

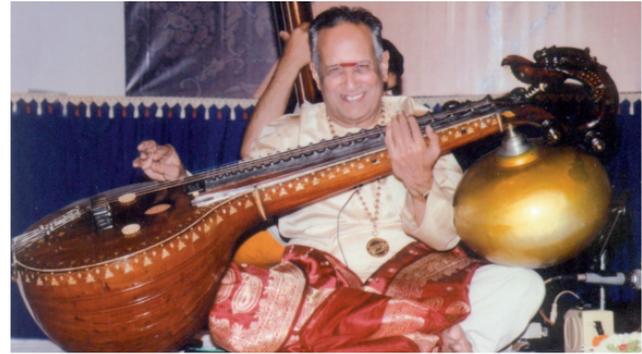
Contemporary concerns

You have developed a unique style of playing the veena in the gayaka style.

Yagnavalkya says that a knowledge of *veena vadana tatva*—the philosophy of veena play—is one of the elements of music that can lead to salvation. I used to wonder why he did not say ‘veena vadana tantra’—the technique of veena play. It was this line that made me realise that the philosophy behind veena play is the more important factor and the choice of technique depends on this philosophy.

My philosophy of veena play is simple—my commitment is only to the raga and the composition. I consider the veena my external voice, and playing techniques mere tools at the service of the ragas and the compositions themselves.

The contours of a raga, the subtle microtonal movements of sounds (gamaka, swara, anuswara, aNuswara or atomic microtones), and special prayogas are all hallmarks of



our system and have evolved over many centuries. It is no easy task to present such nuances through the veena, but the gayaka style is an attempt to represent the grace and fluidity in our music. Committed vainikas have indeed attempted to develop and standardise playing techniques over the centuries. Subbarama Dikshitar, in his *Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini*, has described many right-hand plucking techniques. (Unfortunately, he has not detailed the possibilities of left-hand techniques.) Even if plucking techniques are clear, we still must overcome the restriction of the frets. Can our music be described by the fret-value of swaras? What is the fret-value of the rishabha and dhaivata of Todi?

Bearing in mind all these complications, I saw a compelling need to develop techniques to bring out the beauty of melodic music centred on the capabilities of a human voice. I have developed my own method—one that is beyond-the-fret and off-the-fret. Not just that, it is equally important for me to play the sahitya of compositions with their originally placed accents, without the interference of meaningless plucking. This is what you may term the speciality of my bani or style.

Should instrumentalists care about the lyrics of the kritis they play? It is not as if the audience can differentiate between a *Himadrisutey* and *Biranavara* played on a veena.

Of course, they should! My explanation for this stance has less to do with conveying the lyrics to an audience and more to do with preserving the integrity of a composition. The songs of great composers like the trinity of Carnatic music are musical and emotional outpourings and are meant to be treated as such, be it by a vocalist or instrumentalist. Therefore, I consider it my duty (and every instrumentalist's responsibility) to understand and present the song as an integral whole, consisting of both the tune and the lyrics (dhatu and matu).

Did you have to make any modifications to the veena to suit your style?

I hope you are not attributing the quality of my music to the instrument! Mine is a basic Saraswati veena with steel frets and strings. Just so you know—I have had the pleasure of playing S. Balachander's veena. His was also a regular Saraswati veena. No mystery there.

What is your take on composing new kritis, especially when there are many under-explored compositions of the trinity?

Composing should not be done casually.

**Prof. R. Visweswaran
in conversation with
Srilatha Krishna**

Every composition must serve a musical purpose. It should add new dimensions to a raga, a tala or some other salient aspect of music. An *uttama vaggeyakara* has a thorough understanding of the *lakshya* and *lakshana* aspects of ragas, prosody and subject matter.

The lyrics of good kritis offer insights into the composer's personal and musical values and give clues on how the tune must be handled. They are also a historical record of the eternal questions on the human condition and specific concerns of the times or even specific incidents. Good compositions with these characteristics increase a student's understanding of our music, and add another tool to the performer's kit.

As an exponent of Muthuswami Dikshitar's kritis yourself, what would you say is the best way of interpreting his compositions?

I have been studying the *Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini* for decades and it has given me access to Muthuswami Dikshitar's spiritual and musical ideas as no other source does. However, interpreting compositions from this book requires a nuanced approach, and cannot be a blind reproduction of what is in it.

Dikshitar's handling of many popular ragas is very distinct. For example, Dikshitar's *Darbar* has *rgm* and his *Nayaki* uses both *rgm* and *pdns* prayogas. His *Begada* as seen in the kriti *Sree mata Siva vamanke* has *Pndns*, *ndns* and *sndns*, *srnsD* usages with *kakali nishada*. In such cases, the onus is on the musician to discern the uniqueness and ensure it is retained while rendering the kritis.

Sometimes it becomes necessary to re-learn the authentic version of a raga based on the *Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini*. A case in point is *Tarangini* (*Maye tvam yahi*). The popular version is sung in *madhyama sruti* with a *chatursruti dhaivata*, while a study of the book reveals that *Tarangini* raga only uses a *suddha dhaivata* and must be sung in the normal (*panchama*) *sruti*, and has specific *vakra* and *varjya sancharas*. It takes effort and the courage of your conviction to learn and present such authentic versions on stage. The CD of my lecdem titled *Ragas of dual identity* explores and presents correct versions of ragas like *Tarangini*. I have also composed a kriti, *Karuna rasa tarangini*, to reinforce the delineations of *Tarangini*.

