

## Palghat K.V. Narayanaswamy : Further Excerpts From Interview

*SRUTI Editorial Associate V.S. KUMAR interviewed Palghat K.V. Narayanaswamy when the vidwan was selected to preside over the 60th annual conference of the Music Academy of Madras. The first instalment of excerpts from the interview was published in the Winter Bumper Issue (27/28). The second and final instalment is printed below.*

### Teaching : Hazards, Effectiveness

**When you teach ladies or young boys, you have to sing at a very different pitch from your usual sruti. Does this not affect your singing voice ? What do you do to prevent this from affecting your voice ?**

That's a good question.

The idea is to learn and perfect the method of practising music, the method of aligning oneself to sruti and singing. In the North, there is so much attention given to sruti unison. This is something we must commend and follow.

In learning to sing, the key should be to learn the perfect use of voice. There is no need for separate breathing exercises ; correct singing is the best exercise there can be. There are seven pronunciation techniques—aa, ee, oo, ae, i, ow and humkaram, as they are called—which must be assiduously practised and perfected. In fact, this must be done from childhood. Children must be taught to stay on a given pitch using, for instance, aakaram—singing *aaaaaa*—and slowly to increase the duration of the stay. This will help develop the ability to give karvai-s on a given note without pitch variation. Chembai was a great master in this art—he could stay for eight avartana-s on the same note without faltering on the sruti, you know. He would ask you to count. What's required is not so much physical strength as sadhakam [practice] and strength of the mind.

Sruti-gnanam and laya-gnanam are paramount in the learning and practice of good music. One should do sadhakam with kalapramanam, one should not learn the raga-s and sahitya-s first, then the tala. One has to learn them together at the same time ; otherwise one will not get a grip over tala ever.

**But let's get back to my question—if you teach in different sruti-s, what should you do to preserve your concert sruti and protect your voice for the kutcheri ?**

When I teach female students, I do face this problem that at times I have to sing at a very high pitch, at others at a low pitch. This can't be avoided.

**But it doesn't seem to have bothered your voice at all—you have been able to maintain voice fidelity despite this occupational hazard. How have you managed it ?**

One thing that a singer shouldn't do is overdo the practice. All this stuff about getting up at four o'clock in the morning and singing in the tara stayi [higher octave] is unnecessary

acrobatics. Shouting in tara stayi in the morning should be avoided totally. Early morning practice must be done in mandhra stayi only.

To answer your specific question : the teacher should develop the knack to teach girl students without straining his voice too much. He should give his voice softly and gently so that the timbre of the voice does not break. The other thing, the more important thing, is *not* to keep singing and yelling along with the student all the time. He must make the student sing the sangati-s many times and confine himself to correcting and guiding them. The principle is the same whether the student is a female or a male.

The idea is of course to impart knowledge to someone else ; but in doing this, the teacher must be able to reduce the strain on his own voice to the minimum possible. He must lower his sights somewhat and try to teach at a level which the disciple is able to understand. Say, if there's a sangati I'm teaching which the student isn't quite able to catch, I can go on singing the sangati any number of times ; the student will probably keep singing it the way he has been able to interpret it. Repetition on my part would be a waste of time. Intelligent guidance is what's required in such a situation. So, I must try and spell out the sangati in a lower tempo, get the student to follow the variation at that tempo, and then ask him to speed it up. If you don't vary your speed but expect him to learn the sangati at the faster pace, he will probably never get around his difficulty.

*KVN, Lalgudi & Palani Subbudu*



**But doesn't all this put a lot more strain on you while teaching ?**

Yes, but only mental strain, strain upon the intellect. Not on the voice. And I don't make the mistake of physically repeating the sangati. When I find my student needing some practice—to get the ideas clearly planted in his mind—I ask him to sing the item many times over.

Of course the ideal thing to have is a bunch of students who are quick on the uptake, who understand quickly what is being said. In the case of my daughter Anuradha for instance, I have someone who, because of many years' association perhaps, is able to grasp what I'm saying and translate the ideas in her voice not only identically but with even a special touch of her own, lent by her voice. But everyone you teach can't be like that.

