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BRINDA MUKTHA

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BRINDA MUKTHA
BASTIONS OF A GLORIOUS TRADITION

Brinda-Muktha: Bastions of a Glorious Tradition

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It was October 19th in the year 1988.

The location: Sastri Hall.

The occasion: A concert by two sisters.

The occasion was really big, for the sisters were singing together after a gap of 20 years; and, it was the occasion of the 50th death anniversary of their grandmother, Veena Dhanammal. Many of those attending that concert had not heard the sisters together, though they might have heard either of them singing alone. T. Brinda and T. Muktha, popularly known during their heydays as Brinda-Muktha, had parted ways in 1968 after more than forty years of making music together.

All roads that day led to Sastri Hall. The sisters sang compositions that were directly taught to them by their grandmother, the inimitable Dhanammal. Songs like Dikshitar's *Brihannayaki*, Annaswami Sastri's *Inkevarunnaru* and Kshetrayya's *Rama Rama prana sakhi* brought out the thrilling effects of the Dhanammal bani and had rasika-s wondering why the sisters parted ways at all. The wholesome effect of the Dhanammal bani of Carnatic music was truly reflected in the sisters' tandem singing. The memories of the sisters' concerts of yesteryear and of the unique history of one of the greatest musical families of Carnatic music and dance in more than two centuries unfolded in the minds of many veteran rasika-s of these twin arts on that day.

The story of Tanjavur Brinda and Tanjavur Muktha begins about two centuries before they were born. Papammal was a dancer in the Tanjavur court, as were her daughter Rukmani, and Rukmani's daughter Kamakshi, who danced in the court of Sarabhoji II. Kamakshi had learnt music from her mother and from the Vayyacheri based composers Anai and Ayya. In later years, with the decline of the Tanjavur court, Kamakshi shifted to Madras and set up home at Nattu Pillaiyar Koil Street, George Town. Here, she learnt music from Subbaraya Sastri, who was living in Madras at that time. In fact, Subbaraya Sastri (the son of Syama Sastri) spent the last twelve years of his life, from 1850 to 1862, in Madras.

Kamakshi adopted a girl whom she named Sundaram. Sundaram also learnt music from Subbaraya Sastri as well as from his son Annaswami Sastri. Sundaram gave



Brinda and Muktha

COURTESY : RAVI & SRIDHAR

birth to nine children among whom was the famed Veena Dhanammal (1868-1938). Dhanammal, during her time, was one of the eternal stars of Carnatic music. At an early age she learnt all the compositions in her family's repertoire, besides learning Dikshitar kriti-s from Sattanur Panchanada Iyer (a disciple of Suddha Maddalam Tambiyappan who was a direct disciple of Muthuswami Dikshitar), padam-s from Baldas Naidu, javali-s from composer Dharmapuri Subbarayar, kriti-s of Tyagaraja and Veena Kuppayyar, plus varnam-s from Tiruvottriyur Tyagier (son of Kuppayyar who was a direct disciple of Tyagaraja), and other pieces from many sources. She also learnt the veena from one Azhagiyasingarayya. Dhanammal rubbed shoulders with the likes of Patnam Subramania Iyer, Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer, Tirukodikaval Krishna Iyer, Tiruvottriyur Tyagier, Flute Sarabha Sastri, the koel of Hindustani music Gauhar Jan and Abdul Karim Khan.

Dhanammal had four daughters, Rajalakshmi aka Periakutti, Lakshmiratnam aka Chinnakutti, Jayammal and Kamakshi.

Brinda was born in November 1912 and Muktha in September 1914 to Kamakshi and Soundararaja Iyengar. Both were born at Dhanammal's residence in Ramakrishnan Chetty Street, George Town, Madras. The atmosphere at home was suffused with music. Dhanammal played the veena on Friday evenings, an event the cognoscenti of Madras eagerly looked forward to and savoured with pleasure. Besides this, the singing of their mother Kamakshi



Dhanammal's family (1936) : *Sitting* (L to R) Brinda, Kamakshi, Lakshmiratnam, Dhanammal, Rajalakshmi, T.S. Dattadri, Jayammal, Mukktha. *Standing* (L to R) T. Kothandaraman, Srinivasan, T. Soundararajan & wife, T. Balasaraswati, Abhiramasundari, T. Sankaran, T. Vijayakrishnan.

Back row (L to R) T. Govardhan, T.S. Sivaraman, Varadan.

Foreground (L to R) T. Viswanathan, Bhagyalakshmi, T. Ranganathan, Kalpakam and T.S. Vasudevan.

SPECIAL FEATURE

and aunts Rajalakshmi, Lakshmiratnam and Jayammal also contributed greatly to the musical ambience at home. Visits to the house of great musicians, composers and scholars like Tiruvottriyur Tyagier, Dharmapuri Subbarayar and others also enriched the atmosphere. The house was a kind of trade centre for artists where they taught or learnt new pieces. Rajalakshmi and Lakshmiratnam, and Jayammal and Kamakshi, sang as duos under the name 'Dhanam Pennal' or Dhanam's daughters). Of these, Rajalakshmi had learnt many songs from Patnam Subramania Iyer, while Lakshmiratnam was an authority on Dikshitar and Syama Sastry kriti-s as well as padam-s and javali-s. She was besides, an accomplished pianist. Jayammal, with her powerful, yet soulful singing was in later years to become the lifeline of her daughter T. Balasaraswati's abhinaya. Kamakshi was the 'tyagi', as she gave up her own ambitions in order to further the career of her three daughters.

It was in this musically exhilarating atmosphere that Dhanammal's grandchildren grew up. Of these, Kamakshi's daughters Brinda, Muktha and Abhiramasundari carried forward the vocal tradition. Cousin Balasaraswati, daughter of Jayammal, took to dance and became world famous for her abhinaya. Her brothers T. Ranganathan and T. Viswanathan became famous as mridangist and flautist respectively. Another cousin T. Sankaran served in the All India Radio and later came to be known as a music historian and raconteur. Among Brinda and Muktha's siblings, besides younger sister Abhiramasundari, were their elder brother Vijayakrishnan and younger brothers Kodandaraman and Govardhan.

In the early years, mother Kamakshi taught her daughters. Even when she was four, Brinda could sing such masterpieces as *Chetulara* of Tyagaraja. The family traditionally followed the accepted practice that women were to sing only raga alapana-s and songs. It was taboo for them to attempt swara singing, tanam and pallavi-s which were considered unsuitable for women. Kamakshi, who wanted her daughters to have a concert career and sing pallavi, niraval and swara-s, decided that she would have to look outside the family resources. She selected Kanchipuram Naina Pillai, a close family friend and front ranking vocalist of the time to teach her daughters.

Friendly relations existed between the families of Veena Dhanammal and Kancheepuram Naina Pillai, whose actual name was Subramania Pillai. His aunt and mother affectionately called him 'Naina' and the nickname stuck (see *Sruti* 11). Naina Pillai's mother Kamakshi and aunt Dhanakoti were popular musicians who were known as the Dhanakoti Sisters. They were contemporaries

of Dhanammal and belonged to the same age group. Both families had great respect for each other. They belonged to Syama Sastry's sishya parampara, the Dhanakoti Sisters having learnt from Kachi Sastri, a kinsman of Syama Sastry.

Kamakshi took the children to Kancheepuram and expressed her desire to Naina Pillai. The veteran readily agreed to take Brinda, but told Kamakshi, "Why did you bring Muktha? I won't teach her. Take her back." Muktha was lean and also had a 'hoarse voice' in Naina's opinion. But Kamakshi was not deterred. She said, "Naina, don't worry, Muktha will not sing, she will just sit beside Brinda and strum the tambura. Is there any problem with that?" Knowing Kamakshi to be a determined lady, Naina had no choice but to agree. The children stayed in the guru's house and received musical instruction. It was 1921. Brinda was nine and Muktha, seven years old. Dhanakoti Ammal had died the previous year, leaving her younger sister Kamakshi and her son Naina behind.

Brinda and Muktha had to get up early in the morning and practise the basic lessons of music under the supervision of Naina's mother Kamakshi. Her voice was strong and she could sing in three speeds effortlessly, even though she was quite old at that time. Brinda and Muktha had to practise akaara sadhakam, the sarali, janta and taattu varisai-s, alankaram, geetam, and varnam. During the day, the girls had to go to school to receive basic education. At six in the evening, Naina Pillai would start his class which would go on up to eight. Muktha recollected often that their days were full and that they had no time to play. Gurukulavasam under Naina was unlike gurukulavasam under other guru-s whose disciples had to perform household chores and run errands for the master. Brinda and Muktha, as also other disciples, were housed, fed and looked after well in Naina Pillai's home. Such was his large heartedness.

Brinda and Muktha were the only young girls in Naina Pillai's classes. All the others were young men. At the time of the tutelage of Brinda and Muktha, Tiruveezhimizhalai Kalyanasundaram Pillai and Chitoor Subramania Pillai were Naina's main disciples. Muktha would recall later that many others came, stayed and learnt for a short time and left. Among them Muktha has mentioned Narasimhachari who was Naina's first disciple and N.S. Krishnamachari who also sang with Naina Pillai in his concerts. She also said that both these disciples maintained the purity of Naina's style.

Brinda and Muktha had already learnt varnam-s and the easier kriti-s from their mother Kamakshi. Naina Pillai also taught Brinda a few varnam-s and insisted that she



Soundararaja Iyengar (seated centre) and Kamakshi (standing) with their children (L to R) : T. Kothandaraman, T. Muktha, T. Abhiramasundari, Govardhan (dressed as a girl), T. Brinda and T. Vijayakrishnan (standing)

sing them in three speeds. He taught her niraval and swara singing. Naina would sing an avartana of niraval or swara and thereafter Brinda had to show her skill by singing the next avartana. No notes or patterns were prepared or written down. Much was demanded and expected of Brinda. No allowances were made because she was a mere child. For the most part, Naina was a patient guru but if Brinda did not sing to his satisfaction, he would slap her. Other students would also sing niraval and swara and if they made mistakes, Naina would tell Brinda, "Give him one on the cheek". Brinda was so brilliant that she learnt two kriti-s in one evening. Muktha who was also an 'eka santagrahi' would learn whatever was taught. The next morning, both had to practise whatever they had learnt the previous evening. They thus learnt around 400 compositions of Tyagaraja, hundreds of *Tevaram* and *Tiruppugazh* songs, all in four years. Even in the midst of their gurukulavasam, Brinda and Muktha were invited to give public performances. Their first concert was when Brinda was ten and Muktha eight.

