

## The Sangeetha Vidyalayam

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The gentle waves on the Chinna Chokkikulam *kanmoy* (lake) glinted in the moonlight. Waves of music wafted from its bank. A knot of youngsters walked blithely singing aloud as they were returning home.

What kind of a bhajanai group was that, belting out sarali and jantai varisai, alankaram and varnam at that hour on the road?

The tale goes back nearly six decades.

Madurai had no teacher for Carnatic music in the 1950s. The problem had started way back in the early forties after the time of one Ganesa Bhagavatar, who was probably the only *paattu vadyar* for several households.

Ambujam Krishna was concerned and felt the urge to do something about it. She was already an active office bearer of the Sri Sathguru Sangeetha Samajam, which had moved to a thatched shed in Chinna Chokkikulam after having functioned for years at Sethupathi High School in the heart of the city. (This school proudly announces that the poet Subramania Bharati once taught Tamil there as one of its teachers.)

She envisioned a music school as one of the sabha's activities. As the first step, she persuaded a senior vidwan, C.S. Sankarasivam, who had almost gone into retirement, to move to Madurai and take charge of the proposed school as its principal. A team of younger vidwans was recruited to assist him and Sri Sathguru Sangeetha Vidyalayam was born. It functioned as an evening school with two branches,



At Sri Sathguru Sangeetha Samajam

one at Chokkikulam and the other at Meenakshi Vidyasala near the railway station.

The fee, if I remember right, was ten rupees a month for four classes per week. The real action began after these preliminary measures. Ambujam Krishna literally went door to door, visiting several neighbouring households, where there were children, especially young girls. She came home one evening and took my mother Ananthalakshmi Sadagopan and me to watch a class. It was then functioning in an old mandapam—one of the several Azhagar Edhir Sevai mandapams. The class was interesting and impressive. My mother decided on the spot to enrol my two younger brothers and me. I was somewhat puzzled. I had been giving vocal support to my mother for three years by then in her concerts, learning all the songs more by osmosis than by going through systematic training.

“All of you need to know the basics and this is a golden opportunity.” Mother was firm.

Thereupon commenced our most cherished experience with Carnatic

music which continued for nearly two years. Every aspect of it was delectable. Two sisters, Sundaravalli and Andal in their early twenties, would step out of their home and collect the others on the way to the *paattu* class. They did not have to knock at every door like the heroine of *Tiruppavai*. The varisais sung unabashedly on the road by the group with the volume swelling as it moved from street to street, would herald its arrival and students like us would join the stream and add our voices. This was our revision of the previous day's lessons. The entire neighbourhood reverberated with *s m g m r g s r* and *Mandaradara re*. Little did we care about onlookers. The more they gawked at us, the merrier grew our singing.

Every day we were taught by rotation by a different tutor, Lakshmi Narasimhan, Sundara Rajan or Venkata Krishnan, all following the same syllabus. Most of all we looked forward to the once a week appearance of ‘Peria Vadyar’ Sri C.S. Sankarasivam. Fifty of us with ages ranging from six to thirty six would sit as a single group, in rows according to the lesson. And everybody joined the

chorus from lesson one to the last, as row after row left after their lesson was over. To this day I feel thrilled to sing the first lessons as I mentally hear them in fifty voices soaring and falling.

Peria Vadyar made the learning fun, such as the challenge to hold each note for one whole avartanam or racing through the varisais in three speeds. He would cajole a reticent child of six thus.

“Will you repeat what I sing?”

No reply.

“SARI?” The question would be the first two notes.

The child would repeat automatically.

“Akka”

“Amma”

“Appa”

“O dear, you cannot forget your thatha!”

“Thatha”

“Nee” pointing to the child.

“Saa.” Triumphantly.

The class would struggle to suppress the giggles. Suddenly he would turn to one and bid her to sing the alankaram in Dhruva tala, where you could get tied into knots when it came to the third speed, missing the counts by a mile.



Sometimes a hushed whisper would travel from the back rows to the front. “Mami is here.”

Ambujam Krishna would have arrived silently to enjoy the class, squatting on the floor with the senior students. At the end of the class she would laugh and chat with all of us.

“Watching you sing I am tempted to join the class myself,” she said and was teased, “You can’t join half way. You have to start from sarali varisai.”

Revisiting Madurai recently for the centenary celebration of Ambujam Krishna, I was overwhelmed by the

strides that the Vidyalayam has made during the intervening decades. It became a College of Music in 1966 and is now offering graduate and post-graduate courses in vocal and instrumental music with Bharatanatyam as an ancillary subject. It is affiliated to the Madurai Kamaraj University and enrolls students for M.Phil. and Ph.D. I was happy to learn that the non-formal evening classes, where I had learnt, also continue side by side.

The seed sown by Ambujam Krishna has grown into a tree, further disseminating music and performing arts to the youth of Madurai. In her lifetime, she

witnessed its progress over the first couple of decades.

She also had the joy of watching at least one gifted pupil reach great heights in the firmament of Carnatic music. For it was she, who facilitated the coming together of a great teacher and a great disciple, namely vidwan C.S. Sankarasivam and his star pupil Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan, who entered as a student and went on to become the faculty member of the institution before he launched full time into his spectacular career as a musician, performer and guru.

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