

MAVELIKKARA PRABHAKARA VARMA & P.R. KUMARAKERALA VARMA

A popular teacher-student vocal duo

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MAVELIKKARA PRABHAKARA VARMA

The venue was a temple in Mavelikkara, a small town in Alappuzha district of Kerala, where thousands of music lovers had gathered to drench themselves in the music of nagaswara chakravarty Tiruvaduthurai T.N. Rajarathnam Pillai (TNR). Before the concert began, a boy was brought to TNR with the request that he bless the music student. The maestro asked him to sing and the lad unleashed an alapana of Todi followed by *Jesinadella*, which TNR had made famous! The youngster sang TNR's sangatis with all the flourishes and long karvais of nagaswaram music—which remained a dream for many aspiring musicians. After the alapana, the nagaswara giant hugged the boy and blessed him for a great career in music. The boy was Mavelikkara Prabhakara Varma—who later went on to become a successful musician and a revered guru who groomed hundreds of musicians.

Prabhakaran's family members were

In concert



surprised that the little boy could impress Pillaival without any formal training in music. When asked, he innocently replied that he loved nagaswaram and had learnt the Todi raga from TNR's LP record! In fact, Prabhakara Varma was called "Peepee Ammavan" by boys in the family for his faultless reproduction of the sound of the nagaswaram through his mouth. He was in the habit of listening to the gramophone records of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer and other maestros very intently and would flawlessly render the songs in family gatherings. There was, however, one problem that he endured throughout his life—his leg was affected by polio since his birth, and he used custom-made shoes to walk.

Prabhakara Varma hailed from the Mavelikkara Palace, where an unbridled passion for music marked his formative years. His family was closely related to the family of Maharaja Swati Tirunal. Born in 1928 to Chandra Prabha, daughter of Kerala Panini A.R. Raja Raja Varma (a prolific Malayalam litterateur) and Rama Varma of Kilimanoor Palace (nephew of Raja Ravi Varma), Prabhakaran's inspiration for music stemmed from the classical songs heard from his maternal aunt Bhageerati. Thus, Prabhakaran inherited a rich legacy of literature,



Mavelikkara Prabhakara Varma

painting and music right from his childhood. While studying in school, he participated in a music competition held in connection with the birthday celebrations of Maharaja Chithira Tirunal, in which he bagged the first prize. Recognising the genuine interest of the boy, his family now arranged for his formal music lessons from Mavelikkara Veeramani Bhagavata who lived nearby, and Mavelikkara H. Ramanatha Iyer, who was a faculty in the Swati Tirunal Music Academy, Tiruvananthapuram. Prabhakaran had his arangetram at the Chengannur Mahadeva Temple when he was thirteen years old.

Prabhakaran was not very keen on academics and wanted to take up music as a career. After passing the ESLC Examination, he joined the Swati Tirunal Academy, Tiruvananthapuram, for the Ganabhoosanam course,

where Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer was the principal, and the faculty included other great musicians like C.S. Krishna Iyer, Madurai Kesava Bhagavata, K.R. Kumaraswamy Iyer, and N.G. Seetharama Iyer. These musicians possessed a repository of authentic pathantara of the compositions of the music trinity, Swati Tirunal, Neelakanta Sivan, Papanasam Sivan, Gopalakrishna Bharati, and others, and they passed on their knowledge to their disciples without any reservation. Prabhakara Varma passed the Ganabhooshanam degree with a first-class in 1950. He continued to add to his huge stock of compositions and hone his manodharma under the guidance of Semmangudi and K.R. Kumaraswamy Iyer. When he won a tambura as a prize in the music competition mentioned earlier, it was his good fortune that it was presented to him by the station director of All India Radio, Tiruvananthapuram, who arranged for Prabhakaran to broadcast regularly from AIR.

Prabhakara Varma started a music school in his native place and continued to teach. In 1957, he joined the Swati Tirunal Academy as Assistant Professor. He also secured B.A. Music and M.A. Music degrees. The university exempted him from appearing for the practical exam for B.A. However, while appearing for his M.A. practicals, the examiner, C.K. Revamma asked him to sing an alapana in Narayanagaula. Though Prabhakaran had not formally learnt the raga, he was able to render it, based on his extensive listening, and he was able to perform to the judges' satisfaction.

Prabhakara Varma's husky voice had an inherent sweetness, and he moulded it with rigorous sadhana to convey the musical expressions eloquently. He had abundant patience while teaching students of varied



Prabhakara Varma (vocal), Ponkunnam Ramachandran (vocal support), Chalakudy Narayanaswamy (violin), Parassala Ravi (mridangam) and Tripunithura Radhakrishnan (ghatam)

talents, and they could assimilate the finer nuances of the art and blossom into reasonably good singers with his mentoring. As a graduate of Sanskrit, he was very particular in paying attention to the minute nuances while singing. One could easily recognise the Semmangudi bani while listening to Prabhakara Varma sing kritis like *Dinamani vamsa* (Harikambhoji) and *Rama nee samanamevaru* (Kharaharapriya). He generally sang in vilamba kala in his concerts and focussed on the mood of the sahitya. Varma would choose the line *Ditijali vidalana* to sing niraval for *Deva deva kalayami* and *Soma bimba manohara sumukha* in *Mamava sada janani* to convey their profound meaning. He did full justice to the lyrics of the trinity and other composers.

The music of Ariyakudi, M.D. Ramanathan, Musiri, GNB, and Alathur Brothers too had a compelling influence on Prabhakara Varma. He had built up a vast repertoire from the recordings of great masters of music, and he was the representative of a fine music tradition. Ragas like Harikambhoji, Saveri, and Mukhari would be revealed in different colours in different concerts. He was A Top Grade vidwan of All India Radio and Doordarshan.

Thamaracaud Govindan Namboodiri,

a disciple of Prabhakara Varma, recalls, "Varma Sir's music had an inherent discipline. Though he generally followed the Semmangudi bani in kritis, he assimilated the good aspects that he found in the music of other great vidwans as well to carve his own bani. He had a huge repertoire, and we learnt many monumental compositions from him. He was generous in sharing his knowledge with his disciples, such as the Navavarana kritis of Dikshitar, the Navagraha kritis, many rare Syama Sastry kritis, and Swati Tirunal kritis, the list is quite long. He prompted his students to develop raga alapana skills through the key sancharas in the kritis. He insisted on proportion in everything. He believed that the raga alapana should match the kriti's length, weight and content. His alapana for *Tanayuni brova* and *Amba Kamakshi* would be different. He firmly believed that while rendering kritis, the sangatis should have clarity and weight, and should not be added merely to appeal to the gallery. He preferred sarvalaghu swaras and insisted that kalpanaswarams should always be proportionate to the length and weight of the composition."