well, the light emerged from our teachers’ side, the darkness about the nature of this music was our condition, and what brought us and others together in a common quest was the realisation that the efforts of a few individuals, however dedicated, would make little difference; but the persisting efforts of many over many years certainly would. For this reason we decided to focus on the professional and personal experience of the Carnatic musicians themselves, not our own notions or expectations of what Carnatic music was all about.

Soon this vague idea concretised in what has since become a flourishing

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centre thanks to the most diverse contributions and efforts of devoted individuals of all age groups, Indians and foreigners alike. To begin with the beginning, however, it should be recalled that we were saddened by the fact that so little attention had been paid to senior musicians and less known music teachers and scholars. So many of them had spent all their lives to cultivate and pass on a particular facet of music that they held sacred. How better to do justice to their contribution than by listening to them, and learning from them? By also treating them fairly in terms of acknowledgement and decent remuneration for their concerts and recordings!

We realised that prestige, commercial value and public appeal had no meaning at all with regard to the true and lasting value of “their” music which, in fact, belongs to all of mankind. Fashions come and go, but certain qualities are essential to any type of “classical” music. It was the late Savithri Rajan who taught us that in South India, such intrinsic value or quality is the essence of the concept of “sampradaya”. On the basis of this valuable insight, our public activities were presented, with instant and lasting success, under the Sampradaya banner for more than a year before a society of the same name was founded twenty years ago. Max Mueller Bhavan, the German Cultural Institute of Chennai, graciously provided funds and facilities for several years until the newly founded society could take care of itself with financial assistance from the Ford Foundation.

Hundreds of musicians and scholars have since demonstrated in association with Sampradaya, that music which is rare and endowed with a special quality can indeed be cultivated, disseminated without having to make

any concessions to mass appeal. The purpose for which Sampradaya was founded, and to which the centre continues to be devoted, could be summarized in terms of simple questions like “Which factors have shaped musical life in South India?”, “Who are the exponents of traditional music?”, and “What are the experiences that they can and wish to share with others?”

Sampradaya provides musicians with special opportunities to share their experience in any way they feel to be congenial, depending on the nature of their music, and their own stage in life. In the first place, this means listening to the music they treasure most in what can be described as “public chamber concerts”. Thereby they can share their precious artistic heirloom and creative genius with like-minded individuals without any distractions like speeches or any other ceremonial acts. From the beginning, we decided to prepare and document the musical experience in all conceivable ways so that others could also benefit from it, now and later on. To place this

music in proper perspective, documentary material was gathered or prepared by way of interviews, recording and photo sessions, and field trips. Later on, the laborious work of complementing it with additional research data and documentary material as well as cataloguing needed to be undertaken.

For outsiders, this work behind the screens is, of course, hardly comprehensible; but everyone is welcome to listen to its outcome and make use of the archival materials, whether for personal or professional reasons. For this reason, the establishment of a centre soon became necessary, something easier to conceive than to put into practice. With help from many members of the music community of Chennai (notably a kindly landlord and landlady, Kalpakam and Maj. Gen. A. Balasubrahmanian), this dream came true and continued to be a source of strength in South India’s classical music circles for two decades. It was when this stately Mylapore home could no longer

Sitting (L to R): T. Sankaran, Mannargudi A. Arumugam Pillai, C.T. Lakshmanan. Standing: R. Desikan, Ludwig Pesch and Michael J. Nixon at Sampradaya in 1981



COURTESY: SAMPRADAYA ARCHIVES

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offer hospitality to Sampradaya that Leela Samson came forward to host Sampradaya at Rukmini Devi's former office at Kalakshetra. Sampradaya and its visitors now benefit from the same atmosphere in which great musicians, scholars, teachers and composers have flourished. A bonus is the enjoyment of green and quiet surroundings.

Seen in retrospective, the concept of combining chamber concerts with documentation – regarded as “novel” at the time when Sampradaya was founded – has had a surprisingly enduring appeal. While this is what we had hoped for, its validity first needed to be proved. We were used to rather morose notions typical of Chennai in the 1970s and 80s, for instance, that “classical values” were losing ground and the younger generation of musicians had nothing but “money and instant fame” on their minds. Now we know for sure that, quite the contrary was true in many instances. This not only speaks volumes about the cultured youth of South India, it is also the success story of Sampradaya (despite several ups and downs), reflecting the self-rejuvenating forces inherent in Indian music.

“Small is beautiful” also applies to Carnatic music. Just “cloning” or multiplying this or that feature, enlarging it out of proportion, re-arranging a few notes and rhythms ever so cleverly seems to be rather counterproductive. The flaw of such strategies has particularly been demonstrated whenever Carnatic music has reached the discerning ears of classical music lovers outside India for the first (and all too often, last) time. Foreign audiences don't listen just to be “impressed” (often at uncomfortably high decibel levels) – they too long to be touched by the subtle facets and deeper meaning, the bhava of Carnatic music. In this sense, it is no different from any other good music.

Anybody interested in the history of Sampradaya will be delighted that many among the better known musicians of the younger generation have been associated with the projects initiated by Sampradaya, or have just made good use of its archives. The names of some of them would lend grace to a Who's Who in Carnatic music in the 20th and 21st centuries. The strength of this centre lies in its accessibility, especially the fact that the music and its accompanying

documentation remain where they belong rather than being scattered in various archives around the country or abroad.

Let us hope a community of friends and alumni will grow around Sampradaya to ensure that the centre remains active into the far future, maintains high standards in terms of chamber concerts, projects, and workshops of archival value, and, of course, always remains accessible to those in need of musical inspiration and knowledge. To achieve this goal, Sampradaya also needs financial support from those who have benefitted from its work in their careers and private lives. In addition, it needs disinterested and active involvement in the affairs of the registered society which governs the centre and initiates its activities. The continuing activities of Sampradaya are, after all, an original contribution to the cultural life of Chennai, the music and dance capital of India. No non-profit institution can flourish without selfless cooperation and interaction with a discerning public.

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