

J. Venkataraman: an accomplished teacher

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If performing musicians are the superstructure, those who mould them are the foundation. J. Venkataraman (JV) is one such accomplished guru. The Music Academy will confer the title *Sangita Kala Acharya* on him this season.

Rhythm can be said to be JV's musical USP, just as the Alathur Brothers came to be identified with their laya excellence and their hard work in that aspect of music at a time when Madurai Mani Iyer was renowned for his quietude, Chembai for his bright singing and GNB for his innovations. JV too has put in enormous effort in perfecting rhythm. He can effortlessly render the most complicated tight-rope walking in swara permutations. Living on at Tiruchi, not moving to Chennai in search of concert opportunities, he has trained pupils for nearly sixty years. One of his prominent disciples is Pradeep Kumar, a rising prospect in the kutcheri scene.

JV's grandfather Venkatarama Dikshitar, who played the violin, was the first member of the family to get involved in music. "My father Jayaraman was also a violin vidwan," recalls Venkataraman. "After losing his mother when he was very young, he learnt music and pursued it in the face of several obstacles."

Starting music lessons early with his father, JV did not seek employment after passing SSLC and Typewriting Higher. "Appa told me that I would make him happy only if I pursued music full time. I followed his advice even though my mother was against the idea."

JV then went through a period of gurukulavasam with Alathur Venkatesa Iyer, Alathur Subbier's



father, and made good progress, but extreme poverty caused him to suffer deep depression. Mridanga vidwan Palani Subramania Pillai helped him to come out of his depression. "He heard me sing during one of his visits to Tiruchi and urged me to write to the Music Academy applying for a singing opportunity," remembers JV. "He, however, changed his mind in a flash and said to me, 'No need for all that. I'll take care of it.' That year I sang at the Academy and won a tambura as a prize for the best vocalist in my time slot. It was a turning point in my life."

JV is visibly moved as he recalls Palani's gesture. The fifteen days he spent at Palani's Madras residence then taught him many lessons. His conversations with Palani inspired him to want to master the intricacies of laya, besides giving him many new creative ideas. Though Palani advised him to move to Madras to further his music career, JV could not leave Tiruchi owing to the circumstances of his family. Music producer S.V. Parthasarathy helped him to find employment with All India Radio.

Despite the setbacks he suffered in life, JV taught music without a break,

often travelling to nearby towns. Today, he has become a veritable globetrotter as a teacher.

JV disagrees with the notion that expertise in laya can lead to lack of saukhyam in music. On the contrary, he feels good command over layam is in fact essential to saukhyam. "Without a steady gait, won't you fall while walking?" he asks. "Rhythm suffused Palani's whole being, but did he not accompany Madurai Mani Iyer with the ultimate in saukhyam?"

For all his expertise in that aspect, JV does not confine himself to the imparting of laya-specific knowledge to his students. "I teach them according to their individual aptitude and interests – be it niraval singing, rare kriti-s or ragam-tanam-pallavi."

JV's other area of specialisation has been as a composer of tunes, especially for *Tiruppugazh* and *Divya Prabandham*. He owes his interest in *Tiruppugazh* to the example set by his guru, who hero-worshipped Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai. A devotee of Muruga, Pillai sang *Tiruppugazh* songs in a wonderful voice. Venkatesa Iyer instilled the same level of interest in the genre in the Alathur Brothers who could actually give concerts entirely comprising *Tiruppugazh* verses.

Any unfulfilled desire? "I would like to learn many more songs and tune at least 300 *Tiruppugazh* songs. And I would love to die teaching. What better way to go!" Venkataraman says, with a smile lighting his eyes.

(The author is a blogger and writer on music and a biographer)