Naina's reaction to this early exposure of the children to the concert platform was none too favourable. He used to ask, "Why is Kamakshi in a hurry to make these children perform?" He felt that Brinda and Muktha had to practise more and attain a certain level of maturity before giving performances. These early concerts were not confined to just kriti singing. Raga alapana-s, niraval and swara singing were also included. The sisters learnt many things about laya from Naina as he was a specialist in that department.

Four years went by and Naina felt that the girls had absorbed enough from him. He called Kamakshi and told her, "I have taught them whatever I know. You now take them home, teach them further and polish their music in your mother's (Dhanammal) bani". Brinda and Muktha returned to Madras, to the home of their grandmother.

The second daughter of Dhanammal, Lakshmiratnam was considered by the family and music connoisseurs to be the second best musician of the Dhanammal family after the redoubtable lady. Lakshmiratnam had

a fine voice and she could sing in all the three sthayi-s (octaves) with effortless ease. Soft spoken and refined, Lakshmiratnam, also called Chinnakutti and Totha by the family, sang in tandem with her elder sister Rajalakshmi (Periakutti). She was a specialist, as she has already been noticed, in the compositions of Muthuswami Dikshitar, Syama Sastry, Subbaraya Sastri and padam-s and javali-s, having learnt all these from her mother Dhanammal.

It was Lakshmiratnam that Kamakshi turned to now with the request that she teach Brinda and Muktha. Lakshmiratnam agreed. Being their aunt did not mean that the girls could take liberties with her. Lakshmiratnam was strict and expected discipline, diligence and hard work from her nieces. If the grand sweeps of Dikshitar, the majestic curves of Syama Sastry and Subbaraya Sastri and the deeply emotional outpourings of Gopalakrishna Bharati demanded the utmost attention, concentration and practice, the padam-s of Kshetrappa, Ghanam Krishna Iyer and Subbarama Iyer demanded tremendous breath control and depth and strength of voice. The sisters had to learn not only the songs but also a style, a bani, that was based on the distinctive veena technique of Dhanammal, which expected of its follower the above capabilities.

For almost ten years, Lakshmiratnam taught hundreds of compositions to Brinda and Muktha. The sisters also learnt many kriti-s from their mother. Sometime in the early 1930s, Lakshmiratnam developed asthma and had to stop teaching. Even when they were learning from Lakshmiratnam, Dhanammal taught them some compositions. This she continued after Lakshmiratnam stopped teaching. Dhanammal taught them in all about 30 to 40 compositions, including a few padam-s and javali-s.

Brinda and Muktha never stopped learning. If they heard a new major piece which they liked they would approach the source and learn from that musician. Thus they learnt from Tanjavur Ponniah Pillai, Tiger Varadachariar and others. All these they polished in the unique Dhanam style.

Naina Pillai used to arrange a series of concerts as part of the Rama Navami festivities every year. In 1934, he invited Brinda and Muktha to give a performance. Naina was already a sick man at that time. He heard the sisters sing and was stunned by their virtuosity. He called Kamakshi aside and told her, "Kamakshi, I am sorry. I take back my words of 15 years ago. I did not think much of Muktha. But she sings very well indeed, as well as Brinda." This concert was a turning point for the sisters. A few months later, Naina passed away. He was only 45 years old. The sisters' grief was great, for he was not only their guru but also a father figure to them.

Concert Career

In an era when the likes of Ariyakudi, Chembai and Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer were ruling the roost in the field of Carnatic music, Brinda and Muktha started giving concerts in right earnest. Semmangudi, GNB and Madurai Mani were just then finding their feet and M.S.Subbulakshmi, and D.K.Pattammal were yet to launch their careers. There was still a great appetite for wholly classical, deep, sublime and chaste music as was witnessed in the following that Tiger Varadachariar commanded. But it was a following that was dwindling in numbers. Vilamba kala or slow tempo singing that was the very core of Carnatic music was losing its hold. Ariyakudi had shown the way and other musicians were following in his footsteps. Middle and fast tempo singing was gaining in popularity. Shorter alapana-s, packing the concert with short songs, swaraprastara, and even light classical stuff were all lapped up eagerly by an ever increasing, new generation audience. Musicians were gaining star status. This was the trend starting from the late 1930s and this trend would continue until, one by one, the masters passed on. Nevertheless, throughout their concert career, Brinda and Muktha never thought of compromising their high standards of music.

Their family believed in hardcore values right from the times of their illustrious ancestors. There was no question of stepping down the ladder of purity in order to gain popularity. Brinda and Muktha believed in giving pure music as sung and taught by their grandmother Dhanammal, their mother, aunts and Naina Pillai. There were no frills in their singing, nor any dramatics. They sang the compositions of only great masters like the Trinity, Gopalakrishna Bharati, and Kshetrappa. The fact that they came in the direct disciple line of the Trinity stood them in good stead. These great compositions had come to them without undergoing much of change from what the composers intended. Brinda and Muktha were thus able to present authentic versions of the Trinity's compositions. Padam singing was their forte and many, including senior musicians and rasika-s, believed that the sisters were unequalled in the singing of this genre of songs.

Brinda and Muktha had a small but dedicated band of followers who enthusiastically attended all their concerts. Some of them were fanatics and would not accept any other music. What however stood out was the fact that many musicians, especially those who were popular, were their avid fans. Starting from the great Tiger Varadachariar, the list of musicians enamoured of the sisters' music included Ariyakudi, Chembai, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Musiri Subramania Iyer, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer,

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M.S. Subbulakshmi, D.K. Pattammal, M.L. Vasanthakumari, Papa Venkataramaiah, Palakkad Mani Iyer, Palani Subramania Pillai, T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai, Flute Mali, and Ramnad Krishnan. Semmangudi and MS were eager to expand their repertoire and therefore learnt many songs from Brinda. Ramnad Krishnan became a disciple of Brinda.

Grandmother Dhanammal died in October 1938. If losing the matriarch of the family wasn't bad enough, another shock was to follow two years later. Their aunt and guru Lakshmiratnam died of poor health in 1940 at the relatively young age of 52. The sisters were forlorn. In the early 1930s, Kamakshi and her children had shifted from Dhanammal's house in George Town to Hensman Road in the T. Nagar area of Madras. All the three guru-s of Brinda and Muktha were gone before the sisters reached 30 years of age. In 1953, their mother Kamakshi too passed away at the age of 60.

The next year, in 1954, Muktha acquired a bungalow on 3rd Main Road, Gandhi Nagar, in the Adyar area. The sisters shifted there. Brinda lived on the ground floor and Muktha on the first floor of that house. The nagaswaram maestro T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai, who lived in Madras for a few

years until his death in 1956, acquired a bungalow right opposite Muktha's house. He too was one of the admirers of the sisters' music and he would drop in often and request Brinda and Muktha to sing, which they gladly did for him. Rajaratnam, after all, was a great rasika of Dhanammal's music and he in turn was admired by the entire family. Muktha kept open house and musicians and rasika-s would drop in throughout the day. Card playing sessions would go on all day long and the participants included, besides Brinda, Muktha and their brothers, musicians such as Musiri, Palani, Tiruppambaram Swaminatha Pillai, Semmangudi, Papa Venkataramaiah, and Ramnad Krishnan. There would be discussions on music too. The Gandhi Nagar house of Muktha was thus a beehive of activity and resembled the salons of 18th and 19th century Britain, as also her grandmother Dhanammal's in the first four decades of the 20th century.

In course of time, Brinda had two sons, Babu and Soundaram and a daughter Vegavauhini. Muktha had only one daughter whom she named after her aunt and guru Lakshmiratnam. When Brinda was away at the Central College of Music (now the Tamilnadu Government College of Music), teaching from morning

Brinda, Muktha and Abhiramasundari

COURTESY : RAVI & SRIDHAR



till evening, it was Muktha who raised her children too. All through these years the sisters performed together with Abhiramasundari accompanying them on the violin, often with cousin T. Ranganathan for mridanga accompaniment. In 1963, Abhiramasundari suffered a stroke and became bed-ridden. A brilliant disciple of Papa Venkataramaiah, Abhirami would follow the sisters like a shadow as she could reproduce every sangati. As she could not play any longer, Brinda and Muktha had to do with other violin accompanists, most notably R.K. Venkatarama Sastri and later T. Kesavulu. Brinda's daughter Vegavauhini joined the sisters on stage sometime in the 1960s. Muktha did not object, for she was well aware of her niece's talent and wanted her to shine as a musician, a solid proof of Muktha's broadmindedness.

In 1968, the sisters fell out with each other professionally over the question of All India Radio emoluments. Deliberately or through oversight, Brinda alone was given a raise but not Muktha. For the two sisters who had sung together for more than forty years, it was inexplicable why Muktha was treated thus by All India Radio. Muktha was hurt that Brinda did not plead her case with AIR—perhaps because she did not regard her as her equal, after almost forty years of making music together? Muktha stopped singing with Brinda from 1968. Brinda thereafter was supported by her daughter Vegavauhini or one of her disciples. Left to fend for herself, Muktha did not give concerts for some years.

The sheen of Brinda's music when she sang with Muktha was missing. The kind of support that Muktha gave her was unique and irreplaceable. It was not just support that Muktha gave Brinda, she enhanced the quality of Brinda's music by singing equally well, yet adding an individual touch of brilliance to the music. That is why they were referred to as Brinda-Muktha by everyone. The effect of their combined music was something special. It could not be replicated by disciples giving vocal support. The rasika-s were sad but they could do nothing about it. It was a loss of the true 'Dhanammal effect' which could not be replaced.

