

# GEETHA RAJA

## Steeped in the Brinda bani

S. Janaki



**G**eetha Raja is a respected, well-known, accomplished Carnatic vocalist and a successful guru much sought after by young music aspirants. She has a knack for moulding musically talented youngsters into prize-winning performers. She is a fine representative of the T. Brinda lineage that showcases solid Carnatic music that is the rock foundation for a strong edifice. With a resonant and mellifluous voice, her music is rooted in classicism and marked by a calm and unhurried approach, purity of tones and notes, clarity in rendition, breath control, long karvais, and detailed exploration of ragas. She has an extensive repertoire in sterling pathantaram polished to perfection.

Geetha was born on 5 June 1955, in a family deeply interested in Indian art and culture, especially music. To nourish her musical talent, her parents started her music lessons when she was eight years old. She was placed under the tutelage of Sangita Kala Acharya Bombay S. Ramachandran, who laid a strong foundation by teaching her more than 30 varnams and about 250 kritis! The youngster soon began bagging numerous prizes and medals in music competitions in Mumbai.

At 18, Geetha was lucky to marry into a family which was deeply passionate about music. She was privileged to come under the tutelage of Sangita Kalanidhi T. Brinda, who was a close friend of the family. She learnt many kritis of the Trinity, Tamil compositions, padams, javalis, tevaram and viruttams. Her first vocal

Geetha receiving the first prize from her guru K.S. Narayanaswamy in AIR national competition...



...From M.S. Subbulakshmi. Shanmukhananda Sabha, Mumbai



...Kalaimamani award from J. Jayalalithaa



performance on stage was at Sri Sankara Matham at Matunga, Mumbai, in 1975. As she also learnt to play the veena, Geetha performed a few short concerts on the veena, too, in Mumbai, in 1974-75. She did not have a formal arangetram, but presented music concerts at the local temple festivals in Mumbai. Later, during 1984-86, under a Fellowship from Bhulabhai Memorial Institute, Geetha was fortunate to learn some rare kritis from the veena maestro Sangita Kalanidhi K.S. Narayanaswamy.

With a brilliant academic record, Geetha secured her B.A. in English Literature and French and earned her Masters's in English Literature from the University of Mumbai. She also holds a Master's degree in Music from the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya, New Delhi.

Her disciplined journey in music continued as a student and performer, and



Conferment of title asthana vidushi at Sringeri Mutt

Times Thyagaraja Award from Aruna Sairam at Music Academy



## Geetha Raja in conversation with S. Janaki

she later moved to Chennai with her husband S.K. Raja, in 1998. Two years later, Geetha came under the mentorship of violin virtuoso Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan who taught her laya intricacies in manodharma sangeetam, and helped hone her skills in ragam-tanam-pallavi singing.

Geetha is an A-grade artist of All India Radio, and is featured regularly on radio and television. She is the recipient of several awards including the Kalaimamani title from the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram and Asthana Vidushi from the Sringeri Sarada Peetham. This season Geetha receives the Best Female Vocalist Award from Brahma Gana Sabha, and the GNB Award from the Indian Fine Arts Society. Since 1980, Geetha has been travelling extensively in India and abroad, presenting concerts and lecdems. She is actively involved in teaching Carnatic and devotional music. She has established herself as a musician steeped in classicism, eager to disseminate the treasures of the rich Dhanammal bani imbibed from her guru, to those eager to listen and learn.

*Tell us about your parents and how they encouraged you?*

I was born into a family deeply interested and passionate about the arts. My mother Bhama and father Balakrishnan (both from Tanjavur district) were extremely fond of music and started me and my younger brother Shanker with music classes very early.

Our family has pursued music as a lifelong quest. Although my father was a senior official in Indian Oil Corporation, he was also a Sanskrit scholar and wrote weekly articles on music for the *Financial Express*. My mother led devotional singing groups and compiled an extensive collection of rare Carnatic performances. Though an octogenarian, even now, she watches programmes on YouTube and attends music classes online! My brother studied Carnatic, Hindustani and Western classical music and has started composing music that combines Carnatic and Western classical forms.

