

K.G. VIJAYAKRISHNAN

Passionate about music and linguistics

When K.G. Vijayakrishnan retired from The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, as a linguistics professor, in 2017, he wanted to devote all his time, attention, and love to music, taking a permanent break from linguistics.

And music truly was the first, and arguably the most serious, love of his life. Right from his childhood, Vijayakrishnan was not drawn to anything as much as he was, to music. He started learning veena from his mother Karpagavalli Gopalakrishnan, a disciple of Rangaramanuja Iyengar—the notable vainika from the Dhanammal bani. Being an astute learner, Vijayakrishnan grasped the formid-



able Veena Dhanammal technique and style of veena-playing swiftly and gave his maiden concert when he was barely nine years old. Though

he was exposed to the music of the maestros of the 20th century like Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, and M.S. Subbulakshmi, right from his childhood, his ultimate muse was Veena Dhanammal. She was no different from Goddess Saraswati to him.

He took it upon himself as his life's mission to spread awareness about Dhanammal's music among the Carnatic fraternity. He gave away CDs containing her records to aficionados of Carnatic music, delivered

several lecdems on her musical genius, made a documentary focusing on her style and technique, and was always keen and willing to pass on this tradition to those who expressed regard. His repertoire was colossal. While he played the cherished and time-tested compositions of the Carnatic music trinity, with *Amba Kamakshi* (Bhairavi / Syama Sastry) being his all-time favourite, he also played several rare compositions of less-known composers like *Inta kopamelara* (navaragamalika varnam / Veena Kuppier), *Radha na meedha* (Hameerkalyani / Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar) and *Dalachi dalachi* (Keeravani / Neyyakarampatti Seshayyar), only to name a few. Even though these pieces in his repertoire were acquired from different sources over the years, they sounded homogenous. This is because he scrutinised every music he came across through the unfaltering lens of the Dhanammal bani.

With Aruna Sairam at the screening of his documentary *The Genius of Veena Dhanammal's Music*



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Unlike most Carnatic musicians, he did not believe in the mechanical repetition of a sangati; he in fact despised it. He noted that this was a unique feature of this school of music. So, there was no rigid separation between the kalpita and the manodharma forms of music. He never merely rendered these songs; he was constantly in the zone of creation. The second iteration of each sangati would contain minor and subtle variations from the previous delineation. This demanded the audience to be on tenterhooks, through the entire length of the performance.

Special mention needs to be made of his pathbreaking book *The Grammar of Carnatic Music*, which explores the connection between music and language. He seriously started working on this one-of-a-kind endeavour, which resulted from this “collaboration between the musician and the phonologist in a one-man interdisciplinary project”,

as the acclaimed linguist Paul Kiparsky cites in 1982 and published it in 2008. In this pivotal work, which holds the distinction as a pioneering document of the field, by proposing mathematical charts and scales for measuring pitch values in various ragas and to see constraints on their manifestations, their permutations, and combinations, Vijayakrishnan aspired Carnatic music to the status of a testable scientific theory, and on a broader level, to hopefully understand the music faculty in humans.

As a teacher, he was simply the best. Extremely generous, patient, and most importantly, democratic. He always put his students first, and as his student, I can wholeheartedly attest to this fact. He believed in and emphasised wholesome learning of music, which included learning to play the veena, singing, reading

music from notations, cultivating the expertise to interpret and internalise them, and the skill to write notations encapsulating even the minutest nuances of the musical phrase. He hardly refused to teach anyone who showed interest, but still, he did not have many earnest seekers for this style, which is immensely unfortunate.

He, however, strongly felt that the fate of this musical style was like the mythical river Saraswati, reputed for being invisible to human eyes. She emerges out of nowhere and flourishes, but astonishingly recedes underground, appears again but only scantily, disappears and magically springs up in an unprecedented fashion as she journeys to the mighty ocean. But she is invisible only to those who don't care to look for her. Her distinct presence can always be felt, and is firm in our memories, and she will always arise when the time is right. That was his strong belief.

It is sad that my guru, vidwan K.G. Vijayakrishnan passed away on 23 March 2022, due to physical illness, at the age of 70.

LASHMAN
(Carnatic musician and disciple of Ramakrishnan Murthy and the late K.G. Vijayakrishnan)

JAIKUMAR VAIRAVAN