Muktha went to Bombay to teach at the Shanmukhananda Sabha's music school in 1969. She remained there for a few years and taught a number of students. Bombay Ramachandran, later to teach music at Shanmukananda and now a respected guru in Chennai, was one of those who benefited from Muktha's tutelage. Returning from Bombay, Muktha went to Madurai to live with her daughter Lakshmiratnam, who by now had married. After a year, Muktha returned to Madras. She also sang for



Brinda and Vegavauhini

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her cousin Balasaraswati's dance for sometime after the death of Bala's mother Jayammal.

Brinda as teacher

The Central College of Music was started in Madras in 1950, with Musiri Subramania Iyer as its first Principal. He roped many musicians in the faculty of the college such as Tiruppambaram Swaminatha Pillai and Budalur Krishnamurti Sastrigal. He also persuaded Brinda to join. Thus began a formal teaching career for Brinda. Not that she had not taught before. When she was 21, she began to teach a girl of ten called A.R. Sundaram, the daughter of A.K. Ramachandra Iyer who was the founder of the Rasika Ranjani Sabha and also owned the Midland theatre. Sunda, as A.R. Sundaram was called, had earlier learnt under Lakshmiratnam for a few years until she stopped teaching because of asthma. For ten long years Brinda taught Sunda, who must be considered Brinda's first disciple. Another early student of Brinda's was Indira Menon, daughter of Sir K. Ramunni Menon, a distinguished educationist.

The Music College however, gave Brinda an opportunity to teach the Dhanammal bani to youngsters and budding musicians. She was a stern taskmaster and would not proceed to the next line of a song until the whole class got a line right and perfectly too. The college also provided her an opportunity to share her musical wealth with Musiri, Budalur, Tiruppambaram and other teachers. In turn, Brinda also learnt a few pieces from them. Students of the college at the time included S.R. Janakiraman, now a senior musician and musicologist, vocalists T.R. Subramanyam,

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T.K. Govinda Rao, Suguna Varadachari, the Bombay Sisters (C. Saroja and C. Lalitha) and many others. The immense repertoire of the Dhanammal family was thus given to the world through Brinda. Cousin T. Viswanathan once said that Brinda and Muktha were mainly responsible for the propagation and teaching of Tyagaraja's rare compositions. A vast number of musicians benefited from Brinda and Muktha, though some musicians were reluctant to admit it.

Whatever the age of the person who came to learn from Brinda, he or she had to sit before her like a student. This she established even with Semmangudi and M.S. Subbulakshmi. The disciple had to get every nuance right. None was spared her stinging admonitions. Learning from Brinda was not easy. Many of her phrases and sangati-s in the songs of the Trinity, not to speak of padam-s, were so difficult to learn that they were the despair of even accomplished musicians. A musician had to be extraordinarily brilliant to be able to reproduce what Brinda taught. Her method of teaching was the oral one. Books, notations and cassettes were anathema to her. She did not entertain these modern methods. Neither did she entertain the insincere, non-serious student. She forbade many of her students from singing on stage what they learnt from her. Brinda retired from the Music College in 1970 after serving that institution for twenty years.

With the exception of Semmangudi and M.S. Subbulakshmi, most of the other disciples of Brinda learnt from Muktha also. Brinda would tell her students to learn certain specific songs from Muktha because her sister sang them better.

In later years, that is, from the 1970s through the 1990s, Brinda taught many students. These included V. Subramanian (Semmangudi's disciple), his sister Nagalakshmi Lakshmanan, B. Balasubramanian, Ravikiran, Shashikiran, Kiranavali and many others. She also taught

the veena to a few students who, in her opinion, were capable of grasping the subtle nuances of the Dhanammal style of veena playing. Brinda's daughter Vegavauhini, besides learning vocal music, also learnt to play the veena from her. Brinda visited Bombay many times and taught disciples such as Alamelu Mani, Aruna Sayeeram, Geetha Raja and others.

In the late 1960s, Brinda was invited to serve as visiting professor at the University of Washington, Seattle in the U.S.A. Cousins T. Viswanathan and Ranganathan were already at the Wesleyan University in that country. Daughter Vegavauhini accompanied Brinda, and the mother and daughter also gave a few concerts in the US. In 1990, the Ford Foundation gave a substantial grant to Sampradaya, a music archival centre in Chennai, to impart the Dhanammal bani of music to a few selected students among whom were B. Balasubramanian, Shashikiran, and Anuradha Sriram. T. Viswanathan was the main teacher. Brinda was roped in as resource person and she taught the students many compositions from her repertoire. Brinda also gave concerts well until the mid-1990s.

Brinda received the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1965. In the mid sixties, the Music Academy approached her for publishing a book on javali-s. She helped them compile a collection of javali-s with notation. Sometime in the mid-1970s, she moved to her own house in Besant Nagar, a suburb of Chennai near Adyar. In 1976, she was invited by the Music Academy to preside over its annual conference in December and receive the title of Sangeeta Kalanidhi. She did so and also gave an

Brinda receiving the SNA award from Indira Gandhi



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Brinda receiving the Sangeeta Kala Sikhamani from the then Tamil Nadu Education Minister Nedunchezian

exquisite veena recital on one of the mornings as well as a vocal concert another evening.

Muktha as performer and teacher

In 1970, the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi offered a scholarship to R. Vedavalli, a disciple of Mudicondan Venkatarama Iyer, for learning padam-s and javali-s. Muktha was selected to teach Vedavalli. Thus began a long and fruitful association which blossomed into a wonderful guru-sishya relationship. Vedavalli learnt not only padam-s and javali-s from Muktha but other compositions too. Responding to the prodding of disciples like Vedavalli and rasika-s of their bani, Muktha, who was for some time hesitant to give concerts alone,

Muktha and Vedavalli

COURTESY : R. VEDAVALLI



agreed to start performing. She, unlike Brinda, did not resort to singing niraval or swaraprastara. Like her aunts and grandmother, Muktha stopped with singing alapana-s and kriti-s, besides padam-s and javali-s. This factor did not in any way lower the musical value of her concerts. Rather, Muktha utilised the time available because of the absence of niraval and swara-s to present more of the great compositions of the masters and rare padam-s and javali-s. The kriti-s of Syama Sastry and Subbaraya Sastri, with their exquisite swara-sahitya passages, more than compensated for the lack of niraval or swara-s in Muktha's concerts. She was ably supported by her disciples Nirmala Sundararajan, and in later years by S. Sowmya. Muktha received the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1972.

In 1976, Muktha was approached by Nirmala Parthasarathi (a veena disciple of M.A. Kalyanakrishna Bhagavata and K.S. Narayanaswami) with a view to learning the Dhanammal repertoire from her. Initially hesitant because she had been out of touch with the veena for many decades, Muktha agreed to teach Nirmala. Muktha would sing and Nirmala would play the veena, with the teacher correcting the student and guiding her properly. It was a unique experiment, for the veena playing technique of the Dhanammal school was different from that of other schools, much as its vocal style was. The style was a very subtle one and the fingering and playing techniques concealed more than they revealed. This style was wholly incorporated into their singing by the vocalists of the family. It is to the eternal credit of Muktha and Nirmala that the style of rendering kriti-s, padam-s and javali-s was imparted and imbibed in this manner.

Many other students learnt music from Muktha. Notable among them are Rama Ravi, Nirmala Sundararajan, Ritha Rajan (a disciple of Ramnad Krishnan), Seeta Rajagopal (daughter of music scholar and Kesavardhini owner K.V. Ramachandran and former student of Muktha's mother Kamakshi), Meera Seshadri and Kausalya. Rama Ravi, who had studied music at the Stella Maris College, Chennai, was introduced to Muktha by T. Sankaran. She learnt many compositions from Muktha, besides learning from Brinda, T. Viswanathan and T. Sankaran. After Muktha's return from Cleveland in 2002, the doyen herself called Rama and taught her the Tyagaraja masterpiece *E papamu jesitira*.

S. Sowmya, disciple of Dr. S. Ramanathan came to Muktha in 1986. Dr. Ramanathan had felt that Sowmya needed to expand her repertoire and further polish her style. Sowmya learnt for many years and benefited immensely from her

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tutelage with Muktha. She remained one of Muktha's favourite students.

Others who learnt from Muktha included the dance guru Kalanidhi Narayanan who, in her younger days, had learnt from Muktha's mother Kamakshi. The famous dancer Alarmel Valli also learnt music from Muktha.

In 1989, when the C.P. Arts Foundation organised special classes for interested students to learn padam-s and javali-s, Muktha was the teacher. Besides her regular students, many others including Bharatanatyam exponent Lakshmi Viswanathan learnt from Muktha here. The classes were also attended by B. Balasubramanian, a student of B. Krishnamurti. This was his first exposure to the Dhanammal tradition. Later Balasubramanian was to learn from Brinda (as mentioned earlier) and T. Viswanathan too. Balu is now a professor of music at the Wesleyan University in the U.S.A.

Brinda's 80th birthday was celebrated in 1992 at the Kalakshetra auditorium with M.S. Subbulakshmi giving a special concert that evening.

In keeping with the Naina Pillai tradition, the sisters never released any commercial recordings right through their lives. It was only towards the end of the 20th century, that Muktha, by then well into her eighties, was persuaded to record a few padam-s and javali-s. Brinda would object to any tape recorder being placed near her during performances. But many sabhas have surreptitiously recorded the sisters' performances and these are still doing the rounds. As both sisters were graded artistes at

Brinda in 'Nauka Charitramu'



SAMUDRI ARCHIVES

Kapila Vatsyayan felicitating Brinda on her 80th birthday

the AIR their performances for the radio were, of course, recorded by that institution.

In the mid 1990s, Brinda suffered two fractures that restricted her movements. Film maker Saroj Sathyanarayana made a documentary titled 'Nauka Charitramu', that included interviews with Brinda, M.S. Subbulakshmi and D.K. Pattammal. It was evident even while the film was being made that Brinda did not have long to live. One of her last statements was to her disciple Kiranavali that now that she was forgetting her songs, perhaps it was time for her to go.

