

NELLAI T.V. KRISHNAMURTHY (1920-2006)

Eminent musician, teacher, administrator

C. Ramakrishnan

Nellai T.V. Krishnamurthy was a respected musician and teacher who served as Principal of Swati Tirunal Academy of Music, Tiruvananthapuram. Scion of Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar, he was born in Tiruvarur, Tamil Nadu, to Muthulakshmi Ammal and Viswanatha Iyer on 24 November 1920. His is an unusual story of a boy born in Tamil Nadu going to Kerala to emerge as a Carnatic musician. Noticing the boy's innate talent in Carnatic music, uncle Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar took the seven-year old under his wing as the child's mother and his wife were sisters. Although the parents named him Sankaranarayana Sarma, his guru would affectionately call him "Krishnamurthy" which became his identity for life.

Krishnamurthy learnt the rudiments of Carnatic music from gottuvadyam Sankaranarayana Bhagavatar, one of the early disciples of Muthiah Bhagavatar, before coming under the direct tutelage of the stalwart himself. He underwent strict training under the watchful eyes of the maestro and practised assiduously which enabled him to internalise the kritis and to develop the manodharma aspects essential to become a concert musician. He travelled widely with his guru to neighbouring states and remained a support to him. Krishnamurthy presented his first public performance at the Tyagaraja Utsavam in Tiruvaiyaru when he was seventeen. It was the beginning of a successful career in music.

Krishnamurthy had a brief stint in the tinsel world when the talkies had more Carnatic based songs than dialogues.



As a young boy, he acted as Lavan in *Sangeetha Lava Kusa* in which he sang 36 songs (in D-sharp sruti) tuned by his guru Muthiah Bhagavatar. He acted in films like *Radha Kalyanam*,

Tirumangaialwar, *Valli Kalyanam* and *Tirugnanasambandar*. As Carnatic music was his first love, he moved away from the film world.

In 1934, he accompanied his guru to the princely State of Travancore to present *Chitrodayam*—a Harikatha based on the history of Travancore—during the marriage of Princess Kartika Tirunal Gauri Lakshmi Bayi. Bhagavatar's narrative about Maharaja Swati Tirunal and his compositions prompted Maharani Sethu Parvati Bayi to entrust Muthiah Bhagavatar with the task of collating the compositions of Swati Tirunal and popularising them. Muthiah Bhagavatar took stupendous efforts to collect the manuscripts from the Mullamoodu Bhagavatars and court musicians. He set the songs to music and taught them to his disciples. Krishnamurthy, along with Srinivasan and Narayana Bhagavatar, were made

Young Krishnamurthy in *Sangeeta Lava Kusa*



to repeatedly sing the songs till the guru was satisfied that they could be presented before the Amma Maharani before being taken up for publication.

Upon winning the hearts of Maharaja Chithira Tirunal and Amma Maharani with his musical prowess, Krishnamurthy was directly appointed as Assistant Professor in the Swati Tirunal Academy of Music, Tiruvananthapuram, in 1941 when Muthiah Bhagavatar was its first principal. His uncle also arranged for his performance in the presence of Maharaja Jayachamaraja Wodeyar at Mysore in 1944. Pleased with his rendition of rare compositions of Muthiah Bhagavatar, the king honoured Krishnamurthy with a gold medal and a purse. His earlier tryst with filmdom came in handy while producing the musical opera *Nada Oushadham* for the Swati Tirunal Academy in 1959, which focussed on the curative aspects of classical music. After successful stints as professor and principal at the Swati Tirunal Academy of Music, Tiruvananthapuram and R.L.V. College of Music, Tripunithura, Krishnamurthy retired in 1976. Many



Krishnamurthy as Krishna and Santhanalakshmi as Radha in *Radha Kalyanam*

of his disciples have made a name in the concert field; prominent among them being Prof. K. Venkitaramanan, who received the Sangita Kala Acharya title from the Music Academy, Madras (see *Sruti* December 2016), Rugmini Gopalakrishnan, (vainika, author and retired principal of Chembai Memorial Music College, Palghat), K.J. Yesudass, Neyyatinkara Vasudevan, M.G. Radhakrishnan, Mavelikkara Prabhakara Varma,

Jaya Vijaya, Tiruvizha Jayasankar, Kumarakerala Varma, and K. Omanakutty (recipient of Sangita Kala Acharya in 2018). Post retirement, he worked for a few years as principal in the Tharanganisari School of Music run by K.J. Yesudass. He was instrumental in training the well-honed music band at the Police Training College which performed at government functions and at the Padmanabhaswamy temple.

(Sitting L to R): Rugmini Gopalakrishnan and Nellai Krishnamurthy with the *Nada Oushadham* participants at the Academy of Music