**I wonder whether a musician can restrict his student population only to bright people like that, and say 'No' to anyone else who wants to learn, whether he can refuse teaching assignments which come his way when teaching is done as a jeevanopayam.**

For myself I follow a very strict rule. I do not accept a teaching assignment unless I know I can spare time for it and I know it won't strain me overmuch. Sometimes I'm compelled to refuse despite strong recommendation but, if I take on a worthy student, I'd like to give that tuition all I've got.

**How do you teach raga, swaraprastara, niraval and such creative aspects to students ?**

When Palghat Mani Iyer taught me raga, he would say, for example, *Start singing Todi*. I would start with a sangati. He would listen and say : *OK. Now start differently*. He would go on like that, getting out of me a number of starting sangati-s, a number of alternate methods of developing the raga and some sanchara-s. A sketch of the raga would emerge, with him adding on a few sangati-s of his own. Many raga phrases have come out of the great sangati-s in the various kriti-s played and sung by the masters of old—Papa [Venkatarama] Iyer, Ariyakudi and others. These are ageless, indestructible sangati-s which can help us in getting beautiful images of the raga.

To learn the raga, therefore, one should hear a great deal of good music and one should practise a great deal. The phrases will at first be all wrong and irregular, but slowly the distinct shape of the raga will emerge. One has to pass through the painful stage of apaswara-s and confusing passages. In the [Government Music] College also, I used to structure raga teaching as I have described just now, starting with an outline, using a few well-worn sangati-s that can define a raga reasonably well. But some students thought the raga was just these few sangati-s, they sang only these and called that the raga. I had to chasten them : *These are only the guidelines, the framework within which the raga should be sung*. It is important, that, after finishing college, a student should polish up his alapana with the help of the outlines taught to him and with hard practice. Anyone who thinks he or she can come out of the college and start performing is foolish. It should never be done. The chronology is : college, followed by practice, and learning the nuances, the technical finesse, from a guru. There is much to be learnt from an experienced musician.

**How about swaraprastara-s ?**

58 In swaraprastara, there are two varieties—sarvalaghu swara-s

which are simple, fluid swara korvai-s or combinations that fall in sama eduppu-s; and complicated swara-s where the eduppu or take-off is from different fractions of the tala cycle. These should be practised until one becomes thorough. If this is done, any one of these phrases will come to the performer's help when he is doing the prastara. Within specific swara korvai-s it is possible to have variations on each. For instance, a phrase of four swara-s can be *sa-sa-ri-ga, SA-ri-ga, sa-RI-ga, sa-ri-ri-ga, sa-ri-ga-ga* and so on. Any of these can be chosen depending on what the rakti of the raga demands. Experimenting with a number of these combinations and permutations is the learning of swaraprastara. These are what are called kalpana swara-s.

Of course, this is not all. One should also develop the ability to sing korvai-s of 3-7 or 3-5 or 3-9 without preplanning, on the spot. The muthaippu should seek the singer—not the other way. A singer may have the experience of going round and round looking for the 'idam', of not being able to round off a prastara, but that would probably be his best learning experience. Once this happens he would, he *should* never slip up again on that score. What the singer should do to make the concert a success is another story. His swaraprastara should be done taking into account the capacity of the accompanists to support and enhance the exhibition of his artistry. While the accompanists should be able to play according to the demands of the main performer and enable the singer to give of his best, there is a countervailing responsibility as well. For example, the singer should not abandon his mridangam accompanist in search of a very intricate swara passage.

**My next question is broadly in this area ; it concerns voice preservation. In 1967 or thereabouts, you had some heart ailment. It seems that after this episode, your musical attainments have only been greater, not lesser. Your singing took on fresh nuances and you had no need for props of any kind. What is the secret of this ?**

[Padma Narayanaswamy interrupts to say that the secret essentially is the path shown by his guru, KVN wouldn't give a recital if he had a bad throat, for instance.]

Here is where I'd like to tell you about the greatness of my guru. His 'vazhi', his method was thoroughly disciplined and oriented fully to presenting good music. For example, if he had a cold and the throat was somewhat frozen, he would not sing sanchara-s in the top sadja in the earlier part of the concert. He would select for this phase kriti-s which did not necessitate his singing at a stretch in tara stayi and he would touch the top only gently. As he kept his voice in check and released it gently, it would get adjusted and become fluid and at this point he would be able to essay comfortably the kriti *Sri Subrahmanyaya namaste* in Kambhoji upto the top panchama. When a musician starts ambitiously even when he has a bad throat, the voice progressively worsens till he loses his voice altogether before mangalam. But in my guru's case the voice would become better and in the latter part of the concert it would be sweet like honey.