Both my parents encouraged me to join competitions in Bombay. With this artistic atmosphere at home, I began winning prizes in the sabhas. From 1971 to 1974, I was awarded prizes in all the categories open to vocalists, in the All India Radio national competitions, first prize for classical Carnatic music, as well as prizes in the light classical and light categories, AIR.





In 1974, I received the Rajaji Tambura Prize (Tamil Isai Sangam, Chennai) and the Chellamani Memorial Tambura Prize (Shanmukhananda Sangeetha Sabha, Mumbai), as well as many gold medals and prizes in competitions held at Mumbai and Chennai between the years 1967 and 1975.

*You were lucky to marry into a musical family. Tell us about the musical ambience there. What impact did it have on your music?*

Yes, I was indeed lucky to marry into this musical family! My parents-in-law Rajalakshmi and R. Sethuraman (he was *Sruti's* Bombay bureau chief for several years) were diehard fans of Brindamma's music and invited her to Mumbai every year to spend a couple of months at our home "Chhaya" in Matunga. I thus got the opportunity to interact with

this legendary musician and to learn from her. Brindamma was then teaching at Central College of Carnatic Music, Chennai, and she enjoyed coming away to the cooler weather in Mumbai during the hot May and June months in Chennai.



Geetha's parents-in-law

My husband Raja's younger sister Aruna Sairam and I have done a lot of practice together and have given a few duet concerts, for instance, at the organisation called "Sampradaya" in Chennai—a concert of compositions devoted to the Sastry family—Syama, Subbaraya and Annaswami Sastry, in 1987.

My mother-in-law Rajalakshmi Sethuraman was a performing musician, an AIR artist, and a disciple of Alathur Venkatesa Iyer and Tinniyam Venkatarama Iyer.

She held regular classes in music and taught *Abhirami Antadi*, *Saundaryalahari*, and *Bhaja Govindam* to many ladies. Bhajana sampradaya and nama sankeertanam became a way of life for all of us.

Devotional fervour reigned supreme in the home, and celebrations for festivals like Krishna Jayanti and Radha Kalyanam were awaited with bated breath! The beautiful ambience both at my parents' and my in-laws' homes was definitely conducive to creating a positive impact on my music.



With Sairam, Aruna and S.K. Raja

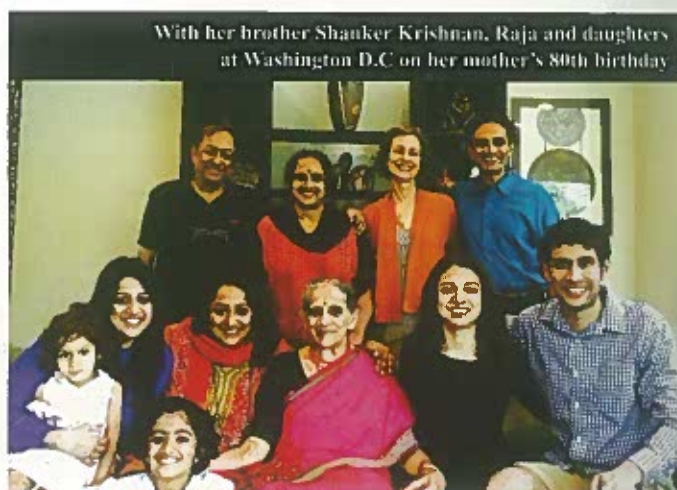
My husband S.K. Raja has been a constant source of support and encouragement throughout my journey in music. Love for music runs in our family. Our daughters Aditi and Shruti have learnt Hindustani music for a couple of years from Shruti Sadolikar of the Jaipur gharana, who is a close family friend. They are settled in USA with their families and keeping up the Indian traditions. Our granddaughters Indira and Rhea learn Western music and play the piano.

*What important facets of music did you imbibe from each guru?*

From Bombay Ramachandran, I learnt the ability to notate songs. He was an excellent teacher who wrote fantastic notation, even for the tiniest nuances in impeccable handwriting! He wrote out his original



Bombay Ramachandran



With her brother Shanker Krishnan, Raja and daughters at Washington D.C. on her mother's 80th birthday

swaravali exercises and insisted that all his students do 'akaara sadhakam' in three speeds and in different ragas. He was a disciplinarian and completely devoted to the teaching of music.



