

Mārgazhi Utsavam

Chennai, Tuesday, December 5, 2006

INDIAN EXILES

By K.N. Narasimhan



Chitraveena N Ravikiran

A journey in harmony

◆ How has the journey from a prodigy to maestro been?

The journey has been a great one and the full credit for this goes to my father and guru Chitraveena Narasimhan. I also owe a lot to my mother and grandmother who taught me different languages which has made a difference in my music too. For one, if one knows the language in which one is singing, then one adds a different dimension to it. That helps one in communicating better. My father had the clear intent to be a prodigy is one thing but to become a maestro is a totally different ball game. Discipline in the initial stages is very important. For the sake of music, I had my initial academic education at home from my parents until class 10. I was directly taken in class 11 and it was pretty easy for me.

I was the only Indian to receive the Millennium Award from the Government of United Kingdom in 2000



the current-day stalwarts.

◆ Tell us something about the concept of Melharmony conceived by you.

I thought about it in 2000 when I was asked to collaborate with BBC Philharmonic Orchestra for the Millennium Festival in UK. The Cultural Min-

ister of the United Kingdom later arranged an encore of the best concerts and we were one among the five chosen teams.

While Indians focus more on the melodic system which means to focus on successive notes, Westerners focus more on harmony or simultaneous notes. During fusion of Indian and Western music, rules of one kind of music will get compromised. I wanted a system to bridge some of these differences by creating harmony with an emphasis on the melodic rules. The concept of Melharmony has been received very well.

I was the only Indian to receive the Millennium Award from the Government of United Kingdom in 2000. American composer Robert Morris also presented a paper on this in November 2005.

◆ Why did you choose a complicated, 21-stringed instrument when there are much easier instruments with frets, like the veena?

First of all, this instrument is very challenging. It demands a lot of concentration and accuracy because it is fretless. It also has much more scope than many other instruments in the sense that it can reproduce microtones almost like the human voice. Another reason for choosing this instrument is that both my father and grandfather were stalwarts of the chitraveena.

◆ Why did you change the name of this instrument from gotuvadyam to chitraveena?

I did not change the name. While doing research, I found out that chitraveena and not gotuvadyam was its traditional name. In order to revive its old name, I got a resolution passed by the Music Academy in 1990.

◆ Tell us something about the International Foundation for Carnatic Music formed by you?

It was launched in 1990 with Semmangudi Srinivasan Iyer as its president. Its role is to publish books, produce albums, conduct workshops and summer camps in different countries of the world. We have also set up a Musician's Benevolent Fund to honour the lifetime contributions of very

seasoned musicians, especially those who have not been financially so lucky.

◆ Your collaborations with world music stars like Taj Mahal and Glen Velez have brought you laurels like The New Age Finalist Award for Best Contemporary Music for 2001. Can you throw some light on it?

I first got into international collaboration in 1987 during a recording in Switzerland initiated by Dr. L. Subramanian. Since then, I have been regularly collaborating with the world's top artists who include jazz, pop, Chinese, Iranian, Brazilian etc., as well as Western classical musicians. Taj Mahal is a legend in Blues (a kind of music started by Afro-American workers) and jazz. I played whatever he sang and we brought out a CD. Glen Velez, who is a drummer and a Grammy award winner, and I brought out an album with Harrisankar on the kanjira and Glen Velez on the drums.

Fusion is one of the best ways of putting Carnatic music on the global map. While collaborating with western musicians, I have been able to introduce traditional Indian concepts like kora and sangathi.

◆ Why did you switch over from vocal to instrumental?

I haven't really switched over. I considered it the best option to expect a voice change at a certain point and still want to continue music without straining the voice. I started giving vocal concerts again in 2000. But, I give them very selectively. Both vocal and instrumental complement each other. If one knows vocal, it becomes easier to reproduce it on the instrument.

◆ You stunned the stage by identifying 325 ragas and 175 solos at the age of two and a half. Do you call this heredity, hard-work or inborn talent?

It is a combination of everything plus the incredible genius of my father who devised unique teaching methods to communicate to an infant child in a most fun-filled manner. My father successfully presented my brother Shashikiran, sister Kiranavali and cousin Chitravina Ganesh. All of us were two and a half years old when we were first presented.

— Divya Narasimhan

Section 2

Lentheas

Classical musicians can no longer seclude themselves from modern distractions or interests. So N Ravikiran has some tips on finding a distinctive voice in the mêlée, writes T K Sreevalsan

a well-tuned balance



■ N Ravikiran in a gig with senior Carnatic instrumentalist Randal Venkateswaran at a Chennai hotel

now that India has won the World Cup, let's talk about the present situation in Carnatic music. The recent news from the BBC suggests that the Indian classical music scene is in decline. This is a misleading statement. There is a vibrant scene of young musicians, composers, conductors and students after the Indian classical music scene. While young, the Indian classical music movement is more dynamic than ever before.

