

INTERVIEW

Many strings to her bow

T. Rukmini, one of the seniormost violinists in Carnatic music, was one of the recipients of the Sangita Kala Acharya award of the Music Academy last motnh.

The veteran spoke to one of her disciples AMRITHA MURALI at length, reminiscing with joy and the enthusiasm of a child about her long, interesting and successful musical journey. Here are some excerpts:

The first major breakthrough or turning point in your career?

I used to perform frequently at the Rama Seva Mandali in Bangalore. One evening, S.V. Narayanaswamy, the founder of the Mandali and Manjunath, an eminent ghatam artist visited our residence and requested me to accompany the genius, flautist T.R. Mahalingam. My joy knew no bounds.

I was all of 16 then. Mali had only heard of my talent but had not heard me play. The publicity for this concert was extensive. Pamphlets were distributed and notices put up all over the city, including my college notice board.

The D-day eventually arrived. The organisers brought Mali home to make a formal introduction. After hearing me play *Pakkala nilabadi*, with alapana, niraval and swaram, patiently, he left without much ado saying that the stage belonged to me that evening. Mali sir was a sensation with the rasikas and true to his popularity we were greeted to an overflowing hall. I showcased with poise and finesse whatever little I knew then and earned tremendous praise from Mali sir and the audience. At the end of the ragam-tanam-pallavi in the raga Ranjani, he spoke for about 10 minutes in praise of my accompaniment. "This lady is not inferior to any male accompanist. She is going to shine like a glowing star in future". This concert was a big turning point in my life and career and his encouraging words still ring in my ears and I will cherish them for life.

The artists whom you accompanied during that period...

I travelled frequently with R. Vedavalli in and around Karnataka and accompanied her on multiple occasions. Vidwan M. Balamuralikrishna was another artist for whom I have played many concerts. I recollect a specific instance when I provided accompaniment for a viola



concert of his. Apart from regular concerts with Mali sir then, I also gave violin support to M.L. Vasanthakumari on many occasions in different cities.

There were offers for violin solo and vocal concerts wherever I performed as an accompanist. At that stage I often sang padams for Padmalochani Nagarajan's dance performances.

You started performing at a time when women going up on stage was taboo and the field was dominated by male artists and male bias. Did you undergo any difficulties due to these factors?

The field was male dominated. I was probably the only popular lady accompanist then. I was lucky to have received many concert opportunities, but there have been instances when I was not able to accompany certain artists because of the male bias which was disappointing.

From R.R. Kesavamurthy to Lalgudi sir, how was the experience?

I had by this time heard Lalgudi sir's playing on so many occasions that I had begun internalising the style. Lalgudis sir had heard me play for T.N. Seshagopalan,

T.K. Rangachari and other artists in Chennai. When he offered to take me under his supervision and hone my skills further, I was thrilled.

A busy schedule made my learning sessions under Lalgudi sir infrequent. He gave me a breath of fresh air, when he opened my eyes to the world of aesthetics and subtleties. He maintained that even the bowing had to be suitably modulated to match the mood of the composer. I could adapt to the style change easily as his music had left a big imprint on me and I had by then the experience of accompanying varied styles of music.

You have set to tune many Dasar padas and also composed a few varnams and tillanas?

I was motivated to set to tune Dasar padas when I was invited by AIR to render a vocal concert at the fourth birth centenary celebrations of Purandaradasa in Udupi. In fact, when I was in Bangalore, I often sang devotional programmes on the radio for which I set to tune diverse Kannada geetams and poems. This practice continued in AIR-Chennai where I sang compositions of Bharatiar in my own tunes. I composed a few varnams and tillanas out of interest.

If you were asked to describe your own playing, how would you do it?

My playing, I think has always been steeped in classicism with a strong Carnatic flavour. Mixing styles of playing has never appealed to me. I make sure that my playing sounds like vocal music and that it has a sense of proportion. Keeping the pathantara of kritis intact, maintaining the laya in raga and kriti renditions and ensuring that the underlying import of the lyrics are not lost have been my areas of concentration. My gamakas and manodharma have always stayed within the tenets of Carnatic music. Constant practice has made my playing stand out with clarity and suddham.

Your experience singing for dance...

I have sung for several dance ballets and performances of Padmalochani Nagarajan and Vyjayantimala Bali. I cherish one particular performance of Vyjayantimala at Paris in which I rendered the vocal support. The performance was a roaring success and won us both accolades.

You have tutored many students. What are the major points you stress while training disciples? What would you want their priorities in music to be?

When I teach, I focus on imparting lessons based on vocal music, raga bhava, sahitya and not mere swaras. I insist that my disciples first learn to sing the kriti before playing it on the violin. Preserving the pathantara I have passed on to them without diluting their music at any cost should be their primary focus. It would also gratify me if they develop a sense of proportion in their music and are able to convey the essence of any raga or kriti without unnecessary phrasings.

What would the role of an ideal accompanist be? What should she look out for in a concert?

To be an ideal accompanist, we have to shoulder certain basic responsibilities. We should try our best to enhance the music of the main performer and be unobtrusive at the same time. Our raga replies, niraval and swaram turns should always be in proportion to what the vocalist or instrumentalist has rendered. We should never overdo our role on stage. Care should be taken to keep the sahitya in mind while playing niraval. As far as possible we should try to play along when kritis are sung and attempt going along with the same style and patterns.

What are your views on modern day teaching methods?

I do agree that technological advancements have made music more accessible to interested students, but I still hold the view that nothing can replace face-to-face teaching. Specifically, for an instrument, correct bowing and fingering techniques are vital and can be demonstrated only in person.

(Amritha Murali is a Carnatic vocalist and violinist)

Amritha with her guru