T. Brinda, or Brindamma, as we all called her, taught us by the time-tested oral tradition method—much like how the Vedas are taught. She repeated a sangati many times till we got it right. She never allowed tape recorders in her sessions, as she felt that the students would not give full attention to the lesson. Our minds were the recorders, and we had to listen very intently to get the intonation and inflection correctly.

K.S. Narayanaswamy, the veena maestro, was an excellent vocalist and taught me many rare compositions. He had made a comprehensive study of the theoretical

aspects of music; vadi-samvadi relationships, graha, nyasa and amsa swaras of various ragas, which he would demonstrate on the veena.

Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan, the violin maestro, influenced me with his sarvalaghu swaraprastara and the importance of kalapramanam/ tempo. I learnt some rare ragam-tanam-pallavis and korvais from him. He also introduced me to the devotional format of music, and I have released a few CDs in this genre.

*After having soaked in the classicism of the Brinda school, what prompted you to learn from maestro Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan who had a very unorthodox approach to music? Did you want to experiment, innovate or push boundaries in Carnatic music?*

Yes, Kunnakudi Sir had a different and revolutionary cut-bowing violin technique emphasising plain notes, which was unorthodox!

I used to participate in the Raga Vaibhavam programmes conducted by Kunnakudi Sir, as well as singing in the dance-drama recordings of Krishnakumari Narendran, for which he composed the music. Sitting in the rehearsals for these events, I observed his composing techniques and the method in which he dictated the notation in shorthand to his assistants. Towards the last few years before he passed away in 2008, he started his 'Sangeetha Gurukulam'

in the Narada Gana Sabha premises, where he taught both violin and vocal to many students. In the violin group classes, he would demonstrate avaratana swarams in various combinations on the violin as well as in vocal, as he was a good singer too. I started taking lessons from him in singing swaraprastara and

korvais, and my swara gnanam benefitted a lot. He was a big admirer of Madurai Mani Iyer's style of sarvalaghu swara singing and told us that he tried to incorporate it in his concerts. The few years that I studied with Sir were educative and inspiring for me.

*As a torchbearer of the Dhanammal-Brinda bani, can you share its salient features with our readers?*

Of course, that is a privilege.

❖ *Adherence to vainika sampradaya in exposition.* The sound of the veena, among all musical instruments, is perhaps the closest to the human voice. It also brings out the most intense experience of 'sruti', or melodic unison and reveals the different classes of tonal variations. The ten types of gentle oscillations or dasavidha gamakas can be demonstrated on the veena, and the tala strings provide inbuilt rhythmic accompaniment. Veena Dhanammal followed the Tanjavur tradition of veena playing, which called for a more limited number of meetu/plucking and created music of serenity and grace.

❖ *Vocal technique of depth and continuity.* Developing good breath control. Importance is given to the ability to sustain long karvais and maintain continuity between phrases. This requisite is important in padam singing. The stress is on the clarity of utterance of both vowels and consonants, or akara and sahitya.

❖ *Specialisation in vilamba kala.* The Dhanammal bani has a repertoire of rare compositions of the Trinity, padams and javalis. The open-throated method of singing followed by the members of Dhanammal's family and exemplifying the style, is known for its resonance and depth. 'Jodi singing' or duetting was a feature in this style of music as it would ensure continuity, so essential to singing padams.

I must mention that though this bani is supposed to be slow tempo, Brinda-Mukta's repertoire consisted of fast-paced kritis which they rendered with speed and precision.

With her guru Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan at the recording session







❖ *Expressiveness of raga delineation.* Veena Dhanammal's family excelled in capturing the quintessence of ragas and invested them with a unique flavour. Be it rakti ragas like Begada, Sahana, Dhanyasi, Yadukulakambhoji, Varali; or ghana ragas like Todi, Sankarabharanam, Kalyani, Bhairavi or Kambhoji – they came alive in their emotive renditions. From a mere “mode”, a raga became a profoundly experienced “mood”.

To quote musician-scholar Jon Higgins: “The main reason this family is so well known for melodic improvisation is that they carry in their ears phrases from Kshetrappa's padams, unparalleled resources for raga material”.

