

TRICHUR V. RAMACHANDRAN

A proud disciple of GNB

M.V. Swaroop

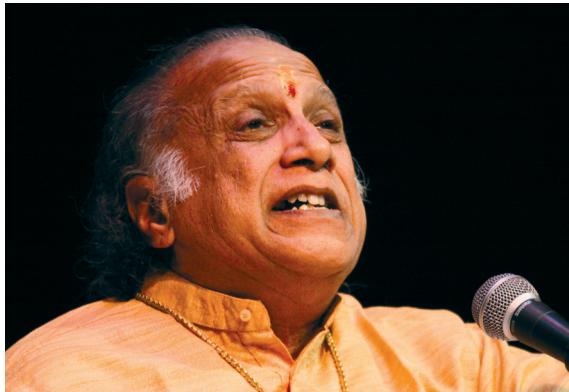
Trichur Ramachandran's striking features, crisply ironed clothes, bright eyes and dignified bearing evoke memories of a bygone era of regal presences. He seems to barely pause to think when he speaks, yet he speaks as if he were reading off a script, with his ideas well-formed, his voice clear, and his delivery near-perfect. Speaking of his guru G.N. Balasubramanian, he says,

"He was in the music field, but he had the bearing of an officer. Like a minister or something," cheekily adding, "a minister of those days." You could say the same about Ramachandran.

Ramachandran's music resembles GNB's music more than the music of any other GNB disciple does. When he moved to Madras to learn from the master, Ramachandran lived in a humble room, but spent most of his time at his guru's house. "It was like gurukulavasam," he says. "He made me sit next to him, and we had our meals together."

GNB taught him many compositions, meticulously ensuring that he grasped every nuance perfectly. Most of the manodharma was however something he learnt by osmosis, by being around his guru, listening, observing and absorbing. GNB always stressed that he should understand the 'why' and 'how' of things. His was a researcher's mind, always questioning, always rationalising, and his music was scholarly and impulsive at once. Ramachandran too adopts this approach to this day.

After a couple of years of learning from GNB, Ramachandran started accompanying him in concerts. "Those concerts were just like classes," he remembers. Apart from the music, he picked up the subtleties of the energy of a concert, and the dynamics between the musicians on stage. The day after a concert, he would spend his time going over what his guru sang, mulling over the 'why' and 'how' of things. Ramachandran says, "Gurukulavasam is the best way of learning. When you spend that much time with your guru, even if you don't spend it in structured lessons, you will learn from just being there. Some of



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those intricacies, some of those secrets, you will learn only then."

A result of this approach to music is the ability to strike at the heart of a raga with just a couple of throwaway phrases, and at the same time, to paint these phrases into an exquisite, expansive mural. There is never a swara or phrase or word out of place when he renders a kriti.

He never seems hurried when singing niraval or swara-s even at supersonic speed, always finding interesting patterns of beguiling simplicity and landing perfectly on the sahitya.

Born in 1940 at Thrissur in Kerala, Ramachandran grew up in a musical atmosphere. His mother was a natural – albeit untrained – musician who sang ashtapadi-s and sloka-s. Ramachandran took his first steps in music imitating her. His sisters were learning music, and he could sing all the songs they learnt.

Ramachandran heard a concert by GNB at a neighbour's wedding in 1948. He remembers: "That day, he sang *Sarasijanabha sodari*. I was enchanted by that music. I was young and didn't know how to judge music. Even so, it made a huge impression on me. I still remember the way he shook his head in the anupallavi!"

Soon, he started formal lessons with Varkala Subramania Bhagavatar. After he grasped the basics, some friends suggested that he shift for advanced training to Tripunithura Krishna Iyer, who had recently moved from Annamalai University to Thrissur. Krishna Iyer laid the foundation on which the edifice of Ramachandran's music was built.

When he was fourteen, he gave his first public performance. Never having sung with accompanists before, he practised with them for a few days to get comfortable with them. I asked him if he remembered what he sang, he thought for a few seconds and said, *Sarasaksha paripaalaya*. Then, he added with a smile, "I can't remember what else I sang."

At this point, music was only a serious hobby; not a profession. He studied hard and completed his B.Sc. Then came a curious twist of fate. His batch was the first to do the pre-university course in college – switching from the 10+2+3 year to the 11+1+3 year model of education in vogue in India before the current plus two system – and the ensuing confusion led to his B.Sc. results coming out late. He had to wait for almost a year. He spent every minute of that period honing his music, practising all day, performing and taking part in competitions. At one such competition where he was pitted against K.J. Yesudass, another stroke of luck came his way. One of the judges of the contest, M.L. Vasanthakumari, impressed by his singing, said, “Why don’t you join GNB as his student?”

Those memories of listening to the master sing *Sarasijanabha sodari* as an eight-year-old came flooding back, but Ramachandran had other issues to sort out in his head. With his father, then the Chief Justice of the High Court of Kerala, wanting him to study further, he had applied for a seat in a medical college. At the same time, his brother and GNB’s son were classmates in Vivekananda College in Madras. Through his brother, he wrote a letter to the guru. GNB wrote back asking him to weigh his options carefully, as music as a profession had many challenges even if it seemed attractive.

