

Padmavathy Ananthagopalan

Jayanthi Kumaresh

Vidushi Padmavathy Ananthagopalan. A rare shining jewel of the music fraternity, an inspiration for many aspiring musicians and vainika-s, a true example of a musical karma yogi. Her connection with music and veena is profound. She has evolved her own style to converse with the instrument which is full of dignity, grace and compassion.



A serious but calm face with a big kumkumam pottu, a simple 'kondai', a subtle smile, and a dignified look. The first time I set my eyes on her was when I was three. Even at that age I could sense something impressive about this petite, strong, disciplined lady, different from everyone else in the family.

With musicians in the family for the last seven generations, its members fit into a mould. Whenever I think about Lalgudi Mama, I am reminded of J.S. Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, which scaled newer altitudes and horizons in an eternal quest for something new, fresh and creative, an inspiring flight of everlasting creativity. He was the towering light shedding his glowing brightness on the entire family.

But "Pattu Perima", as she has been lovingly known to me right from my childhood, proved to be a person of a different cast. To start with, she played a different instrument. In a family with a history of violinists, she played the veena! A self made person, she was very independent and had her own viewpoint about everything. It was this bold individuality, confidence and originality which drew me to her. She became my childhood idol and it was

she who inspired me to take up the veena as my instrument.

Initially guided by her father, she learnt most of what she acquired out of her own quest for musicality and excellence on the instrument – the veena. Like many women of her generation, she was not encouraged greatly to perform in public. But she taught for most of the day and after everyone went to sleep, spent hours and hours with the veena to figure out the different technicalities of this magnificent instrument. She loved the gayaki bani and she created her own style.

She was more than a teacher to all her students with her so. Strongly committed and dedicated, her students could not help imbibing her absolute sincerity and seriousness of approach. None could get away with surface level involvement. She made them swim in waves of music and they had to dive deep and master the art. No excuse was allowed, for she looked into any drawback faced by the disciple and went all out to help them out of difficulties. She was unmindful of repeated efforts or the time she spent in doing so. A strict

disciplinarian, she guided them at every step of their lives. Looking at her strict countenance and heart full of great ideals, you sometimes feel she lives in Utopia!

A devotee of Devi Kamakshi, Perima has also set to tune and taught Sanskrit works such as *Lalita Sabasranamam*, *Saundaryalahari*, *Mookapanchasati* and the like to many enthusiastic students. Philanthropy was a great part of her life even during the days when she could not afford it. She has had the privilege of being blessed by the Kanchi Paramachaya several times for her services.

For 10 years she taught at the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society when we started calling her "Singapore Perima". Creating a great impart there, she published a series of music books called *Shadjam*, *Rishabham*, *Gandharam*, and so on. During that period, she came to India once a year to perform and meet family and friends. It was on one such occasion that she promised me that when she returned to India for good, she would let me stay with her and teach me. I used to play for her every time she came and even if she had five minutes, she spent it teaching the veena or practising. My memory is still fresh of what a great attraction it was for me as a child to watch her play tanam-s. She moved to India least suspecting the surprise I held in store for her! Moved to Chennai to do "gurukulavasam" with her in the real sense – live with her and learn.

As a guru, I saw in her a challenging taskmaster. Much as she is loving, she is very strict. She woke me up at 4 in the morning and had a long timetable ready for me. This was the

MY GURU

regime all her students had to follow. She insisted on hours and hours of practice, lots of listening to past masters, reading books and newspapers for general awareness, a special time allotted for spiritual growth and strengthening of character, and a very strict dress code for all the students.



Jayanthi and her guru

Back in India, Pattu Perima started a music school called the Sri Satguru Sangita Vidyalaya because our family hails from the Tyagaraja sishya parampara. Hundreds of students thronged the vidyalaya. Based in Anna Nagar, this institution has become a great alma mater for the arts over the past 22 years.

It is a matter of pride that several of her students are performing artists today. Her disciple Usha Rajagopalan is a sought after violinist. In vocal music, her disciple Maalavika is an up-and-coming singer.

Perima has traversed many an uphill path in her life undeterred, with single-minded purpose

– her veena. Her playing style is the quintessence of classicism. Her fingering techniques are individualistic. She is a great admirer of the veena legend Dr. S. Balachander and considers him her ‘manaseeka guru’. Though she does not follow his style of playing, she reveres him greatly and has imbibed many of the impressions she formed through listening to him. Balachander Sir, who had much regard for her accepted me as his disciple as a mark of his affection for her.

As a guru, Perima is unique. She does not insist on her disciples being her shadows, merely following the path she has created. She wants them to

explore new avenues and find their identity. She has the magnanimity to let her disciples listen to and mingle with other senior musicians in the field. She encourages her disciples to learn special kriti-s or other specialties like pallavi-s from other vidwans, for she believes in inculcating anything that is qualitatively enriching, paving the way for new improvements and a broader vision.

Padmavathy Ananthagopalan is a precious human being for whom music is beyond art, it is a way of life – a winning edge. ■

(The author is a leading veena vidushi)

Awards and Titles

Padmavathy has many awards and titles to her credit, some of which are Gana Saraswati, Nada Kanal, The Rotary Award for Achievers, Veena Tatvagnya (Veena Foundation, New Delhi), TTK Award (Music Academy, Chennai in 2006), Padma Sadhana (Padma Sarangapani group of Institutions), Gaana Nidhi (Sri Jagadguru Veda Parayana Trust), a Scroll of Honour (Rukmini Arts and Music Trust), and the most recent of them all – the Vellore Gopalachariar Memorial award (The Sruti Foundation).

Some CD recordings

Veena Duet – AVM

Anubhavam – Home Records

Reminiscences – Anugraha Records

Jayant Kastuar, Secretary - Sangeet Natak Akademi, presenting the Vellore Gopalachariar award to Padmavathy Ananthagopalan



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