

B. KRISHNAMOORTHY

A devoted teacher of Carnatic music

V. Karpagalakshmi

Vidwan B. Krishnamoorthy is a multifaceted artist – Carnatic vocalist, musicologist, researcher, and passionate teacher. He was born on 24 August 1932 at Padarakudi near Karaikudi, where he lived with his maternal grandfather for a while. He had three brothers, the eldest being the late Sangita Kalanidhi B. Rajam Iyer. Krishnamoorthy's biological mother gave him in adoption to her childless elder sister Ananthalakshmi. So it was that little Krishnamoorthy grew up in his 'Periamma's' house at Paganeri. Fond of music, he liked to listen to the songs of S.G. Kittappa, Subbiah Bhagavathar and others. The Sri Rama Navami Utsavam was a grand annual celebration at home. Attracted to the bhajana paddhati, the child started learning the songs when he was five years old from Atmanatha Iyer and Tirukoshtiyur Iyengar. He knew all the songs by heart – from the Todayamangalam to the final Deepa Pradakshinam. He can remember most of it even now.

After a few years, Krishnamoorthy moved to Karaikudi with his grandfather, a purohit knowledgeable in the sastras and astrology. It was in Karaikudi that the foundation for serious music and Sanskrit was laid for him. His school teacher Ramanatha Iyer, father of mridanga vidwan Karaikudi Mani, was fond of music and promoted many young musicians. A student of Mazhavarayanandal Subbarama Bhagavathar and Swaminatha Bhagavathar, he developed a liking for young Krishnamoorthy and encouraged him. In Karaikudi, Krishnamoorthy learnt music from Rama Iyengar (a disciple of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar), and Sanskrit from Sundara Sastri at Koviloor near Karaikudi.

On the invitation of his brother B. Rajam Iyer, who was ten years older, Krishnamoorthy came to Madras in 1947 and started learning music from him in gurukulavasam. Rajam Iyer had been teaching music to the women in the Trivandrum Palace for a few years before moving to Madras.

Krishnamoorthy learnt from Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar as well. The doyen resided first at Nadu Street in Mylapore and later at Devanathan Street, Mandaveli, where young Krishnamoorthy spent much time just listening to him singing, or helping him with chores. The youngster who revered the senior was a great admirer of his music. "*Avar paattiley enakku oru mayakkam* – His music cast a spell on me", he says emotionally. As Krishnamoorthy demonstrates Ariyakudi's singing of *Sujanajeevana* in Harikambhoji, it is an admirable mimicking of the late guru's voice and style. "When I went home and tried to sing the raga like him and could not manage it, I cried. As I was only 15, I could not understand the subtleties and nuances". Ariyakudi often asked him to accompany him, but Krishnamoorthy did not want to leave his brother.

Krishnamoorthy joined the Central College of Carnatic Music in 1950, when Musiri Subramania Iyer was the principal and Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai (flute), T.K. Rangachari, T. Brinda, and Karaikudi Muthu Iyer (mridangam) were faculty members. They were present



at the interview for admission. "I sang Kambhoji in the Ariyakudi style and Swaminatha Pillai became very emotional," says Krishnamoorthy. He took up violin as a subsidiary subject taught by Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer and Varahoor Muthuswami Iyer.

"In the music of Ariyakudi, Musiri and Brindamma, there was emotional involvement; they knew how to present a raga or sahitya with the proper nuances. I grew listening to such masters; I immersed myself in their great music," Krishnamoorthy recalls with nostalgia.

"In the College, Musiri used to take liberties with me, which he didn't with other students. He would scold me in a stern voice, 'Listen to what I say, and how I sing'. Maybe he thought I would fare well in the future. When he sang a niraval, the sound of his voice, the beauty and the patterns of the sangatis were remarkable".

Brinda too was rather fond of Krishnamoorthy and he loved the way she sang padams which could melt the listener's heart. (He sings *Evvadey* in Sankarabharanam and demonstrates the subtle sangatis she would bring out effortlessly). "It needed a certain maturity to understand her style of music. Her way of singing the sangatis was like sprinkling flowers". She would sing a Tyagaraja kriti and ask him to repeat it, which he did impeccably, since he was deeply interested in it. He recalls with pride Brinda's advice to students who wished to sing in her presence: "Sing what Krishnamoorthy has taught you".