Ramachandran had not made up his mind yet, but because he had nothing else to do at the time, he decided to go to Madras to meet GNB. After listening to the boy sing, GNB asked him to join classes from the next day. Ramachandran moved to Madras, and began his lessons. To add to his confusion, he secured a seat in the Calicut Medical College. As if that were not enough, he was also offered a job in All India Radio, Vijayawada. Forced by the family’s emphasis on education, he discontinued music lessons and joined medical college, but barely a few weeks into the course, he started feeling restless. His mind wandered to the streets of Santhome, to his guru and his music classes.

A month later, he quit medicine and moved back to Madras. He started living in a room, and spending as much time as he could with GNB. It was a far cry from Thrissur, where as the son of the Chief Justice, he lived in some luxury. But the frugality of those years only steeled him for an arduous life as a classical musician. Such was his devotion to his guru that when GNB moved to Trivandrum as the Principal of the

Music College there, Ramachandran shifted too, staying close to the master’s house. GNB’s failing health and his insistence on performing through his ill-health which led to his premature death are now part of history. Ramachandran’s voice chokes with emotion as he remembers his presence by his guru’s side during his last moments.

Soon after his guru’s death, Ramachandran received a Central Government scholarship to learn music, but had no guru. He asked Palghat Mani Iyer what he should do. Mani Iyer advised him to learn from Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. Ramachandran wondered if their styles would match, but decided to go to Ariyakudi anyway. However, when he went to Iyengar’s house, he found the legend lying in bed, clearly on the last leg of his journey. He was in no position to teach anyone.

After GNB passed away, Ramachandran and other students started compiling his compositions. GNB often wrote his songs on scraps of paper – on the back of envelopes or pamphlets and left them lying around the house. His students learnt many of them, and Ramachandran has been able to recover 72, although he says there were around 200 of them in all. These are now available in the form of two books. Sadly, some have only the lyrics, with the varnamettu lost with the passage of time.

Flute legend N. Ramani remembers that he was to play in a GNB tribute concert shortly after his death, and wanted to play as many of GNB’s compositions as possible. Ramachandran was gracious enough to record all of them on a tape for him. Some years ago, Ramachandran, accompanied by his daughter Subhasree, recorded a CD of GNB’s compositions that even won an award. He wants to do more to preserve those compositions.

Ramachandran then approached M.L. Vasanthakumari who accepted him as her disciple. Being from the same bani, he was able to follow her art easily. He learnt many compositions from her, and his career blossomed under her guidance.

Ramachandran repeatedly stresses the importance of having a guru. “They keep you on the right track,” he says. “Youngsters today do not have that kind of guidance. They learn from recordings, from tapes. The tape cannot guide you when you go astray. You need a guru for that.”

COVER STORY

Ramachandran married within his bani. Charumathi, his wife, a student of M.L. Vasanthakumari, is an accomplished musician and teacher. "She is a great musician and teacher," Ramachandran says. "Her handling of pallavi-s is extraordinary. We exchange ideas often." Ramachandran even performed in some operas directed by Charumathi.

From an early age, Ramachandran was fascinated by Hindustani music. When Ramachandran sang some viruttam-s during a concert with a distinct Hindustani touch, his violin accompanist Anantharaman suggested to him that he learn Hindustani music. He put him in touch with the late Krishnanand who had taught Hindustani music to some members of the Parur family. Ramachandran became proficient enough in Hindustani music to perform on stage.

Ramachandran first sang at the Music Academy in 1962. During a class, GNB picked up the phone and called the Music Academy to recommend his student for a concert there that year. That was Ramachandran's debut at the Academy. He sang again in 1965 and then in 1971. When he was still in the sub-senior category, T.N. Krishnan, a well entrenched senior, accompanied him.

Fifty years after his Academy debut, Ramachandran is the Sangita Kalanidhi designate this year. He has accumulated a number of titles, the Padma Bhushan from the President of India being the foremost amongst them. His eagerness to learn more and give more to Carnatic music is refreshing. Like the great masters, he says, "I am still a student."

(The author is a practising lawyer and Carnatic flutist)

Ramachandran has recorded the *Narayaneeyam* with 1036 verses, in sloka form, in a variety of raga-s. It was released by Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavtar at Guruvayur (see photo). 'It took me three and a half years to record,' he recalls. 'Each day in the studio, I recorded from 10 am to 5 pm. Often, I would record something and the Sanskrit scholar would tell me that my pronunciation of some word was not okay. Before the days of digital recording, you had to record the whole thing again if you made a mistake.'

The recording is a tour-de-force. The tunes are not complicated, and each set of sloka-s in a raga has only two or three raga flourishes. The whole recording is around 6 CDs long, but you can hear it continuously without any fatigue; it is that beautiful.



Some honours and awards

The Central Sangeet Natak Akademi award (2004)
Padma Bhushan (2003)
Kalaimamani – Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram
Sangeeta Choodamani – Sri Krishna Gana Sabha
Sangeeta Kala Siromani – The Indian Fine Arts Society
Isai Selvam – Muthamizh Peravai
Tulasivanam award – Tiruvananthapuram
Sangeeta Kalasagara – Secunderabad

Nada Kalanidhi – Delhi
Tamil Isai Tilakam – Pollachi
Gana Kalanidhi – Coimbatore
Sangeeta Ratnakara – Cleveland, U.S.A.
Narayaneeya Gana Praveena – Jakarta, Indonesia
Asthana Vidwan of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham
Asthana Vidwan of the Ahobila Matham