

Geetha Raja



Bombay S. Ramachandran

Bombay S.Ramachandran, guru par excellence, was in the forefront of the teaching fraternity in Bombay and it was my good fortune to be his student and learn the intricacies of Carnatic music from him. Though I started learning the basics at the age of eight, I was introduced to Ramachandran Sir in 1965 when I was a ten-year old and I can say with certainty that it was he who kindled the spark of music in me. He exposed me to the wonders of Carnatic sangeetam and developed a sense of interest in my young mind. I studied under him for more than eight years and in that period, he taught me a vast repertoire of varnams, kritis and manodharma sangeetam. I will always be deeply thankful to him for being such an inspiring guru.

Bombay Ramachandran passed away on 20th August 2013 at Chennai after having lived a very fruitful life, teaching a large number of students both in Mumbai and Chennai. He served the Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha's Sangeetha Vidyalaya for 35 years and returned to his hometown Chennai in 1992. A bachelor all his life, he settled in his own home in Indira Nagar, Adyar, and taught many interested students. The Music Academy, Madras, decorated him with the 'Sangita Kala Acharya' title in 2001 in recognition of his unique career as a dedicated teacher and guru.

Ramachandran Sir was the third of five children born to S.M. Singaram Pillai and Dhanabhagyam Ammal of Madras. Singaram Pillai was very fond of music and was keen for his son to pursue a career in music. After initial tutelage in music under various teachers, Ramachandran did gurukulavasam under Chittoor Subramania Pillai for twelve years. Chittooraar was a disciple of the famous Kanchipuram Naina Pillai and a repository of Tiruppugazh and Tamil compositions. Thus Ramachandran was able to garner a sizeable repertoire of these unique gems.

He then joined the Central College of Carnatic Music in Adyar, Chennai, when Shri Musiri Subramania Iyer was the Principal and benefitted greatly by the systematic training offered in that institution. Tirupamburam Swaminatha Pillai, T.Brinda, M.A. Kalyanakrishna Bhagavathar and Prof. P. Sambamoorthy were on the Faculty and it was an all-round musical education in practice and theory that young Ramachandran received. Also studying for the 'Sangita Vidwan' course in Central College at the same time, were well-known names like T.K. Govinda Rao, S.R. Janakiraman and T.R. Subramanian.

When Shanmukhananda Sangeetha Vidyalaya offered him a teaching opportunity, Ramachandran moved to Bombay and made that city musically richer with his vast knowledge and experience. Though he conducted classes at Shanmukhananda, he used to come home to give me private lessons and I have vivid memories of his visits in the early mornings (even as early as 6 am) before I started for school! Always neatly dressed in crisp kurtas, Ramachandran Sir had a commanding personality and elicited respect wherever he went. He was a man of few words and his speech could be laced with sarcasm and humour.

His method of teaching was comprehensive. He had the fantastic ability to write notation even for the tiniest nuances in an impeccable and legible handwriting. When I began lessons, he insisted that I copy out in another book, the notations that he wrote in Tamil and it was thus that I learnt to write in my mother tongue. He was of the firm opinion that there would be no writing in English or Hindi and that I definitely had to learn Tamil through music! I am extremely grateful for his insistence as otherwise I may never have learnt Tamil at all. Learning languages goes hand in hand with musical education and a knowledge of Tamil and Telugu is always useful for a Carnatic music student.

He would ask students to buy a long bound book and hold it breadth-wise - so that it would be able to contain many sangatis of a whole avartanam of Aditala (32 aksharas) in one page - and write the notations of all the songs. His neat handwritten books containing rare varnams and kritis are some of my cherished treasures. They still yield surprises for me and I go back often to the notated compositions to clarify any doubts that I have. He composed many beautiful swaravali exercises himself and wrote them out for students to do akaara sadhakam in three speeds and in different ragas.

In the 1970s, before the advent of modern technology, it was the 'spool tape' which gave us listening pleasure. One such tape had a recording of *Daritapu* (Saveri) and *Korinavara* (Ramapriya) by Brindamma and he used to remark, "See how beautiful this rendition is. You must listen to Brindamma's concerts." Since Ramachandran Sir had learnt from Brindamma in Central College, he taught all his students in Bombay many rare compositions from her repertoire too.

Ramnad Krishnan, T.Brinda, T.Mukta and T.M.Thyagarajan were some of his favourite musicians and he taught me many songs which were made famous by them.

Ramnad Krishnan's *Bhuvinidasudane* (Sriranjani), *Varamulosagi* (Keeravani), Brindamma's *Shri Kamakshi* (Vasanthi), *Chinnanadana* (Kalanidhi) and TMT's *Nadadina* (Janaranjani) were a few of the compositions which he shared with all his students and showed his keen sense of musical aesthetics.

Ramachandran Sir prepared me to join various music competitions conducted by All India Radio, Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha, Bharatiya Fine Arts, Swati Tirunal Kalakshetram and so on. For these competitions, special items like compositions in apoorva ragas, rare Dikshitar kritis or Navaratri kritis of Swati Tirunal would be at his fingertips and notated precisely and taught. He was proud when I won prizes in the competitions and would convey his appreciation with a 'besh' and a smile of approval.

My brother Shanker Krishnan, younger to me by five years, also took Carnatic music lessons from Ramachandran Sir in his childhood. Having also learnt Hindustani and Western music later, he has often expressed his deep gratitude to this wonderful guru who gave him excellent training and a lifelong interest in learning music.

'Vidya daanam' cannot be computed in financial terms and without 'guru kataaksham' it is not possible to achieve any goal in music and the arts. We have to be thankful to the guru for showering his blessings on us. We were indeed lucky to have such an awe-inspiring teacher to guide us. In recent years, whenever I visited him at his home in Adyar, he would make kind enquiries about my parents who had settled down with my brother in the U.S.A.

Towards the end of his life, he struggled with painful arthritis but his quick repartee and mental faculties were intact. When he passed away a few months ago in his late eighties, his students felt bereaved--- Aruna Sairam, Meera Nathan, Aruna Ranganathan, Lakshmi Devnath, Nanditha Ravi, Sumitra Nitin and many others, along with me, mourned the loss of a great and dedicated guru. May his soul rest in peace!

Kalaimamani Geetha Raja is a widely-travelled and well-known Carnatic vocalist based in Chennai.

CORRECTION

In the review of Attendance 2012-13 carried in the issue of Shanmukha of April-June 2013, its price is mentioned as Rs. 1000. It is the subscription amount for the membership of the Dance History Society of India that includes a copy of Attendance (the dance annual) besides free admission to six programmes in Bengaluru. Otherwise a single copy of the journal costs Rs. 700. The price is Rs.500 for students and for bulk purchases (minimum 10 copies).

For outlets in most cities see www.attendance-india.com.

