

NERANKI VISHNU MURTHY

A versatile percussionist

Vidwan Neranki Vishnu Murthy, a first-generation percussionist, shaped his life and career with optimism and determination. Born on 23 February 1922 as the seventh child of Krishnayya and Parvatamma in Puttur, Karnataka, Murthy was orphaned at a very young age. Even with his elder brothers taking up the role of breadwinners for the family, poverty struck hard forcing him to discontinue school from the eighth standard despite his stellar grades. He turned to music and trained in tabla-playing with Ramakrishna Prabhu, Narayana Pai and N.R. Bantwalkar. His quick learning abilities saw him entering the local concert platforms quite early in life. Later, on the advice of his tutor Ramakrishna Prabhu, he left for Mysore in search of a guru who could guide him in the intricacies to a greater degree. His passion was such that he pawned his tiny earrings for 3½ rupees with his family jeweler and left without informing his family.

In Mysore, Murthy went to the house



of Gopannayya, a family friend, who promptly introduced him to tabla vidwan D. Sheshappa of the Mysore Palace. Sheshappa accepted Murthy as a disciple and also had one of his students offer him a day job at a hotel to help him make a livelihood. Despite his busy work schedule, Murthy managed to attend the concerts of all the musicians visiting Mysore. It was on one such occasion that Murthy, yearning to attend a concert

by the famed Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar with Palghat Mani Iyer and T.S. Chowdiah, scaled the fence of the concert hall trying to evade the security guard and injured himself. The compassionate Chowdiah who happened to witness the incident was impressed by the determination of the blood-drenched boy and arranged a special VIP pass for him for all the concerts in the hall that day; a turn that the boy remembered with gratitude for the rest of his life.

As earning a livelihood became increasingly difficult, Murthy decided to pursue mridangam as it seemed more lucrative in light of the bustling Carnatic music scene at that time. Murthy requested Mogur T. Puttaswamy, a regular visitor to Mysore, to teach him to play the mridangam and was readily accepted as his disciple. In 1947, on Puttaswamy's recommendation, Murthy moved to Madras and began teaching tabla to the children of Kadandale Krishna Bhat who owned Krishna Bhavan Hotel (now Woodlands Hotel) and K. Seetharama Rao who owned Dasaprakash Hotel. Murthy was offered food and a room to stay by the former.

Mariyappa Bhat, Head of the Kannada Department, Madras University, helped Murthy with opportunities to provide mridangam accompaniment to artists at local concerts. As he settled into a life in Madras, Murthy came under the tutelage of maestro Palghat Mani Iyer in the gurukula style. Mani Iyer even had Murthy teach tabla to his students.



Following his marriage to Saraswati in 1954, Murthy began accompanying dance artists for films in Madras for a monthly salary of nine rupees. Apart from playing the tabla and mridangam, he also expanded his skill set to include the tabla tarang, kasht tarang, jal tarang, sheesh tarang as well as the sitar and santoor. As an offshoot of Murthy's friendship with Prabhakar Betrabet, and Krishnanand—organisers of the Tansen music festival in Chennai—the idea of learning tabla with the illustrious Shaik Dawood took root in his mind. Murthy had been impressed with Dawood's solos broadcast by All India Radio, as well as his live performances at the festival. Whenever Murthy travelled to Hyderabad he took lessons from Shaik Dawood. In his later years, he recalled Dawood fondly saying: "The whole world calls you Vishnu Murthy but I will call you Vishwa Murthy."

When the tabla legend Ahmedjan Thirakwa visited Madras, Murthy would be his local guide. Being a musician fluent in Tamil, Kannada, English and Hindi, he was ideal for the task. After many days of their association, Thirakwa came to know that Murthy was a tabla player. Surprised that he had not requested for any lessons, he asked Murthy, "Do you not want anything from me?" Murthy replied, "I will be more than willing to take whatever you give!" The Ustad then taught him some exquisite compositions.

Murthy was also a regular mridangam accompanist for Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavat, who once described his chapu to an audience in Kolkata as one of the sweetest sounds he had heard. Murthy accompanied

Murthy with wife Saraswati



Accompanying Pannalal Ghosh (flute) and Janardan Mitta (sitar)



With Ravi Shankar

N.V. Murthy (tabla), M.S. Subbulakshmi and Radha (vocal)



almost every Carnatic artist of note including vocalists like GNB, Madurai Mani Iyer, Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Tiger Varadachariar, M.S. Subbulakshmi, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, and D.K. Pattammal, and instrumentalists like T. Chowdiah, Lalgudi Jayaraman, M.S. Gopalakrishnan, T.R. Mahalingam, N. Ramani, Chittibabu and Mysore Doreswamy Iyengar.

In Hindustani music, he accompanied illustrious artists like Bhimsen Joshi, Bismillah Khan, Ravi Shankar, Janardan Mitta, Ahmed Hussain, Pannalal Ghosh, Basavaraj Rajguru and Parveen Sultana. And in dance,



Accompanying Kamala



With B.V. Karanth

Felicitations by Janardan Mitta and Lalgudi Jayaraman...



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... By music director K.V. Mahadevan



he provided accompaniment to legends and stars like T. Balasaraswati, Lalitha and Padmini, Sulochana, Vyjayantimala and Hema Malini. He also travelled extensively across Europe, Asia and America as part of Bharatanatyam dancer Kamala's orchestra.

Murthy was also part of the percussion ensemble in numerous Kannada and Tamil films including block-buster hits such as *Sankarabharanam*, *Hamsa Geethe*, *Kalai-kovil*, *Chandralekha*, *Tillana Mohanambal*, *Sampoorna Ramayana*, *Ananda Bhairavi* and *Malaya Marutha* among others. Despite his regular job in films, he held an enviable record of concert performances.

Among the notable awards he received are the Lalgudi Samman and the Cine Musicians Association Samman.

Murthy was a B-High grade artist of All India Radio, Chennai and retired in 1990 from an active musical career

after nearly forty years. He gave away all his instruments to his students in Chennai and returned to a quiet life in Puttur, his hometown, where he taught students who came in search of him. A methodical person, he wrote all his lessons in his notebooks in Kannada that he bound himself. In fact, his books that are now in the possession of his student Ravikiran Rao, document both the compositions and the names of the people who shared them with him like Samta Prasad, Lalji Gokhale, Popatkar, Chotelal Mishra, Prabhakar Betrabet and Ram Jadhav.

The nonagenarian's failing memory made it difficult for him to recognise even his family members, but somehow did not affect his recollection of compositions and techniques of sound production. His eye for detail when he taught students remained sharp. Though frail, it did not impact his playing which remained strong and firm.

The passing away of versatile percussionist Neranki Vishnu Murthy on 13 July 2018 in Mangalore at the age of 96, has left a void in the field of Hindustani and Carnatic music.

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With inputs from RAVIKIRAN RAO
(Sandeep Hattangady is a Hindustani musician)