

S.A.K. Durga

Carnatic music has lost a luminary in the demise of Dr. S.A.K. Durga. Founder of the Centre for Ethnomusicology in Chennai, Durga encouraged studies in this area, leading the way as a researcher and musicologist.

Durga was research advisor for many a student of doctoral studies in the field of music and contributed to the training of performing musicians in the correct usage of their voice through workshops and training sessions. She learnt music from giants like Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Madurai Mani Iyer and T. Viswanathan.

In the 1960s she came under the tutelage of flautist T. Viswanathan from the Dhanammal family who was a reader and the head of the music department at the University of Madras. He encouraged Durga to study further the subject of effective usage of the voice for Carnatic music, and she pursued post graduate studies in voice culture. Her paper "Voice, Abuse and Misuse" was adjudged the best at the International Institute in Experimental Singing in Denver, Colorado. She then studied laryngology and physiology under ENT specialists Dr. Venkataraman and Dr. Ramaswamy and obtained her doctorate in Ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University. She presented a paper based on a comparative study of Gregorian and Vedic chants and Tevaram as part of her post-doctoral research paper at Yale University.

A true academician in spirit and practice, she approached the subject of the usage of voice and the psychology of singing with a studied seriousness. She firmly believed that the voice, an instrument gifted by Mother Nature, must be made pliable for singing. According to her, it is not naturally constructed for singing in varied octaves, but has the capacity

to be made pliable to do so with correct practice. "Indian classical vocal music demands a range of voice reproduction in different octaves, unlike other forms of music. Reproducing this is a skill that comes with correct practice, as too much shouting or too low a pitch can damage the voice," she opined.

Taking this up as a cause, she worked on this subject, perfected a training module and imparted training to many vocalists. I was a beneficiary. A DVD titled *Saareera Sadhana* released by Swati Soft Solutions stands testimony to this well-articulated model of training. Durga also gave lectures on the psychology of singing and teaching. She believed that positive strokes, a little appreciation, encouragement and correct practice techniques would go a long way in teaching music, as this opened the mind of the student and made him or her sing freely without inhibition, thus opening up the voice box and the vocal chords. She felt that a vocalist must eschew self-doubt that confidence was very important for the voice to open up and for the musician to make a good presentation.

Many know of Durga as a musicologist, but only a few know of her as an excellent vocalist. With a pliant and malleable voice that could traverse freely, I remember her sing recently, the rather difficult padam, *Payyada* in Nadanamakriya (sung normally in madhyama sruti) in panchama sruti with absolute ease in the higher ranges of the song, with the consummate ease of a young musician! She had trained herself in all aspects of the voice that she imparted to others.

Ever year, in memory of her father S.A. Venkatarama Iyer, she used to organise interesting programmes under the banner of the Centre for Ethnomusicology, offering discussions,



concerts, lectures featuring artists from all over the world, on varied forms and aspects of music.

Never one to miss the morning lecture sessions of the Music Academy, she did full justice to her role as a member of the experts committee for several years, participating in healthy discussions during the sessions. Frank and to the point, she never minced words, speaking with clarity, yet taking care not to offend anyone. I have always seen a bright smile on her face, even in poor health, taking adversity in her stride.

Durga was the first Asian to publish a book on ethnomusicology and the first recipient of the award for musicology from the Music Academy, Madras. She served as Professor Emeritus of the Department of Indian Music at the University of Madras for four years. She was an advisor and resourceperson for some projects of the Sruti Foundation, and wrote articles for *Sruti* magazine. The last honour conferred on her was the Musicologist Award from the Narada Gana Sabha. Unfortunately it had to be presented posthumously as she passed away before the music season.

With a pleasant smile, a sharp mind, candid speech, a congenial personality, jovial in spirit, she lived life on her terms with complete dignity, fully immersed in her chosen field of study, shaping many a musician to think, read, analyse and sing with a well honed voice. Born in Kumbakonam on 1 June 1940, Durga passed away on 20 November 2016 at the age of 76. Truly a loss as that voice has now been put to rest!

SIVAPRIYA KRISHNAN
(Carnatic vocalist and marketing professional)