

## R. Visweswaran: Bridging the North-South divide

**M**usic was his passion, so he opted to make it his profession. Music to him was an elixir which, combined with his unswerving faith in his spiritual guru Mataji Vithamma, brought him back from the jaws of death time and again.

R. Visweswaran was totally immersed in music. This multi-talented artist was adept at playing Carnatic music on the veena, Western classical music on the Flamenco guitar, BGM for films, and Hindustani music on the santoor, composed music for dance and strummed on the surmandal as he sang for his wife Chitra's Bharatanatyam recitals.

Born on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1944, Viswes or Vichechu as he was affectionately called, belonged to a family steeped in music. He was the nephew of the legendary GNB and the son of R. Ranganathan who served the Madras Music Academy as its secretary for many years. Even as a child he had an instinctive feel for music. He learnt Carnatic vocal music from mother Rajeswari, veena from vidwan Pichumani Iyer, and went on to equip himself as a licentiate in teaching in Western classical guitar from the Trinity College, London. He had specialised training in padam-singing from T. Muktha.

A Chartered Accountant by education, Viswes gave up accounting to pursue his first love — music. Multidisciplinary in his musical skills, "Pandit Viswes" was one of the seniormost disciples of the santoor maestro Shiv Kumar Sharma, and had the rare distinction of being the only South Indian to play the Kashmiri santoor, in a professional



capacity. His guru remarked at a special function organised to honour the memory of Visweswaran in Chennai, that the credit for bringing the santoor to the South goes to Viswes.

Noteworthy among Visweswaran's concerts abroad were performances at the Munshi Centenary celebrations of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London; the official Jawaharlal Nehru Birth Centenary celebrations in Paris; the Montelimar Festival in France; and the Fete de la Musique (International Jazz Festival) in Rouen, France. His interaction with musicians of international repute, such as John Kaizen Neptune, Shakuhachi flautist of Japan and Terry Allen of U.S.A. culminated in music albums.

Viswes was a graded artist of All India Radio and recently released a Hindustani santoor CD titled *In Contemplation*. He was featured on BBC Television, SBC (Singapore) and several other TV channels in India and abroad. Prior to his active performance career in the classical arts, he worked with stalwart film music directors like R.D. Burman, Laxmikant Pyarelal, Hariprasad

Chaurasia, Rajesh Roshan, M.S. Viswanathan, Ilayaraja and A.R. Rehman.

He presented solo Carnatic vocal recitals. Married to the famous Bharatanatyam dancer Chitra in 1972, his vocal accompaniment and music compositions for her dance have also contributed to the aesthetic sensitivity of her dance presentations. In this capacity he participated in major cultural festivals in India and abroad. One of our readers A. Seshan, a critic, writer and connoisseur of music, writes from Mumbai: "I would always remember Visweswaran for his brilliant and bhava-laden singing of *Krishna nee* on a TV channel while accompanying Chitra. It is the best rendition of the song I have ever heard."

The Chitra-Visweswaran dance-music collaboration started off with the latter playing the veena for the former's dance. In 1980, on a trip to UK, acceding to a casual request by an organiser friend, Viswes took his seat in the wings and for the first time shared the vocals for Chitra with well-known singer Rajasekharan. A spinal surgery and a severe heart attack in 1984 cut short his busy career in film music. It was only after that, in 1985, that he took to singing full time for Chitra's dance programmes. On the one hand it ensured that the couple could be together and Chitra could take care of him, on the other they were happy that both could together do what each one loved best — music/dance. He had a melodious voice. Singing for Chitra was quite a challenge as she often performed more than twenty sanchari variations for a line. The combined talents of

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this couple have influenced audiences around the world.

The couple established the Chidambaram Academy of Performing Arts in Chennai in 1975. The main thrust of the institution is to instill an awareness of India's rich art and culture in their students. Both Chitra and Visweswaran taught dance and music to more than 100 children at Lalit Kala Mandir run by their spiritual guru Vithamma.

Viswes composed music for many advertisement jingles and ad films. As a classical composer, he scored the music for over 30 dance presentations comprising solo, group, thematic, dance-dramas and dance theatre presentations. He has composed several anjali-s, jatiswaram-s and tillana-s (including one in Rasikapriya), and set to tune a number of sloka-s and bhajan-s.

In 1995 Viswes fell critically ill, but his passion for music, his positive attitude to life, and his faith in his spiritual guru helped him make a slow but steady recovery. The Kalaimamani award of the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram came as a timely shot in the arm. He soon made a short trip to London to play the santoor at the Nehru Centre and at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, as



well as provide vocal support to Chitra. The seriousness of his condition did not deter him from successfully completing his Senior Fellowship project awarded by the Dept. of

**The Chidambaram Academy of Performing Arts (CAPA) organised a special function to celebrate the memory of R. Visweswaran on 2<sup>nd</sup> September at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Hall in Chennai. Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma, Mrs. YGP, M.S. Viswanathan, Prof. C.V. Chandrasekhar, Chitra Visweswaran and Mataji Vithamma paid rich tributes to his memory. He was brought to life through his music — excerpts were played from his vocal and santoor recordings; the students of CAPA danced to his compositions; his disciples sang and a two-CD pack comprising a selection of Visweswaran's vocal and santoor presentations was released.**

Culture, Government of India, on the comparative study of the application, presence or absence of gamaka in different systems of world music. He was a learner all his life.

Viswes also worked on the presentation of Carnatic music on the santoor. He first presented Tyagaraja kriti-s at the aradhana at Tiruvaiyaru in January 2007 and at the Cleveland Tyagaraja Aradhana festival in April. This was followed by a hectic tour in U.S.A comprising dance performances, santoor and vocal recitals. It was his last overseas tour. He died of cardiac arrest on June 28<sup>th</sup> 2007 in Chennai.

Viswes was simple and unassuming, with a remarkable sense of humour. There was never a dull moment in his company and his ready wit sent you into peals of laughter. He said that "Life without humour is like a tumour." He was always humming a raga and liked to analyse the sanchara-s of a musician as he walked out at the end of a performance. His reaction to an unsatisfactory recital would be: "It was mu-sick!" followed by a chuckle.

Visweswaran was a perfect gentleman and a good human being.

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