

## T.S. SANKARAN (1930-2015) Mali's Ekalavya

**B**orn on 28 October 1930, T.S. Sankaran was the son of flute vidwan T.N. Sambasiva Iyer from whom he imbibed music and flute playing at a very tender age. The family hailed from the village of Sathanur in the musically and culturally rich Kaveri delta. Family folklore dating back a couple generations speaks of associations with the illustrious 19<sup>th</sup> century son of Sathanur, musician Panchanada Iyer, a disciple of Muthuswami Dikshitar.

Later on, "Sankaran sir" (as he was to all who knew him) was a loving and dedicated disciple as well as perhaps the closest confidante of the legendary Mali. "Mali sir" was a native of Tiruvudaimarudur, a mere stone's throw from Sathanur. In a conversation with the poet Vali, published in the Tamil weekly *Kumudam* sometime in the 1960s, Mali hailed Sankaran as an Ekalavya who perfectly imbibed his style without any direct instruction.

That said, Sankaran was no carbon copy of his guru. He was an original musical thinker and the innovator of a unique flute playing style. He certainly took the best elements of the Mali style, added his personal touches and perhaps combined it with other elements reminiscent of the great nagaswara vidwan T.N. Rajarathnam Pillai whom Sankaran held in the highest esteem. What he evolved was an exquisite gayaki style. When playing kritis, it was marked by great poise and control, the kalapramanam steady, precise and unhurried, the sahitya clearly articulated by an optimal blend of blowing, tonguing and fingering. His raga alapanas combined the core gamakas with long, perfectly sruti aligned karvais and interspersed by rapid fire nagaswaram-like brigas. Sankaran's use of blow modulation for expressivity is unique among Carnatic flautists who depend mostly on



fingering techniques for this purpose. Furthermore, he used head movement effectively for precise enunciation of certain gamakas and as part of his overall expression. While his "viral adi" or fingered staccato was of the strong Mali school variety, he also used true *tuthukaaram* or tonguing for



Flute vidwan T.S. Sankaran passed away peacefully on 9 April 2015, in Chennai, after a brief illness. He is survived by his son T.S. Jayaram, a senior bureaucrat in the Indian Ordnance Factory Service, his daughter-in-law Jeyashree Jayaram and grandsons J. A. Jayanth, who has been making a name for himself as a young flute star, and J. Jaykishan. He was predeceased by his wife Sundari. Having spent a major portion of his professional life as a staff artist in AIR-Delhi, T.S. Sankaran returned to Chennai in the mid 1980s and thereafter was a regular part of the music season, keenly followed by his dedicated fans. In the last decade he often performed in the company of Jayanth.

clear cut articulation of swaraprastara. Mention must also be made of the beautiful Mali school cross fingering techniques that lent so much character and weight to spuritams. Sankaran's posture was perfectly erect and he held his flute in a most graceful and elegant way. His gentle swaying and eye movements communicated the bhava of the music wonderfully to the fellow musicians on stage and to the listeners in front of him.

When it came to raga lakshana, Mali was known to take artistic liberties while carrying the day by the sheer power of his sound and overall genius. On the other hand, although Sankaran's approach to ragas was highly creative and original, it was also very chaste and carried the conviction of a deep, lifelong research into raga swaroopa and nuanced differentiation of ragas.

Sankaran practically owned ragas like Bhairavi, Kalyani and Kambhoji on the flute. Other ragas he treated with great depth and insight like never before on the flute were Kalanidhi, Natakapriya, Kokilapriya, Ramapriya, Husseni, Abhogi, Harikambhoji, Ranjani, Ahiri, and Jingala, to mention a few. His brilliant nadai variations in the Mohanam and Bhairavi varnams were thrilling. Very often, his swaraprastara cycles for any kriti were complemented by some tisram variations.

Sankaran was a great authority on vadi-samvadi relationships between notes and phrases within ragas. For him these were the direct, practical outcomes of an intense musical and tonal experience rather than sterile theoretical exercises. Therefore, he was able to employ these insights to superb and dramatic effect during his raga delineations.

Technical aspects of Sankaran's work on the instrument merit a little elaboration. Like his guru, Sankaran had an equally intense and close relationship with sruti. This



sensitivity drove his careful selection of instruments for both himself and his disciples. He always stashed away some wax – “mezhu” – in the small pit on the outside of the closed end of the traditional bamboo flute (that is, one that makes use of a natural knot in the bamboo as an integral stopper at one end). The wax comes in handy to slightly alter a finger hole location or size, and thereby pitch. Sometimes wax can also be used to reduce the dead-space beyond the blow hole, which has the effect of increasing the pitch of the overblown upper octave.

