

Exemplars of a rare tradition

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TBalasaraswati, the Bharatanatyam virtuoso and T. Viswanathan, the enchanting Carnatic flautist, have left indelible impressions on their arts. Though they were independently successful in two different performing art forms, they were similar in their style of expression. This unique style has to be credited to the music of their grandmother, the legendary Veena Dhanammal.

We cannot pay a tribute to Balasaraswati or Viswanathan without honouring Dhanammal. She was a legendary artist, whose passion for her veena created ethereal music that deeply affected her children and grandchildren, permeating their chosen arts. Thus did the sensuous and expressive Dhanammal school of art evolve.

It was providence that drew me to this style of music nearly 50 years ago. My family hails from Sengalipuram, a small village in Tanjavur district. It gained prominence as a result of the presence of eminent persons like the great Anantharama Dikshitar, a scholar and renowned performer of upanyasam. My father, T.P. Ramamoorthy, initially served in the army. Later, he took to agriculture in our village to support me in my musical endeavours.

As an ardent lover of music, my father used to welcome and entertain many eminent musicians at home. To be able to meet and listen to a galaxy of artists in our village was to be truly blessed. Vocalists such as Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Madurai Srirangam Iyengar and



Moorthy with Viswa

Madurai Mani Iyer; nagaswara artists like Tiruvavaduturai Rajarathnam Pillai and Ariyalur Angappa Pillai; violinists such as Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai; and flautists like Sholapuram Suppiah Pillai, Mayavaram K.V. Rajarama Iyer, Tirukannapuram Srinivasa Pillai, K.H. Ramachandra Sastry and Palladam Sanjeeva Rao visited Sengalipuram frequently to perform at the temple. Therefore, it was only natural that I developed an abiding interest in music. I was particularly drawn to the melody of the flute.

Turning point

In the early years, I learnt flute and vocal music from Kanakambujam Ammal, Mayavaram K.V. Rajarama

Iyer, and Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai. The pivotal point in my musical journey was when I accompanied my father in 1961 to the Tyagaraja Aradhana in Tiruvaiyaru. I was then twenty years old. I had the good fortune to listen to T. Viswanathan's flute for the very first time. He was playing the Tyagaraja kriti *Merusamana*, in Mayamalavagaula. It sounded so different from what I had heard until then that I found myself irresistibly drawn to Viswanathan and his music.

I wanted to know more about this captivating artist. Rajamanickam Pillai told me that Viswa was the grandson of the great Veena

Dhanammal and the brother of T. Balasaraswati. He also told me that this was a unique school of music with a captivating style.

This triggered an urge in me to learn and master this style. I pestered my father to somehow help me become an apprentice in this school. My father approached veena vidwan M.A. Kalyanakrishna Bhagavatar, in this regard. He requested the vidwan, after a performance in our village, to persuade T. Viswanathan, to accept me as his student.

I vividly remember the day Kalyanakrishna Bhagavatar escorted me to Viswa's family home. I was asked to play a musical piece of my choice in the presence of Viswa's family – his mother, Jayammal, Balasaraswati, and Viswa's brother Ranganathan. In an attempt to display my talent, I chose to play the Bhairavi Ata tala varnam *Viriboni*. I played the pallavi-anupallavi-chittaswaram unit, with what I thought was verve and finesse. Just when I began to play the charanam, Jayammal told me that would be enough. Though disappointed that I could not exhibit my talent further, I was certain they had been bowled over. I learnt later that Jayammal's peremptory halt of my performance was because she could stand it no more.

Viswanathan asked me to join the diploma course in music offered by the Madras University, where he was teaching. The Dhanammal style of music required me to relearn the fingering technique of the flute. My love for this style of music made me practise with devotion and enabled me to obtain a first class certificate. I am proud

to say that I was probably the first person to thus qualify as Viswanathan's student from the Madras University.

From here on, my study became more intense. By this time, I had secured a Govt. of India scholarship to study under Viswanathan. I stayed in Viswa's home and did little else than play the flute, just like in the gurukula system. Viswa's teaching was structured and systematic. This, along with the ambience in their home, was ideal for the imbibing of music.

