

VECHOOR HARIHARASUBRAMANIA IYER (1925-1994)

True representative of the Semmangudi bani

C. Ramakrishnan

The establishment of the Sri Swati Tirunal College of Music in Tiruvananthapuram in 1939 was a milestone in the history of Carnatic music in Kerala. It was the result of the vision of three outstanding individuals—Maharani Sethu Parvati Bayi (mother of Sree Chithira Tirunal Maharaja), Sir C.P. Ramaswami Iyer (Dewan of Travancore) and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. The academy was established with the primary objective of propagating the compositions of Swati Tirunal. Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar was roped in as its first Principal and he painstakingly collated the manuscripts of the kritis of Swati Tirunal from various sources, tuned them and popularised them. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer took over from Muthiah Bhagavathar as Principal, to be succeeded by such illustrious musicians as G.N. Balasubramaniam and K.S. Narayanaswamy. This institution can really be proud of producing a bunch of talented musicians among whom Vechoor Hariharasubramania Iyer occupies a prominent position.

Early years

Hariharasubramania Iyer was born in Vechoor, a quiet village in Kottayam district, to Neelakanta Iyer and Janaki Ammal on 11 November 1925 as their second child among four sons. Noticing his taste for Carnatic music from an early age, his parents engaged nagaswara vidwan Chertala Kuttappa Panicker for preliminary lessons. After his matriculation, Hariharasubramaniam



enrolled in the Swati Tirunal Music Academy of Trivandrum in 1943 and passed the Gana Bhushanam course in First Class in 1947. As a student, he acquired a wealth of compositions of the likes of Swati Tirunal, the music Trinity, Purandaradasa, Papanasam Sivan, and Arunagirinathar, from the faculty which included great masters like Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, C.S. Krishna Iyer, M.A. Kalyanakrishna Bhagavathar, K.R. Kumaraswamy Iyer, Musiri Subramania Iyer, and G.N. Balasubramaniam (visiting faculty)—and the subtle nuances of Carnatic music. He also underwent gurukulavasam under Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer for five years to further hone his skills.

Teaching stint

Hariharasubramania Iyer joined the faculty of the RLV (Radha Lakshmi Vilasam) College of Music and Fine Arts, Tripunithura, in 1947. Later he got transferred to his alma mater, the Swati Tirunal College of Music, Trivandrum, and retired from service in 1980. Post retirement, he served as Visiting Professor in the RLV College of Music in Tripunithura, and the Chembai Memorial Government Music College in Palghat, besides holding the post of Principal of the Sree Chithira Tirunal College of Music run under the aegis of the Sree Swati Tirunal Sangeeta Sabha, Trivandrum. While heading this institution, he undertook a project of publishing notations for all the songs covered in the syllabus for the various courses, but breathed his last before completing the task.

During his long career as a teacher, he trained thousands of students, some of whom have blossomed into musicians of substance and present pure classical music, seamlessly passing it on to succeeding generations. He imbibed the positive aspects of his guru Semmangudi, and was clever enough to avoid the negative aspects such as nasal voice, taking snuff, and facial contortions. Vechoor sang with a stoic face, devoid of any expression or mannerisms. When Sethu Parvati Bayi wanted to identify a guru to teach music to her great-grandson Prince Aswati Tirunal Rama Varma, she interviewed all the available gurus in Trivandrum and selected Vechoor for his unswerving adherence to classicism.

His uncompromising music

The music of Vechoor Sir, as he was respectfully addressed in the concert circuit, was unadulterated, pristine music which was greatly gamaka oriented. His initial training under the nagaswaram vidwan perfected his gamakas which were reflected in his alapana. He had an endearing voice and he sang in 1-kattai with sruti suddham, akara suddham, laya suddham, kalapramana suddham, and sahitya suddham. He was also inspired by the expansive alapana style of GNB and his flashing brigas. He very much appreciated the music of MLV and liked her judicious application of brigas. The vilamba kala music of M.D. Ramanathan and the bass voice of Pudukode Krishnamurthy also had their influence on Vechoor's music. The influence of GNB could be seen in his presentation of songs like *Sudhamayee*, *Himagiri tanaye*, *Evarikai avataramey*, and *Kalayami Raghuramam*. There was raga bhava in every phrase of his raga alapana, tanam, niraval and kalpana swara. His well structured alapana was presented in a delectable format, strengthened with the characteristic nagaswara pidis spanning three octaves and ornamented with vadi samvadi touches, equally appealing to novices and connoisseurs. It was characteristic of him to plumb the depths of each raga and present it in its grandeur. There

