

S. Seshagiri Rao

‘Veeneya Bedagidu Mysuru’ is one of the several epithets for Mysore. The erstwhile Mysore state has produced many illustrious stars in veena and a unique style known as the Mysore bani is in vogue even to this day. The region has produced great exponents in violin too. Sangita Kalanidhi T. Chowdiah, who introduced a seven-stringed violin in place of the conventional four-stringed one was the first violinist from Karnataka to reach the top echelons of Carnatic music. S. Seshagiri Rao has been the foremost among the following generations of excellent violinists in the state. He has been a reputed accompanist and soloist for more than six decades.

He was born in 1944 in a musical family in Bengaluru. Life was not a bed of roses for him as he lost his mother when he was just two years old. The responsibility of raising Seshagiri Rao and his elder brother Srinivasa Rao fell on the shoulders of his father H.S. Venkatasubba Rao, an accomplished violinist himself.

Seshagiri Rao started violin lessons with his father at the age of 13, but this too did not last long as his father passed away four years later. Undeterred by the tragedy and the hardships he faced early in his life, Seshagiri did not give up and with grit and determination, continued to practise eight to ten hours a day. Though he did not receive, nor could afford formal training, he developed a unique style of his own based on the solid foundation laid by his father.

His concert debut was at the



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Tyagaraja aradhana festival in Malleswaram, Bengaluru, when he was 18. Academically, Seshagiri Rao is a B.A. Honours graduate from MES college, Malleswaram, but music was his first choice. He continued to practise hard and played at every available opportunity—be it for theatre, dance, harikatha or light music. He provided violin accompaniment for Kannada plays featuring famous actors like Rajkumar, T.N. Balakrishna, comedy star Narasimharaju and Master Hirannaiah. All along he honed his skills by listening to performances by the stalwarts of those days.

Soon word spread about his ability and he started to gain opportunities to perform at prestigious venues. He recalls with gratitude the encouragement he received from

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many leading musicians of his time like Chintalapalli Ramachandra Rao, Chintalapalli Krishnamurthy, R.K. Srikantan, Salem G. Desikan, Papa Choodamani and many others. Seshagiri Rao was in his twenties when he accompanied Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar.

He vividly remembers the occasions when he provided violin accompaniment to M.S. Subbulakshmi, M.L. Vasanthakumari and D.K. Pattammal. These golden opportunities came to him by accident, at the last minute, when the scheduled violinists could not make it. He made full use of these breaks and never looked back. Seshagiri Rao is perhaps the only violinist to have accompanied all of the so-called

female trinity on several occasions at prestigious sabhas and venues.

Once, when a violinist who was to accompany M.S. Subbulakshmi could not reach Bengaluru in time for the concert, the secretary of the Malleswaram Sangeetha Sabha E.N. Seetharaman, who was aware of Seshagiri Rao’s capabilities, convinced the organisers to provide a chance for him to accompany MS in that concert. With hesitation and no alternative, the organisers agreed. The concert was a huge success and both MS and Sadasivam were impressed with his violin accompaniment. They provided many opportunities to him at concerts in Shimoga, Chickmagalur, the Mysore palace, and also prestigious venues like the Music Academy in Madras, and the Kannada Sangha in Delhi. He also has the distinction of accompanying

MS at the SAARC festival held in Bengaluru, in which Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was in the audience along with other heads of states of the SAARC nations. Seshagiri Rao gratefully acknowledges the hospitality extended by the Sadasivams during his concert tours with them.

This is what critic Subbudu wrote about Seshagiri Rao's accompaniment in M.S. Subbulakshmi's concert at Siri Fort Auditorium, New Delhi: "Young Seshagiri Rao on the violin was indeed an asset. He has nimble fingers and can coax any melody out of the instrument. Added to this was his keen sense of grammar and this greatly enhanced the stature of the recital".

It was again under similar circumstances that Rao accompanied MLV and DKP. Both were impressed with Rao's mastery over the instrument and MLV insisted that Rao should accompany her in a concert organised by the Karnataka Gana Kala Parishat in its annual conference—along with mridangam legend Palghat Mani Iyer. Sudha Raganathan provided vocal support to MLV in that concert.

Equal to the task of playing the highly technical pallavis of DKP, Rao was the most sought after violinist for her concerts in Bengaluru and Mysore. Once, in a concert, when Rao reproduced whatever DKP rendered in a rare pallavi, Palghat Mani Iyer, who was accompanying on the mridangam, came up to Rao and patted him to show his appreciation. Rao considers himself very fortunate to receive a silver arghyapatram from D.K. Pattammal, when he was adjudged the "best young violinist" by Music Academy, Madras.