**To a large extent, you too seem to have mastered this technique. How does one achieve this ? Also, when you had the ailment, what steps did you take to conserve yourself ?**

For a month-and-a-half after that heart trouble, I was absolutely forbidden to sing. It was a horrible experience, y'know.

I was forgetting my music and a stage came when I thought it was the end of my career. As they say, 'Irumbum thozhilum irukkak-kedum' [Rough translation : 'Too much rest is rust']. If you don't sing regularly, you can get badly out of shape. That of course doesn't mean that you should practise all the time. I have a concert engagement, let us say. I don't have to practise all the songs or the pallavi for that engagement. I simply have to tune the tambura and keep my voice at the consistent pitch and stay at that sruti. An exercise of this kind is more than sufficient to get the voice to do what one wants.

### Experiences Abroad

Can you tell us about your assignments, your teaching and concert experiences abroad ?

In 1962, I joined the Government Music College in Madras as a lecturer. Musiri Subrahmania Iyer was its Principal then. In 1965, Dr. Robert Brown, the ethnomusicologist who has specialized in Carnatic music, came over from Wesleyan University in the U.S. and requested Musiri to spare my services for a couple of years so that I could teach at Middletown. This University is in Middletown, Connecticut, as you may know. Iyerval agreed to release me. So I went to Wesleyan, as did Palghat Raghu as my partner, under parallel arrangements. As artists-in-residence, our tasks were to teach Carnatic music to students there, give concerts on Fridays and go along with Dr. Brown to give concert and demonstration sessions arranged by the University. Our concerts in this period were without any violin accompaniment.

After about a year of this, we planned a coast-to-coast concert tour. Around this time, in 1966, M.S. Subbulakshmi had come to the U.S. to perform at the U.N.. Violinist V.V. Subrahmaniam had accompanied her. Dr. Brown wanted me to speak to Sri Sadasivam and ask him to allow VVS to stay back in America for a year and go along with Raghu and me on the concert tour. Sri Sadasivam was very happy to do this and VVS accompanied us on the tour. It was a grand experience. The tour included a memorable concert "under the stars" in the Hollywood Bowl.

What were the audiences like ? Were there many Americans ?

Americans were in the majority, yes. They were mostly students taking courses in the Humanities and some in Carnatic music. Before every concert, Dr. Brown would give an introduction, explaining our music, its lakshya and lakshana, in words which they could follow. He would demonstrate the technical aspects of the concert that was to follow — what a varnam is like, how alapana and swaraprastara are done, where a tani avartanam is played in a Carnatic music concert and what it is, etc. He would name the composers whose kriti-s I was going to sing and talk briefly about them. Really, Bob Brown has done a great deal for the dissemination of Carnatic music in the U.S.. Quite a bit of the credit must go to him. In fact, Bala, Viswa and others had also gone to Wesleyan before me and had been welcomed similarly and encouraged by Bob Brown and Jon Higgins. When Viswa went there under a scholarship, Brown and Higgins were studying in Los Angeles.

Your next visit to the U.S. was in 1974, wasn't it ?

Yes. I went to Berkeley, in California, under the auspices of an organisation called the American Society for Eastern Arts. This is run by Stan Scripps and his wife Luise who was a



*KVN—singing in America*

disciple of Balasaraswati. That year there was a big group that went — Balasaraswati, myself, T.N. Krishnan, Palghat Raghu, V. Nagarajan, Nikhil Banerjee . . . even Amir Khan was scheduled to come but he died in an accident shortly before he was to leave. The visit was a great experience indeed. It had everything — concerts, teaching . . .

Did you go to Europe at all ?

I had participated in the Edinburgh festival in 1963. In 1977 I was one of the musicians invited to sing at the Berlin music festival. It's a well-known music fete in which both Carnatic

*KVN—cooking in America*



and Hindustani music are represented. Many musicians of repute, like D.K. Pattammal, K.S. Narayanaswamy and Hariprasad Chaurasia, have been invited to this festival. From Berlin we went to Holland and toured London, Paris and Geneva. The people—the foreigners—who listened to our music seemed to like it.