Another piece of the puzzle is understanding the undercurrent of emotion—that of supreme bliss—that flows through Dikshitar's kritis. Take the kriti *Sree Kamalambikaya katakshitham* in *Sankarabharanam* raga, for instance. Here when Dikshitar says *Sachidananda paripoorna brahmasmi*, he is referring to his own state of eternal bliss—the realisation of the non-dual nature of *Atman* and *Brahman*. This realisation, and the act of merging with the *Brahman* is an extremely emotional experience. It is vital to understand the nature of this state of bliss to interpret the emotion behind his songs. Unfortunately, the combination of the Sanskrit language and metaphysical references makes his kritis appear devoid of emotion, often resulting in poor interpretations.

What should be the goal of music?

The goal is to produce ragas like *Ahiri* and *Devagandhari* and present them with their inherent beauty.

That said, the primary goal for all professional musicians should be to present music of a high standard and to raise the stature of the music (and thereby the musician) among listeners. When the stature of the musician rises thus,

awards and recognition will pursue her, rather than the other way around.

To get to this place of excellence, musicians need to target spirituality (*aadhyatmikate*) and humility as personal goals. This allows them to rise above material concerns and focus on producing music of high quality. Bhakti has been pivotal in the evolution of Carnatic music. It is essential for musicians to have bhakti, or as Tyagaraja has put it, *Sangeeta gnanamu bhakti vina sanmargamu galade manasa?*

You are talking about humility and spirituality with respect to music. This is different from the common understanding of these terms.

When I refer to spirituality, I am not referring to rituals. I am talking about a non-materialistic attitude. When I use the term humility, I am not talking about doing namaskarams to people around you, but about approaching music with humility. A humble approach ensures that musicians do not take undue liberties with their interpretation of ragas. Restraint, an often-overlooked aspect of Carnatic music, adds the qualities of peace and dignity. Restraint comes only with humility. And I strongly believe that this humility must be taught from a young age.

Speaking of bhakti, what is the lot of the non-believing musician? Should he stay away from Carnatic music?

Not at all. In the absence of belief in a deity, nadopasana is an alternative available to musicians. In nadopasana, music becomes the motive, the means and the end. It is a more difficult way of attaining the goal of spirituality and requires sadhana and tapas (perseverance and determination). What I mean is that either through bhakti or nadopasana, he must target spirituality, as opposed to materialism. Otherwise, his music is relegated to the level of a mere skill.

Is it possible to stop the vicious cycle of musicians blaming the audience for their choices on the concert platform and audiences blaming musicians for lowering the quality of music?

The only way to stop this is through the musician's uncompromising personal and professional ethics. When a good musician achieves fame, he must use it to raise the standards of music among audiences. He must not succumb to the temptation of playing to the gallery.

Many of these goals seem too idealistic?

We must realise that an ideal is only a direction in which to move, it is not a destination that anyone can arrive at, even after years of committed and intense practice. Musicians need to constantly move forward on the path towards the ideal. At the same time, they need to look back and ask themselves if they have improved in their music

and be prepared to take corrective measures as required. An idealised approach will allow them to deliver refined music which can exhilarate and give peace to listeners.

Your thoughts on teaching Carnatic music and musicology in colleges?

Based on my academic experience, I think the short time students spend in college can be utilised more effectively. Their time is better spent on practical music and modern-day concerns. In my opinion, instead of nit-picking over treatises written centuries ago, musicology should be forward-looking and should help improve the practice of music. I have shared my ideas on this subject in many forums. My books, *Sangeeta Sastra Chintana Rasayana* in Kannada and *Facets of Music* in English, both contain ideas of practical importance.

What are your views on music therapy?

I have experienced the comforting and curative effect of creative music in my own life when I was going through some physical ailment at the peak of my music career. I am a firm believer in 'mind over matter'. Nevertheless, I am highly sceptical about such claims standing the test of scientific scrutiny. If someone claims that listening to a Kamavardhini has such-and-such an effect on a patient, we first need to ask them what kind of Kamavardhini it is. Is it rendered by a beginner, an intermediate or a top-level exponent of the raga? Was it vocal or instrumental music? Since there are too many variables and most are hard to quantify, I place little hope in tall claims about music therapy.

You are giving full-length veena concerts and lecdems even at this age!

I don't follow any fitness regimen, if that is what you are asking! My good health is due to the blessings of Devi. It may also be because of the bliss resulting from the practice of music itself and the fact that I do not abuse the body I have.

Any advice for contemporary musicians, teachers and students?

They already have access to plenty of material on how they can improve their music. I don't have anything more to add, except that the *madi* (classicism/traditional values) in our music must be maintained at all costs. They can start by adopting these in their music, perhaps. (Laughs)

Do you have any predictions regarding the future of Carnatic music?

Carnatic music is beautifully complex and complexly beautiful. It has a very strong foundation built over the centuries and enjoys an unrivalled place in the world of melodic music. With just what we have now, I think it will easily flourish for at least another 500 years! ■