When the Tamil Nadu Government Music College was set up, the first two batches of students were admitted in the 4th year as their standard was quite high. Thus Krishnamoorthy was a student at the college from 1950 to 1952. He was known as BK and his classmates were Sirkazhi Govindarajan, Sarada Sivanandam, Vaidehi, Balasubramaniam, and Balakrishnan, while T.R. Subramanyam, T.K. Govinda Rao, K.S. Venkataraman and S.R. Janakiraman belonged to the first batch of students. As the group sat under a tree during the lunch break and practised swara-singing, their teacher Swaminatha Pillai often joined them. After BK completed the course in 1952, Swaminatha Pillai wanted him to have his arangetram at the Mylapore Saibaba temple. Rajam Iyer suggested that BK and he could sing as a duo and they did so. For three years they performed together as the Rajam Brothers.

After he completed his course in the Central College of Carnatic Music, Dr. V. Raghavan, Secretary of the Music Academy – whose daughters Priyamvada and Nandini were B. Krishnamoorthy's first students – arranged his appointment as a teacher at the Model School, run by the Academy, with a scholarship to train under Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer. Krishnamoorthy learnt from him for almost twenty years. Meanwhile, he also received a Govt. of India fellowship for specialising in pallavi singing, which too he studied under Mudikondan's guidance and learnt some very rare pallavis. Mudikondan advised Krishnamoorthy,

who knew Sanskrit, to study texts like *Sangeeta Ratnakara*, *Sangraha Choodamani*, *Sangeeta Makarandam*, and *Brihaddesi*. Krishnamoorthy presented his first concert at the Academy in the afternoon slot at the annual conference in 1958, the year GNB received the Sangita Kalanidhi award.

Krishnamoorthy also received specialised training from Umayalpuram Rajagopala Iyer (a direct descendant of Tyagaraja), and T. Jayammal of the Dhanammal family.

Krishnamoorthy soon joined as a teacher in the Teachers College of Music run by the Music Academy. R. Vedavalli was his colleague when he taught there (1959-78). He married Shantha in 1959, and the couple have a son and a daughter. In 1967, Krishnamoorthy was appointed inspector for music schools in Tamil Nadu by the Madras State Sangeeta Nataka Sangam.

He applied for a job with the Tamil Nadu Govt. Music College in response to an advertisement in 1978. A panel comprising S. Balachandar, Sirkazhi Govindarajan, principal Sandhyavandanam Srinivasa Rao, T.N. Krishnan and Justice Gokulakrishnan selected him for the post of lecturer. He taught all levels of students including those learning ragam-tanam-pallavi. He recalls: "My classroom was often filled to the brim, including students from other years or even subsidiary classes." He had the keen ear to spot who was making a mistake. Sometimes students came to him even during lunch to learn from him. A lecturer from 1978 to 1988, he regularly presented concerts at the Music Academy and won the Tambura Prize there.

Staffroom conversations were invariably discussions on music, often about raga lakshanas and talas. His colleagues included T.M. Thyagarajan, K.V. Narayanaswamy,



B. Rajam Iyer

Krishnamoorthy in concert



B. Rajam Iyer, T.R. Srinivasan and Tiruppamburam Shanmukhasundaram. Nellai Devaraja Iyer, a senior mridanga vidwan, one day threw a challenge. He presented a complicated ‘kanakku’ and said if any one could perform it correctly, he would carry the person on his shoulders and go around the college three times. Someone suggested Krishnamoorthy’s name.

“I couldn’t sleep that night and was thinking only about the kanakku till I got it early morning at 4 o’clock,” he says. “During the lunch break I demonstrated the tala kanakku to the accompaniment of thumping on the table by other vidwans in appreciation. I told Devaraja Iyer not to carry me on his shoulders but requested him to bless me so that my musical knowledge should grow”.

“I gained lakshya gnanam in Paganeri, but only after coming to Madras did I acquire lakshana gnanam, swara gnanam and other aspects of music,” says Krishnamoorthy.

