

Taking Carnatic music to the US Interview with Lalgudi G.J.R. Krishnan

It was a rainy day in Madison in May 2008. With grey clouds hanging low in the sky, Lalgudi G.J.R. Krishnan took time off from his concert schedule for a cup of Wisconsin's specialty – their very own ice cream. Speaking to GAYATHRI SUNDARESAN he allowed his mind to travel back in time to the days when as a young lad he set foot on alien America in the shadow of his father, the changes he has observed through the years, up to the present, when he has attained a standing of his own as a senior musician.

Music tours then and now

I could say that the first Carnatic music concert tour of the U.S.A. worth its name was done by my father in 1971. He took N. Ramani Sir along with him – this was a novel idea of combining flute and violin in concert! Ramnad Raghavan accompanied them on the mridanga; Trichy Sankaran too played for some of the concerts, while some had double mridanga! They did some 33 concerts on that tour. Travel was not quite as convenient as now, and communication was only through snail-mail! Calling home was unthinkable as it was phenomenally expensive. The artists had to endure all the travails of being far away from home and hearth. Pioneers always have to sacrifice so that the successors can benefit!

Lalgudi's was undiluted pure Carnatic music; it was not watered down to attract crowds. He received a rousing reception wherever he went. At Stanford, he could see a long line of Americans waiting in queue to buy tickets for the concert.

After that first tour, he refused all



G.J.R. Krishnan in Madison

other offers as he did not believe in travelling every year. He toured again in 1983, after a great deal of persuasion, at the invitation of Dr. Rajagopal of CMANA, New Jersey. This was my first tour of the US, as his accompanist. Every one of the 28 concerts of that trip was a gem.

I was recently listening to the mind-boggling Simhendramadhyamam he played at Dayton. I realise its worth even more sharply now – probably went over my head then! What a treat it must have been to listen to it live, so far away from India!

My father had the wonderful habit of maintaining a diary (which I don't). He is a great observer. At the Festival of India in the US and the UK, he even drew the plan of the hotel, the location of his room in it, and even the shape of the key in such minute detail!

On one occasion, after finishing our US tour, we went to London, where

we lost our passports. They had all been kept together in a pouch and my father had kept them in the trolley. Naturally everyone was very upset, but my father was more upset at having lost his diary! Finally he got back only the diary and he was very happy! We managed to land with a landing certificate and then applied for duplicate passports.

I distinctly remember the 1983 tour, when we performed at Wesleyan University with Dr. Viswa and Prof. S. Ramanathan present. It was like being in Kalakshetra. Every American student was keeping the tala! That was a unique experience. Wesleyan was perhaps the only university aware of our music then. It was very heartening to play there.

I accompanied my father again in 1985 on the Festival of India tour. We were paired with Hindustani musicians in some places. The day-long jugalbandi in San Francisco is still being talked about! It was one of the best. We took everybody by storm. There were many Americans among the listeners – it was a wonderful experience.

My sister and I toured once with our father for Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. There were not many concerts, but each concert was a major draw.

My first US tour as an independent artist with my sister Vijayalakshmi was in 1990 on the invitation of CMANA. Our "Visit USA" budget tickets involved a lot of extra flying between cities and made us travel-weary. The schedule was packed with Friday-Saturday-Sunday concerts.

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The organisers of our tours usually billet us in the homes of music loving people from India. Most of them are very hospitable. In 1983, I had just completed college and I almost felt like an aborigine, coming from a very old tradition, transported to this New World! Awareness of the value of Carnatic music among school or college going children was very low, and I felt quite diffident about conversing with them on an equal footing!

Even in 1990, kids born and brought up in the US were not familiar with our music. Probably the parents also had a sense of confusion, as they faced a different set of variables. It was probably that transition phase, so parents were not willing to force their children into anything. It was difficult to put on two different caps at work and at home. Except in a few households, the majority of Indians wanted to blend into American society; they still felt diffident about displaying their own identity.

I came again in 1994, and in 1996. I began to perceive that awareness

was beginning to grow perceptibly. The ABCD-s (American Born Confused Desi) did not feel ashamed of their culture. They were at least getting curious enough about our music to attend concerts and get to know it. When we practised, the younger generation was also present.