Brinda also told an ardent admirer that no one could replace Muktha and that the sheen that their music possessed when they sang together was something special and inimitable. Muktha looked after Brinda affectionately

during her last days. Though inwardly pained by the inaction of her elder sister in the All India Radio issue, Muktha never let that affect her relationship with Brinda. Right from the 1980s, Brinda often went to Muktha's house and stayed there for a week or ten days and the younger sister played the perfect host. During her last days, Brinda told Muktha that she, Brinda, had wronged her in many ways and that she was extremely sorry about it. Brinda passed away on



Muktha receiving the SNA award

6th August 1996. "With this pure music is dead," remarked veteran Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer.

Muktha remained active for a few more years. The Music Academy belatedly recognised her contribution to music by awarding her the title of Sangeeta Kala Acharya. Once, to a few admirers who called on her and asked her about the awards she had received, Muktha replied, "The Music Academy gave me a title of Sangeeta Aasaari or something like that!" 'Aasaari' in Tamil means carpenter. Muktha did not think much of awards and was amused that many were forthcoming in the evening of her life. She continued teaching music to all those who sought her out.

In March 2002, Cleveland Sundaram persuaded Muktha to travel to the U.S.A. to participate in the Cleveland Tyagaraja Aradhana. There she gave an exquisite concert to a packed hall of about 2000 rasika-s. Most of the listeners were youngsters and had never heard a scion of the Dhanammal family. Bowled over by the purity and the sublime quality of Muktha's music, they gave her three standing ovations. Muktha herself humorously remarked upon her return to Chennai that this was the largest gathering of rasika-s for a music concert by a member

SAMUDRI ARCHIVES



Tamil Nadu Governor Rammohan Rao felicitating Muktha

of the Dhanammal family. Their concerts had never attracted more than 500 people at the most.

In January 2003, Muktha gave a chamber concert at the Musiri house in Mylapore, Chennai. Big crowds thronged the house to hear what was perhaps the concert of the year. Senior and junior musicians as well as ardent fans of the Dhanammal style were there. Muktha, almost ninety years old, sat for two hours and more and moved the audience with a delectable performance. Right from the beginning of the concert, request after request poured in from all corners for this song or that padam and Muktha obliged all of them.

But inwardly, the doyenne was grieving. The death of Sankaran and Viswanathan, coming within two years of

Muktha in concert with Murthy and T. Viswanathan



each other had left Muktha the sole survivor of the 13 grandchildren of Dhanammal. In many ways she never recovered from the death of Viswa. When he was a child she had been particularly fond of him and the fondness remained till his end. The concert was to be Muktha's swan song, for she never performed again.

In October 2003, Muktha suffered a fall that left her very weak. She remained confined to her house thereafter. In March 2004, the All India Radio recognised her as a 'National Artiste' along with M.S. Subbulakshmi and D.K. Pattammal. Muktha's granddaughter attended the award ceremony on her behalf. The passing of Semmangudi in 2003, and a year later of her close friend M.S. Subbulakshmi left Muktha forlorn. "Why should I live any longer, Subbulakshmi, why did you go alone, why

didn't you take me with you?" was her constant lament. But to all those who called on her she was as courteous as ever. She was looked after with love and affection by her daughter Lakshmiratnam. Until the end, music never left her. Even when she could not recognise her own daughter, to the utter surprise of everyone around, she could sing any song with all the sangati-s and words intact.

The last surviving veteran of the Dhanammal family quietly left this world on March 11th 2007. Her disciple Nirmala Sundararajan brought a saree from the Goddess's shrine of the Varadaraja temple in Kancheepuram. On her last journey, clad in this red saree Muktha was radiance itself. Her face glowed like the rising sun. But the sun had on that day set on the exquisite and sublime art of the Dhanammal dynasty.

Their Character and Personality

Brinda as a Person

Stern, taciturn, proud, the very personification of arrogance. This was how the world perceived T. Brinda. People saw her as a cold person, incapable of warmth or affection, which they felt was in total contrast to her sweet, sublime music. Only a few knew that she reciprocated genuine love and affection. Of course, Brinda could be quite carping and unsparing if the occasion demanded. She never tolerated the artificial, the pretenders, the hypocrites. Her sharp retorts to people who wallowed in self-importance could be quite hurting. Nor did she tolerate disciples who, after having learnt from her, dared to sing what they had learnt in a shoddy manner. Once, a musician who had learnt a few padam-s and javali-s from Brinda chose to sing a padam in his All India Radio concert. Both Brinda and Muktha had the habit of listening to the AIR concerts every morning. Brinda waited for the musician to reach home from the AIR studios and phoned him. "Look," she said, "I taught you padam-s and javali-s because you pestered me. You have no right to ruin my name. Henceforth do not sing in public what I have taught you." Sure enough the musician had to comply.

After she taught Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer the javali in the raga Paras, she told him, "Now Srinivasa Iyer, if you want to sing this javali in concerts,

see that you make no changes. Sing it exactly as I have taught you. Don't say that this version has the prati madhyama and therefore you will avoid that swara." Whenever Semmangudi sang the Paras song *Smarasundaranguni* he included the prati madhyama swara in it as taught by Brinda. Strict grammarians were of the opinion that raga-s like Gaulipantu and Paras did not employ the prati madhyama and that the followers of the Dhanam school who included the swara were wrong. But Brinda was adamant and never changed her stance since the source, Dhanammal, sang those raga-s that way.

With sincere disciples and genuine rasika-s Brinda's attitude was totally different. In 1988, on the occasion of Navaratri, she gave a concert without accompaniments at the house of a descendant of Syama Sastry in West Mambalam. The great-grandson of Annaswami Sastri, he had in his possession the original portrait of Syama Sastry that the Tanjavur palace painter had done at the request of the great composer just days before he passed away. He also had the Sree Chakra, Ganapati and Syamakrishna—all of which Syama Sastry had worshipped. The programme consisted of songs of the Sastry trinity. There were hardly a dozen rasika-s present. Brinda was offering her music as worship to the Devi and Syama Sastry. She was accompanied by Ritha Rajan.



One of us made bold to ask Brinda to sing *Venkatasaila vibhara*, the Hamir Kalyani masterpiece of Subbaraya Sastri. Sure of some admonition from her, those gathered around her looked at us with pity. She cast a glance at us and sang the song. Immediately we asked for *Emani ne* in Mukhari. The others were aghast at our impertinence. What cheek, what temerity, that too from mere 'boys'! After another glance in our direction, she sang the song. Again we asked for another song, this time *Ninu sevinchina* in Yadukulakambhoji. The others sat stunned when Brinda sang that song as well. Normally, none who knew her dared to ask Brinda for a particular song, for she would never oblige. We too had been inwardly nervous. After her exquisite 'nadopasana', we prostrated before her. She blessed us and kept her hands on our heads for some time. Whether it was the 'presence' of Syama Sastry or our genuineness that forbade her from disappointing us, it was a thrilling and unforgettable experience. With her younger students she was kindness and patience personified, and this was noticed many times.

Brinda was a charming host. When she arranged concerts of her cousin T. Viswanathan every year at her house, she sat on the verandah and welcomed the guests. Whether the visitor was elderly or young, she got up every time to receive him or her, much to the embarrassment of the visitor.

Brinda was an excellent cook too and her cuisine was as delectable as her music. She could draw kolam-s that could be the despair of an accomplished painter and she could knit sweaters and other useful clothes that would be the envy of an expert tailor. Her talents were legion. In whatever she did, she created beauty.

Brinda wore simple sarees and jewellery but she wore them with such elegance that she just needed to be around to make her formidable presence felt. And yet, many people were deterred by her reputation of being arrogant and standoffish. She knew but did not care to make any effort to dispel such an impression.

Muktha as a Person

Muktha was perhaps the mildest, gentlest personality of the Dhanammal family, as acknowledged by Dhanammal's disciple Savitri Rajan. Muktha was a genuinely affectionate person and a good conversationalist.



Her sense of humour was infectious and she had innumerable anecdotes to relate about music and musicians of the past seventy years. Her house in Gandhi Nagar, Adyar, Madras, where she and Brinda and their families lived together for several years, was open to all. As noticed earlier, musicians and rasika-s often dropped in for a chat, to play cards all day long, to discuss music, or to learn. All were heartily welcomed by Muktha whose hospitality was famous among those who knew the family.

Muktha never talked ill of anyone and had a word of appreciation for anyone worthy of it. She listened to the younger generation of musicians with an open mind and appreciated them if they sang well. Of course she also, like others in her family, was capable of witty sarcasm. But her comments never hurt others. Muktha exhibited genuine affection towards all her disciples and took a keen interest in their careers if they were professional musicians. As for amateurs, she imparted her music with the same genuineness as she did for professionals. Her disciples discussed their family problems with her and Muktha would go out of the way to offer them advice or help.

One of her disciples, Meera Seshadri passed away a few years ago in the train on the way back from Guruvayur to Madras. Muktha genuinely grieved for her and rued the tragedy of one of her disciples passing away before her. Meera Seshadri used to conduct the Navaratri festival at her residence every year, and Muktha would sing on one of the nine days without fail.

All her disciples have admitted that whenever they prostrated before her to receive her blessings they were moved to tears. Such was Muktha's genuine love for people. No one had a bad word for her. In this she was a rarity among musicians, worthy of being placed

among such noble souls in the field of Carnatic music as Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, Madurai Mani Iyer, M.S. Subbulakshmi and M.D. Ramanathan.

Muktha signified all that was good in this world. She perceived her music as 'nadopasana' and observed several times that Tyagaraja had advocated music as a means to obtain salvation and not for making money or becoming popular. It was clear that this was her ideal. To the last she conducted herself along these lines. Surely, Tyagaraja, must have been pleased.

RAVI & SRIDHAR

Interesting Anecdotes

❖ When Brinda was about 13 or so, the veteran Hindustani vocalist Abdul Karim Khan, who was a frequent visitor to Madras and an admirer of Dhanammal's music, sang a complicated sangati in a raga at an informal gathering, and declared that no one present there could reproduce it. Konnakkol Pakkiriya Pillai who was present asked Brinda who was seated on his lap to sing the prayoga. Brinda repeated it exactly as Abdul Karim Khan had sung it. The stunned Hindustani maestro apologised to those present and said that Brinda would grow up to be no ordinary musician. This incident was related by Brinda's cousin T. Sankaran.