Krishnamoorthy was due for promotion as Professor a few years before his retirement in 1988 but was thwarted by internal politics. P. Bhanumathi, who was then the Director of the College, came to know of it and went straight to Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran, who immediately granted the promotion. For about nine months Krishnamoorthy was also the Principal-in-charge there before he was transferred to the college in Madurai in 1989 as the principal, from where he retired in 1991. During his tenure he regularised the appointment of some staff members and also got them the arrears due to them.

Krishnamoorthy was so fond of teaching that he immersed himself in it even after retirement. He hardly ever had any time for his son and daughter. Among his VIP private students was J. Jayalalithaa. M.L. Vasanthakumari was known to have taken his help in pallavi singing. He was sometimes asked to teach special aspects of music in the Teachers’ College of the Music Academy. Even today he helps researchers in music.

Several years ago, Mudikondan’s son-in-law was very keen that Krishnamoorthy should teach his daughter, though her grandfather thought she did not have it in her. Krishnamoorthy felt sorry for her and very patiently trained her to a fairly good level. She even learnt to sing a Simhanandana pallavi in the presence of Mudikondan, who exclaimed that Krishnamoorthy had made the impossible happen! “I love to teach and feel happy to listen to my students sing,” says Krishnamoorthy.

Krishnamoorthy’s repertoire is vast, including compositions of rare and less known authors. He has been a tireless researcher too, judging from his publication of many rare musical documents. He learnt padams and javalis from T. Balasaraswati’s mother T. Jayammal of the Veena Dhanammal family. (He sings *Narimanikku* in Khamas to

demonstrate her style of singing.) Once Bala was to dance a padavarnam in Todi at the Tiruvananthapuram palace. Though she had recordings of it, she asked Dr. V. Raghavan to have Krishnamoorthy sing it, as she felt he would be able to do it to suit her style.

He is proficient in Tamil, English, Sanskrit, Hindi and Telugu. His ability to lucidly present and demonstrate a variety of subjects won him acclaim. Some of his lecdems include Mahavaidyanatha Sivan’s 72 melaragamalika, the tillanas of Pallavi Gopala Iyer, Arunachala Kavi’s compositions, Mazhavai Chidambara Bhagavata’s compositions, rare tillanas in 108 talas, rare talas such as the Simhanandana tala, Pratapasekhara, Ragavardhana, Shatkala pallavi, Swarasthana sruti parinamam (all for the Music Academy), raga lakshanas (for Carnatica) and compositions of Swarna Venkatesa Dikshitar (Indian Fine Arts Society). He performed twice in the Pallavi series organised by *Sruti* in Chennai.

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Composing music for Sanskrit compositions and stotras is another facet of Krishnamoorthy, exemplified by his tuning of Dr. V. Raghavan’s song *Chandrasekharam* on the Kanchi Mahaswami, in Keeravani, the Swami’s favourite raga. M.S. Subbulakshmi and Maharajapuram Santhanam both presented it in concerts. From the beginning he composed music for the Sanskrit dramas produced by the Samskrita Ranga founded by Dr. Raghavan. He and Vedavalli sang for the productions and toured various parts of the country.

In the West Mambalam Kothandarama temple there was an elderly chief priest who wanted me to set the *Venkateswara Suprabhatam* to tune. I set it in ragamalika beginning with Nata raga. The arangetram was at the temple and a Tamil newspaper published a good review. Anna Rao, executive officer, TTD, heard about it and wrote to Musiri Subramania Iyer enquiring whether Krishnamoorthy could present it in Tirupati. Musiri asked me to sing a few verses to ascertain the standard and then told me about Anna Rao’s request. I went with Krishnaswamy Iyengar (violin) and Guruvayoor Dorai (mridanga) to Tirupati and sang for about two hours in the hall where coins from the Hundi were counted. I sang

the *Suprabhatam*, *Prabhathi* and *Mangalasasanam*. None of us accepted any remuneration except for transport charges. When Ariyakudi came to know about it he too asked me to sing for him.