But what about the older generation? The BBC article quotes Dr. M. S. Subbulakshmi and K. S. Gopalakrishnan as being disappointed by the younger generation of Carnatic musicians.

In Bangalore, the older generation includes Dr. B. Rama Rao, who is a prominent exponent of new-age Indian classical music, and Dr. K. S. Gopalakrishnan, who is a leading exponent of Carnatic music. They are both well-known artists and teachers, and they have made significant contributions to the field of Indian classical music.

But what about the younger generation? The BBC article quotes Dr. M. S. Subbulakshmi and K. S. Gopalakrishnan as being disappointed by the younger generation of Carnatic musicians. They are both well-known artists and teachers, and they have made significant contributions to the field of Indian classical music.

Despite the reservations expressed by the BBC, there is a growing interest in Indian classical music among younger audiences. This is reflected in the success of various Indian classical music groups, such as the Indian Classical Music Ensemble, the Indian Classical Music Society, and the Indian Classical Music Association.

Ravikiran has no issues with encounters with other forms of music. He finds them only capable of enriching rather than spoiling the classicism of the Carnatic system

I prefer a hermeneutic approach. Only that at the end of the day your music should be like a milkshake – and not fruit salad. It should be a fluid mix of various qualities with one flavor still standing out. And not a mere assembly of flavours. In short, it's not about fusion; it should not obscure individuality.

The point perhaps Ravikiran is elucidating on open-mindedness. A look at his music reveals his unique propensity to bring you with you many things. He likes to vary his language, his idiom, his singing, the sequence of rhythm cycles. Given these, the best would be to focus on a couple of aspects of your music. As a Carnatic singer, a certain degree of strictness is a must. Given this, I think that the most important thing is to be open to new influences. Many Carnatic masters were in fact specialists. They worked to further embellish their strong areas of musicality.

These days you also have masters who are more open-minded, experimenting with different styles of singing, fusing their style with various forms of music. Some are even into dance productions and film songs and all. Ravikiran has no issues with such associations and finds them only capable of enriching – and not spoiling – the classicism of Carnatic music. In this case, there's also room for evolution. However, he advises to add a strict condition: Don't start from music featuring with mixing. First gain strength in your system, and then maybe dabbling in the others.

Especially, Ravikiran gives no tip without himself having gained first-hand experience of it.

melharmony master



Born in February 1956, Ravikiran started the music world with his debut in 1975 and never stopped. Now 45, he is still at the top of his game, having performed at the prestigious Mahindra World Culture Festival, Ravikiran performed in 1997 at the age of 41. He is considered one of the greatest Carnatic musicians in the world. Many of his recordings were in fact specialities. These worked to further embellish their strong areas of musicality.

awards

- International Level:
 - Mahindra Festival Award, Malaysia, Government of USA, 2000, Best Indian Classical Performer
 - Bank Conference, USA, 2000, Best Indian Classical Performer

National Level:

- Mat. India Award, Madras International, 1992
- Sangeet Award, Sankriti Foundation, 1992

State Level:

- Kalaimamani (One had), Adyar Award, 1983
- Kerala Sahithya Akademi, Bhagya Lakshmi State Award, 1988



www.ravikiran.com

Section 2

Lambeth

Classical musicians can no longer seclude themselves from modern distractions or interests. So N Ravikiran has some tips on finding a distinctive voice in the melee, writes T K Sreevalsan

a well-tuned balance



Chlorophyll fluorescence and its relationship with photosynthetic electron transport in Phaseolus vulgaris L. at different soil

Reactions had just started in a dark, dirty alcove. A detailed description of the setting where the crime took place is left out here, the audience is left to work it out for themselves. The scene ends with a series of short, sharp, jagged exclamations. Many of the words were cut off, as was standard at the time, so the meaning remained mysterious. A couple of seconds later the people in the ensemble were gone. The stage was now completely obscured by the darkness of the auditorium.

In hindsight, the little episode looks far from silly. It seems to present a specimen of new age-contractions before they became viral and a momentary sort of deal-making with one of them. But in fact, after all is said and done, it's a bummer, he would sincerely want regular cast and regular and mostly not the old school type too. His name flashes Chomsky's minder may be a journalist's delight, but when it comes to his approach to the art in its entirety, the 22 year-old has a set of vibrant, wide-openings about the theory, practice and aesthetics of various music forms of the world.

Forget the relatively flippant reminders like a springtime BEES sleep away from your desk or the next few days after mounting his campus roots as the editor is rendering a particularly challenging pallor. That's for rookies to resolve. The modern-day academic has to be bombarded with matters of sufficient importance on a daily basis. Gone

"Now I myself belong to that category," claimed Dr. Wilson. "But that doesn't have to go against my interests, too." And that's the key consideration, he believes. "You can improve in all your positions and still not let them drain from your mind if you devote enough time to it." In fact, the music-teacher believes that your private listening or close study of your musical capabilities when you are following a planned performance schedule can be a great help. "If you are going through a home streak of practice, which took like, instructions could rather refresh you."

