

IMPRESSIONS

## The TRS I knew

**D**eath has removed from the music scene the colourful figure that was T.R. Subramanyam, the musician known to all as TRS. His 84 years did not dim his zest for life, cheerfulness and spontaneity. Crippled physically by age and a stroke, and having undergone a hip replacement surgery, he could still be seen almost every day in a concert hall in the city. The performer in the concert might be a novice but at the end of the programme he or she would receive warm appreciation from him. Most youngsters he listened to were not known to him personally, but this did not matter to him in the least. A few select rasikas and I have shared the first row in sabhas with him on many occasions and his standard joke was "*Inda row mahanubhavulu*" (this row is for greats).

It is difficult to find another person with his warmth and generosity. Many are the Carnatic musicians he introduced in the north during his long innings in Delhi University.

His style of music was intellectual rather than aesthetic, a departure from the established tradition in Carnatic music. His batchmates of the Central College of Carnatic Music like the late T.K. Govinda Rao, Bombay Ramachandran and S.R. Janakiraman have said that, ever a maverick and a rebel, he was the first to ask questions and indulge in discussions with renowned professors of the time like Musiri Subramania Iyer, Tirupamburam Swaminatha Pillai and T. Brinda. Those days a disciple was expected to be meek and silent – to keep his ears open and mouth shut. TRS was a free spirit then as he was later in life.

From his student days, TRS was adept in creating pallavis in different talas and nadais. The korvais that he sang during the kalpanaswaras also were very complex arithmetically. No mridanga vidwan could take his concerts with TRS lightly.

The first time I heard him was in mid 1971 when I was posted in Madras. He was a very popular vocalist then and even a very conservative sabha like Nadopasana, relaxed its rules to feature his concerts frequently. The first concert I attended swept me off my feet, especially his rendering of what is now called 'poruttam' – singing a cluster of swaraprastaras to match that of the 'eduppu'. Intellectually, this exercise was stimulating. Unfortunately almost all young vidwans started copying



this indiscriminately and it has since become stale and artificial. And the irony is that many mridangists have taken to this, at times even goading the main artist to join in the fun.

My acquaintance with him in 1971 soon turned into friendship. In 1978, I was posted to Lucknow and TRS was a professor of music in Delhi University. In Delhi, he was closely associated with local sabhas and was primarily responsible for arranging programmes of artists from elsewhere. As we had a healthy population of south Indian families and a music sabha in Lucknow, we made use of TRS's services to get artists coming to Delhi to also present concerts in Lucknow. This arrangement considerably reduced our overheads. In the five years I was in Lucknow and three years in Delhi thereafter, we were able to arrange concerts of leading artists like Dr. S. Ramanathan, D.K. Jayaraman, S. Kalyanaraman, V.R. Krishnan, K.V. Narayanaswamy, Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, Nookala Chinna Sathyanarayana and others. TRS himself became our 'asthana vidwan' and gave many concerts in Lucknow. He never hankered after money and gracefully accepted whatever remuneration we could arrange for him. This policy he followed with other sabhas too – a rare quality.

TRS sang for the mridangam arangetram of my son Ashok in 1982 and during the past five years, he attended

the arangetram of all my disciples in Chennai; he was a chief guest on one occasion.

Wherever TRS was stationed – Andhra, Delhi or Chennai – he launched music sabhas and provided opportunities to not-so-well-known musicians. The Music Education Trust that he started in Chennai featured artists not only from Chennai but elsewhere too including those based abroad. He was much sought after and invited often to music workshops and social functions. At various times, he was a member of Prasar Bharati's audition board, and a judge in music competitions held by major institutions like the Music Academy, and served as examiner in many universities.

An unsavoury incident happened in his life some twenty years ago. *Sruti* magazine came across the manuscript of a thesis on music by a disciple of TRS, and excerpts from it were quoted selectively and extensively in its November 1991 issue. On the basis of these extracts, the thesis appeared to be poor in content, research, language and execution; the sole source of information was TRS himself. It had a number of unsubstantiated observations on music personalities. It had concluded that TRS was an epoch maker of the century! Unfortunately, a majority of Ph.D. theses I have come across are of very poor quality with the guide's aim being the number of 'scholars' they have mentored in their time. If it was the objective of *Sruti* to expose the poor quality of theses, it was certainly justified in doing so; but this 'expose' was presented in a very elaborate manner. In any case, the thesis was yet

An elaborate article titled *An Ajatasatru 'Scans' Music Personalities From Behind A Tira Seela – Views of T.R. Subramanyam* projected in a doctoral thesis, was published in *Sruti* 86 (November 1991). *Sruti* was given access to a photocopy of the thesis captioned *Epoch-Makers of the Recent Past in the field of Carnatic music*, submitted by Radha Venkatachalam.

to be published. The language used was extremely harsh and the comments on various points in the thesis, overly sarcastic. A hysteria built up after the *Sruti* issue came out and vidwans and readers, went hammer and tongs at TRS in a 'holier than thou' spirit. Sabhas boycotted TRS and his concerts in Chennai were cancelled. Under the circumstances, *Sruti* could have adopted an objective role to cool tempers; on the other hand, it added fuel to fire. Some of us connected with *Sruti* tried to calm things down but to no avail.