My father composed music for the ballet *Jaya Jaya Devi* arranged by Cleveland Cultural Alliance in 1994. It took the art scene by storm. It was so popular I was told that tickets were sold in black! It was always performed to packed houses. Awareness had indeed improved.

The present scenario is totally changed. Almost every Indian kid in the US knows what Carnatic music is. Many take lessons, and sing well too. Many organisations and artists have contributed to this.

Several music teachers (vocal and instrumental) have made the US their home. Visiting artists are also doing their bit, but the resident musicians have been able to bring about a sea change in the Indian community by keeping the flow of

interest alive. Many have reached a professional level. In the days to come, I will not be surprised if they bring just the main artist from India and have the accompanists from here locally.

I feel a deep gratitude to the teachers here, who after a hard day's work, instead of relaxing, take up the task of teaching music, which they want to pass on.

We have NRI festivals in India where artists who have settled abroad get to perform. In a few years I expect that the NRI tag will go and they will be at par with the artists in India. That is a very healthy development.

During our tours abroad, we had weekend concerts, with free time during the week. I used to talk to the children of my hosts about Indian music, tried to make it simple and interesting for them. I continue to do that even now, though with more students learning now, I have less free time. And with internet, I do not even have to be in the same city as the students, so my time is usefully spent.

Earlier, even at home, the young – IITians for instance – shunned classical music as being old fashioned. During one of my tours I recall meeting a group of IITians in Purdue University who held “tape listening” sessions! They had probably never paid attention to Carnatic music while living in India; but having travelled far away from home, they found Carnatic music to be a good antidote to their homesickness! This transformation set me thinking that every IITian should come to the US to realise the value of our music!

Spic-Macay contributed much by

In concert with his sister Vijayalakshmi



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involving the students in organising concerts and lecdems. These were not ticketed performances, so the students began attending out of curiosity, and then slowly developed a liking for classical music.

The audience profile down the years has been pretty much the same. The Indian associations then and now organise concerts only within the Indian community. We may see a handful of Americans who have learnt through word of mouth. If the organiser publicises the concert at the local universities, it will definitely kindle an interest among the student community. Very few organisations bring in a mixed crowd.

It is satisfying to bring joy to Indians settled here, but it is also very satisfying to play to an American crowd, because that is when music transcends regional and cultural barriers. Performing in the universities gives real joy.

Music teaching

The initial teaching cannot be done through Skype. It *has* to be done in the presence of the teacher. Parents and students should understand the importance of this

factor. This is essential for vocal music too, but absolutely imperative for an instrument. A visiting artist tours for two or three months. Many students learn in bits and pieces from every artist they host. There is the danger of the student getting totally confused.

I would say that in institutions also, it would be better to have a guru from one bani teaching throughout the course. In earlier times, a guru would examine a prospective student to gauge whether he was worth the time spent; but now anyone – with or without musical talent – can apply and be admitted to music classes. The positive aspect here is that, the student can become an informed listener, even if he does not become a performer.

Rage to perform

It is good to organise competitions to encourage children to perform. At the same time, this should be treated as a learning experience, and everything should not hinge on winning alone. Parents should inculcate a healthy spirit of participation in their children.

Another worrisome aspect is this anxiety to perform. Music as an art can be learnt for your personal

enjoyment. It is a system that will improve you as a person; it can be a stress relieving change from academics or work. It can be refreshing and helps you concentrate better at work. For every artist who succeeds as a performer, there may be hundreds who do not make it to the stage. Undying passion, a burning desire, and a lot of hard work are essential for you to become a professional. Is it not so in any field? Even if you do not get to perform on stage, music can be a healthy pastime, a very useful link to India, to your culture and roots. In the rage to perform, don't lose out on the enjoyment. And it is up to the parents to instil this in the children.

Include C-music in academics

Just as Hindustani music is being taught in ethnomusicology departments in universities, the Carnatic music stream should also become a part of academic study. This will create more researchers. Even now, when Indian music is mentioned, people abroad think of Hindustani music alone. It is a wonderful system, of course, but Carnatic is no less; we are only asking for the recognition it deserves. ■