was a marked discipline in whatever he presented. His alapana of a main raga like Kalyani or Todi would be for 10-12 minutes and he never indulged in stretching the raga to exhibit his vidwat or manodharma. At the same time, in classes or impromptu sessions, he could sing a major raga like Sankarabharanam for an hour without repetition of any sangati. The seasoned rasika found his exposition of rakti ragas like Saveri, Arabhi, Anandabhairavi, Varali, and Sahana haunting. He generally followed the madhyama kala rendering of kritis which would appeal to the majority of listeners and the kritis would be presented with well defined sangatis. He followed his guru's path of presenting mind boggling sarvalaghu swara patterns and eschewed pre-rehearsed korvais. He created many pallavis in the sapta talas and was adept in presenting 4-kalai pallavis in a highly enjoyable manner, never sacrificing aesthetics for arithmetic.

Vocalist Trivandrum Sekar, who accompanied Vechoor for many years recalls: "His concerts normally attracted a sizeable crowd of rasikas who were keen to savour unadulterated music. In 1989, there was a devastating flood in Madurai and the next day was his concert. Though the city was reeling under the impact of the floods, his concert had a full house. Kritis like *Evarikai* and

Nijadasavarada which he rendered in that concert had a unique sheen—his quintessential music brimming with raga bhava—the lakshya never trespassing the lakshana. In 1990, he presented three concerts in Mumbai and the NCPA chairperson wanted his concert to be recorded for its archives. After much persuasion, Vechoor relented and agreed to a recording for 90 minutes which included *Sree Mahaganapati*, *Brovabharama*, *Sarasijanabhamurare*. It will be a blessing for music lovers if NCPA makes the recording available to the public. The Gayaka Ratnam concert at the Swati Tirunal Sangeeta Sabha, Trivandrum, in 1994 is still cherished for his *Smaramanasa* (Darbar), *Samodam paripalaya* (Ramapriya) and the ragam-tanam-pallavi in Mukhari."

Senior accompanying vidwans held him in high regard, and besides the native musicians, vidwans like Guruvayur Dorai, Umayalpuram Sivaraman, T.K. Murthy, V.V. Ravi, M.A. Sundareswaran, M. Chandrasekaran, and Tiruparkadal Veeraraghavan accompanied him in many concerts. Vechoor believed that the concert was a team effort and he ensured that accompanists were in their comfort zone. He sang in the Navaratri Mandapam for many years when Semmangudi never missed a concert of his favourite student and always expressed his appreciation of his scholarly presentation. Once after hearing the concert of Vechoor at the Navaratri Mandapam, T.N. Krishnan (who was to accompany Semmangudi the next day) assured that next year he would accompany Vechoor and he kept his word.

A graded artist of Travancore Broadcasting Corporation (later named as AIR) since 1950, Vechoor was elevated to the level of A Grade. He gave concerts throughout Kerala

(L to R): T.K. Murthy (mridangam), Ayamkudi Mani (vocal support), Vechoor Hariharasubramania Iyer (vocal), V.V. Ravi (violin)





(L to R): Trivandrum R. Vaidyanathan (mridangam), Hariharasubramania Iyer, Trivandrum Sekar (vocal support), K. Venkitachalam (violin)

and Tamil Nadu in temple festivals and sabhas and also in Mumbai. He never planned his concerts, choosing his songs instantaneously, judging by the venue and the audience. He performed at the Madras Music Academy in 1977. His concert was a permanent fixture on Vaikkathashtami day in the Vaikkom Mahadevar temple as also in many temples in the Nagercoil-Tirunelveli belt, where, year after year he presented new kritis and pallavis. He retained the timbre of his voice till the very end. His last concert in Soorya, Trivandrum, held a few days before his death, received rave reviews from critics and connoisseurs. It is unfortunate that Vechoor was strictly against recording of his concert, causing a great loss to musicians, music students and rasikas. Very few songs from his concerts are available in the public domain and with private collectors of music. (*Sarasijanabha murarey* in Todi at <http://y2u.be/Aoeo4VBGqog>).

Guru non pareil

Vechoor belonged to a century when masters desired that their disciples should internalise the songs and any type of recording was not permitted. There was an instance of a student recording the lessons being suspended from class on detection. Vechoor would not even permit the students to note down the lyrics.

