

## T.K. RANGACHARI

### A musician's musician

D.B. Ashvin

**T**andalam Krishnamachari Rangachari (TKR) was one of the foremost exponents of Carnatic music, known for bringing a fresh and exciting tinge to his performances. Though very few recordings of his music remain today these are appreciated for the fine performances they are, enjoyed by young and old alike, especially in the music community.

Rangachari was born at Varahaneri, a suburb of Tiruchirapalli on 3 June 1912. His mother Rajalakshmi Ammal, a music teacher, taught him his first music lessons. As a child, he was fondly called 'Tavil Rangan' for his propensity to drum rhythmic sequences on household pots and pans. His mother passed away when Rangan was just ten and his upbringing was largely thanks to his grandmother in Srirangam. His first guru was Kodaganallur Subbiah Bhagavatar, a musical giant and a disciple of Konerirajapuram Vaidhyanata Iyer. Young Rangachari underwent rigorous training under the traditional gurukula system imbibing his guru's unique aspects, namely, control over briga, niraval in three speeds and laya vinyasam. TKR's first concert was at the tender age of ten at the Pattamadai high school near Tirunelveli, where he enthralled the audience with a fascinating rendition of *Dvaitamu sukham* – the Tyagaraja masterpiece in Reetigaula raga.

When the Annamalai University in Chidambaram was instituted in 1929, TKR was eager to join the Sangeeta Bhushanam course offered there. This was a golden opportunity to train under musical giants like Sabhesa Iyer, Ponniah Pillai and Desamangalam Subramania Iyer. He went armed with a letter of recommendation from his guru but met with disappointment as the selections had already been made. However, realising his eagerness, the authorities allowed him to take the entrance exam the next day. During the test he was asked to demonstrate the subtle differences between the raga-s Darbar and Nayaki. TKR's response impressed the examiners so much that not only did they give him admission, they automatically promoted him to the second year.

TKR completed the Sangeeta Bhushanam course and joined the university as a lecturer. He served there from 1933 to 1942 under the leadership of Tiger Varadachariar. Leaving Annamalai University in 1942, TKR lived in Tanjavur for a short period before joining the Central College of Carnatic music at Madras, headed by Musiri



Subramania Iyer. The faculty there included T. Brinda, T.M. Swaminatha Pillai, Devakottai Narayana Iyengar and M.A. Kalyanakrishna Bhagavatar.

TKR was invited back to the Annamalai University in 1953 as a senior lecturer. Along with Dandapani Desigar, he embarked on pann research. The two gave several performances focusing on Tevaram-s and Pasuram-s they set to tune. TKR was invited by the Ceylon Art Academy in Sri Lanka for a series of concerts and teaching assignments in 1964. He resigned his post at the university and went to Sri Lanka for the assignment, eventually returning and settling in Karaikudi with his eldest son.

All these years, TKR was quite busy in the concert circuit, but his ascent to the top rung of performers was slow, with a galaxy of superstars dominating the scene. His deep involvement in teaching was another reason why his concert career did not take off until the later part of his life; it was as if the rasika-s had suddenly woken up to realise his merit. He gave several memorable concerts in the decade 1966-76, to be recognised as one of the top performers during that time. One such performance was during the Sri Krishna Gana Sabha Gokulashtami series in 1966, when he was accompanied by Palghat Mani Iyer (for the first time) and Lalgudi Jayaraman. This concert included soulful renditions of *Sree Subramanyaya namaste* in Kambhoji and *Sangeeta sastra gnanamu* in Mukhari and two spectacular

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tani avartanam-s by Mani Iyer. Another excellent concert was at the Music Academy in the same year, when he was accompanied by M.S. Gopalakrishnan (violin), Tanjavur Upendran (mridanga) and Mysore Manjunath (ghata). His renditions of *Tatvamereuga tarama* in Garudadhvani and *Paramatmudu* in Vagadeeswari send the audience into raptures. He also performed several memorable concerts with Palani Subramania Pillai on the mridanga.

Most of TKR's concerts were unplanned, shaped appropriately depending on the mood and reaction of the audience. His presentations always had a fresh feel to them, and his concerts were deemed "fashionable" even in those times. His voice was an asset he had developed over the years. It was a perfect mix of azhuttham and melody, and obeyed his every command. His vocal range covered two full octaves and he used it to his advantage to take raga exploration to new heights, uniquely delineating unexplored areas in the tara sthayi and ati mandra sthayi.

He was quite vocal on stage and kept the atmosphere lively. Singing a unique sangati in Kalyani for instance, he would stop and remark that the sangati was being lost to the Carnatic scene and imbibed in cinema music instead! He would shower generous praise and encouragement on up and coming accompanists, many of whom are stalwarts today and remember his generous appreciation. He was often referred to as the "professor on the dais" nudging his disciples to sing along and giving them significant opportunities to perform alone. Quite disapproving of listeners walking out during the tani avartanam, he did not hesitate to chide them.

"Always respect the audience, especially the knowledgeable sections," TKR said in a 1966 interview with B.V.K. Sastry. He believed that a good musician needed to first cultivate a good voice and use this as an effective medium to communicate the subtleties of Carnatic music to the audience. He said that artists should have an open mind to listen to and imbibe the good aspects of any music be it Carnatic or Hindustani, innovate instead of treading the beaten path, at the same time remaining within the boundaries of tradition. He recognised that Carnatic music was evolving in keeping with the changing mood of modern audiences and that

artists should try to harmoniously blend the old with the new to keep up with the times. He was a great admirer of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar whom he regarded as his manaseeka guru.

"It was a golden period of my life to be the student of my great guru Rangachariar for it was he who opened my eyes to good music, erasing my ignorance," reflects his disciple and eminent vocalist Neela Ramgopal. It was serendipity that TKR, after returning to Chennai following his retirement from Annamalai University, accepted her invitation to visit Bangalore every month to teach her and a few aspirants.

"His voice was sharp and clear with perfect alignment to sruti and capable of delineating even the toughest raga-s with ease," she says. She remembers being moved to tears by a string of deeply soulful sanchara-s by him during a lesson. Raga alapana and niraval were his forte. The sahitya in the niraval fell magically in the correct place, enhancing the musical value and at the same time retaining the meaning. In swaraprastara, even as he taught various combinations and permutations of the swara-s he stressed that the students must absorb the raga nuances as well. Neela Ramgopal vividly remembers a concert TKR performed in front of Andavan Swami in Bangalore in which his Mohanam raga alapana and the kriti *Yein palli kondeerayya* put the audience into a trance. She regrets that by the time his music received due recognition, he was no more.

TKR moved to Chennai in 1977 and spent the last few years of his life before passing away on 19 February 1979. He trained many musicians including the late Vairamangalam Lakshminarayanan who accompanied him in several concerts spanning three decades. His other disciples included Neela Ramgopal, Neyyatinkara Mohana Chandran, Malini Kasturirangan, Jaya Krishnan, Palghat Ambi Iyer, and Sadagopan. He is survived by five daughters and three sons and his disciples and family carry forward his legacy.

*(A grand centenary celebration has been planned by the TKR family at the Music Academy, Chennai, on 1 December 2012).*

**(The author is T.K. Rangachari's grandson)**