

S. Ramanathan - scholar musician

M. V. Ramana

Somewhere in his series on Karnatic Music, Prof. Sambamoorthy classifies Karnatic musicians into kriti vidwans and pallavi vidwans. If one were to extend this to cover musicians like Dr. Ramanathan, one would be tempted to introduce the term Musicologist Vidwan.

Prof. Glen Haydon in his "Introduction to Musicology" defines musicology as the field of musical research, the careful or critical inquiry or examination in seeking facts or principles concerning music. While India has a long history of musicological explorations in the field of Karnatic (and Hindustani) music, examples of which are the works of people like Mathanga, Sarangadeva and Venkatamakhi, many books on Karnatic music are filled with just myths and episodes extolling the greatness and piety of various musicians and composers. Such works cannot be considered musicology. Around the turn of the century, especially after the establishment of the Madras Music Academy with its annual conferences, several Karnatic musicians who took an interest and spoke about the lakshana aspects of music were often termed musicologists. Again, this is not quite appropriate since they often quoted what had been said by others with no critical input from themselves. And, the few musicologists who did serious research, seldom performed. Dr. Ramanathan, arguably, was the first to combine meticulous scientific research into the foundations of Karnatic music, with a successful career as a performer. Since he always attempted to incorporate the results of his research in his performances, he was also a blend of the theoretician and the practitioner.

Dr. Ramanathan (1917-1988) started learning music from Ramudu Bhagavatar of Tirukkoilur. After further training from Manavurpettai Subrahmanya Dikshitar, he joined Annamalai University in Chidambaram. There he learnt music from a whole range of luminaries including Ponniah Pillai, Sabesa Iyer, Sathur Krishna Iyengar, Subrahmanya Ayya and Tiger Varadachariar. Subsequently he learnt from Valadi Krishna Iyer, a treasure house of Thyagaraja kritis. He also studied the veena under Devakottai Narayana Iyengar, the renowned vainika.

If I had to summarize Dr. Ramanathan's music in one word, I would say authentic. The most important aspect of our music is the melodic and rhythmic framework of the compositions - not the lyrics. The term used to describe the great composers of Karnatic music - Vaggeyakara, or the creator of lyrics and music - indicates how the musical setting is an essential part of a composition. It is this musical framework that distinguishes a great composition (or composer) from a minor one. Therefore, in order to appreciate and evaluate any composer, we have to listen to his or her compositions the way he or she envisioned it. By authenticity I mean the efforts by people like Dr. Ramanathan at ferreting out the original tunes of different compositions and propagating them intact. These labours constitute a great contribution to Karnatic Music. He undertook such efforts with the tunes of the Divyanama kirtanas of Thyagaraja, the Kavadi Chindu, and the songs of Subramania Bharati, to name a few. The last mentioned is particularly important because most musicians sing several popular songs of the poet, but not one of them is sung the way Bharati composed them. This has resulted in most people thinking of Bharati only as a poet and not as a composer. Even in the case of familiar compositions, it is the hallmark of his authenticity that he avoided the common tendency to add frills to each and every song in the form of excessive shaking of notes (commonly known as gamakas), fast movements (brigas) and variations on the main theme (sangatis). The eschewal of disproportionate gamakas also established another distinctive aspect of his music - the predominant use of straight notes. It was this combination of the use of straight notes and authentic music that made his performances take on a special pedagogical character.

Perhaps it was the experience of learning from different teachers, especially while studying for the Sangita Bhooshanam course at Annamalai University, that made Dr. Ramanathan take to teaching so well. Having been in one of the early batches at Annamalai University, which pioneered teaching Karnatic music in a

classroom setting, it is but natural that Dr. Ramanathan would be associated with colleges of music for much of his life. Among them are Kerala University, Wesleyan University, the Music Colleges in Madras and Madurai.

Dr. Ramanathan was one of the most approachable teachers. A friend of mine who was studying at IIT Madras had developed a sudden liking to Karnatic music, partially by listening to SPIC MACAY (Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth) concerts on campus. One day, on a whim, he went to Dr. Ramanathan's house and asked him (with no prior introduction to Dr. Ramanathan) if he would teach him music. When asked how much he had learned so far, my friend replied that he had never learned anything. Without any hesitation, Dr. Ramanathan started by teaching him a small song. This continued for a few months before Dr. Ramanathan's death.