Even before he reached his thirties, Rao was a busy concert violinist. Appreciation poured in from both audiences and seasoned critics. Rajashree, the music critic of *Indian Express* wrote in 1967, "Seshagiri strikes: Yet a third violin recital within a week. The performer was young Seshagiri Rao who has been rapidly rising. His concert on 17 February was really top class. The tonal clarity... alacrity, the expressive gamakas, the fertile imagination and the fluent swaraprastaras underlined his superiority". Later in the year the same critic wrote again in the *Indian Express*, that 22-year old Seshagiri

has turned out to be the sensational 'find' of the season."

Once, for a Ganeshotsava concert in Bengaluru, the organisers suggested Seshagiri Rao's name to the vocalist Sattur Subramania Iyer. Sattur was reluctant at first, but when M.L. Veerabhadraiah, his regular mridangam accompanist also recommended, he hesitatingly agreed for Rao's violin. Sattur was so impressed with Rao's playing that in the middle of the concert when Rao was delineating a raga, he took the mike and said "Veerabhadraiah, the violinist you recommended is playing exceptionally well, he deserves all encouragement and God bless him with many more concert opportunities."

Despite his busy career, Rao was keen to join AIR as a staff artist. He remembers with gratitude, the encouragement received from V.V. Ranganathan, a famous khanjira artist from Bengaluru who was instrumental in Rao joining All India Radio. Rao was selected and posted at AIR-Mysore. Here again, Rao acknowledges the support extended by another great violinist H.K. Narasimhamurthy, who too joined

Seshagiri Rao playing the violin for Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar



AIR, around the same time. Both Seshagiri Rao and Narasimhamurthy stayed in a small rented single room at Mysore. Two years later, when AIR started its operations in Bengaluru, Rao sought a transfer and was posted to Bengaluru as a regular staff artist. He grew in stature during his long 28-year tenure at AIR culminating with the “A Top grade” at the time of his retirement in 2004.

During his stint in AIR, Rao accompanied all the leading stars of Carnatic music besides performing in solo recitals in a record number of concerts including Radio Sangeet Sammelans and the National Programme of Music. He also directed many music ensembles and provided signature tunes to many popular AIR programmes, which are beamed even to this day.

Rao has the rare distinction of providing violin support to more than 30 Sangita Kalanidhis in his illustrious career spanning more than six decades. The list begins with Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar and includes all time greats like Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, MS, MLV, DKP, N. Ramani, M. Balamuralikrishna, Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, K.V. Narayanaswamy, Bombay Sisters, Trichur V. Ramachandran, T.V. Sankaranarayanan, Maharajapuram Santhanam, R.K. Srikantan, Sikkil Sisters and many others.

Rao has had a very cordial relationship with R.K. Srikantan’s family and acknowledges with reverence the magnanimous support extended by Srikantan while he was in AIR and also on his concert tours. When R.K. Srikantan passed away, a senior connoisseur of Carnatic music in Bengaluru recollected that Rao had accompanied R.K. Srikantan in no fewer than 1000 concerts and their combination was like milk and honey. Rao has also accompanied all the senior disciples of R.K. Srikantan—M.S. Sheela,



Receiving the Karnataka Sangeetha Nritya Academy award

T.S. Satyavathi, R.A. Ramamani, and many others.

Flautist N. Ramani also had special admiration for Rao’s playing and wished to have him as accompanist in many of his concerts in Bengaluru. The admiration was such that Ramani, who gave a concert at Seshagiri Rao’s wedding reception, also played the flute at the wedding reception of Rao’s daughter, after a gap of nearly 25 years.

With regard to instrumentalists in music, there is a saying “It is not what you play, it is what you play with.” Rao has a good number of high quality imported violins suitable to any voice or instrument. The mandolin wizard, U. Shrinivas, in one of his concerts accompanied by Rao, was surprised at the tonal quality of the violin, that too without any amplification or pickup.

Rao has won many awards including the Ganakala Bhushana from Karnataka Gana Kala Parishat; Best

Violinist from the Music Academy, Madras; Kalajyothi from Nadajyothi Sabha, Bengaluru; Karnataka Sangeetha Nritya Academy award; and Kaladeepthi from Thyagaraja Sabha, Mysore. Flute maestro Hariprasad Chaurasia felicitated Rao in a function organised by MICO Fine Arts Society, Bengaluru.

Rao’s wife Savitri has been a pillar of strength and has very ably managed the family while Seshagiri Rao was busy with his music career. The couple have two daughters Gowri and Ranjini, both happily married and settled in Bengaluru.

Rao, who is an ardent devotee of Lord Rama and Lord Venkateswara, has been active in teaching students, some of whom are concert performers. He keeps himself busy and his typical day is full of music—teaching students or learning new compositions by listening to renderings by legendary artists.

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