

CHITRAVINA N. RAVIKIRAN



The Crown Prince of Carnatic Music – Part 1

Andrián Pertout speaks with Chitravina N. Ravikiran about South Indian 'Carnatic' music, and his recording session with blues artist Taj Mahal.

In 1969, two-year-old Chitravina N. Ravikiran became the world's youngest performer ever, and in the process was bestowed with the eternal blessing of sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar's words, "If you don't believe in God, just look at Ravikiran." In the years that followed, he went on to establish a formidable musical career in every major city around the world, with his esteemed participation in international festivals, concerts and lectures. He also became the recipient of many awards, titles and honours, which include the prestigious 1985 'Star of India Award' by Wisdom International. The 1994 'Mumtaz Mahal' project with blues artist Taj Mahal and Vishwas Mohan Bhatt represents one of his escapades from the reverence of Carnatic classical music tradition, and illustrates the level of diversity that is synonymous with chitravina artist Ravikiran.

In 1969 you achieved the unthinkable with your first professional appearance at the age of two, thus becoming the world's youngest performer ever. How do you reflect today on these early years of your life?

CNR: "Well, honestly speaking, I don't remember too much about when I was two. But I do have recollections of how I was always around, you know, in different cities, having demonstrations, with top-notch musicians like Pandit Ravi Shankar and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer interviewing me and asking questions. And I personally should give a lot of credit to my father, who is my master and guiding guru, because he is the person who's brilliance in music as well as amazing teaching methods played a very, very vital role in my talent being not only spotted but also channelled. I think that's a very, very vital contribution that he gave. And he never overburdened me, I never felt pressured to do something or achieve anything, he just made music fun and a way of life."

What is the essential philosophy behind a South Indian classical musician?

CNR: "Philosophy is very individualistic, and I don't know whether this ordinary musician as a single species has got one single philosophy, it varies from person to person. Carnatic music really is India's oldest system of classical music, it dates right back to the Vedic times, and it's a very, very complete

system. It is built on very solid foundations of melody, rhythm and lyrics, and it is given equal balance for both composition as well as improvisation. In a typical Carnatic concert we try to give as much variety, completeness, proportion and balance, that's what we try to project, all these varied aspects of a concert. And the philosophy is the same as anyone, enjoy ourselves and project the enjoyment to everyone. So as a system of music, Carnatic music can be appreciated at a motive level or at the intellectual level, or for those who are so inclined, it can be appreciated at a spiritual or philosophical level, because the lyrics can be religious, philosophical or spiritual in nature. There are also songs which are romantic, songs which are patriotic, and so many other types of social songs, but the majority of people who listen to Carnatic music and look for the lyrics, also get a spiritual sort of enjoyment."

What is your own personal outlook?

CNR: "I personally think that music can be looked at from two viewpoints. As an end in itself, where you approach music for its own sake, and where excellence and perfection is the priority, that will be the end, so music is the supreme thing there. The other approach of course is to view music as a means, to promote good will, positive things. I think music has got a very much active role in society, which can be tapped and exploited, and explored."

Tell me about the instrument that you play. How would you describe the chitravina and its function within 'Carnatic' music?

CNR: "The chitravina is an old instrument, but it had been dormant for some years, and recently it has come back to popularity, from the early twentieth century. Honestly speaking, it was my grandfather who really brought the instrument to its glory. He was a legendary artist, and then his son, that is my father. By God's grace, from the late seventies I've been playing the instrument in concerts. I started as a vocalist first, but then I thought that this instrument had a lot of scope. It's a beautiful instrument, and it's got a lot of continuity, because of the fretless nature."

What is its construction?

CNR: "Basically it's got a major resonator on the right side, where it's plucked, and on the left it has got a sort of a gourd to balance. So it's a lute type of instrument, it's totally fretless, and it's got twenty-one strings. It's a beautiful instrument, it's got resonating strings, and it can actually bring out the best of Carnatic music, both in a vocal style, as well as in an instrumental style. Recently, since the late eighties, I also played a lot with musicians from other cultures, like pop musicians, jazz musicians or blues, all these artists. So I played in a lot of fusion concerts and recordings."

After performing on a global scale for over two decades there must be a book's worth of reminiscence. What do you consider as some of your most memorable highlights from around the world?

CNR: "It's very difficult for me to sit and reminisce, because I believe that it should be at least another fifty years before I really start looking back, until then I should only be looking forward. And so I'm really thinking of what next to do, and what next to do. There have been lots of great moments in my life, no doubt at all, and some of the greatest are when you really get knowledgeable audiences or other fellow musicians who come and cheer you up, or who can perceive what you are trying to do. To get accolades from good musicians who have been through what you are doing, that's probably the best thing. And in that category I've been really lucky because great masters have seen, and have been kind enough to judge my music to be nice, and all that. And I think my life has been pretty positive and really nice so far. I love to travel and play with different artists all over the world, and visit different cities. It's always nice to also get good audiences from different countries that enjoy what you are doing. And it's especially nice when I'm able to communicate my music, because of the

medium of instrument, it's more abstract, and so people are not divided over the language, or the theme, or anything. You know, it's pure music that attracts them."

In 1994 you participated in the 'Mumtaz Mahal' project with blues artist Taj Mahal and Vishwas Mohan Bhatt. How would you describe the experience?

CNR: "It was very interesting, and I had played a lot of fusion before, but with Taj we met just a few minutes before the recording and just kept on improvising. Another musician, Vishwas Mohan Bhatt also played, so I think it was fun, and I think we enjoyed one another's music tremendously. We were rather natural and free about the whole thing. In fact that CD was rated among the top ten in '95 in the national US 'World Music' category."

