

Ramnad Krishnan: a confluence of three streams

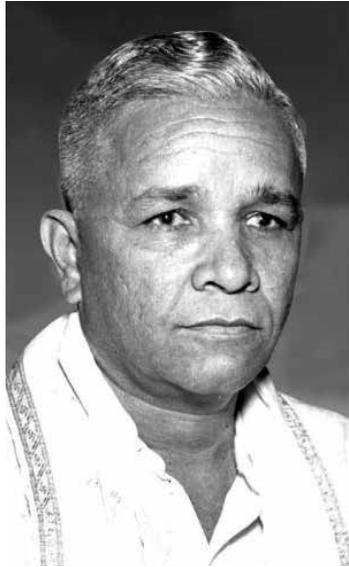
Geetha Raja

Ramnad Krishnan's name brings to mind his electrifying delineations of ragas like Sahana and Begada, Keeravani and Sankarabharanam. Through his son R.K. Ramanathan's initiative, a year-long celebration of the legend's music was organised at Raga Sudha Hall in Chennai, with two programmes held every month, starting in September 2017 and concluding in September 2018.

Born on 14 September 1918 in Alappuzha in Kerala, Krishnan was one of eight siblings growing up in a musical atmosphere. His brothers Lakshminarayana and Venkatachalam were violinists, Raghavan and Eswaran were mridangam players. Krishnan's education was in Ramnad in Tamil Nadu where he learnt music from the late vidwan C.S. Sankarasivam (elder brother of mridanga vidwan C.S. Murugabhoopathy).

His bani

In Krishnan's music, you could see a confluence of three streams—first, his guru Ramnad Sankarasivam's music; second, the admiration he had



for the GNB style and the way he incorporated it in his singing; third, the adoration for the Dhanammal school of music with its illustrious votaries like T. Brinda, T. Muktha, T. Balasaraswati and T. Viswanathan. Sankarasivam's father Chitsabhai Servai was a scholarly musician at Ramnad and a disciple of the laya wizard Pudukottai Manpoondia Pillai, who revolutionised khanjira playing. Sankarasivam also learnt

from the towering music personality Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar. Krishnan probably derived his musical genius to some degree from these unique inputs imbibed from Sankarasivam. He created a style of his own by combining the briga dexterity and brilliance of the GNB bani and the repose and vilamba kala excellence of T. Brinda. His voice, capable of executing breathtaking speed with precision, was a great asset in formulating a unique style.

He was introduced to the Veena Dhanammal style of music through his friend N.S. Krishnaswamy Iyenger (a disciple of Kanchipuram Naina Pillai) whom I have seen visiting my guru Brindamma, at her home 'Saugandhini' in Adyar. I spent some unforgettable days at Brindamma's home in 1974, when I was nineteen years old, learning the compositions of Gopalakrishna Bharati and Arunachala Kavi for the music competitions conducted by the sabhas in Madras.

Ramnad Krishnan was so famous for his masterly treatment of Sahana raga that he was referred to as 'Sahana' Krishnan. What was so different about his Sahana that we all rave about it? Maybe it was the clarity of thought behind his every turn of phrase. His vibrant and thinking personality was reflected in his music. When we analyse his style, we see an extremely intelligent and quicksilver mind conceptualising the sound picture as it were, and executing the brilliantly thought out phrases, interspersing slow and fast sangatis. As in all

In concert with C.S. Murugabhoopathy (mridangam) and Chittoor Gopalakrishnan (violin)



aesthetically rich music, the plain and the ornamented notes are juxtaposed with proportion. Plain swaras are given their importance and gamakas are used with care. Modulation was another aspect of Krishnan's music which contributed to the beauty of his style. Meaningful pauses and karvais on the upper octave shadja created an atmosphere of visranti and saukhyam.

In the raga based Indian music tradition, where importance is given to the aural method of imbibing raga by listening (*kelvi gnanam*), we look up to masters of raga delineation like Ramnad Krishnan to understand its intricacies. He was indeed a trendsetter, a musician who brought freshness and spontaneity to the Carnatic music scene. The impact of his music has grown stronger with the passage of time, as can be seen in his influence on a whole generation of musicians from the 1970s.

He brought apoorva and rarely explored ragas to the concert platform like Jayamanohari (*Yagnadulu*), Phalamanjari (*Sanatana*), Janaranjani (*Smarane*), Poornachandrika (*Palukavemi, Nejesina*), Devamanohari (*Kannatandri*), Nayaki (*Neebhajana*), Poornashadjam (*Lavanya Rama, Sreemanini*) and made them his

signature pieces. He explored uncharted terrain in his handling of certain ragas. His Bahudari (*Brova-bharama*) was adventurous whereas he could be lyrical in Keeravani (*Varamulosagi*), caressing its notes beautifully.

My guru Bombay Ramachandran was an ardent admirer of Ramnad Krishnan; he listened to his concerts and taught his students authentic pathantaras of Sreeranjani (*Bhuvinidasudane*), Saveri (*Daritamuleka*), Varali (*Etijanma*) and more.

Krishnan served on the faculty of the Government College of Carnatic Music, Adyar, Chennai, for a brief period. During his teaching stint as Visiting Professor at Wesleyan University, U.S.A., he recorded two albums for the Nonesuch Records Legendary Explorer series. The albums included classics like *Ninnadanela* (Kannada), *Palinchi Kamakshi* (Madhyamavati), *Abhimana* (Begada), *Tamarasadalaneetri* ragam-tanam-pallavi (Bhairavi), *Ini enna pechchu* (Sahana padam) and *Modijesevelara* (Khamas javali). A digitised version of this two-LP record set is available on YouTube under the heading *Ramnad Krishnan: Vidwan – (Songs of the Carnatic Tradition)*.

He trained many disciples like Ritha Rajan, Nagamani Srinath, Vegavahini Vijayaraghavan, Neyyatinkara Vasudevan, Nirmala Sundararajan, Usha Sagar, Janaki Sunderarajan, Peria Vaithi (Vaidyanathan), Papa Natarajan, T.R. Ratnam (playback singer), Kamala Narayan (Bharatanatyam dancer), Jagadambika (Srilanka) and others.

Talking about Krishnan's fantastic sense of humour and penchant for punctuality, his son Ramanathan became emotional as he relived memories of his renowned father. A classical musician to the core, he did not pander to the gallery and hence earned the appellation "a musician's musician". Ramanathan also said that Ramnad Krishnan felt that the audience must be exposed to unalloyed, traditional, classical music and hence would never heed 'popular' request. His passing away on 29 January 1973 at the relatively young age of 55 years left a void in the music world. R.K. Ramanathan's documentary on his father Ramnad Krishnan will be something to look forward to.

(The author is a Carnatic vocalist and teacher)