❖ When Brinda and Muktha were young, they went to learn the veena from Krishnamachari, younger brother of Tiger Varadachariar. One day, Dhanammal dropped by Krishnamachari's house and saw her two grand-daughters learning from him. She was not impressed by either the style or the teaching method. She promptly called them and asked them to come to her. Brinda and Muktha then started learning the veena from Dhanammal. Muktha gave up soon because she could not get the fingering right. According to her, Brinda, in course of time, started playing the veena like Dhanammal herself.

❖ Tiger Varadachariar was a frequent visitor to Dhanammal's house. She had great regard for him. Dhanammal would always welcome him saying, "Vaango Tigervaal," and then request him to sing. Tiger would call out to Brinda-Muktha, "Hey

Brinda



kuttigalaa, come, won't yousingforme?" And the sisters would oblige. Asking them to sing specific padam-s, he danced to them. Muktha used to say that Tiger's abhinaya was so wonderful that it could shame even a seasoned dancer.

❖ When Muktha's eldest granddaughter was born in 1964, she wanted

Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer to sing at the cradle ceremony. She approached the veteran who demurred saying that as he had a concert at Tiruvananthapuram the day before, he would not be able to make it. Muktha would have none of it. She told Semmangudi, "Look Iyerval, I am not asking you to marry my daughter, only to sing. Just come and sing." Semmangudi was floored by this retort. Sure enough, after the concert at Tiruvananthapuram he boarded a flight to Madras the next morning and sang at the cradle ceremony.

❖ In 1989, Brinda participated in the Tyagaraja aradhana at the Tyagaraja Vidwat Samajam in Mylapore, Chennai. M. Balamuralikrishna was the President of the Samajam at that time. He had invited many senior musicians to participate and most of them did so including Semmangudi, MS and MLV. After the Pancharatna group singing (which was exquisite and far removed from the cacophony witnessed at the aradhana observance in Tiruvaiyaru these days), the musicians got up to leave. Semmangudi was heard telling somebody that it was he who had recommended to the Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran that Oliver Road in Mylapore be renamed as Musiri Subramania Salai as Musiri had lived there for a long time. An ever alert Brinda retorted, "Iyerval, does anyone remember a poor old lady named Veena Dhanammal? She does not have any road or lane named after her. Perhaps her name does not deserve to be recommended by the likes of you!" A highly embarrassed Semmangudi could do nothing but smile sheepishly.

❖ On January 14th 1989, Brinda arranged a concert of her cousin T. Viswanathan at her home in Besant Nagar. Viswa played and sang a piece in Harikambhoji starting with the words, "Avataaram enduku". He announced at the end of the song that Tyagaraja was the composer and that the bard had composed it at Chidambaram. It was obvious to everyone that it was a dubious claim. Brinda promptly told Muktha who was sitting next to her that Tyagaraja had not composed it at Chidambaram but at the Wesleyan University when he visited the US! Viswa was at the time Head of the Department of Ethnomusicology at the Wesleyan University.

RAVI & SRIDHAR

Brinda-Muktha: Certain Aspects of their Music

Ravi & Sridhar

Brinda and Muktha had a thousand songs in their repertoire. The popular and the rare kriti-s of Tyagaraja and Dikshitar, the gems of Syama Sastry and Subbaraya Sastri, Anai-Ayya, Gopalakrishna Bharati, Arunachala Kavi, Subbarama Dikshitar, Ponnayya Pillai, Kshetrayya, Mysore Sadasiva Rao, Subbarama Dikshitar, besides innumerable javali-s were all in their possession.

Karubaru, a grand Tyagaraja song in Mukhari was their favourite. Today this song has become famous. Similarly *Elavataramu* in the same raga was a grand edifice of pure and deep melody. So was *Sangeeta sastra gnanamu*, again in Mukhari. In Todi, they knew many Tyagaraja songs including *Tappi bratiki*, *Kotinadulu*, *Emi jesitenemi*, *Enduku dayaradura*, *Endu daginadu*, *Kadatera rada*, *Munnu ravana*, and *Proddu poyenu*. *Manasu swadheenamai* and *Emi neramu* in Sankarabharanam, *Mundu venuka* in Darbar, *Nee bhajana gana* in Nayaki, *Seetavara sangeeta gnanamu* in Devagandhari, *Mummurtulu* and *E papamu* in Athana were some of the other major pieces of Tyagaraja that received excellent treatment by Brinda-Muktha. Most of the above mentioned pieces were sung by them in vilamba kala, the slow tempo. The kriti-s sounded so different, so ravishing, that it gave the lie to the theory that Tyagaraja kriti-s were all in madhyama kala. They had a number of short, delightful Tyagaraja compositions in rare raga-s in their repertoire. *Tolinenu jesina* in Kokiladhwani, *Tanameedane* in Bhooshavali, *Vinave O manasa* and *Manasa manasaamarthyamemi* in Vivardhini and *Varasikhi vahana* in Supradeepam are some of them. Muktha had the habit of singing these short pieces to put her daughter, nephews and nieces to sleep.

Dikshitar pieces were another heirloom received from Sathanur Panchanada Iyer. These pieces were sung as Dikshitar would have envisaged them, with both the deep and subtle gamaka-s, the grand sweeps and glides, all like the gait of a majestic elephant. *Akshayalinga vibho* and *Dakshinamoortey* (both Sankarabharanam), *Sree Subramanyaya namaste* (Kambhoji), *Veenapustaka dharineem*



Brinda and Muktha

(Vegavahini), *Chetasree* (Dwijavanti), *Sree Rajagopala* (Saveri), *Sree Venugopala* (Kurinji), *Sree Matrubhootam* (Kannada), *Mamava Pattabhirama* (Manirangu), *Saraswati manohari* (Saraswati Manohari), *Sankaram Abhirami* (Manohari) and the Navagraha kriti-s, to mention only a few, acquired an altogether different sheen at the hands of Brinda and Muktha. Many of these songs were identified with them.

Impeccable lineage

Brinda and Muktha, like their grandmother, had no use for dialectics and arguments in music. They trusted their ears. Should anyone challenge them on the grammatical correctness of their renditions they could demonstrate and explain how their version had sastraic support. Doubting Thomases were simply informed of the impeccable lineage through which the works of the Trinity and other great composers came to them. Music for them was a matter of singing, not of rhetoric.

What were the essential, important features of the Dhanammal school of music? According to Muktha, the 'anuswara' which made up what is called the gamaka, as also the jaru-s and karvai-s. It was the importance given to the anuswara and the gamaka that was the hallmark of that style. No swara was left to fend for itself. It had to take the company of the neighbouring swara-s appropriately and this was beautifully achieved by that school. Muktha

further said that the anuswara had to be coupled with bhava, not just dryly sung. “Each and every swara should be sung with bhava and feeling. Otherwise what is the use of singing it?” Their singing of sangati-s involving complicated anuswara combinations was effortless yet full of feeling. Theirs was a typical example of bhava sangeetam which touched your soul. As much as the gamaka was an important component of their music, smooth and beautiful karvai-s, and breathtaking jaru-s were important too.

While singing certain kriti-s, they were so taken up by the music that both Brinda and Muktha sang as if possessed, as if they were in competition with each other (in the words of a staunch rasika, “potti pottundu paduva!”). *Chetasree* of Dikshitar in Dwijavanti was one such composition. Their version almost followed Venkatamakhi’s definition of the raga whereas the version of other musicians is now almost akin to the Hindustani Jaijivanti. In the madhyama kala passage of the anupallavi, their singing of ‘Pootanadi samharam, Purushottamavataram’... and in the charanam, the line, ‘Nava champaka nasikam’ in the top register was thrilling, as if the gates to heaven had opened. The unique rishabha swara of Dwijavanti would take on a beautiful contour. All through the song, Muktha’s alternating between the middle octave and the top would enhance the quality of the music without deflecting attention from Brinda’s exquisite singing. This was the case with the charanam line beginning with ‘Sadhujanopeta’ in *Akshayalinga vibho*. So was the case with the two compositions of Subbarama Dikshitar, *Sankaracharyam* in Sankarabharanam and *Kantimati* in Kalyani. The latter was a perennial favourite of theirs as well as their rasika-s. Only if one has listened to this song sung by both Brinda-Muktha together, can one understand its true greatness. The effect that they created in the seemingly simple anupallavi line, ‘Santamuna bhavinchedi’ and in the charanam lines, ‘Naradu sahimpumamma’ was incredible and inimitable.

The influence of veena

Brinda-Muktha’s singing of the beginning of almost every line in the samashti charanam of the Dikshitar masterpiece *Tyagaraja yoga vaibhavam* illustrates the Dhanammal effect best. The jaru gamaka-s employed at the beginning of the line, ‘Yuga parivarutyabda’, in this song are out of this world and the sangati-s for the word ‘maasa’ are very difficult to reproduce. The swara-s for this word are the madhyama and the shadja, that is, *ma, sa* (swarakshara) for ‘maasa’. The throat has to slightly shake the madhyama thrice and land on the shadja which Brinda and Muktha did to thrilling effect. So also the rishabha to

shadja jaru in the beginning of the line ‘Sree Guruguha Gurum’ produced the same thrilling effect. It is in pieces like these that we can discern the influence of the veena on their music. Their version of *Sree Subramanyaya namaste* is almost totally different from the usual one, with the charanam sung in true chauka kala. The current popular version is sung in madhyama kala.