TRS was among the first to subscribe to *Sruti* when it was launched thirty years ago. He asked many of his friends to subscribe to the magazine and I, as one of them, did so almost immediately. He took all the criticism by *Sruti* and others with amazing equanimity. He was deeply hurt but did not comment on it in public. He did not cut off his subscription to *Sruti* in anger but continued to read it till the very end. That was TRS.

K.S. KALIDAS

(Mridanga vidwan, connoisseur of classical music and regular writer for *Sruti*)

## Master of his manodharma

The relationship I shared with TRS was a special one – deep respect for a scholarly musician, a sincere appreciation for an all giving guru and an honest liking for a wonderful human being. In short, TRS the man and TRS the musician were complementary and a rare blend.

Bangalore K. Venkataram once called TRS an 'ashtavadhani' in music – because TRS was a gayaka with a bani of his own, a bodhaka for several students, a lekhaka, an upanyasaka, a sastragnya, a nirvahaka, a nirdesaka and a vaggeyakara of good pedigree. The novelty of his bani drew rasikas as well as gave food for thought to a serious student of music. One had to delve deep into the intricacies of music to understand his approach.

The musical style of TRS was innovative. His performance was always based on robust fundamentals. Rhythmic dominance did condition his rendition. TRS treaded a path laid and determined by himself. It was at once

conventional and unconventional. As a master of many musical forms he indulged in endless experimentation striving to strike a judicious balance between swara and laya. Subbudu referred to TRS as an embodiment of Tala, Raga and Swara (TRS). TRS was indeed a maestro with a difference, because the impressions of his preceptors pale into insignificance when contrasted with his individualism.

Over the years TRS evolved a style combining various ideas in vogue in the yester generation. His familiarity with the language of a particular composition enabled him to bring out the bhava without any 'pada chhedam'. His ability to weave considerable intricacies in his concert qualified him to be described as a 'musician's musician'. His forte was, of course, pallavi singing. He relieved pallavi singing from cumbersome formalities inherited from previous generations to make it a pleasant experience. His nadai pallavais were very complex and musically rich. TRS had the ability to construct a pallavi on the spot and



T.K. Venkatasubramanian (extreme R) with TRS

execute with aplomb. TRS had the expertise to improvise and explore new vistas. He was an original thinker and represented the new generation of the ‘GNB style’.

Some musicians and critics hold the view that Prof. T.R. Subrahmanyam’s music was cerebral and not soulful. TRS himself never made any pretensions of reaching spiritual levels. His music contained all the ingredients that could make a concert successful, namely a strident voice, comfortable both in lower and higher octaves, total control over laya, impressive alapanas and swarams. His concerts were object lessons for budding musicians. I wish to record that TRS has been encouraging a lot of young artists. He was always on wheels to promote the art and spotted new talent. The helping hand of TRS has been beneficially felt by

every organisation connected with music, in India and abroad.

In a one-on-one discussion, I raised the question whether music was for the mind or for the heart. TRS assumed the role of samsodaka and drew my attention to Sarangadeva’s statement that music is the self-motivated manifestation of latent thought – “*Aatma vivakohamano..... Aavirbhavaayate dhwanim*”. He went on to explain that both thought and emotions condition the musical output and that is also the definition of manodharma. For him, manodharma was a symbol of freedom of thought and expression, which permits adequate scope for creative and innovative expressions of an artist. In this experimentation there should not be any fetters from the past (tradition!!). According to TRS, such freedom was unlimited but required regulation only. A delicate balance between lakshana (theory) and lakshya (practice) was to be struck. Unfortunately, there are no guidelines to achieve that balance and there is a lot of disagreement when it comes to optimising aesthetic satisfaction and excellence.

TRS was convinced that manodharma sangeetam was an edifice built on kalpita sangeetam. He was the undisputed master of that manodharma. Raga alapana, swara kalpana, tanam, niraval and pallavi are all dimensions of that manodharma.

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