Viswa had learnt the techniques of playing the flute from his guru Tirupamburam Swaminatha Pillai, a great innovator. He re-designed his flute to approximate the music emanating from it, to the vocal rendition of music, in which the gamaka-s are emphasised. It was only natural that Viswa adopted his guru's gayaki style of playing the instrument. Viswa further modified the design of the flute to make the sound resemble the music issuing from the veena. This alteration also prevented the emphatic effect that occurs while negotiating sharp turns in swara sequences, like *Ga-Ma-Pa-Ma-Pa-Ma-Ga-Ri*. On the whole, Viswa successfully managed to produce on the flute the same ethereal effect of Dhanammal's veena.

Learning music from Bala

My learning was interrupted when Viswanathan had to leave Chennai on an assignment for the U.S.A. I was confused and thrown off balance. Sensing my discomfort, my guru advised me to use the time to learn music from Bala. What at first seemed to me a great loss,

turned out to be a golden learning opportunity.

I learnt a number of pada varnam-s, kriti-s and padam-s from her. When she taught keertana-s, she spontaneously used Bharatanatyam hand gestures, to further emote the meaning and mood of the pieces. These gestures were so eloquent that you could learn the nuances of the swara-s from them.

Bala taught me the technique of using the body to accentuate intonations, which was a trait of their school of music. In that style, the ascent or descent in swara sequences must be enhanced with the corresponding raising or lowering of the head. Bala would also insist that the flautist must sit upright and keep the right hand at chest level.

Bala used to say that music should spring forth from deep within the body, giving it strength of emotion. She helped me learn to produce all the subtleties in the gamaka-s. I learnt to render them in many ways, by developing an intimacy with my flute. I experimented by sometimes deeply embracing my flute, or sometimes casually nudging it with my shoulder, ever so gently rubbing it on my cheek and whispering into it, or by boldly swaying with it. I learnt how such a subtle and sensitive approach brought out variations into gamaka-s and swara-s.

Once I had to go to Delhi for a final review of my grant. I was interviewed by an eminent panel of judges, including T.L. Venkatarama Iyer. One of the judges asked me how Bala, who was not a flautist, had

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come to be my teacher. Venkatarama Iyer countered the question by stating that learning vocal music from Bala meant learning everything of significance in their school of music! Thus, Bala added many vital ingredients to my music, adding to it the essence of the Dhanammal style and making it more soulful.

After a period of learning with Bala, I travelled to the U.S.A. to continue to learn the flute from Viswa. I learnt a number of kriti-s, and more important, absorbed Viswa's attitude to music, his openness and experimentation with the various forms. I began to understand that Viswa had experimented by incorporating Western techniques of playing the flute, into his own music. Such openness enriched the quality of his music, resulting in his making a profound impact on the listeners.

Bala's household used to attract musicians of all kinds. Ustad Amir Khan, the much revered Hindustani vocalist would often visit and stay

for a while. His practice sessions sent me into raptures! I was inspired to learn the grammar and techniques of Hindustani music. Bala was also keen that I learn this style and she helped me to obtain a grant from the ministry in Delhi, to learn from the celebrated Hindustani flautist Devendra Murdeshwar. By the time I received the grant, Murdeshwar unfortunately passed away. However, I moved to Delhi and spent many years learning Hindustani raga-s on the flute from renowned artists like Pandit Vinay Chandra Maudgalya and Ustad Naseer Ahmed Khan.

Bala and Viswa both believed that the Hindustani style of music had some fine qualities worth bringing into the Carnatic style. Their open minded approach to the arts, learning and infusing ideas from other styles into their own, made their art complete.

Whenever Bala or Viswa performed in Delhi, several Hindustani musicians would attend, testifying to their

interest in the Dhanammal style of music. Once, the great Siddheswari Devi attended Bala's recital. She later invited Bala and her daughter Lakshmi to her home for dinner. I accompanied them. Siddheswari requested Bala to sing. Bala, in turn, asked Siddheswari to sing. She began singing an ashtapadi of Jaydeva with deep emotion. Bala went on to do abhinaya extempore to Siddheswari's music. It was enchanting to see two great artists reach out to each other in perfect harmony. The forty years that I spent with Bala and Viswa were full of such experiences!

Bala and Viswa have immensely contributed to my music by sharing their wealth of knowledge, with their openness to expose me to other forms, making my musical journey rich and complete in all respects.

I have a small group of students, to whom I teach this art. Even today, when I practise or teach my students, I feel Bala and Viswa's eternal presence. ■