

R.A. RAMAMANI

All the world's her stage

Srilatha Krishna



RA. Ramamani is a multifaceted musician. Singing avadhana pallavis, providing dizzying vocals for Indo-Jazz bands, composing for jazz and fusion, running a music school, training scores of students in India and abroad in Carnatic music—she has done it all. This versatile artist turned seventy on 2 March 2020.

Ramamani grew up in a conservative family in Bengaluru and was raised on a staple of Sanskrit, Tiruppavai, slokas and Carnatic lessons. At around the age of five, she joined her elder sister Chingamani in her music classes with Srinivas Ramachandra Rao. A student of Selvapillai Iyengar, Rao was a conscientious teacher and taught them music for an hour or more every evening for almost ten years. As their singing skills grew, he advised them to continue their lessons with Bellary Seshagiri Achar.

Ramamani started performing when she was eleven years old, along with her sister and brother R.A. Rajagopal who was a percussionist. She also learnt to play the mridangam from M.L. Veerabhadraiah at Bengaluru University.

Seshagiri Achar was one of the famous singing duo ‘Bellary Brothers’ (the other one being Venkateshachar). He was a master of manodharma and was-known for his expansive raga alapana. Under his guidance, Ramamani entered a world of abundant creativity. She often gave concerts with her sister. When she joined college, Anoor Ramakrishna guided her in the intellectual elements of music such as ‘kanakku’ and ‘graha bhadam’. In the late 1980s, she started learning from R.K. Srikantan, who had a very different style and insisted on teaching her rare compositions.

These inimitable gurus helped her get a strong mooring in Carnatic music.

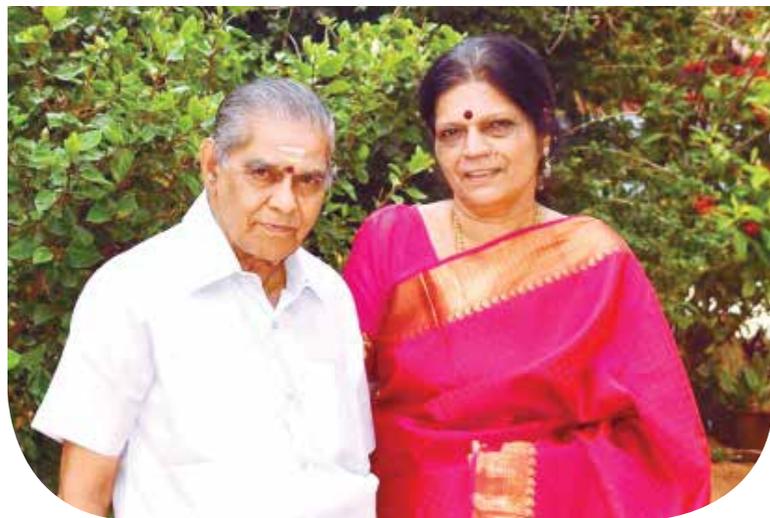
Her innate interest in the rhythmic aspects of music soon drew her to the art of rendering pallavis. She won the first prize in a pallavi competition conducted by the Karnataka Ganakala Parishat. It was a proud moment for her when D.K. Pattammal presented her the prize of a tambura, as M.L. Vasanthakumari looked on as the chief guest. This was quickly followed by a win at the Music Academy of Madras in 1970, with Mudicondan Venkatarama Iyer and Tinniyam Venkatarama Iyer as the judges. Another resounding success came when she demonstrated an avadhana pallavi to an assembly of the greats of Carnatic music in Bengaluru. Everyone remarked on the musical merits of her rendering and applauded the fact that she did not let it denigrate into an exercise in rhythmic excesses.

Pallavis became her forte. Once, when M.L. Vasanthakumari conducted a pallavi workshop in Bengaluru, she asked for an intelligent singer to assist her in demonstrating the pallavis. B.V.K. Sastry and Mysore Doreswamy Iyengar immediately recommended Ramamani. Another time, when K.V. Narayanaswamy attended her concert at Mylapore Fine Arts in Chennai, he seems to have remarked on her fearlessness in rendering a five-kalai pallavi in Natakurinji, and for her elaborate treatment of the raga Janaranjani.

Marrying mridangam vidwan T.A.S. Mani turned out to be a blessing. Mani had started the Karnataka College of Percussion (KCP) in the early 1960s (see *Sruti*, November 2019). A few years after their marriage, he recruited his wife into the college so that they could meet the demand for Carnatic

vocal classes. Recalling those days, Ramamani says, “He had numerous contacts among Carnatic musicians. The college would always be buzzing with visiting musicians. Intense discussions on music, and musical sessions with percussionists were the norm. Amidst this atmosphere, I was easily clocking six hours of singing practice, four hours of listening and an additional two hours of music-related discussions each day.”

Ramamani’s entry into the larger arena of world music happened due to the efforts of her husband. T.A.S. Mani had started travelling the world with his Tala Tarangini, the first all-percussion ensemble from south India. Ramesh Shotham, a drummer from the just-disbanded rock band Human Bondage, was one of his new students. At Ramesh’s insistence, Mani took Tala Tarangini to the Calcutta Jazz Yatra in 1978. It was at this time that the group Sangam was formed, after a meeting between Rama, her brother R.A. Rajagopal and the famous jazz musician, Louis Banks. Theirs was the first attempt at Indo-Jazz with an Indian vocalist. Ramamani used her skills in konnakol and swara-singing to reproduce the phrases played on the piano, and



With husband T.A.S. Mani

the concept appealed to everyone in the band. Sangam, consisting of Ramamani, Braz Gonzalves, Karl Peters, Louis Banks, R.A. Rajagopal, Ramesh Shotham and Ranjit Barot, started travelling around the world. Ramamani later started composing for them as well. She always used the Carnatic framework and adapted it to suit Western instruments and instrumentalists, but significantly, she stayed away from the composed songs of Carnatic music.

Another long-term collaboration was with Charlie Mariano, the renowned

saxophone player. Working with him, Ramamani composed for an album *Jyothi*, which was released by the independent record label, ECM in 1983. It became an instant success, and the pieces in this album soon became classics. In fact, orchestral and big band arrangements continue to be built to this day around her compositions. Charlie Mariano, artists of the KCP and Sangam toured extensively, starting from the Berlin Jazz festival in 1983 and the North Sea festival in 1984, and their partnership continued for almost thirty years.

Soon, various jazz bands from around the world approached her with requests for collaboration. Ronan Guilfoyle, the Irish jazz musician and composer, created *Khanda - Five cities*, an extensive piece that brought together jazz, Irish and Indian musicians. The albums *Sketches of Bangalore* and *Pulse of Bangalore*, were projects with Mike Herting. Working with her, the London Philharmonic Orchestra created some memorable music that included the tuba and a string quartet. *Amalgama*, an album with Flamenco musicians led by Xavier Turul earned wide recognition. *Crossing Roots* featured KCP on percussion with acoustic and flamenco guitars. *KCP5*, *Many Ways*, *Mishram*, *Jungle Book*, *City Life*, and *River Yamuna* were other successful albums.

R.A. Ramamani in concert with S. Seshagiri Rao (violin), B.R. Srinivas (mridangam) and Ranganatha Chakravarthy (ghatam) in January 2020