Sankaran played the very thick walled, heavy variety of south Indian flute championed by Mali. This is the kind of flute that can produce that characteristically rich and soulful tone in the hands of the right player. It is correspondingly more strenuous to play, particularly in the overblown upper octave. To indicate his blowing strength, Sankaran often touched the ati-tara shadja on this heavy

flute; many struggle beyond the tara panchama even on the easier thin-walled flutes. The heavy flute is fast disappearing from use among the younger generation of flautists (with notable exceptions, certainly including Jayanth). Sankaran also invented a unique lever and stopper arrangement operated by the little finger of the right hand, to extend the reach of the normal flute to the mandara shadja and a little below.

As a music guru, he was patient and giving to a fault. He treated all with equal respect and was able to bring some humility to the gifted and impart some gift to those with lesser talent. His greatest gift is certainly Jayanth, who has imbibed this unique bani from the cradle. Other disciples include the brilliant vocalist and flautist Sriram Gangadharan, the gifted and versatile multi-instrumentalist Vijay Venkat, Sankaranarayanan (Lecturer, Madras Music College), Flute Venugopal (Dubai), Vasanth Kumar (Teaching Faculty, Annamalai University), Chennaiya (Teaching Faculty, Sri Venkateshwara College of Music, Tirupati), Flute Raghuraman (New Delhi), Venkataraman, Karthik, Radhika Rammohan and Mani Sundaresan (Chennai). I have also benefited from a bit of loving tutelage from Sankaran sir and cherish a notebook with his handwritten notations for some varnams and kritis. An entire book with Sankaran's hand-written notations is soon to be published with the guidance of Jayanth.

A rare photo of Sankaran playing the tambura for Mali





His last award - Swaralaya Venugaana Ambalam Award from Vishwam Fine Arts in July 2014. Sankaran was felicitated by Leela Samson, C.V. Chandrasekhar and Guruvayur Dorai



Receiving the Kalaimamani award from M.G. Ramachandran

The well-known North America based Bharatanatyam exponent Hema Rajagopalan was a lifelong patron of T.S. Sankaran and was instrumental in arranging his tours of North America over the last several decades. Others in the field of Bharatanatyam too have benefited from association with Sankaran. He also had a long standing relationship with Kalakshetra and Rukmini Devi Arundale, and counted Sankara Menon and S. Rajaram as his friends.

As a human being, Sankaran's impeccable grace and dignity evoked the instant love and respect of everyone who came in contact with him. Many were his quiet good-Samaritan acts, immensely helpful to people in their most critical hour of need, and often carried out at a considerable personal cost to Sankaran and his family. Most

often, none but Sankaran and the beneficiary would know anything about these gestures. Such was his utter and total self-effacement. Very often, the beneficiaries were peripheral figures of the Carnatic music community marginalised by a system without any safety net – elderly tavil and tambura vidwans and such.

Sankaran had an instinctive empathy and sensitivity to his fellow beings and the phrase “wouldn't hurt a fly”, either physically or emotionally, would be an apt description – diplomacy, tact and grace were inborn in him. He was blessed with robust health and a strong and well-toned body maintained by virtue of a simple and moderate lifestyle. Until his very last, he stood with his back held ramrod straight and cut a handsome, fit and distinguished looking figure.

He felt deeply and passionately about matters of social justice and was an ardent admirer of the social reformer B.R. Ambedkar. In matters of religion, while holding strong theistic beliefs arising from an expansive, transcendental Hindu world-view, he rejected

the superficial external symbols of religion, and more importantly of caste. In every respect Sankaran was, as one might say in America, the “real deal”, completely devoid of any pretentiousness.

Among the numerous awards and recognition that came his way some notable ones include the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2001), the Kalaimamani Award of the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram (1997), Flute Mali Award by the Madras Music Academy (1996) and Sangeeta Seva Nirata by the Sri Tyagaraja Sangeeta Vidwat Samajam, Chennai (2008).

**UDAY SHANKAR**

(A disciple of T.S. Sankaran and a bio-medical design engineer based in Chennai and Pittsburgh, U.S.A., the author is the inventor of the chitravenu, new sliding wind instrument with sympathetic strings, for which he was awarded a US patent in 2014)

With grandson Jayanth (flute), Nagai Muralidharan (violin), Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman (mridangam) and B. Shree Sundarkumar (khanjira)