The bhava-laden compositions of Syama Sastry and Subbaraya Sastri received special attention as they were the precious property of their family, Dhanammal’s grandmother being Subbaraya Sastri’s disciple. The swara-sahitya passages brimmed with special beauty. Brinda sang the sahitya and Muktha the swara, simultaneously. This was repeated in the charanam with the roles reversed. This is not an easy feat as it requires tremendous concentration and the extraordinary effect that it produced on listeners had to be experienced to be believed. This was especially true of *Marivere gati* (Anandabhairavi), *Janani ninuvina* (Reetigaula), *Sree Kamakshi* (Vasanta) and Annasami Sastri’s *Inkevarunnaru* (Sahana). Syama Sastry’s compositions like *Ninuvanaaga mari* (Poorvikalyani), *Ninne namminanu* (Todi), *O Jagadamba*, *Pahi Sree Giriraja sutey* (both Anandabhairavi), *Palinchi Kamakshi* (Madhyamavati), the Bhairavi swarajati, and the kriti-s of Subbaraya Sastri like *Ninu sevinchina* in Yadukulakambhoji, *Venkatasaila* in Hamirkalyani, *Emani ne* in Mukhari and *Sree Kamalambike* in Todi, were some of the gems subjected to the same grand treatment. Annasami Sastri’s *Inkevarunnaru* in Sahana was a dazzling jewel adorned with all that was beautiful in that raga.

Padam-s and javali-s

Padam-s and javali-s being their forte, none equalled them in their rendition, except members of their own family like aunt Jayammal and cousin Balasaraswati. Brinda-Muktha were so much identified with them that many people believed that they knew only padam-s and javali-s. Their rendition of *Moratopu* in Sahana, *Rama Rama* in Bhairavi, *Ososi* in Mukhari, *Payyada* in Nadanamakriya, *Vaddante* in Pantuvarali and the padam-s in Ghanta, Ahiri, Punnagavarali, Begada, Sankarabharanam, Kalyani and Surati, to speak of only a few, should all be classified as deep meditation in those raga-s. Most of these padam-s were set in Tisra Triputa, which tala was the despair of even accomplished musicians, but Brinda and Muktha handled padam-s in this tala as if it was their slave. The padam rendition was slow and unhurried. They began the padam with the anupallavi which created an immediate electrifying effect on the listeners because the anupallavi would almost always start in the top register.

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Their javali-s were sparkling and ravishing and many of the javali-s as well as padam-s brought out the true sringara bhava. Pining for the lover was the theme in certain padam-s and javali-s and there was a certain pathos in their rendition if the sahitya so demanded. *Sakhi prana* was one such javali which in the hands of Muktha reached sublime heights.

Brinda possessed a beautiful voice that had strength as well as a melodiousness that defies description. Both Brinda and Muktha possessed tremendous breath control and used this strength of theirs as well as the depth of their voices shrewdly and to great effect. Their control of the volume of their voices was especially amazing. The honey dewed voice of Brinda perfectly blended with the somewhat rough voice of Muktha. When they sang together in the middle octave it sounded as if only one person was singing. This can be verified in the few recordings available.

Brinda and Muktha had no use for the scale raga-s or latter day favourites like Ranjani, Nalinakanti, Valaji and the like. They presented the highest in art music. They never hesitated to sing Begada, Saveri, Sahana, Varali, Mukhari, Dhanyasi, Yadukulakambhoji or Surati in concerts. Their exhaustive manodharma challenged these highly gamaka-oriented raga-s. A Sahana or a Surati had to rise to the occasion to satisfy the demands of their unbounded imagination and the craving of their souls. Not that they would sing alapana-s for half an hour or more. Not they.

But their knowledge and manodharma ensured that they brought out the complete essence of a raga in just a few minutes. Brinda's and later, when she sang alone, Muktha's raga alapana-s were eagerly looked forward to by rasika-s. Every swara was embellished with anuswara-s and the deep gamaka-s interspersed with beautiful karvai-s were exhilarating. A two-minute alapana of Begada that Muktha sang at her last concert at the Musiri house is a case in point. All that the great raga had to offer was said in those two minutes. Brinda's niraval-s and kalpana swara-s were precise and to the point. Being Naina Pillai's disciples, Brinda and Muktha had perfect laya, but they did not indulge in laya acrobatics.

Once, at a concert in Sastri Hall, Muktha sang a Bhairavi alapana and Tyagaraja's *Raksha bettare* in it. Rasika-s attending that concert were floored when she immediately started an alapana of Mukhari followed by Tyagaraja's *Karubaru* in the raga. There was not the slightest hint of Bhairavi in her Mukhari. The rich gnanam and immense courage of Muktha were there for all to see. Very few people knew the extent of Muktha's gnanam as, all along, she chose to live in her sister's shadow. But those close to her knew that her musical knowledge was profound.

Brinda was also an accomplished vainika. She played the Dhanammal style on the veena. A video recording of the 1970s done in the US has her playing the instrument with Vegavahini. It is not only an aural but a visual feast too,

Brindamma

I did not have much exposure to the Dhanammal bani of music when I joined the Central College of Music for further studies in music in 1949. It was at the instance of my guru at Kalakshetra, Tiger Varadachariar, that I joined the college. There my teachers were Musiri Subramania Iyer, Budalur Krishnamurti Sastri, Tiruppambaram Swaminatha Pillai and T. Brinda among others.

Brindamma maintained her timings and she expected us also to be on time for our classes. She never wasted even a minute and would straightaway start our lessons. T.R. Subramanyam and T.K. Govinda Rao were among the senior students studying along with me. Brindamma would sing a line and we would repeat it. All of us had to get every sangati right, only then would she proceed further. She had a sharp ear and would never miss any deviation on our part. Brindamma was strict and never tolerated any mischief or out of turn behaviour on our part.

She taught us several pieces, most of them compositions of the Trinity. Once, egged on by T.R. Subramanyam and T.K. Govinda Rao, I made bold to request her to teach us a padam. Both of them wanted to learn the Ghanta padam Neyyamuna. I was very nervous when I asked her, "Amma can you please teach us the Ghanta padam?" She gave me a stern look and asked, "Oho, avvalavu dooram vandudutha?" (Oho, have you come to that level?). Of course, she did not teach us any padam immediately. But after she was convinced that we had progressed well, she taught us five padam-s. Brindamma's teaching method was so good that I have never forgotten even one sangati in any of the pieces she taught. I learnt music at the college for two years and passed out in 1951. Since then I have had the opportunity to listen to Brinda and Muktha's music often. In my opinion there is no music outside of Tiger, Musiri and Brindamma. These three great artists represented all that was best in Carnatic music. Of course there is no gainsaying the fact that Mukthamma was equal to Brindamma and that there is absolutely no difference in the music of the two sisters.

S.R. JANAKIRAMAN

so elegant and graceful is her handling of the instrument. In veena playing too, Brinda never let the swara alone and embellished the playing with suitable anuswara-s.

Muktha's music

Muktha's music acquired more maturity in later years, in the 1970s and 80s. Her voice could not be described as melodious, as noted earlier it was quite hoarse, yet she overcame this deficiency and made it her strength. She shunned the niraval and kalpana swara-s and sang only raga alapana-s, besides of course, compositions. Visranti and sublimity were the hallmarks of her music. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer has said that he was in the habit of using sleeping pills at night. Once he attended a concert of Muktha where she sang an exquisite *Ninu sevinchina*, the Yadukulakambhoji masterpiece of Subbaraya Sastri which captivated him and held him in thrall. That night, he could sleep well without the aid of a pill. This, Semmangudi said, attested to the power of Muktha's music. Muthuswami Dikshitar's *Veenapustaka dharineem* (Vegavahini), *Dakshinamoortey* (*Sankarabharanam*), Subbaraya Sastri's *Ninu sevinchina*, Tyagaraja's *Raksha bettare* (Bhairavi), *Karubaru* (Mukhari), the

padam-s *Ninnu joochi* (Punnagavarali), *Ela padare* (Begada), *Niddirayil* (Pantuvrali), *Padari varugudu* (Kambhoji), *Tiruvottriyur Tyagarajan* (Athana), *Naninna dhyana* (Kanada) and the javali-s *Sakhi prana* and *Marubari korvalene* (both in Chenchuritti), to mention only a few, gained considerable weight and beauty in Muktha's hands. None in the audience failed to be emotionally moved when she rendered these works. The rasika's heart would be suffused with peace and his soul elevated.

This unique style of music can now be heard only in a few recordings done surreptitiously and there are only a couple of official recordings. Those fortunate few who had the opportunity to listen to the doyennes have their memories of the great music of Brinda and Muktha to savour.

There is a new found interest in the music of Brinda and Muktha amongst young rasika-s the world over. Many rasika-s who have listened to other musicians and have accidentally stumbled upon Brinda-Muktha's recordings have said that after listening to their music they are not able to listen to anyone else. What greater tribute does the Dhanammal style need, and need anything more be said about Brinda-Muktha's music? ■

“I grew up with the music of Dhanam's family”

Senior musician RAMA RAVI learnt the Dhanammal style of music from T. Viswanathan, T. Sankaran and from their cousins T. Brinda and T. Muktha too. She sings padam-s and javali-s (besides other major pieces) which she imbibed from the family, in her concerts. She also teaches music to a number of earnest students. Rama Ravi shares her learning experiences with Sruti.

My grandfather, V.N. Shama Rau was a well known advocate. Though he had not studied music formally, he was a great connoisseur of music and a good rasika too. He put his daughter, that is, my mother Thulasi, under the tutelage of vidwan Parur Sundaram Iyer (father of violinists M.S. Anantharaman and M.S. Gopalakrishnan), to learn both vocal music and violin. My grandfather had great respect and admiration for guru Sundaram Iyer and obeyed his guidelines with respect to music.

Dhanammal's music was very close to Sundaram Iyer's heart and he held her in high esteem. It was he who introduced my grandfather to Veena Dhanammal's music and wanted his student Thulasi to gain some 'gnanam' by listening to that style of music and enrich her own. Shama Rau thus became a frequent visitor, along with

his daughter Thulasi, at the famous Friday concerts of Dhanammal at her house in Georgetown. In this manner, the Veena Dhanam style was imbibed by our family.

