

## MY GURU T. Brinda

Geetha Raja

This is the centenary year of my guru T. Brinda – Brindamma to many of us – an illustrious member of the veena Dhanammal family, a veritable treasure house of Carnatic music.

Born in May 1868, Veena Dhanammal was the granddaughter of Kamakshamma, a renowned dancer in the Tanjore Court, who initiated her into music studies. Dhanammal also learnt from her mother Sundarammal, Sathanur Panchanada Iyer and Veena Baldas. Dharmapuri Subbaraya Iyer and Tiruvottriyur Tyagier were other musical stalwarts who enhanced Dhanammal's perceptions.

Dhanammal's career as a remarkable vainika spanned almost sixty years and during this time she carved a niche for herself in the annals of Carnatic music as the founder of a style known for its melody and tranquillity.

Successive generations carried on the precious family heritage of music and dance and thus we have many names dotting the genealogical tree: Rajalakshmi Ammal and Lakshmiratnam Ammal, Jayammal and Kamakshi Ammal (vocal); T. Sankaran (Tamil Isai School of Music); T. Brinda, T. Mukta and Vegavahini Vijayaraghavan (vocal), T. Abhiramasundari (violin); T. Balasaraswati and Lakshmi Knight (Bharatanatyam); T. Viswanathan (flute); T. Ranganathan (mridanga); T. Brinda's grandson S. Girish (vocal), Balasaraswati's grandson Aniruddha Knight (Bharatanatyam), T. Mukta's granddaughter S. Uma Maheshwari (Bharatanatyam), and T. Brinda's brother's son Balaji Venkateswar (vocal) carry forward the legacy in the next generation.

T. Brinda was born on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1912 to Veena Dhanammal's daughter Kamakshi Ammal. Along with her younger sister T. Mukta, she inherited Dhanammal's bani and a prodigious repertoire of songs – rarely heard kriti-s of the Trinity, Tamil compositions, padam-s, javali-s, Tiruppugazh and viruttam-s.

Duetting or jodi-singing was a family tradition because this type of singing would ensure karvai or continuity, so essential to the singing of padam-s. Gaps in singing resulting from intake of breath could be eliminated and the effect of two voices in unison would be supremely melodic to the listeners' ears. Dhanammal's daughters Rajalakshmi and Lakshmiratnam and later Jayammal and



T. Brinda

Kamakshi; Jayammal and Balasaraswati; and Brinda and Mukta continued the practice of jodi singing.

The repertoire of the family of Dhanammal included rarely heard pieces of Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastry. The compositions of Syama Sastry and Subbaraya Sastry were family heirlooms that Dhanammal inherited. Some well known Sastry compositions rendered by the Dhanam family are *Nilayatakshi* (Paras), *Ninnennami* (Todi), *Marivere* (Anandabhairavi), *Nannubrochutaku* (Todi), *Sri Kamakshi* (Vasanta) and *Karunajoodu* (Sree).

*Dikshitar songs sung by them include Veena pustaka dharini* (Vegavahini), *Kantimatim* (Kalyani), *Bribannayaki* (Andali), *Hastivadanaya* (Navroj) and *Tyagarajapalaya* (Gaula).

Some Tyagaraja kriti-s in the treasure trove of the family are *Seetavarasangeeta* (Devagandhari), *Buddhiradu*

## CENTENARY FEATURE

(Sankarabharanam), *Balebalendu* (Reetigaula), *Paramatmudu* (Vagadeeswari), *Grahabalamemi* (Revagupti), *Marakatamanivarna* (Varali) and *Neekedaya* (Neelambari). These were a few of the additions to the repertoire through Kanchipuram Naina Pillai, a great Tyagaraja-bhakta and the guru of Brinda and Mukta. Naina Pillai specialised in apoorva raga-s like Jagannohini, Andolika, Rudrapriya and Manirangu and provided an extra dimension to the already rich list of kriti-s.

Brindamma's mastery over raga alapana is acknowledged by one and all. Her handling of raga-s like Kalyani and Todi or Gaurimanohari and Ramapriya is like the master craftsman's touch in filigree-work, every nuance and feeling explored. The swift akara movements and pauses on the shadja and panchama with absolute sruti suddham make the listener wonder in awe at such musicality.

She had a supremely well cultivated voice that reached the lower registers with ease as well as the higher octave – like a temple gopuram broad at the base and tapering at the top. It amazingly retained the same firmness and sheen even when she gave concerts at the age of seventy plus.

