

## “He is my greatest asset”: Seetarama Sarma      Gayathri Sundaresan

**G**uru Seetharama Sarma is a happy man. A deep sense of fulfilment envelops him as he talks about his sishya, T.M. Krishna. This *bhagavatulu* from the village of Kuchipudi forsook his family tradition to choose Carnatic music as his vocation. Having encountered many hurdles in his journey, he found a haven in Kalakshetra. Rukmini Devi tapped his potential effectively in her productions (see *Sruti* 238). Even while being entrenched in the activity he loved, travelling far and wide for performances, Sarma was keen to impart his knowledge to as many students as possible.

“I taught him the alankaram-s in different raga-s. I taught him lessons in the old format, including what is known as ‘Nagabandha swaram’. He sang clearly in 5 ½ kattai. I was happy teaching him,” Sarma recalls, as he goes back in time, tracing the progress of Krishna’s musical talent. “Seriousness comes only after a certain level, but right from the beginning I knew that this boy had *asadhya gnanam*. He could easily translate into swara any note or phrase I sang. His cousins, girls who had also started learning from me, soon discontinued their lessons as they were unable to match his level.”

Sarma cherishes a letter Nedunuri Krishnamurti wrote him after he presented Krishna to him: “Krishna’s singing is still ringing in my ears. He will become a

The guru and his sishya



star in Tamil Nadu. And that is when *your* merit will be acknowledged”. Sarma is overwhelmed as he says: “Realisation dawned on me on reading and re-reading that letter that *this* was to be my destiny. Images of my life’s struggles raced through my mind. Krishna was the medium through which I would be recognised. I had no other concern than making him a fine musician. And whenever I pondered this, I always had good omens. I am content, now that my sishya has reached the heights I aspired for him. I am filled with joy and pride. I regret that his father is not alive to see his rise to fame. I am also saddened by the thought that I may not be around to see him receive the coveted Sangita Kalanidhi from the Music Academy, as he surely will one day”.

“Krishna’s first concert was in 1988 at the Spirit of Youth series at the Music Academy. I was hesitant to let him perform, but agreed on the insistence of T.T. Vasu. This concert during Navaratri turned out to be his arangetram, where he impressed one and all with a very fine performance. Krishna was a picture of confidence, he had no stage fear whatsoever. He was adjudged the best performer that year and he received the award from sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar. Following this he was placed in the noon slot at the Academy during the December season that year.

“There were comments that it was rather early to make him perform. But I was quite clear about allowing him to sing. I knew he would gain experience and maturity steadily; I did not expect him to sing a ragam-tanam-pallavi straightaway. I prepared his song list taking into consideration the sequence of songs, the sequence of raga-s so that they did not clash, the variety of tala-s, the balance of chauka and madhyama kala-s, etc. He always took my blessings before every concert and asked for my opinion afterwards. My first response would be an encouraging “Well done”. Later we would go into the details and work out the areas where he had to improve.

“From 1988 onwards he was given a slot at the Academy every year without

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a break. He was promoted to the 2 pm slot and then the 4 pm senior slot. In 1996, he applied to AIR on my advice. He directly got the B High grade.

“Krishna has the gift of *vaak suddhi* – clarity of diction. I have taught him the meaning of every song, be it Sanskrit or Telugu, so that he can render it with greater understanding. To all that I knew, I added my own creativity and taught him to the best of my ability. I advised him to have utmost respect for our *sampradayam*. He listened to senior vidwans like T.V. Sankaranarayanan and T.N. Seshagopalan.

“At one stage I felt Krishna should approach a senior vidwan like Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer to learn more kriti-s by the likes of of Dikshitar and Swati Tirunal. It was an amazing coincidence that Semmangudi was the chief guest at Krishna’s concert organised by Hamsadhvani in 1999. Highly impressed by Krishna’s skill, Semmangudi himself offered to guide Krishna. When Krishna’s parents consulted me, I agreed wholeheartedly. Semmangudi also appreciated the training I had given Krishna until then.”

“Krishna decided to get married at a very young age. His future was still ahead; he still had to make his mark in the Carnatic field and reach the level of the great masters. Would all my dreams and aspirations

for him come to naught? I worried as a father would for his son that his *vidya* would go waste. Krishna’s single-minded determination is well known. So I told myself: why should I have negative fears? Maybe his music will blossom after marriage. Krishna always listened to me implicitly on musical matters. I did not question him on this life decision, which he alone could make.

“I can now say emphatically that his music improved tremendously after marriage. After seeing this positive effect, I was greatly relieved. A sense of peace descended on me. I felt that even if I were to die then, Krishna and his music would live on to glory. Now when the world praises him, I shed tears of joy. I am happy that he involves himself in many more music-related activities like research.

“He is my greatest asset. Even now, after attaining a star status, he informs me of all his engagements and seeks my blessings. He organised a grand event to celebrate my completion of 50 years in the music field. He was upset when I was given the TTK Award and not the Sangita Kalacharya award of the Music Academy. But I take it that this award is in recognition of my services to the TTK family!” ■