

OUR GURU

SEETHALAKSHMI VENKATESAN

A loving teacher

Seethalakshmi Venkatesan, Carnatic vocalist and teacher, passed away on 18th November 2012 at Bengaluru. Born on 12th June 1926, she had over 70 years of music to her credit – singing, performing and teaching. She had a resonant voice with a majestic metallic timbre to it. Her concerts are frequently aired on All India Radio and Doordarshan.

When Seethalakshmi was only seven, her parents, the Sahasranamams, noticed the talent in their child and put her under the tutelage of Palghat Vaidyanatha Iyer in Trivandrum. She made her debut at the age of ten in the presence of Maharani Sethu Parvathi Bai who gifted a gold chain to the child. Seethalakshmi was married at the age of 13 to Venkatesan, an ardent lover of music. His encouragement and support helped her blossom into a fine musician.

She had the good fortune of being trained in the gurukula paddhati by Tanjavur Sankara Iyer at Tanjavur, and later learnt from Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer at Chennai. Be it her impeccable rendering of compositions, delineation of ragas bearing her stamp of individuality, or emphasis on raga bhava, her singing provided the essence of raga music.

Seethalakshmi learnt Hindustani music from Pandit Rama Rao Naik, which helped her render bhajans and ragas in the Hindustani style with great beauty and ease. She had a deep love for Hindustani ragas like Brindavani Sarang, Hindol, Behag, Kedar and Yaman to name a few. In handling such ragas, she touched a chord that few are capable of.



As her students for 25 years till a week before she passed away, we feel blessed to have learnt her repertoire and style. She was an excellent teacher, and there developed a deep bond between us. She was an integral part of our lives. Every time we went to her class we found something new to learn from her – new compositions, tips on raga rendition, niraval singing, unique kalpana swara patterns, or rounding off a composition. She was very affectionate, but also took the liberty to scold us when she thought it was necessary.

Niraval singing was her forte. Raga passages were an expression of her feelings, and she rendered them without compromising on grammar. However, she did not adhere to the formula of building a raga from note to note. She had this innate ability to paint a beautiful picture of the raga in all its hues. In swaraprastara she

Saralaya Sisters

preferred extempore sarvalaghu and raga bhava to calculations. She often shared her guru Semmangudi's advice: "God has given women beautiful voices, so there is no need for any unnecessary circus in manodharma".

When we first went to Mami – as we all called her – we did not know anything about the manodharma aspects of music. She gradually guided us into the beautiful fold of ragas, niraval and kalpana swaras. She had this incredible ability of making us learn the toughest facet of Carnatic music with the utmost ease, without feeling frustrated or disheartened. The vast number of compositions we learnt were first taught to us without notations. Only after we learnt the kriti would she give the notation for reference, and not to learn the sangatis.

Another aspect of her style was her perfect concert planning. Till the week before her demise, she guided us on the list of songs to be included in a particular concert. Mami made sure we sang one suddha madhyama and one prati madhyama raga for the main and sub-main pieces in a concert. In addition she took care of the varied talas, tukkadas and devotionals that go into a particular concert.

Mami had an insatiable thirst for knowledge and took all the trouble to learn something new and teach it to her students. She meticulously planned what to teach in the next class – this made her a treasure house of compositions old and new. Her memory was remarkable even at the age of 86 – she rarely referred to books while teaching or performing.

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We called her a ‘walking encyclopedia of music’.

Some of her senior disciples are T.S. Rama, V.N. Padmini, Vembu, Chitra Srikrishna and Aiswarya Vidya Ragunath. She also formed a group called ‘Saptaswara’, comprising seven women vocalists, with Mami in the lead. It was a unique platform where all seven could perform individually and in unison. It was a great success.

She performed many times in sabhas like the Bangalore Gayana Samaja, Madras Music Academy, Karnataka Gana Kala Parishat, Tamil Isai Sangam, Chennai and Sri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts, Mumbai, to name a few.

Mami loved to listen to good music from artists young and old. She attended concerts and mentally made notes of points she could learn – such was her humility and reverence for the art. She diligently attended the Chennai Music season for over 50 years, and encouraged us to do the

same. It was she who introduced us to the Chennai season 23 years ago.

Her refined taste was evident in the way she kept house, and in her immaculate style of dressing – with diamonds and sarees in colours she thought suited her best. She was at home in Kannada, though Tamil was her mother tongue. Apart from this she could communicate eloquently in English and Malayalam.

Some titles and awards

- ❖ *Sangita Kala Acharya* from The Music Academy, Chennai (2006)
- ❖ Karnataka State *Rajyotsava Award* (2001)
- ❖ *Sangeeta Kalaratna* from Bangalore Gayana Samaja (2000) (see photo below)
- ❖ *Sangeeta Ratna* from The Academy of Music, Chowdiah Memorial, Bangalore (1995)
- ❖ *Gana Saraswati* from Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (1978)
- ❖ *Karnataka Kalashree* from the Karnataka State Sangeetha Nritya Academy
- ❖ *Sangeeta Raga Nidhi* from Ramakrishna Bhajana Sabha, Bangalore

Mami was fun-loving and had an excellent sense of humour. We went out with her many times for lunch or dinner and even on vacation. She was an excellent cook and we have tasted many of her gastronomic delights.

Her passing away has left a deep void in our lives. We have lost a true friend, philosopher and guide.

(The Saralaya Sisters — Kavitha and Triveni — are Carnatic musicians)