

Tribute to Sangeetha Kalanidhi K.S.Narayanaswamy

Geetha Raja



Geetha Raja receiving the 1st prize in the All India Radio Music Competition for Carnatic Classical Vocal Music from Sangeetha Kalanidhi K.S. Narayanaswamy in 1973. To the right is Shri.R.S.Bhole (Station Director, AIR Mumbai)

Sangeetha Kalanidhi K.S. Narayanaswamy (Koduvayur Sivarama Narayanaswamy) was born on 27 Sep 1914 to Narayaniammal and Koduvayur Sivarama Iyer in Palghat district in Kerala. I was fortunate to have had advanced lessons in veena playing from this great maestro when he was the Principal of the Shanmukhananda Music College at Mumbai. Together with my vocal music training, I was given instruction in playing veena from reputed gurus in Mumbai like Smt. Mangalam Muthuswamy and Smt. Vijaya Viswanathan, as my parents were of the opinion that learning to play an instrument would be very helpful to my progress in vocal music. KSN Sir came to Mumbai as Principal of the Shanmukhananda Music College in 1970 and thus I had the golden opportunity of learning veena playing from him.

I admired KSN Sir as a performer who respected classicism and as an exceptional veena player who made no concession to the gallery. I was always struck by his capacity to bring out the essence of ragas in a very few phrases. He also used "meettu" or plucking the strings – to the minimum and thus brought out a "vocal" rather than an "instrumental" effect. This was the Thanjavur style of playing, in which subtleties and raga bhavam were given more importance than rhythm based calculations. Particularly, rakthi ragas like Yadukulakambhoji, Sahana, Dhanyasi, Saveri or Nilambari – were his forte and he could evoke the rasa or sthayi bhava immediately, with precision in the oscillation of notes.

KSN Sir joined the Music College at Annamalai University in Chidambaram where he learnt vocal music under stalwarts like Sangeetha Kalanidhi T.S.Sabesa Iyer and Sangeetha Kalanidhi Tanjore Ponniah Pillai, descendant of the famous Tanjore Quartet. He learnt the Veena under Desamangalam Subramania Iyer and the Mridangam under Tanjore Ponniah Pillai. From 1937 to 1946, he served as lecturer at the Annamalai University, his alma mater and assisted in publishing the Tamil kritis of Gopalakrishna Bharathi, Neelakanta Sivan and Arunachala Kavi.

Shri K.S.Narayanaswamy was invited by His Highness, the Maharaja of Travancore, to take up lecturership in Veena at the Swati Tirunal College of Music in Trivandrum. He later succeeded Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer as its Principal and retired from there in 1970. At this juncture, he took over as Principal of Shanmukhananda Music College of Mumbai and held this position for more than fifteen years, adding stature to this institution with his immense experience.

KSN Sir's method of teaching relied on the ancient "oral tradition" form of imparting knowledge, like how the Vedas were taught. He would dictate the lyrics first, with meticulous attention given

to pronunciation; then he would play each sangati many times till the student was able to reproduce it; he would also vocalise the same sangati to show the bhava. Hence it was a very effective combined vocal and veena method of teaching which left its impact on the student's mind.

In 1985, under a fellowship given by the Bhulabhai Memorial Institute, Mumbai, when Shri Soli Batiwala was its Director, my sister-in-law Smt. Aruna Sairam and I had the unique opportunity to learn vocal music from KSN Sir. An excellent vocalist in addition to being a vainika, KSN Sir taught us many compositions not often heard on the concert platform. To name a few: *Shri Muladhara* (Shri ragam—Muthuswami Dikshithar); *Vadanyeswaram* (Devagandhari – Muthuswami Dikshithar); *Anandanatesa* (Todi –Ramaswami Sivan) and *Kanakamaya* (Huseni – Swati Tirunal).

He would teach us by playing the veena and supplementing his teaching by singing also. In addition to teaching compositions, he would intersperse his instruction with a lot of pertinent remarks on "raga lakshana". He used to demonstrate the symmetry in the handling of gamakas in certain ragas, the differences between allied ragas like Ritigowla/Anandabhairavi; Durbar/Nayaki and so on. Elaboration on methods of raga alapana, the use of akara in ragam singing and thanam exercises – were other subjects he dwelt upon. He also used to relate stories about his gurukulavasam with Sabesa Iyer and his student days at Annamalai University, Chidambaram.

His method of teaching also took into account an important aspect of instruction which Hindustani musicians adopt. He had an analytical mind and had made a comprehensive study of vadi-samvadi relationships; graha, nyasa & amsa swarams - of various ragas which he would explain and demonstrate on the veena. Hindustani musicians usually always give these details about ragas to their students.

As a guru he was generous and kind to a fault. He never raised his voice, used to have infinite patience with his students and took a paternal interest in their progress. When he left Mumbai to settle down in Trivandrum, all of us gave him a fond and emotional send off at VT station, which I still vividly remember. I subsequently visited him both at Trivandrum and at Chennai, and till the end he was musically alert with his childlike smile and quiet sense of humour.

KSN Sir was a recipient of many awards including the State Award of Kerala in 1962 and that of Tamil Nadu in 1968; the National Award of Central Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1968; the Padma Bhushan from the Govt. of India in 1977; Sangeetha Kalanidhi from the Madras Music Academy in 1979 and the Swathi Ratna in 1999. When he passed away in 1999, the world of music lost an exemplary veena player and a good human being. It was indeed my great fortune and privilege to have known KSN Sir at close quarters and to have learnt from him.

Kalaimamani Geetha Raja is a widely travelled and well known Carnatic vocalist based in Chennai with many awards and titles to her credit.

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