

From the heart

The following is written by R.K. SHRIRAMKUMAR, grandson and disciple of R.K. Venkatarama Sastry.

The sun would be on the horizon, about to retire for the day. Much dust and enthusiastic tones of high frequencies would be generated on the streets with boys playing cricket. That was when he would bring me home, after a long walk from school (Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan) teaching me, enroute, verses from either the *Vishnu Sahasranama* or the *Samkshepa Ramayana*. That done, he would instruct my mother to give me a snack. And even before I could finish it, he would be ready with his violin and would have summoned me many a time for class. Mouli (G. Chandramouli, my classmate in school, who had also learnt the basics along with me from guru Savitri Satyamurthy), would arrive and we would have class together.

“A varnam a day keeps the weakling away,” our guru used to tell us. Hence, class always began with varnam-s, in different kalapramana-s and in various speeds. The strong emphasis on varnam-s was to enable us later to play tanam, of which he had imbibed a characteristic unique style from his great guru Mysore T. Chowdiah. We were taught many kriti-s, especially of the Trinity and of Tyagaraja in particular.

An ardent devotee of Tyagarajaswamy, he imparted to us not just the musical content of the compositions, but also the import and the importance of the sahitya.

Grandfather and guru



Not one composition was taught without teaching knowledge of the sahitya. It was made absolutely loud and clear that we will have to play the composition as it is sung. He did not subscribe to the concept of ‘instrumentalising’ Carnatic music. According to him, it was vocal music that reigned supreme and the best instrumentalist was one who could reproduce the effect of singing on the instrument.

To achieve that, the sahitya was of the utmost importance and he held the view that only with the combined knowledge of the sahitya and the sangeeta would bhava glow in the hands of an instrumentalist. No wonder, even as a violinist, he built up a huge repertoire of compositions, all thanks to his close association with doyens such as Tiger Varadachariar, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Musiri Subramania Iyer, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, and Papa Venkataramiah.

Tears would roll down his cheeks when he talked about the greatness of the saints and their immortal compositions. Many a day, we would be told the significance of various references in these compositions. ‘Bhakti’ was the password that he adopted. Music, in his view, was to be used as an instrument to experience the Divine. Every other connected result was considered secondary.

After a long session of violin lessons, my chat sessions would be cut short, rather sternly, to go do my sandhyavandanam.

Grandson and disciple Shriramkumar



SPECIAL FEATURE



Vainika Vidya Shankar, Shriramkumar (vocal) and Arun Prakash (mridanga) at a morning lecdem on Subbaraya Sastry kriti-s presented by Venkatarama Sastry at the Music Academy

The next session with him would be with my school homework ranging from solving riders in trigonometry to writing samasa for Sanskrit pada-s to Tennyson's poetry to a lesson on Kabir's doha-s! He had an artistic flair for drawing and could design the kolam-s of the pooja mandala-s with great élan. Cooking was also one of his many talents. Politics was a field of deep interest. He had to read *The Hindu* from beginning to end and enjoyed discussing the happenings of the day's political scenario. But his heart was in Vedanta. He regularly attended, and jotted down notes from, lectures on Vedanta and Advaitic thought.

Orthodoxy in thought and action was his way of life. He had immense faith in the dictums of Vaidika dharma and performed his religious duties in a highly diligent manner. In fact, he refused to cross the shores of India as the dharma wouldn't allow it. M.S. Subbulakshmi, whom he had accompanied in numerous concerts, was a great source of inspiration and support to the whole of

our family. When I sought her blessings on my debut concert tour of the United States of America, she asked me a simple question, with a twinkle of surprise in her eye: "Did he approve of it?" Yes, he was willing to make allowances and so we could transgress rules, of course for a meagre 'parihaara' later!

He was very much alive to changes and developments in the music fraternity. His belief that there wasn't any end to learning resulted in vidwan V.V. Subramanyam taking me under his wings. It also resulted in vidwan D.K. Jayaraman taking me under his care, teaching me vocal music.

A man of very few words, with a lifestyle that was pious, humble and lofty in ideal, he had the greatest honour of performing the Aradhana pooja of Sadguru Sree Tyagarajaswami on the sacred day of Pushya bahula panchami at Tiruvaiyaru for nearly fifty years. The music world today remembers him as one of the most respected vidwans of all times. To the world he was "Vidwan R.K. Venkatarama Sastry". To me, "*Thattha*". ■