I studied at Besant Theosophical High School and at Kalakshetra, in both of which music was also taught. Following that, I did my graduation and also masters in music from the Stella Maris College, Madras. T. Viswanathan (grandson of Veena Dhanammal) was one of the examiners at my final examinations. On his suggestion, I decided to continue higher studies in music at the University of Madras where Viswanathan was then the Professor and Head of the Department of Music. Apart from listening to other stalwarts of Carnatic music of that time, I grew up with the music of Dhanam's family — Brinda, Muktha, Viswanathan, Balasaraswati and Sankaran. I was so enamoured of their style of music that it became a passion for me to learn more and study in depth. This culminated in my research thesis on gamaka-s, a topic suggested by Dr. T. Viswanathan, to obtain my M.Litt. degree in music. Only much later, did I realise the value of this study, and found how inseparably connected these two were — the Dhanam style and the aspect of gamaka-s. Viswanathan opened my eyes to several

subtleties and nuances of music and taught me a number of compositions.

T. Sankaran, another grandson of Veena Dhanammal, shifted to our colony during my college days and became a close friend of my grandfather and family. He became my benefactor too. He not only helped me learn masterpieces of great composers, but also made me edit and present a number of javali-s, which were in his treasured possession. It was he who took me to Mukthamma and introduced me to her. He requested her to teach me. Thus began my tutelage with that veteran musician. I learnt a number of major pieces like, *Evarichirira* (Madhyamavati), *Karubaru* (Mukhari) from her, besides padam-s and javali-s. She was a patient teacher and would untiringly repeat a sangati in order that the student should get it right. The most admirable quality in her was that she had no reservation in teaching any song which the student asked for. How broadminded and generous she was indeed! She had a remarkable memory, always ready to teach any song off hand, with no confusion about the sahitya or the sangati-s.

After my marriage, I had to accompany my husband to different places in his transferable job. Since I had already started giving concerts, I used to visit Chennai for this purpose. While in Chennai, I utilised the opportunity to go to the Dhanammal family members to improve my repertoire. During the 1970s, I had the good fortune to learn some invaluable pieces from Brindamma. I learnt, along with others, Tyagaraja's opera, *Nauka Charitram*. I was one of the participants in Brindamma's presentation of this opera at the Music Academy. In December 1976, Brindamma presented a lecture demonstration on padam-s at the annual conference of the Sri Krishna Gana Sabha. I happily recall how she specially invited and prepared me for this programme. She taught me and a few others a number of Telugu padam-s in this connection, and put us through rigorous training sessions. I can never forget those moments of joy and thrill in my life. Brindamma was a good teacher, and was strict too. She was a disciplinarian and a perfectionist, and would never compromise on quality. She would sing and expect the student to reproduce the lines exactly as she did. If we did otherwise even slightly, it would bring expressions of disapproval on her face. She could never bear diluted versions. It was all a very



Brinda

memorable experience for me, which I will always cherish.

The Ananthapadmanabha Swamy Temple was built at Adyar, Chennai, in 1962. Brinda and Muktha lived very near this temple. During the month of Margazhi (December – January), on the Vaikuntha Ekadasi day, the deity was brought outside the temple premises to be taken out in procession on the streets. It was then customary for Brindamma and Mukthamma to sing the Subbaraya Sastri masterpiece, *Ninu sevinchina* (Yadukulakambhoji) in front of the deity. My mother and I would sing along. This went on year after year. Even after Brindamma settled at Besant Nagar, Mukthamma continued this service to the Lord till well into her eighties. It was a fulfilling experience for all of us, and even when I think of it now, it induces an ecstatic feeling in me.

As part of his routine, the Paramacharya of Kanchi used to visit a number of places in Chennai, to conduct pooja-s and rituals. On one such occasion, when he visited the Padmanabha Swamy Temple, the sisters sang the grand Sankarabharanam piece of Subbarama Dikshitar, *Sankaracharyam*, followed by other pieces, captivating the listeners with their bhava and bhakthi laden sangeetam. What a service indeed to the Lord, through the medium of music!

When, in my concerts, I sang pieces that I learned from the Dhanammal family, many rasika-s of the Dhanammal bani felt happy that I was singing in that style. Even now I strive to maintain that style and I teach my students many songs from the repertoire that I have acquired from them. My daughter, Nanditha Ravi, was fortunate enough to sing before both Brindamma and Mukthamma and receive their blessings.

In 2003, when Mukthamma returned to Chennai after giving an exquisite concert in Cleveland, I went to offer my respects to her. It just so happened that she enquired if I knew *E papamu* of Tyagaraja in raga Athana. When I said no, she said I should learn it and taught me that piece then and there. She was 88 then! The guru-sishya relationship with Mukthamma was a beautiful one till the very end. She treated me with love and affection, like her own daughter, who incidentally is of the same age as I am. I grieved much when the great musician passed away. But I will always cherish my learning experiences with the veterans of that family. ■

Mukthamma's fragrant music

There was once a sprawling bungalow in the heart of Adyar with its garden full of jasmine creepers and an atmosphere of heady musical fragrances. It was a place where I, a wide-eyed twelve-year old loved to go every evening not only to imbibe music lessons from a wonderful human being named T. Muktha, but also to linger among the jasmine creepers and make garlands. She was my beloved Mukthamma, one of the towering beacons in my journey of musical discovery; the others being my Guru Dr. S. Ramanathan and my own father Dr. Srinivasan. My association with Mukthamma began one evening when my father received a call from Dr. Ramanathan, asking him to take me to an address in Besant Nagar. My father duly took me to the house, which we later came to know was that of Y.G. Duraiswamy. It was only after reaching there that we learnt that the 'legendary' Mukthamma of the Brinda-Muktha duo was taking classes for a few ladies.

Mukthamma asked me to sing and upon hearing me, asked my father to enrol me in the class. The first padam that I learnt was *Vadiga Gopaluni* of Kshetranya in raga Mohanam. That was the second major step forward in my musical journey, the first being my introduction to Dr. Ramanathan himself when I was merely six years old.

I was struck by Mukthamma's simplicity and the sincerity with which she taught everyone. A very patient teacher, she would never hesitate to repeat any line or sangati. After a few classes with the group, she asked me to come to her house to learn on an individual basis and that marked the start of my fascination with the jasmine-bedecked bungalow and the golden soul that resided within.

Every class would begin with me revising the padam-s and kriti-s that she had already taught me. And then she would teach me a new song. There was absolutely no recording or notation. She would just dictate the words at the end of the session. Amma would keenly listen to what was sung and would acknowledge with a nod if she appreciated what she heard. She would see to it that whatever she taught was rendered with perfection. I remember the patience with which she taught me the Nadanamakriya padam, *Payyada* in Tisra Triputa tala. I found it very difficult to grasp the 'akaaram' passage of the pallavi line, where the rhythm and the melody are woven very beautifully. It took me four full

sessions to learn the padam, and that surprised Amma very much.

Amma's memory was amazing and she never referred to a book at all, a testimony to a life soaked in music. She used to be amazed that one would even refer to a notebook. Amma believed that through 'sadhakam', one can, and should, commit all the songs to memory. I had the great fortune of accompanying Amma in a few concerts. The very first occasion was at Sastri Hall when, halfway through her concert, she beckoned me to get on the stage and sing with her. Imagine my nervousness at facing an audience consisting of musical giants of the day and renowned critics from various newspapers! But Mukthamma was very encouraging. And like in class, Mukthamma was strict about the pathantaram, singing each sangati twice even on stage!

The mother in her worried about my safety, insisting that I go home every evening before it got too dark. She never let me go home alone after 6 pm and made me wait till my father came to pick me up. It was on one such occasion that my father and I got to listen to Mukthamma, Brindamma and Vegavahini Aunty singing together with just a tambura for accompaniment. I consider it divine grace that we got to listen to such heavenly music.

Mukthamma's sense of sruti and her musical memory were amazing even during her illness. While she could not remember people, she never forgot the songs. Visiting her once during her convalescence from an illness, I even heard her sing kalpana swara-s for 'O Bhamane' in the padam, *Valapu dasa* in Varali, a rare treat considering the fact that she never sang kalpana swara-s in her concerts.

Amma was such an affectionate, caring and wonderful human being who taught great music with love and sincerity. She taught me countless padam-s and javali-s, kriti-s of the Trinity, Subbaraya Sastri and Tamil composers as well as tillana-s, Tiruppugazh and Tevaram. Today Mukthamma is physically no longer with us and neither is that lovely bungalow. But she has left me and several of her students with an onerous responsibility — that of caring for and sustaining her fragrant, everlasting music.

S. SOWMYA



Muktha

Mukthamma as a veena teacher

NIRMALA PARTHASARATHI, well known vainika, had the unique opportunity of learning the Dhanammal bani on the veena from T. Muktha. She describes her experience.

I had learnt the veena from M.A. Kalyanakrishna Bhagavatar and K.S. Narayanaswami and was playing in their style, which was essentially similar. In 1976, Bombay Ramachandran took me to Mukthamma and requested her to teach me. Mukthamma did not agree at first as she felt that she could not correct me on the veena. She had lost touch with the instrument many decades earlier. Bombay Ramachandran persisted saying that she could try for a few days and if she did not find it suitable she could discontinue teaching me. Thus began my lessons with Mukthamma.

It was a unique experiment. I had only heard concerts of Brindamma and Mukthamma and I did not have much knowledge about their style. Mukthamma would teach me by singing and I would have to play the sangati-s on the veena. When I made a mistake, she would correct me until I got it right. It was as if I was learning the veena afresh, because I not only had to learn the songs, I had to absorb a unique bani and play accordingly. As Mukthamma had heard her grandmother Dhanammal playing the veena several times, and as she knew how a song or a particular sangati in it should sound on the instrument, she would wait for me to get the correct nuance and only then go to the next line. She would make me repeat a sangati any number of times in order that I got it right. The words and the bhava had to be incorporated in my veena playing, in short, the veena had to sing as Brindamma and Mukthamma would sing.

At first it was very difficult to reproduce exactly what Mukthamma sang, but with her constant encouragement I could get the nuances right. Mukthamma was pleased with my progress, and began teaching me major pieces from her vast repertoire. It was while learning padam-s from her that the real test began. The slow, evocative pieces of madhura bhakti challenged my fingering technique. I had to work hard in order to maintain the continuity as the gamaka-s and karvai-s in the padam-s were long drawn out. The depth and grandeur of those gamaka-s would demand not only utmost concentration but also tremendous control in the fingering style. Continuity of a particular sangati was very difficult to achieve. Thanks to Mukthamma, who, although a hard taskmaster, was also a patient guru, I could learn the playing of major

kriti-s and padam-s in their style. With her rich raga gnana and swara gnana she guided me brilliantly. I thus learnt hundreds of compositions from her.

