He is a man on a mission, and his passion for his vocation is palpable as he strides the stage like a lion unchained. He roars, he paces restlessly across the dais, he bursts into song, now crooning (in imitation), now bellowing, and then giving vent to the most nuanced vocalisation of Hindustani or Carnatic raga. He cajoles, bullies, and thunders at trained vocalists he picks as volunteers from the audience. His long, coloured, brushed back straight hair and salt-and–pepper beard, his grand, brightly-coloured, ornate kurta-suits and his colourful jewellery give him the appearance of a prosperous godman or magician about to unveil an exciting bag of tricks. Within minutes, he convinces his mesmerised audience that the human voice is a singing voice, that a strong, musical voice is everyone’s birthright. In the forty five minutes he is allotted – at the Music Academy’s morning academic sessions last season – he dramatically demonstrates that not only is a strong, sruti-aligned voice alive to every nuance of Carnatic music desirable, it is also achievable by those willing to work for it.

Ananth Vaidyanathan is today India’s leading voice expert, but his career might have shaped differently had he not seriously damaged his voice in his youth. Trained in Carnatic and Hindustani classical singing, he “lost” his voice in the 1980s and regained it with help from Sunil Bose, a teacher at ITC-Sangeet Research Academy, and Peter Calatin of Ireland, eventually learning from Calatin to be a voice trainer.

Ananth was born in Jamshedpur in 1957, to “doctor parents passionately interested in Carnatic music”. His father, an untrained singer, taught Ananth his first songs. Starting lessons at the age of seven, Ananth later became a pupil of Sangita Kalanidhi T.M. Thiagarajan, while pursuing undergraduate studies in Economics at Loyola College, Chennai. He later went on to graduate in business management from XLRI, Jamshedpur.

Attracted to Hindustani music by the voice of Parveen Sultana, Ananth joined the ITC Sangeet Research Academy as a music scholar, but some “errors in the training methods he followed damaged his voice.”

To quote him further, “My interest in voice engineering (more loosely called voice culture) began in 1981, when I lost my singing voice as a 24-year-old Indian classical vocal student at the ITC Sangeet Research Academy at Kolkata. I sang again on the 6th of October 1993 – after more than 12 years of agony and ecstasy, ending up working with some really fascinating people – Peter Calatin, my final saviour, and my first Indian voice teacher to whom I owe my perspective for the Indian voice of the future – the late Sunil Bose.”

After resuming singing in 1993, Ananth began to teach voice in 2003. From 2007, he has been training contestants in various television shows across India “with fantastic results that establish the power of a systematic voice method”.

With dramatic, consistent, sustained results to show for his efforts as a voice engineer-trainer, Ananth is not resting on his laurels. He has set his sights on benefiting
Indian classical vocalists, Carnatic musicians in particular. He is convinced that not only is there a need for voice training in the field, but that permanent transformation is within the reach of every vocalist who needs help. The field is unfortunately riddled with popular disdain for what is often dismissed as an exotic system of voice culture, something that is not suited to Carnatic music with its emphasis on gamaka. Some who are impressed by the success of his methods – as so spectacularly demonstrated in Air Tel Super Singer, in the case of film music singers – treat the science as a quick fix for those with problems with their voices, not as a holistic system of voice training and management.

Be that as it may, Ananth Vaidyanathan's biggest advertisement is the amazing improvement in the voices of his young wards on TV shows. Almost all of them and their parents acknowledge his contribution publicly, stressing that he is keenly interested in the all round welfare and progress of the child, not just her voice. Part intuitively, part scientifically, he is quick to diagnose the root cause of specific voice problems and offer remedies that work. He has been known to observe the vocal habits of performing musicians and predict serious voice problems if they do not change their ways. One of the key areas he addresses is that of self-belief and confidence in the singer. He is himself abundantly endowed with these qualities. In conversation, he is lively, energetic and truly vocal - pun unintended - almost obsessive about his mission in life. No small talk for him! While he is an attentive listener, he can be brutally honest in his responses; not for him polite agreement for the sake of social, political correctness.

If you met him back in the 1980s unaware of his vocal problems in music – he had his speaking voice intact then and was an organiser of concerts on behalf of ITC – you could come to the hasty conclusion that he loved to hear his own voice — there we go again — not realising the depth of his passion for music. In his present avatar, he sprinkles his conversation with several anecdotes involving his favourite singers/ guru-s, like Kishori Amonkar, K.G. Ginde, Parveen Sultana, M.S. Subbulakshmi, M.L. Vasanthakumari, S.P. Balasubramaniam and K.S. Chitra. Some wonder if the extent of his listening to masters past and present has been limited by his preferences and his decision to straddle different systems rather than adhere to one system of music, but others ask if that sharp focus amidst such diversity has not been his principal strength.

Ananth Vaidyanathan is the champion of perhaps the first major campaign for voice training in Carnatic music. At least one leading vocalist swears by his methods and admits to benefiting from them, and a couple of others are toying with the idea of approaching him, but prejudices will have to be overcome before voice training becomes an essential part of every vocalist's tutelage. In the following pages, Ananth Vaidyanathan writes extensively on the theory and practice of voice training and his own journey in it so far.