My journey in music began at the age of eight when my parents Bhama and Balakrishnan started nurturing the musical instincts in me with care and dedication. I was fortunate to get married in 1973 into a family that breathed music – as my father-in-law R. Sethuraman and mother-in-law Rajalakshmi were diehard admirers of Brindamma's music. It was thus that I had the great opportunity to interact with this legendary musician for many years when she used to make annual visits and stay

with us at our home in Matunga, Mumbai. She was then teaching at the Central College of Carnatic Music and would come away to the cooler weather in Mumbai during the hot May and June months in Chennai.

My parents-in-law organised master classes at home where Aruna Sairam (my husband's sister), Alamelu Mani (singer Hariharan's mother), Kalyani Sharma, Padma Swaminathan (singer Vani Jairam's mother-in-law), myself and many others learnt from Brindamma.

Much like how the Vedas are taught, her way of teaching involved the time tested oral tradition rather than looking into books. She would repeat a sangati many times till the student got it right. Tape recording the sessions was not allowed. We had to listen intently, get the intonation and inflection correctly and sing the composition during the next class. Brindamma encouraged us to write the notation ourselves and usually, after the class, we would notate the song and then show it to her for correcting it. Thus there was no question of forgetting the song as we heard it so many times and formed a mental picture of Brindamma singing it.

The Brinda-Mukta duo upheld the beauty of one of the finest forms of Carnatic music – the padam. Reposeful padam-s and vilamba kala Dikshitar and Sastry compositions were honed to perfection by them, with the same song sung hundreds of times, so that it became a part of yourself.

A padam like *Payyada* (Nadanamakriya) or *Ninujoochi* (Punnagavarali) from Brindamma conveyed the depths

Brinda in concert accompanied by daughter Vegavahini



## CENTENARY FEATURE



Brinda with the bridal couple Geetha and S.K. Raja

of emotion and feeling and transported the listeners to another world. We could visualise the nayaka-nayika bhava through the sangeeta and sahitya which blended so well in her resonant voice.

In her presidential address at the Madras Music Academy's 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference in 1976 when she was conferred the title of Sangita Kalanidhi, Brindamma said: "Music is a supremely divine art. It has been regarded as a means to one's salvation. Bhakti is its life blood. 'Bhava Sangeetam' constitutes the realisation of the content of the song as envisaged by the creator and singing it with feeling. We should remember that music is a path to spiritual uplift."

She gave a lot of importance to the content or meaning of the song and her style is rightfully known for its bhava and enunciation. A judicious mixture of gamaka-s and straight notes made her renderings very aesthetic, evoking the appropriate rasanubhava.

I have very fond memories of her motherly affection for me. The general impression was that in addition to a formidable demeanour, she had a caustic tongue but she used it sparingly.

I loved the twinkle in her eyes behind her aristocratic rimless glasses and the constant smile would always play

around her lips, while she took part in the daily activities in our home. She exhibited a joie de vivre and was fond of playing cards with like minded music enthusiasts. Sangita Kalanidhi K.S. Narayanaswamy, then Principal of Sri Shanmukhananda Sangeetha Vidyalaya, was a regular in the card sessions with Brindamma at Chhaya, our home in Matunga. The room would reverberate with jokes and laughter, interspersed with hot tea and snacks. We loved the flavourful garlic kuzhambu and other dishes that she sometimes made for us.

Brindamma was a legend in her own lifetime. A musician's musician, she earned the respect and admiration of her contemporaries for her courage of conviction to stand by her values. She passed away on 6<sup>th</sup> August 1996, at the ripe age of 84. She will be remembered with gratitude by everyone whose lives she touched with her majestic music and high thinking – truly a great woman achiever of her times.

(Geetha Raja is a Carnatic vocalist and teacher)



# MURALI MUSIC MUSICAL

**Dealers in :**  
**All Kinds of Musical Instruments**  
**Music Books & Cds**  
**Expert Repairs & Prompt Service**

23, BBC Manor, Doraisamy Road,  
T. Nagar, Chennai - 17.  
Phone : 044-2434 5105 Fax : 044-2436 1153  
E-mail : leenamuralimusal@gmail.com /  
deepmuralimusal@gmail.com  
Web : www.muralimusal.com

For Books On  
Music and Dance

## THE KARNATIC MUSIC BOOK CENTRE

The Indian Music Publishing House

You can now buy books on music and dance online  
log on to : [www.carnaticbooks.com](http://www.carnaticbooks.com)

Visit Our New Showroom At: 23-A, Sripuram First Street, Royapettah, Chennai 600 014. Phone: 2811 1716 & 2811 3253  
email: <[kmcb@vsnl.net](mailto:kmcb@vsnl.net)>Website: [www.carnaticbooks.com](http://www.carnaticbooks.com)