“Ariyakudi knew a hundred songs in Todi alone. He explored the various aspects of the raga so well! There was raga bhavam, sahitya bhavam, layam, everything in his music”, says Krishnamoorthy. Rajam Iyer, Madurai Krishnan and K.V. Narayanaswamy had done gurukulavasam with Ariyakudi. “The beauty of a gurukulam is that when the guru sings it is easily absorbed by the young students and it remains etched in their memory. As you grow older, the analytical mind takes over. Since I did gurukulavasam with Rama Iyengar and Rajam Iyer, and spent time off and on with Ramanuja Iyengar himself, the Ariyakudi style is well entrenched in my memory”.

Did learning from different senior vidwans, with varied styles not affect his music? “I was set in Ariyakudi’s style and there was no moving from it, but I absorbed the good aspects of other gurus like a *hamsa pakshi* does, and made them my own”.

Krishnamoorthy speaks with reverence about Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer’s devotion and dedication to music. “During the Tyagaraja aradhana at the Music Academy, not long before he passed away, Semmangudi Anna was seated behind the group on a chair. When all the vidwans were getting ready to sing the Pancharatna kritis, he said to me, “Krishnamoorthy! Come here. I learnt this lakshana geetam yesterday. Listen to me and tell me if it is okay”. It was an eye-opener that even at his age he was interested in learning a lakshana geetam. What bhakti to sangeetam! He was constantly involved with music and nothing else”.

Umayalpuram Krishna Bhagavatar and Umayalpuram Sundara Bhagavatar were disciples of Tyagaraja who accompanied their guru and wrote down his compositions as he sang them. These have come down to us through their descendants. The Sangeeta Nataka Sangam, now known as the Eyal Isai Nataka Manram, commissioned Krishnamoorthy to learn the *Divyanama Sankeertanams*, *Nauka Charitram*, *Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam* and the arohana-avarohana of 2500 janya ragas of the 72 melakartas, from Umayalpuram Rajagopala Iyer. He not only learnt them but also notated the compositions. Unfortunately, the project was shelved. With the support of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, 50 of them were published in 2011, as *Umayalpuram Pathantaram of Saint Tyagaraja’s Divyanama Sankeertanams* by Prof. B. Krishnamoorthy, who actually knew all 350 keertanas.

After retirement, Krishnamoorthy was invited to teach at Kalakshetra, Chennai. He was invited by Sandhyavandanam Srinivasa Rao to teach at the Mysore University and by Dr. Sripada Pinakapani to the Andhra University in Visakhapatnam, but he did not accept any of those offers.

He trained four young frontline artists – Sikkil Gurucharan, Amritha Murali, Kunnakudi Balamuralikrishna and Sumithra



Receiving the Sangeet Natak Akademi award from President Prathibha Patil

Vasudevan – in ragam-tanam-pallavi singing under the Guru-Sishya Project of the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

He has several recordings to his credit including one of *Ashtapadi* (with R. Vedavalli), *Tyagaraja Vibhakti Kritis of Muthuswami Dikshitar*, *Gurubhyo Namaha*, *Divyanama Sankeertanam*, *Navagraha Keertanas of Swarna Venkatesa Dikshitar*, and the *Tamil Compositions of Swarna Venkatesa Dikshitar*. He has notated all the compositions of Swarna Venkatesa Dikshitar.

On a parting note, he recalls an unforgettable incident when he and Rajam Iyer went to Orikkai where Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, the pontiff of the Kanchi Kamakoti Math was camping. The sage softly sang *Kamalambike* in Todi – the Dhyana keertanam of Muthuswami Dikshitar’s Kamalamba Navavaranam. He asked the two of them to sing the kriti. Krishnamoorthy regards singing in the presence of the Paramacharya as a great blessing.

Krishnamoorthy is the recipient of several awards and honours like the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Sangita Kala Acharya title from the Music Academy, Madras, Best Musician award from the Tamilnadu Govt. Music College, and Best Veteran Vocalist from Kartik Fine Arts, and Sangeeta Ratnakara from Bhairavi Fine Arts Society, Cleveland. He is an A-grade artist of All India Radio and has been performing regularly for over six decades. He has composed the music for several devotional and light classical productions of All India Radio and also rendered some of them. He is presently serving as guide and resource person for several musicians working on fellowships and special projects.