❖ *Authenticity and range in repertoire.* The pathantara of this bani included rarely heard pieces of Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastry. The kritis of Syama and Subbaraya Sastry were family heirlooms that Veena Dhanammal inherited. In addition, other vaggeyakaras like Patnam Subramania Iyer, Tanjavur Ponniah Pillai, Pallavi Gopala Iyer, Anai-Ayya brothers and Mysore Sadasiva Rao also figured prominently in the family's repertoire. The pathantara or format of the compositions was handed down from generation to generation by the “karna parampara” method without any changes.

*How involved are you in propagating it?*

For the last few years, I have been performing in concerts many pieces taught to me by Brindamma. I am also teaching this repertoire to my disciples and doing home recordings of these valuable songs.

‘Kalakendra Music and Dance’ asked me to record some music lessons in a teaching format. I have already recorded three compositions, *Tyagaraja yoga vaibhavam* (Anandabhairavi, Muthuswami Dikshitar), *Nee sari sati* (Kalyani, Ponniah



Pillai), and *Aligitey* (Husseni, Kshetrappa) with my disciples and these sessions are available on the internet. This is an ongoing programme, and I will be recording more compositions.

I have given a couple of lecdems on ‘Brindamma bani’, and the dissertation for my post-graduate degree through Gandharva Mahavidyalaya was titled “Special features in Veena Dhanammal's Style of Music”.

*You learnt to play the veena too. Do you still play the instrument?*

My gurus in veena were Mangalam Muthuswamy, Vijaya Viswanathan and K.S. Narayanaswamy (KSN). My parents felt that learning to play an instrument would be helpful to my progress in vocal music. KSN Sir came to Mumbai as the Principal of the Shanmukhananda Music College, and I had the opportunity to take lessons from him.

Unfortunately, I am not in touch with the instrument nowadays, but have a great fondness for it!



*You have won many prizes in the light music categories too. Can you tell us about the genre?*

Yes, I did win prizes in All India Radio's Light and Light-Classical categories at the national level. I am also an admirer of bhajans and abhangs; and include them often in my concerts. It requires a different orientation to sing abhangs, as they are in Hindustani ragas. But having grown up in Mumbai and listening to that genre, it was easy to pick it up.

In the Tamil Devotional genre, I have sung a CD entitled *Maalavanum Velavanum* (Songs on Krishna and Muruga)—music composed by Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan and released by Saregama in 2006.

*Do you give more importance to raga bhava than the emotional content?*

I think equal importance should be given to both raga bhava (form) and emotional content (substance). The unique quality of Indian music (Carnatic and Hindustani) is that it is referred to as ‘raga music’. The improvisatory nature of our music is its hallmark. The fact that an Indian musician can perform for three hours without looking at a score/ notes is simply amazing!

Carnatic music relies on lyrics and compositions much more than Hindustani music. Praising deities, describing kshetras—gives a spiritual slant to Carnatic music. When the saintly composer Syama Sastry sang before his ishta devata Goddess Kamakshi, the words poured forth in a happy blending of raga bhava and emotional content.

*You did your Masters in music from Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. Did it include training in Hindustani music as well?*

Prof. T.R. Subramanyam suggested I do my Master's degree through Akhil Bharatiya Gandharva Maha Vidyalaya, New Delhi. I was awarded the "Sangita Alankar" degree in 1986 after passing many papers in practicals and theory. Pandit Vinay Chandra Maudgalya was the Principal of that institution. The course that I studied did not include training in Hindustani music.

*Your jugalbandi experience with Sandhya Kathavate.*

Hindustani musician Sandhya Kathavate (Agra gharana) and I were good friends in Mumbai, and we shared a common passion for music. We did joint musical presentations or jugalbandis in the years 2000 to 2010. Interacting with Sandhya opened my eyes to the aesthetics of both systems of music, with their similarities and



Jugalbandi concert with Sandhya Kathavate at Nungambakkam Cultural Academy Trust (2010)

differences. Fortunately, we arrived at a common pitch to sing and that reinforced the spirit of give and take so essential in a jugalbandi.