**When was your next trip to America ?**

In 1983, I was invited by an organisation called Bhairavi. This is run by some South Indians there—Cleveland Sundaram, Venkataraman and Anantha. They did a beautiful job, organising concerts and demonstrations for us—M.S. Anantharaman, Trichur Narendran and Padma were with me—over a period of three months. We went in September and returned in December.

**And then ?**

In 1984 I went to San Diego University in California under a Fulbright Scholarship. My assignment involved teaching, attending seminars, singing to students in advanced classes and answering their questions. They—the American students—were all people who knew music; if not our music, at least Western music. They were all intimately connected with music. Padma, who accompanied me, taught the girls.

**During your two teaching assignments in America, were you teaching the students individually ? Or in groups ?**

Only individual students. Occasionally there was a group of two or three, but this was rare. Invariably the students had individual schedules worked out with the teachers and they followed them diligently.

**How did you find the student attitudes in the U.S. ? Is it true that some said : 'I'll give you so many dollars, teach me these songs' ?**

I didn't find any such attitudes. Of course, in the various universities I taught, the schedules were all laid out, but even otherwise I don't think they [the music students] are money-minded. In fact, a young man who approached me for learning said : *I'm afraid I can't pay you anything but I'm very keen to learn. I said : It's alright. Come along.* There are have-

*KVN, Veeruraghavan, Ramani & Raghu*



*KVN with VTS, Raghu & Bob Brown (in tie and jacket)*

nots in America too.

**Did you have problems communicating with the students ?**

Right. In the beginning I wondered how I would manage it and voiced my apprehension to Brown. He assured : *I haven't called you to speak ; I've called you to sing.* I guess I developed the skill to get my points across over two visits. This last time I even spoke in a seminar and Brown said : *You are doing just fine, much better than I ever can !* Sometimes, struggling to express an idea, I'd ask around for the correct word. Anyhow I've been able to make myself understood. So that's that.

### Concert Accompaniments

**Do you have any views on the role of accompanists in a concert ?**

A violin accompanist has an unenviable role to play. He should invariably be more knowledgeable than the singer. Because he has to play for so many main performers, he necessarily has to know more kriti-s and be better at technique and be familiar with a variety of styles. But all the same he has to underplay and subjugate his artistry to that of the singer. A soloist can play at will and exhibit everything he has but not an accompanist. The violinist has to understand the quality and quantity of sound to be given for a particular singer, for a particular song, even for a particular prayoga in a kriti. The song being sung should be heard by him clearly, this is of paramount importance. Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai used to hold the sound of his violin at a level where he could hear the singer well. Similarly, Palghat Mani Iyer's playing depended entirely upon the voice of the singer. The softer the voice, the softer his mridangam sound would be. For a singer with ghana saareeram he would play with more force.

**How much of their own virtuosity can the accompanists exhibit ? Isn't there a problem for them either way, in that if they show their virtuosity they are accused of overshadowing the singer and if they underplay, the listeners accuse them of lacklustre or dreary performance.**

There was a violinist named Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer, also called Suswara Sundaresa Iyer. Do you know how he used to play ? If the main singer took five minutes [to delineate a raga], he would take only one-and-a-half or two. But in that time he would show everything the main artist did and more. The raga would be rasa-purvaka and ranjaka to the core [full of rasa and a pleasure to listen to]. He would be only sketching the raga, mind you, but it would have the

impact of a complete alapana. Some accompanying violinist might say, for instance : *The singer sang for five minutes, but I played only for 4¼ minutes.* What was the need to play for 4¼ minutes, pray ? In any case, duration by itself is not the main issue. If the circumstances warrant it, there'd be no harm even if he played for longer. What is important is the presence of mind of the accompanying violinist, his quick grasp of the situation and the aptness of his response. Proportion is everything in a concert. This was what endeared M. Chandrasekharan to me when he accompanied me recently in a Gayana Samaja concert in Bangalore. I was singing Saveri as a prelude to a pallavi and did it in three parts—first upto the panchama, then the upper reaches and then the descent. At each stage when I gave him the floor, he played briefly and only upto the point which I had sung. This kind of understanding heightens the listening pleasure and the singer's own mood considerably.