This love for teaching could also be seen in all his concerts since his music had a pedagogical character, that I referred to earlier. However, his special knack for instruction came out best in his lecture demonstrations. In my opinion, if there was an award for the best lecture demonstrator, he should have been the first to get it. I don't know if there is any such prize or if he was awarded one. Some of the subjects he offered lec-dems on are Closely Allied Ragas, Syama Sastri, Muthiah Bhagavatar, Thyagaraja Ramayana, Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam, Pre-trinity Composers, Subramania Bharati, Framing of Pallavis, and so on. But the one he was best known for was A Day with Thyagaraja. With such a wonderful choice of topic, Dr. Ramanathan could perform many, many times, and yet not repeat himself. Once it would be a day where Thyagaraja had just composed Rama Nee Samanamevaru in Kharaharapriya; on another occasion it would be a day when a musician from North India had come to meet Thyagaraja who then bursts into Dasarathe nee runamu in Todi. His zest for lecture-demonstrations also indicates his deep interest in instilling the capacity to appreciate the intricacies of Karnatic music in lay audiences.

Alongside performing and teaching, Dr. Ramanathan the musicologist, was always involved in musical research. With the help of Prof. Jagannathachari, Dr. Ramanathan pursued his now famous work on music in the Silappadikaram, the classic Tamil work from the Sangam period. For this work he was awarded a Ph.D. by Wesleyan University. His research on the use of 22 srutis in Karnatic music, as well as the Kudumiyamalai inscription, won him much praise. In his work on the 22 srutis, his training as a vainika must have stood him in good stead. Over the years he was associated with the Tamil Nadu Sangeet Natak Academy and the Tamil Isai Sangam, where he was Director of Research.

His unceasing interest in learning more and more showed in all his activities. He was one of the very few exceptional musicians who would attend the concerts of other musicians and try to learn from them. When people try to point out that others would not attend his concerts and ask him why he attended theirs, he would simply reply that the loss was entirely that of the other musician. Once he attended the concert of a prominent musician who sang a rare kriti of Dikshitar. Dr. Ramanathan promptly went to the musician's house the next morning and requested him to teach that song. The musician replied that he had applied oil to his hair before bathing (i.e. he had taken an oil-bath) and in the process forgotten the song. While this may seem amusing, the incident reveals the narrow-mindedness of the musician, a characteristic that unfortunately is not uncommon in the world of Karnatic music. Dr. Ramanathan was clearly much more broad minded.

Another interesting characteristic of his was that he would always go around with a notebook and a pencil; whenever someone would say something important related to music, he would quickly write it down along with the name of the person who said it and any references he may have for his statement. Dr. Ramanathan would often use these in his lecture demonstrations where he would invariably mention who gave him that piece of information. Dr. Ramanathan's large mind also extended to encouraging young and upcoming musicians; this showed in his helpfulness to his accompanists.

Dr. Ramanathan was also a good composer. In particular his compositions in Bhavani (see CD Review), Gopriya (a janya of Rishabhapriya that is unique in the property that it is invariant under shift of tonic,

i.e. grahabheda) and one in Surati are worthy of mention. Apparently, when Dr. Ramanathan was dying, he requested his daughters to sing Dikshitar's Abhayambayam in Sahana and his own Surati composition.

Dr. Ramanathan's musical lineage is continued by his many disciples. Prominent among them are his daughter Geetha Bennett (who plays the veena), Sowmya and Unni Krishnan (who started learning under Dr. Ramanathan and switched to Savitri Satyamurthy, a disciple of Dr. Ramanathan herself, after Dr. Ramanathan's death). Smt. Vasumati Nagarajan of the greater Toronto area is also a disciple of his; through her we now have some grand disciples of Dr. Ramanathan in Toronto. I hope they will continue his legacy of combining theory with practice, scholarship with popularization, and authenticity with melody.