We have presented more than twenty-five programmes in Mumbai, Chennai, Visakhapatnam and Boston (USA), working on common ragas like Kalyani, Abhogi, Chakravakam, Charukesi, Pantuvarali and their Hindustani equivalents. She is a gregarious personality, and we have had fun singing together. We have learnt compositions from each other—Sandhya sang Tamil songs with relish, just as I enjoyed singing bhajans and abhangs.

*Any other musical collaborations?*

I have collaborated with scholar Sujatha Vijayaraghavan in many programmes like *Chumma Chumma Varuma Sukham*—a presentation of javalis and Tamil padams, with dancers. *Prananayaka* was another thematic programme with dancers, based on padams and javalis that premiered at Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival in 2017.

Dr. Chithra Madhavan and I have presented programmes on "Kshetrams"—Tiruvannamalai and Chidambaram (2014 and 2015); Krishna Vaibhavam—programme on "Krishna Temples" both in Chennai and Coimbatore (2017).

*How and when did you start teaching?*

I started teaching music in 2002. I prefer to teach direct rather than online, as it becomes strenuous to impart the nuances of sangatis properly in an online class.

It was my privilege to conduct special classes in padams and javalis under the auspices of The Music Academy, Chennai, from 2009 to 2011 and be a guest lecturer at the Advanced School for Carnatic Music (ASCM) in 2017.

Some of my disciples have been awarded the prestigious CCRT (Centre for Cultural Resources and Training) scholarships from the Govt. of India. I have conducted workshops/teaching sessions for the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi; "Sustaining Sampradaya" for Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival; for Marabu Foundation, Thillaisthanam; Natyasruti, Bangalore; Navatman Music Collective, New York, USA; Sangeeta Siksha Peetam, Chennai; Spic Macay Anubhav 3—a Carnatic Music Intensive; Classical Arts Club, IIT Madras.





Workshop at Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (2016)...

***You are a very successful teacher for young music students (prize winners). What is your teaching methodology?***

Yes, I am happy that many of my students have been winning prizes in competitions and giving concerts too.

I always teach one-on-one so I can give full attention to the student's strengths and weaknesses. Proper pronunciation of lyrics, sruti alignment, and attention to tala—are important aspects which I look into. Learning kalpita sangeetam (compositions) and manodharma sangeetam (improvisation) are the two areas in which I concentrate during classes.

I draw upon the repertoire learnt from my gurus, to teach songs in ghana and apoorva ragas, from a variety of composers. The student has to prepare/ revise an already taught composition with alapana, niraval and kalpanaswarams as homework.

I have a batch of students whom I call once in a while for group manodharma sessions. They really enjoy singing niraval and swarams one after the other in a spirit of camaraderie. This also makes them learn newer ideas in the improvisation segment.

Sometimes, I send them a raga quiz, mentioning the names of about 25 ragas, and they have to find out the arohanam/



...At Marabu Foundation (2018)

avarohanam and other details and be prepared to sing alapana in a raga of their choice.

But, it is not 'All work and no play'! We enjoy getting together even for joint cooking sessions where they cut vegetables and make pasta and macaroni in my kitchen! Most of all, I cherish being with these bubbly, energetic youngsters who bring smiles to my face with their eagerness to learn.

***Did the pandemic have an effect on your music?***

Yes, there were good and bad sides to the pandemic. For two years, not being able to have direct classes and meeting only on Zoom, made us really long for the times when we could have our manodharma "jam" sessions. But I think it contributed to better introspection and music practice ideas. Online sessions brought the world closer, and communication with students across countries became a reality.



***Your views about online teaching and online performances?***

Though teaching face-to-face is the best option, online instruction through Skype and other methods makes it possible for gurus to share their valuable knowledge with so many students in farflung countries who are eager to absorb the intricacies of Carnatic music.

Similarly, there is no substitute for the pleasure of singing to a live audience, but online platforms and performances are viable alternatives.

***Any plans for the future?***

To perform and teach for as many years as I can! To make more recordings of compositions from the repertoire taught to me by my gurus Brindamma and Bombay Ramachandran and to notate them for future generations. I would like to share my expertise and pathantara with whomsoever who wishes to learn. ■

# Our Guru Geetha Aunty

**G**uru Geetha Raja has an enthusiastic, smart, intelligent bunch of young music students, most of whom are CCRT scholarship holders. All of them describe “Geetha Aunty” (as they call her) as affectionate, caring, very approachable and empathetic. They say her positive outlook towards life reflects in her music too. The teacher has been a motivator whose suggestions have often helped them overcome difficult life phases.

