

SUKANYA RAMGOPAL

Breaking gender stereotypes

Srilatha Krishna

Sukanya Ramgopal has carved a singular place for herself in the world of Carnatic music as the only top-ranked woman ghatam player. A prime disciple of ghatam maestro T.H. ‘Vikku’ Vinayakram, her passion for the percussion instrument has taken her around the world.

The walls of her living room are lined with shelves of ghatams. A granddaughter of the celebrated Tamil scholar U.Ve Swaminatha Iyer, Sukanya grew up in Chennai in an atmosphere of Carnatic music. Predictably, she and her sister were made to learn vocal lessons first. Soon after, she was sent to learn violin from Vinayakram’s younger brother Gurumurthy.

She recalls: “Although I sat in the violin class, my attention was invariably on the mridangam classes going on in another room at Sri Jaya Ganesh Tala Vadya Vidyalaya. One day, when I was barely ten, I casually walked into the mridangam class where T.K. Harihara Sharma (Vinayakram’s father) was teaching, and told him that I wanted to learn from him. After the merest pause, he asked me to sit down and started my lessons right away. There was not even a formal request from my parents or the customary offering of fruits and flowers!”

“The training was intense. I spent every waking hour thinking about my lessons or practising. Even studies became secondary to the mridangam. Within a short span of three years, I had gained sufficient mastery over the instrument to perform on stage. My guru started sending me to accompany musicians on stage whenever opportunities arose.”

Asked about her move to the ghatam, she says, “Fascinated by Vinayakram Sir’s ghatam playing, I requested him to teach me as well. He refused at first, saying that it was a difficult instrument to handle—even for him. But his father came to my rescue, pointing out that the ghatam did not know whether the player was a man or a woman! So, it was in fact Harihara Sharma who introduced me to the ghatam, while Vinayakram left for the U.S.A. on a year-long assignment. It was only on his return from the US that he noticed my perseverance and started teaching me. Those were the golden days, when he had not yet started travelling abroad frequently and was able to allocate considerable time for teaching.”

When asked about her career, she makes no bones about the hardships she endured to come up in the male-dominated field of Carnatic percussion. “I had moved to Bengaluru after my marriage. For many reasons it was difficult to get concert opportunities. Often, concert organisers or main artists would prefer to have only a mridangam accompanist, or a specific mridangist. Even when they needed a ghatam accompanist, I had to cross a few more hurdles. The mridangist would have to agree to let a woman ghatam-player accompany him, and then give me chances during the concert to display my skills. Concert opportunities used to come to me mainly through event organisers during the Ramanavami and Gokulashtami music festivals. Interestingly, my very first trip abroad



was to London as an accompanist to vocalist Rudrapatnam S. Ramakanth, with T. Rukmini on the violin. There was no mridangam!”

Sukanya talks about the difficult position of the ghatam artist in a concert. “The mridangist most often comes prepared with the kuraippu and korvai for the tani avartanam, but we have to comprehend it on the spot and give an appropriate response on the ghatam. In that sense, our role is a lot more challenging. But I thoroughly enjoy it. Then there are mridangists who will not let me play for the tani avartanam or a pallavi. It is in this context that I recall the magnanimous old-timers like Haridwaramangalam Palanivel, Tanjavur Upendran and Dr. S. Ramanathan who used to encourage me. I wish to see that kind of generosity from the younger generation of artists,” says Sukanya.

This tenacious artist has indeed come a long way from her early days. Today, she leads the “Sthree Taal Tarang”—an all-women percussion ensemble of veena, violin, mridangam, ghatam and morsing

(see photo). Besides India, this ensemble has performed in several music events abroad.

The “Ghata Tarang” is another of her innovations. “Vikku Sir made the ghatam practically ‘speak’ the syllables of sacred chants in his percussion programmes; I attempted the ghata tarang to make the ghata ‘sing’. I set up ghatams of different pitches around me to make up an octave of a scalar raga and play them myself (like a jalatarang). With enough thought and practice, the result was quite pleasing.” She says that her inspiration was Harihara Sharma’s ‘Ghata Mala’, where each student would play with a ghatam set to a different note of a raga.

Sukanya has released a book of practical exercises for students of the ghatam, titled *Sunaadam: the Vikku Bani of Ghatam Playing*. “I spent a lot of time verifying the lessons in my book by playing them myself,” recalls Sukanya. “Many years ago, I had proof-read and verified Harihara Sharma’s book which contained lessons for the advanced learners. This experience came in handy in compiling this book. I was fortunate to have very generous gurus when I was a student and I want to pass on this generosity to another generation of percussionists.”

She is very happy to talk about the Vikku style. “Traditionally, percussionists used to replicate the mridangam solkattus on their instruments. This approach failed to recognise the challenges and opportunities presented by each instrument. My guru elevated the ghatam’s status on the national and international stage by developing special techniques to overcome its shortcomings as well as to showcase its uniqueness. For instance, it is difficult to extract and sustain a sound in the clay pot. Therefore, in our school, the resonating long syllables ‘Thaa’ and ‘Dhee’ are replaced by ‘filling it up’ with intricate patterns of shorter syllables. Our unique style also involves the use of all ten fingers and use of the various parts of the pot to extract a variety of sounds and rhythms.

Much has been said in the media recently about the vanishing art of ghatam-making. There are very few ghatam-makers today. Manamadurai is the main source of ghatams and a family in Chennai is another. Ghatam vidwan K.S. Manjunath was instrumental in convincing a family of potters in Devanahalli to take up ghatam-making. Sukanya’s ghatams are of the sturdy Manamadurai variety, made by a member of the family which has been continuing this tradition for almost a century. She says that the ghatam-makers of Manamadurai have been experimenting with the materials and the processes to increase the sustain in the pots and their efforts are bearing fruit.



Sukanya points out that the ghatam blends very well with diverse types of music, allowing her to play in many fusion ensembles. She recalls some memorable collaborations. “I worked with Kuchipudi artist Shylaja on a unique dance programme to the added accompaniment of the ghata-tarang and a ghatam instead of the mridangam. Shylaja and I spent many days perfecting the pieces for the programme. We presented this during the annual day of her dance school and it turned out to be a grand success.”

“Another remarkable experience was a performance with Flamenco dancer Bettina in Germany, where her exciting footwork matched my ghatam and konnakol almost syllable for syllable. In general, I see that percussion ensembles appeal to a wide range of audiences around the world.”

It is Sukanya’s dream to bring the glory of the tabla-ghatam combination made popular by the Vinayakram-Zakir Hussain duo (as part of the Shakti band). She has received many awards and citations for her artistry. She will be receiving the TTK award this year from the Madras Music Academy.

Her students arrive for a rehearsal, and it is time to wrap up the interview. She leaves us with some concluding thoughts. “Music teachers must spend more time teaching timing/laya at the preliminary stages along with the basic swara exercises. I would like percussionists to experiment with and come up with new techniques to highlight the uniqueness of their instruments and not just use the mridangam techniques.

Although parents are very supportive of their children today, not many girls take up percussion, especially the ghatam. I do not believe in the stereotype that women are not good at laya. It is high time prejudices against women percussionists went away.”

Sukanya’s passion for the ghatam and concern for its future keep her motivated despite the prejudices she encounters even after four decades of experience on stage. She carries on as a lone crusader, making us confront our own preconceptions and prejudices every step of her way. ■