**Would you therefore expect your violin accompanist merely to follow your sangati-s faithfully, or would you allow something more creative, something which spurs you to reach greater heights ?**

Certainly the latter, certainly some creative accompaniment—but the accompanist should be capable of that, shouldn't he ? If he is not, it would be much better off if he were to conclude his tani-s quickly and underplay totally. He should at least be intelligent enough to realize his limitations and not play out the 'full length of time' as preconceived by him. In fact, he would be spoiling the concert and annoying the listeners as well if he did that ; if he were to show no virtuosity at all, the singer can try and make up for that lack with his talent. A kutcheri needs a lot of teamwork, really.

**Do you specify accompaniments you would like to have for your concerts ? Do you think a musician can or should do this ?**

A singer should be ready to sing, regardless of who is accompanying him. He might have ideas of his own, that such and such a violinist or mridangam player would suit him best. But he must not enforce it on the organiser. Of course people, listeners who have heard his concerts for a long time, might feel that he comes off best in a particular combination and they sometimes express a wish that he should sing with those

*KVN, M.S. Anantharaman, Narendran & Padma*



*Semmangudi Narayanaswamy*

sidemen. In such cases, if a sabha secretary were to ask me for my suggestions regarding the sidemen, I'd say : *Do as you please, but you might consider so-and-so.* I sometimes recommend a violinist who hasn't played at all with me, so that I can get a new experience and the listeners also have a variation.

**When you sing with a new accompanist, do you make any special effort to ensure that you blend well ?**

Nothing of that kind. I don't think it's required in our music to make advance preparations. The artists often meet only on the dais—so arranging the concert items in advance or rehearsing is out. We have to learn the grammar and the sahitya-s and the pathantara-s well before we get on the concert platform ; so it isn't necessary to know each other. A musician who has reached a certain level should be able to sing to any accompaniment ; the same goes for the sidemen in reverse.

**But do accompanists come to you sometimes to prepare for a concert ?**

Yes, they do sometimes. But more often than not, a violinist who has played for a few singers learns the different styles and acquires the skill to interpret the style of a new singer within the first couple of items in a concert.

### **Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi**

As you know, the Sruti Foundation has been implementing a project to restore ragam-tanam-pallavi to its proper place and to promote special pallavi concerts. You were, in fact, the first musician to be featured in the Project's pallavi series in Madras. Can you share your views on the significance of ragam-tanam-pallavi in Carnatic music ?

Ragam-tanam-pallavi is indeed an important item in our music, in our kutcheries. As a rule, it comprises an elaborate ragam, tanam and a pallavi in 4-kalai chaukkam. If a musician wants to give the pallavi the pride of place in his or her concert, this multi-tempo rendering is a must. There are many beautiful pallavi-s of this genre. If you examine some old-time pallavi-s, you'll note the words are very few, but the pallavi will be sung in 4-kalai, so that there is more scope for intricate niraval. Then there are nadai-pallavi-s too.

In a concert, there are times when the pallavi is the main item. At other times, a major kriti in a major raga may itself 41



*At the Academy : KVN speaking, with Vasanthakumari, Brinda, Pattammal, Subbulakshmi & Semmangudi on the dais.*

come off so well in fulsome detail, that a pallavi may seem superfluous. In such an event, a short pallavi will be in order—not a 4-kalai affair, something smaller—but it should have substance, like a difficult tala or a tricky eduppu.

Pallavi-s should be sung more and more but we can't expect to hear a pallavi in every concert. The short duration of kutcheris these days makes it difficult. If we try to give representation to many composers, as we are expected to do, then we have very little time left for a detailed pallavi. We are also expected to include as many musical forms in a kutcheri as we can—varnam, javali, padam, tillana, ashtapadi, bhajan, tarangam, viruttam and so on. In the old days there were no

such constraints and one could sing just four or five items, including a pallavi in a recital.

That's why I think SRUTI's Pallavi Project is an excellent idea. When you explore a pallavi properly, you need two hours and more—which you can get in a special programme like that. Such special pallavi-oriented concerts should be held widely, but in regular concerts a pallavi should not be insisted upon even as it should not be avoided totally. It should just happen. It shouldn't be forced. The motto for a general concert must be : sing anything but don't allow the rasa to be affected adversely. However, for the prime-time concerts in a place like the Music Academy, it's important to include an elaborate pallavi. □

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