**Jhanani Mahalingam**, started learning from Geetha Raja in 2009 as part of the padams and javalis classes at The Music Academy, Chennai. She recalls that she was advised by her guru, the late Ananthalakshmi Sadagopan and her daughter Sujatha Vijayaraghavan to learn from Geetha Raja, who they felt would be the best mentor to guide her. “The best part about sessions with G Aunty (as I fondly call her) is that I get to listen to her sing all the beautiful jarus, gamakas, brigas (at the apt speed) and modulations. The intricate phrases sound so effortless but so hard to repeat! She often mentions that the voice should flow like oil – “Thaila dhaare” and is a stickler for the correct pronunciation of words. On the day of the concert, she insists that we should give sufficient rest to the voice, meditate and do deep breathing.

**Madhumitha Doraiswamy**, who has been learning from Geetha Raja for the past ten years, provides an interesting insight. “When I was eleven years old, I frankly hated Carnatic music. I would find an excuse not to go to classes, and I threw so many tantrums that my dad was convinced to stop music classes for me. However, my mom was stubborn that I should continue learning and decided to change teachers. Taking me to Geetha Aunty was probably the best thing that happened to me. She would repeat phrases tirelessly till I perfected them. Even though I was a beginner then, she had the unconventional idea of teaching me to sing kalpanaswaras. This increased my interest in the art form, and I started attending Carnatic concerts. Geetha Aunty is the sole reason why I am singing today. She has always been a supportive presence in my life who believed in me during times when I didn’t.”

Her sister **Niveditha Doraiswamy** recalls that she would initially simply tag along with her sister Madhumitha. “Geetha Aunty helped develop my interest by sitting with me and

making sure I was able to sing every phrase. She encouraged me to learn an instrument to help with swara knowledge, and that has fueled another passion in me. I would sing manodharma with absolutely no clue as to what I was doing and would hopelessly look at Aunty. She would patiently guide me through the thinking process behind manodharma and how I could improve. When everyone around me seemed to be going to competitions and concerts, I felt as though I wasn’t getting better, and through these times of insecurity, it was Aunty who would be a voice of support and never gave up on me. Now I’ve started winning competitions in sabhas and singing confidently. Her teaching and guidance have shaped me not only in music but even as a person.”

**Shreya Ravikumar** describes her as “a passionate teacher and a stickler for perfection. Before every class, she would give us notations and teach all compositions in an organised manner. She teaches padams and javalis with such due care, pointing out the nuances and delicate details that we miss.”

Young vocalist and violinist **Vibha Krishnakumar** shares that “The apt word to describe Geetha Aunty is “Generous”—not only in giving us her most valuable treasure—music, but also generous as a person. Whether she teaches us a complex padam or a small, simple kriti, Aunty has an innate ability to gauge the capability of her students and changes her teaching methodology accordingly. She is probably the most organised person I will ever meet—from her neatly labelled utensils in the kitchen to her endless notebooks with details of her concerts, the hundreds of songs she knows, her daily schedule and more!”

**Ramcharan K** is happy that she regularly teaches them songs from the Brindamma repertoire. “She is very patient and repeats a phrase until I perfect it. She does a lot of manodharma in class before teaching me a song. Aunty also conducts ‘kalpanaswara jams’ whenever possible, in which all her students participate. It always ends up being a fun session, with snacks to round it off.”

“She encourages us to listen to a lot of different artists and apply for competitions and concerts. Aunty is one of the reasons I like to sing Carnatic music. She makes a great effort to help me build and retain my self-confidence before concerts. For my first kutchery, Aunty came to my house to oversee the rehearsal, motivate me, and make corrections wherever possible. That helped me give a good performance. Aunty constantly motivates us by sharing even our smallest achievements on her social media pages. As I am her only male student, when my voice broke, she took a lot of effort to help me join Sriram Parasuram Sir for voice training and culturing.”

All the disciples chime in one voice that they will be ever grateful that Geetha Aunty is their guru. ■

PHOTOS BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