A typical class would start with the singing of varisais, alankarams, and varnams, thereby ensuring that a strong foundation for music was laid. Hence, even decades after learning them, his students are able to render the songs with precision without referring to notebooks or the iPad in a concert. Aswati Tirunal Rama Varma learnt from Vechoor for twelve years and after his demise, learnt to play the veena from R. Venkatraman and K.S. Narayanaswamy, and vocal music from the maestro Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna. Rama Varma asserts that the solid foundation laid by Vechoor Sir enabled him to adapt to the diverse styles of his four gurus and successfully carry forward the legacy of Balamuralikrishna. Vechoor regarded his students as his family members. Although he hailed from an orthodox family, he never worried about the caste or religion of his students and many times paid the college fees and offered food to poor students, despite his own financial constraints. One of his students, belonging to another community, did gurukulavasam and was more than a son to him. All this he did quietly without any publicity.

Vechoor believed that every student had his individuality with regard to voice felicity, strength and

weakness, so he encouraged them to develop their own styles and not become his carbon copies. His disciples who have made a mark in the concert arena are many and include K.J. Yesudass, P.R. Kumarakerala Varma, (the late) Neyyatinkara Vasudevan, Vaikom Vasudevan Namboothiri, Tiruvizha Jayasankar, Varkala C.S. Jayaram, Prince Rama Varma, Ayamkudy Mani, Trivandrum Sekar, Guruvayur Venkiteswaran, Parvatipuram Padmanabha Iyer, Bhama Krishnan, Trikkariyur Rajalakshmi, M.N. Savithri, K.N. Sreekumar (Secretary, Swati Tirunal Sangeeta Sabha, Trivandrum), and Jayalakshmi Ramesh.

A strong willed person

For a contented person, never aspiring for riches or positions, Vechoor was strong willed. In his twenties, he once went to present a concert at the Guruvayur temple during the Ekadasi festival. He was already seated on stage with his accompanists and was about to begin the concert when a famous violinist walked in and the authorities asked young Vechoor to yield the stage to the senior violinist. The young musician left feeling humiliated. Vechoor returned at night after everybody was gone and the mike set was still there. He went on stage and started singing to the accompaniment of the tambura. The famous violin vidwan rushed to the venue upon hearing the heavenly music, and came forward to take Vechoor under his wing and even promised an exalted position in Carnatic music. But young Vechoor rejected the offer; this of course turned out to be a blessing for thousands of music aspirants in Kerala.

When the TV station started functioning in Trivandrum, many vidwans applied for performance



Receiving the Gayaka Ratnam award from Princess Kartika Tirunal Gowri Lakshmi Bayi as T.K. Murthy looks on



Receiving the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academi award

slots. When Rama Varma asked Vechoor to give an application, he replied: “So far I have never submitted an application for any post; I have accepted whatever came to me”. In course of time, Vechoor was offered a performance opportunity. As he was not used to lights and make-up, Vechoor felt very diffident on the day, but the spontaneity and confidence with which he sang reflected his lifelong sadhana.

Though outwardly reserved and self effacing, Vechoor had a keen sense of humour, and loved action movies, especially the films of Bruce Lee, which he watched with his friend, violinist Chalakudy Narayanaswamy. In May 1994, some of his students made arrangements for a US concert tour which however, had to be cancelled as Vechoor suffered a heart attack. A staunch believer in destiny, he did not show the slightest disappointment, but he did have the pleasure of seeing

many of his disciples going on concert tours abroad. And as a real guru, it was the success of his disciples that gave him more pleasure than his own success.

Awards and recognitions

Like many of his peers in Malabar land, Vechoor too did not receive the recognition and awards he richly deserved. The Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi award was bestowed on him in 1987, duly followed by Sangeeta Ratnam from the Irinjalakuda Sangeeta Sabha in the same year. The Swati Tirunal Sangeeta Sabha, Trivandrum, honoured him with the coveted title of Gayaka Ratnam in 1994. The Chembai Music Trust, Trivandrum organised a remembrance day for Vechoor Hariharasubramania Iyer on 16 December 2017 in which many of his disciples shared memories of their revered guru.

The next generation in the Vechoor family is taking the legacy forward. Vechoor has one son and two daughters. The elder daughter Radha Sharma, who learnt music from him, lives in his house in Valiachalai Street, Trivandrum, and conducts music classes, while his son Neelakantan and younger daughter Geetha (a music graduate and teacher) are settled in Delhi. His grand-daughter Rathnaprabha is an up-and-coming Carnatic musician in Chennai. Her concert in Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Mini Hall during the music season was well received. Vechoor Sankar, a noted musician in Kerala, is his brother’s son and young vocalist N.J. Nandini, disciple of Parassala Ponnammal, is his brother’s granddaughter. Vechoor Hariharasubramania Iyer passed away on 16 November 1994 following a massive cardiac attack. His wife Mahalakshmi passed away last year. ■

Inputs and photos from Rathnaprabha