"Rays of Romance: Silver Dagger" distributed by Frequency Glide Enterprises. For further information write to Chitravina N. Ravikiran, 16/122 CPWD Quarters, Indiranagar, Madras 600 020, India; C/- Ramana Kanumalla, 1783 Talbot Road, Blue Bell, PA 19422, USA; Email: ravikiran@erols.com or nravik@hotmail.com; or visit Mohan Krishnamoorthy's [Carnatic Music](#) Web Site.

ANDRIÁN PERTOUT

The second part of this interview was published in [Mixdown Monthly issue #53](#), September 1997. In this article he discussed his non-stop recitals for world peace, and the role of music today.

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CHITRAVINA N. RAVIKIRAN



Chitravina N. Ravikiran - Melbourne, June 1998
(Left to Right: Sridhar Chari, R. Thiyagarajan, Chitravina N. Ravikiran, Greg Jordan, Mohan Ayyar)

The Crown Prince of Carnatic Music – Part 2

Andrián Pertout speaks with Chitravina N. Ravikiran about his non-stop recitals for world peace, and the role of music today.

As founder of the International Foundation for Carnatic Music and the Musicians' Benevolent Fund, Chitravina N. Ravikiran is certainly a socially conscious individual and an acknowledged philanthropist. He set a world record in 1985 with a non-stop twenty-four-hour recital on the chitravina lute, being a personal dedication to world peace. In protest of current global events, Ravikiran recently conducted a similar 'Gandhian' styled twelve-hour marathon in Melbourne, Australia, with a cast that included mridangamist Sridhar Chari, bansurist R. Thiyagarajan, guitarist [Greg Jordan](#) and keyboardist Mohan Ayyar. His latest Australian visit was also marked by the staging of the Bharatam Dance Company's production of 'Savithri' at the National Theatre, where enchanted audiences were exposed to his composing talents.

How did the 'around-the-clock' non-stop recitals for world peace come about?

CNR: "The first one was in 1985, and I was eighteen years old. And that was really just for my personal satisfaction that I went and played. It was only about three days before that I thought I should do that, so I just went and did it, and it was really fun because I didn't get up at all, I just played continuously. And I didn't have any food or drink, or anything, I just played non-stop. I didn't even change my posture actually, I was sitting in the same position which is great. Now recently, the one I played in Melbourne was more or less a response to what's happening in the world currently, where you know, this nuclear thing and other things are becoming a big issue. So I thought, OK let's get musicians from different parts of the world and show that these musicians care about all these things. And the idea was to project the image that people are for peace, irrespective of whatever the politicians may think. So I just wanted that image to be projected, and that message to be communicated through music, that was the basic idea."

The many social, political and economic problems of today are a feature of not just India, but representative of a global phenomenon. What is your perception of the benevolent role of music in society?

CNR: "Well, I personally think that there are two things. One is that music can be benevolent in a passive way, like what we do now. We get together and just say that we are doing this for that reason, but it's not because we are playing that everybody is going to stop doing nuclear tests or anything. This is more a passive way, but I think music can also play a little more of an active role. Like I personally think, and in fact am working on something called 'Musopathi', which is using music for active therapy. Especially using improvisation in music. That's what I'm concerned about, and I've been meeting people a lot and have been really well received so far. I'm trying to develop it on scientific lines, so that it's standardized and cures can be found out. I'm not saying that music is going to cure aids or something, that would be too much to say or claim, but I personally think it has got a very good chance in any situation which is dealing with mental things, like hypertension or depression. And recently I heard that even cancer has been diagnosed to be among a particular type of personalities only. So I personally think that music could have a very active role to play in those sorts of situations, because at any time when it's a mental thing, music has got a very strong role to change outlook and attitude, or to have a strong influence on outlook, attitude and way of life to the person who plays this instrument. As a musician yourself, you should be aware that when you listen to some types of music, it relaxes you. And there are some types of music which make you feel bouncing and energetic, and some other types which may make you go out and have a drink, or go out and take drugs. The basic thing is that it's a combination of the frequencies, and the speed of the music, and also the theme to a certain extent of course. The speed, the combination of frequencies and the decibel levels to which the ear and the nervous system is exposed to, all these things play a role."

Tell me about Ravikiran the composer. What is your general approach to composition?

CNR: "Honestly, I just compose whatever I feel like. Say, I think I'm a natural composer. My first instinct to compose was pretty much at the age of two or so, when I just created some musical scales that had not been used before. It is really considered that they were discovered by me at that age, but it's not like I invented them, I just discovered some new forms. Then later on I was composing with both orchestral types of music and classical Carnatic compositions with lyrics. I love to compose, so it's just a natural process. You know, I compose when I'm flying, or sometimes when I'm watching a cricket match or something. So it just happens, and I just write it on something. So far I have composed about three hundred and fifty pieces, including some dance dramas and ballets. In fact I came here now to compose and direct the music for a show called 'Savithri', which was held at the National Theatre for a week by the Bharatam Dance Company. So I just finished that."

Do you have a vision for the future?

CNR: "I personally think that there are plenty of things to be done. I'm interested in lots of things, so it's a question of channelling my energies simultaneously in so many things, so many directions. But my first and foremost thing is of course me as a performing musician, that's my first and foremost priority. I would like to be known as a great performing artist, and a composer. The rest of it, my interest in music for peace, or music for cure are all the other facets of me. I would love to do a lot of good things, so my motto in short would be 'service to music and service through music'. I would like to play a lot of fusion concerts, a lot of concerts with top artists across the world, and I would like to continue to perform in my solo capacity as well. I've got a busy schedule around the year most of the time, like I travel seven, eight months all over the world performing, so I'm just enjoying life and hope to continued by God's grace."

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