

## SPECIAL FEATURE

### R.K. SHIRIRAMKUMAR (part 2) Our own RKS

Gowri Ramnarayan



Shriramkumar

SHANKAR RAMACHANDRAN

**V**iolinist R.K. Venkatarama Sastry was a venerable presence in M.S. Subbulakshmi's house in the years he accompanied her on the violin. Always meticulously dressed in panchakacham, bordered angavastram, and the kind of nondescript shirt that conservative men wore in that age, he had his forehead generously streaked with sacred ash and

a kumkum dot. His small spare tuft was the only thing that sometimes dared to be unruly. Everything else about him spoke of simplicity, relentless discipline and control. He could daunt you with his silence. When he played the violin you knew he belonged to an immaculate tradition. Not for him adventures and risks. He kept it straight and pure. MS had tremendous respect for his austerity and dignified bearing.

When R.K. Shriramkumar entered the MS circuit he was really a stripling. He had his grandfather's simplicity and suddha pathantara. He was (and remains) scrupulously orthodox without making a song and dance about it. He performed his pooja and ritual with complete conviction, wore his vibhooti with utter faith, and had the same adoring veneration for Tyagaraja and other great uttama vaggeyakaras. In the years to come he would develop a taste for the best in sangeeta and sahitya, and disdain what he called "alka" (tinsel) sangeetam. I watched his benchmark rising higher and higher—for himself, as well as his choices in music.

MS was predisposed to like him as the grandson of Venkatarama Sastry, and grew to love him for his vinayam, modesty, and yes, she applauded his conservatism. The music he played when I first heard him was neat, not grand. He never took risks, how could he when he was accompanying a legendary senior? But he was quick to grasp what had to be done, and did it quietly, even unobtrusively.

MS would guide him as to her needs and he was eager to do his best in support.

As the years passed I saw changes in Shriram's music. There was the expected maturity in matters musical, a natural result of experience and accompanying many great musicians. But there was something more. Bhava began to seep in, sometimes, deep, sometimes tremulous, but always refined. Slowly it gained in power. A legacy from guru D.K. Jayaraman? The impact of M.S. Subbulakshmi?

True, there are times when you wonder if he is holding himself on leash and not pushing the envelope, at other times you think he is confining himself to the vocal style and not exploiting the possibilities of what his instrument can do.

But not on the day he is at his best, soaring with Sankarabharanam, plunging into Todi, racing with Arabhi, floating on Behag, caressing Neelambari. At such times you forget who is making music and with what. Nothing exists except the raga. It envelops you totally.

We all know that Shriram has a colossal repertoire at his fingertips and can remind the vocalist of the fifth word in the fourth line he or she has forgotten, or play forcefully enough to let such smudgings go unnoticed. Youngsters find in him a guru who can strengthen them, clear their doubts, and also remain a friend. What endears Shriram to young and old is his terrific sense of humour, his ability to

mimic people without disrespect. He can see the funny side of dark situations.

For an inflexible classicist he can manage to live with other kinds of music around him. Straightforward though he is, Shriram rarely gives offence to anyone. He has his affiliations to people and schools of music, but shuns camps. What an incredible feat to remain a favourite with both M.S. Subbulakshmi and D.K. Pattammal! I think both ladies confided in him, confident of his empathy. Both divas felt that he genuinely revered them for what they were, without taking sides, so common in the Carnatic music realm.

What do we envy most in Shriram? His total lack of envy. He is happy with what comes his way, does his best, leaves the rest to God. Shriram is not only a wonderful musician, he is a wonderful human being. He is also a lucky man.

Why? Because, artists are a strange breed—even those possessing as much equanimity as Shriram does. They experience highs and lows of a different kind. In Akhila, a highly placed official of Sankara Nethralaya, Shriram has a wife with an identity and personality strong enough to let him be the way he is. Tell me, how many husbands can claim that, in or out of the music world?

(As MS's vocal accompanist, the author frequently shared the stage with Shriramkumar and travelled with the team)

**L to R: Shriramkumar, Gowri Ramnarayan, M.S. Subbulakshmi, H.P. Ramachar, T. Sadashivam and Radha Viswanathan**