Mukthamma was gracious enough to ask me to accompany her on the veena and I have done so several times. It was because of her training, and of course also because of my tutelage under the great masters Kalyanakrishna Bhagavatar and KSN

that I was able not only to give solo veena concerts but also accompany Mukthamma many times.

In the 1980s Brindamma was requested by the Krishna Gana Sabha in Chennai to present a special programme of padam-s and javali-s at their Gokulashtami festival series. She called me and asked me whether I would accompany her. I told her that I would have to ask Mukthamma to which Brindamma agreed. Mukthamma was kind enough to give me permission. During the practice sessions Brindamma closely watched my playing and complimented me saying, "You are playing this bani well." I had the good fortune to accompany her vocal music on the veena.

I also played for Mukthamma at the Krishna Gana Sabha in 1989 at a special programme of Syama Sastry songs. Many of her disciples sang with her and the programme was hailed by rasika-s and critics alike as being excellent.

I have personally experienced Mukthamma's kindness. She was very fond of me and my husband. Whenever we invited her to give a concert at our home she would readily oblige and ask me to accompany her. She has also graced functions in our family. Mukthamma treated her disciples as members of her own family. This enabled them to move freely with her and also helped them to imbibe her music without much difficulty. This is a rare trait in a musician and accounts for the sense of immense loss expressed by her disciples when Mukthamma passed away. I can never forget the years I spent with Mukthamma. ■



The veena-vocal legacy

A generous and meticulous teacher

Vidushi R. Vedavalli's tribute to T. Muktha in *Sruti* brought back memories of the unassuming, simple, humble, humane qualities of a great torchbearer of a grand tradition, who was my teacher also. I was touched by Mukthamma's generosity and down to earth nature on quite a few occasions which created a deep impression on me.

In 1970 my dance teacher T. Balasaraswati wanted me to learn from Mukthamma, the Swati Tirunal padam *Valapu tala vasama*, so that we could include it in my dance performance at the Navaratri Mandapam Festival in Tiruvananthapuram. My father, Dr. V. Raghavan and I called on Mukthamma and she immediately agreed to teach me to sing that padam. The next day, even as I was preparing to leave for Mukthamma's house she came to our house in Royapettah. We were pleasantly surprised and I told her so. Pat came her reply: "What does it matter whether you come to me or I come to you? Learning the composition is important". I was speechless. Her generosity and straightforward attitude were unique, be it towards a senior artist or a student, and that remained her hallmark.

In 1971, at the suggestion of my father who was then a sitting member, the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi initiated a Fellowship Programme for padam and javali singing. Father who had a soft corner for Mukthamma, recommended the assignment to her as the teacher with R. Vedavalli as the disciple. A day prior to the commencement of the classes for the fellowship, Mukthamma came home to meet my father and on seeing me, she spontaneously asked me to join the session the next day. I was taken aback, and was somewhat hesitant to join a senior musician like Vedavalli. The class started in the presence of my father in the Green Room behind the stage of the Music Academy main hall. Mukthamma began teaching *Idi neeku* in Begada and her sangati-s came so swiftly that I was too stunned to follow her, especially with Vedavalli repeating them so beautifully. Much to Mukthamma's disappointment I did not continue my classes. However, later I became Mukthamma's pet student for a decade from 1989 to 1999, enriching my repertoire by attending classes both at the C.P. Arts Centre where she taught for sometime and later at her residence.

Mukthamma taught with great involvement and attention to detail. She was always very generous in sharing her musical heritage. There was never any hesitation or

reservation in teaching all that she knew. She was a very patient and kind teacher who would attend to all the intricate nuances involved in every composition. She would not spare me until I landed on the sangati-s properly.

During a decade of my private tuition under her, I used to wonder at her lung power to linger and dwell on the sangati-s with such clarity, be it a slow one or a fast paced briga delineation. While those in padam-s like *Maaname bhooshanamu*, *Bhamaro*, *Ososi*, and *Rama Rama* created a deep emotional impact with their soulful touches, swift ones in javali-s like *Narimani*, *Smarasundaranguni*, and *Neemata* came out from Mukthamma's high tonal renditions like lightning. Age did not wither her vocal quality even in her ripe years.

Mukthamma always sang along with the students as she taught the compositions. At times, she would close her eyes and continue to sing with great concentration, repeating the sangati-s for our benefit. I would sometimes touch her asking her to pause or to tell her that it was time to conclude the session as the students had to go home. Mukthamma would always be ready to start the class on time as planned, but would never set a time limit to conclude the class. She was a very sincere teacher.

In the 1970s, after a long gap, Mukthamma sang padam-s for Bala's recital at the Music Academy. What the audience witnessed that evening was an unforgettable picture of visual music. Mukthamma's singing was followed by Bala's own voice from time to time, and the entire session of abhinaya still remains etched in my memory, especially Mukthamma's brisk singing of a mangalam describing the divine wedding with its hustle and bustle, which was beautifully brought to life by Bala in dance. It was an unforgettable experience to watch the outstanding skills of both — the musician and the dancer, as they vied with one another — at times competing, sometimes complementing each other.

On yet another memorable occasion, both Vedavalli and I accompanied father's Music Academy lecdem on Swati Tirunal compositions. Vedavalli sang the padam portion for my dance performance, that included *Valapu tala vasama* also. This was on the day of the Sadas in 1973-74, the year Bala was honoured with the Sangeeta Kalanidhi. Mukthamma was right there in front, sitting with Bala, MS, H.H. Marthanda Varma of Travancore and other experts and stalwarts in the audience. After the performance, Mukthamma came up to congratulate

Vedavalli and myself, proving time and again her qualities of simplicity, kindness and large-heartedness. It meant a lot to me personally, to receive her ever inspiring, encouraging compliments and blessings at that moment.

During one of my visits to her place some months prior to her demise, she was bedridden. She held my hands

Some more anecdotes

❖ It was about a couple of years before Dhanammal died. Brinda and Muktha were invited to give a concert at Perambur, Madras. The Sabha secretary requested them to sing the song *Vachamagocharundani*, the Athana composition of Mysore Sadasiva Rao. The sisters replied that they did not know it. Upon which the secretary himself volunteered to teach them the song. They sang the song in their concert. The next Friday they were at Dhanammal's house to listen to her music. Their mother Kamakshi told Dhanammal that Brinda and Muktha had given a concert earlier that week. Dhanammal called the sisters aside and asked them what they had sung. When they said that they had sung *Vachamagocharundani*, the old lady asked them to sing the piece. The one-kalai Adi tala piece in fast pace that she heard irked Dhanammal no end. "Niruthungadi, niruthungadi!" (stop, stop) she cried and then asked them to come home the next day. "I'll teach you the song as it should be sung." The sisters learnt the song the right way, in vilamba kala and in 2-kalai Adi tala. Dhanammal had never taught this song to anyone. The way Brinda and Muktha would sing this song is indescribable. The swara passages are simply grand and majestic.

❖ In the year 2000, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, T. Muktha, M.S. Subbulakshmi and D.K. Pattammal were honoured by the All India Radio. They were the seniormost musicians alive at that time. Semmangudi told Muktha: "My time has come, I am already 92. I am counting my days." To which Muktha replied: "Look, Iyerval, right now no one is waiting with open doors or poornakumbham to receive you in heaven. You will live for some more years." The Pitamaha of Carnatic music enjoyed the banter as did the other two lady veterans. There was hearty laughter all round.

❖ Once at a private recital of T. Viswanathan in the year 2001 at Gowri Ramnarayan's house, he sang the Ghanta padam *Neyyamuna*, but left out two sangati-s in the charanam of that song. The next day we were present when Viswa called on Muktha. She asked him: "Are you forgetting your sangati-s?" and then

tight and said: "Let's sing", and before I could start, she began with *Mamava Pattabhirama* singing the full song, her eyes remaining closed all the while. Her music was her soulmate and she could remember it even amidst a fading memory.

NANDINI RAMANI

turning to us she remarked, "Probably he (Viswa) has accepted a lot of concerts and has decided that he will sing only one sangati per concert!" All of us including Viswa had a hearty laugh.

❖ Muktha taught at the Teachers College of Music at the Music Academy for some time in the 1970s. Like any other college, the Teachers College too conducted an annual sports meet for its students. Muktha sprang a surprise on everyone saying that she would also participate in the running race. She was 64 years old then. The Academy mandarins and students tried to dissuade her, but Muktha was adamant. She participated in the race and ran along with the students. On the way Muktha slipped and fell and had a few bruises. "Doesn't matter, I wanted to participate, and I have done so, that's enough," said the brave veteran. Such was the indomitable spirit of Muktha. This incident was related by musician R. Vedavalli who was learning from Muktha at that time.

❖ After our classes were over one Sunday in 1989, Muktha asked us how we had come. When we told her that we had come by moped she remarked, "Oh, come on! Let's go for a ride upto the Padmanabha Swamy temple." We tried to dissuade her as we felt she might not be able to balance herself on the pillion. She was 75 then. Muktha's daughter also asked her what people in that street would think of her when they saw her riding on the pillion. To which Muktha replied, "Oh I have been living here for 35 years, what will they think? Let them have a good laugh at my expense! Does it matter?" And of course she rode on the pillion to the temple and back with one of us driving the moped.

RAVI & SRIDHAR

In *Sruti* 273 under 'Interesting Anecdotes' (p. 36) on Muktha inviting Semmangudi to sing at the cradle ceremony of her granddaughter, Muktha's remark to Semmangudi was actually "Look Iyerval, I am not asking you to get married, only to sing. Just come and sing." *Sruti* deeply regrets the error in the story as published.

E - BOOK EDITION

BRINDA MUKTHA

BASTIONS OF A GLORIOUS TRADITION

Sruti

INDIA'S PREMIER MAGAZINE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

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