

Neyyattinkara Vasudevan (1940-2008)

C. Ramakrishnan

Neyyattinkara Vasudevan shone like a meteor in the field of Carnatic music. Hailing from a humble background, he attained success as a vocalist and teacher against heavy odds, facing many rough patches along the way. Born on 24 August 1940, as the son of a Dalit woodcutter, in rural Thiruvananthapuram district (Neyyattinkara), Vasudevan went on to become a leading vocalist from Kerala.

Lord Krishna was the presiding deity of the local temple in Neyyattinkara. Just like Krishna, Vasudevan was born at midnight on Gokulashtami, and the family naturally believed that this child would bring good luck to them. Vasudevan was the third among five siblings. Vasudevan's parents, Narayanan and Rajamma strove to impart good education to the children.

Narayanan was adept in playing the nagaswaram, but worked as a woodcutter for his livelihood. The family lived in deep penury, in a thatched hut lit only with a kerosene lamp, in the village of Athazhamangalam in Neyyattinkara.

Early days

Called Manivel, the child was exposed to nagaswaram music played by his father in the evenings after returning from a day's hard work in the forest. He would accompany his father to nagaswaram concerts in nearby temples. There was a hamlet of nagaswara vidwans in the vicinity and Vasudevan spent more time in their homes than in school! He did his schooling in the Therivila Primary School and Neyyattinkara Boys High School. He also went with his father to cut wood. Even as a child he was more attracted to



music than academics. Seeing the boy's innate interest, Vasudevan was initiated into music under a local musician, Kochukunju Bhagavathar.

Vasudevan joined the Tyagaraja School of Music run by Shanmugham Bhagavathar for advanced music lessons, where he developed an enduring friendship with Mohanachandran, who later became a successful musician.

At Swati Tirunal College of Music 1961-62: (Foreground) S. Girija and Vairakumari. Sitting (L to R) K.S. Harihara Iyer, N.G. Seetharama Iyer, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer (principal), Dr. K. Bhaskaran Nair (collegiate director), K.S. Narayanaswamy and K.A. Krishnamachari. Standing: (L to R) Neyyattinkara Vasudevan, K. Raghunathan Nair, P.R. Kumarakerala Varma and M. Karunakaran



Vasudevan sang film songs of M.K. Tyagaraja Bhagavathar and K.B. Sundarambal in the nearby temple festivals. Later, he joined the Swati Tirunal College of Music (then known as Music Academy) to embark on a career in music. At college, he was fortunate to be trained by stalwarts like Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, G.N. Balasubramaniam, Harihara Iyer, Seetharama Iyer, C.S. Krishna Iyer, K.S. Narayanaswamy, and K.K. Sivaraman, among others.

Life at the Academy

Vasudevan has reminisced, “I could hardly afford one meal a day. You could get a standard meal for four annas in a hotel, and we would walk every afternoon for four kilometres for that meal! I lived in the Academy verandah along with a few other students. Classes would start at 8 am. Some of us would get up early and practice until 7 am. Recalling Semmangudi’s classes, Vasudevan said, “He would take classes from 10 am which would extend up to 3 pm. Many days, it would be one raga or one kriti. We would be amazed at his soaring manodharma and the ragapravaham he could create for hours together. We were reprimanded at times, but he was patient to teach until each of us absorbed the minute nuances of each sangati.”

The Academy used to arrange concerts by eminent artists for the benefit of the students. Thus, Vasudevan got the opportunity of listening to the concerts of Chembai, Ariyakudi, Balamuralikrishna, and keenly observed the nuances in their music.

One day, Vasudevan was singing Harikambhoji in class during the lunch recess. Semmangudi, who was impressed with the alapana, asked him how he had learnt it. Vasudevan meekly replied that he learnt it from his father’s nagaswaram playing. His father was invited to the Academy, and Semmangudi honoured him with a shawl—a genuine recognition of vidwat wherever found.

On another occasion, the students’ committee at the Academy organised a concert by M. Balamuralikrishna. Semmangudi, as the principal, was not in favour of this but relented on the committee’s repeated requests. Balamurali, in his inimitable manner, created the ‘Balamurali spell’ with his innovative approach to various ragas coupled with his resplendent manodharma. The students and



With Balamuralikrishna

teachers were mesmerised by his alapana of Revati, preceding the Tanjavur Sankara Iyer composition, *Mahadeva Siva sambho*. The Varali which followed enthralled everyone. Semmangudi who joined the concert only midway, sat through the concert till the finish! In the end, he honoured Balamurali with the shawl he had received from the Mysore Maharaja and confessed, “This is the best Varali I have heard so far!”

Musical journey

Mridanga vidwan Mavelikkara Velukutty Nair, a faculty member in the Academy, was impressed with Vasudevan’s dedication. Through his

association, Vasudevan honed his laya skills needed for a concert musician. Prof. Subramania Sarma, who was a faculty member, also recognised Vasudevan’s potential and supported him in the initial stages of his career. He arranged for Vasudevan’s formal arangetram in 1959 at a church; Sarma accompanied him on the violin with Sathyavan Unnithan playing the mridangam.

The following year, Vasudevan won first place in the All India Music Competition and went to Delhi to receive the gold medal and certificate from K.C. Pant, Home Minister. Later, he met noted dancer Guru Gopinath, who arranged a few concerts for Vasudevan in Delhi. On his return, the Academy gave a warm reception to Vasudevan who presented a fitting concert in the presence of Semmangudi and his other gurus; Subramania Sarma accompanied Vasudevan on the violin and Mavelikkara Velukutty Nair on the mridangam. Semmangudi was pleased with the concert and heartily blessed him. A grand reception was also organised in his village where too Vasudevan sang a concert.

In concert with Velukutty Nair