But it has much of relevance — even at the point it is limited to its learning curve, leading to a slow erosion of India's education in the *Curriculum Above*. In this case, parental anxiety to the issue of old and contemporary masters — 10% parents — checking its Classes. Has India as a deficitary viewpoint? Yes, it exists; so you should expect competent teachers to know various kinds of music — and as varied schools of singing within the South Indian system. If a study shows it then makes their career begin. I always

Ravikiran has no issues with encounters with other forms of music. He finds them only capable of enriching rather than spoiling the classicism of the Carnatic system.

prefer a heterogeneous approach. Only that, at the end of the day, your menu should be like a milkshake — and not their salad. It should be a fluid mix of various qualities with one flavor still standing out. And not a there assessment of flavours. In short, "selective diners" — or should we say, opposite milkshakes.

The postal service has been instrumental in spreading the gospel. Look, for example, how the Mennonites are now using the post office to spread their message. They have a large number of members in America, and the post office is a great help in reaching them.

Obviously, Savikko gives his tips without himself having gained first-hand experience of it.

melharmony master



awards

www.els-s.com

National Library

- #### State Level

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Vidya Subramanian Shah meets chitraveena maestro, Ravikiran, in Chennai on the eve of his concert in the Capital this week

Chitraveena's man of the hour

You have to wade through a vegetable market and a squat little settlement before you reach a cluster of housing board flats in Thiruvanmiyur, a Chennai suburb. The flat is small, very close to the sea and there is a pleasant breeze wafting in. There is little in the living room other than big pictures of Gods and Goddesses. Ravikiran, the chitraveena maestro, walks in perkily, clad in a silk kurta and pants with gold rimmed glasses and a typical younger man's mustache mark. His bearing is more like that of an intellectual than a musician. "This place is more like a studio," he says, as we settle down to chat. "We eat our meals at my father's house. I do not fancy the idea of staying (his wife, herself a musician) getting tired after a full day of household chores and neglecting her music. So here, we only sit and practice."

At 29, after having been in the limelight for a long time now, Ravikiran still cherishes the little time that he gets to spend with himself and his music. "The deeper I get into it the more insignificant I feel. Music has this amazing quality to reveal itself in installments. To me it is an effort to fill the gap between the mind and the body, between thought and execution. Whatever I have achieved so far, is God's grace."

Ravikiran responded to music very early in life. It all began when he was barely over a year old. He had asked the name of a ragam that his father was playing. Two months later he was quick to identify the ragam in a radio broadcast. From then on his tremendous retentive capacity came to be noticed and his father set on the course of developing this amazing talent in the child.

"We lived and breathed music. Raga names were integrated into our daily lives — so Kona (spanish in Tamil) was always Keeravani, Mullai (mudhal) was Malavasi, and so on. It was all done so playfully that we always enjoyed our music; it never felt imposed or boring," says Ravikiran.

Significantly, this master of the gottuvadyam or chitraveena, as he calls it, who was himself a prodigy till not so long ago, believes prodigies are made not born. The grandson of a gottuvadyam maestro, Mysore Narayana Iyer, Ravikiran made an entry into the world of music under the tutelage of his father, Narasimhan, also a Gottuvadyam *vidwan*. Unswervingly, he says, "I do not really remember the beginning



Ravi Kiran: 'Prodigies are made not born'

I guess I was really small then. Whatever I know is because of my father's painstaking efforts at organising my press clippings.

right from the time I started getting some recognition. He returns with files and folders full of clippings and there is a scrap book with all that was published right from the year 1969 when he was just two-years-old!

That year Ravikiran's talent had already received media attention. After much persuasion from many *vidwan*s who recognised the genius of the child, his father presented him at the Town Hall in Madras for what virtually was a test of Ravikiran's talent.

One cannot but agree when one sees that in this family it is not only Ravikiran who possesses these amazing capabilities — his brother Sashikiran is a vocalist, his sister Kiranavali is also a vocalist and a cousin Ganesh is a Gottuvadyam artiste and all are prodigies!

Did he ever feel that music had been thrust upon him?

between various ragas but I was also able to articulate the distinction between them."

Not merely did he see the difference between Gurumamankar and Keeravani he was also able to find the words with which to communicate his understanding. All this from a child who could barely speak. Ravikiran attributes much of this wonder to the teaching methods of his father. Nerasimhan believed that it was possible for a musical prodigy to be nurtured (heritage or no heritage) provided the child is normal and has average intelligence.

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Did he ever feel that music had been thrust upon him?

Says Ravikiran, "In allowing the child to take time to decide what he or she would like to pursue regardless of given talent we only perpetuate mediocrity. To achieve brilliance in any endeavour one's talents need to be tapped and harnessed early in life. My parents recognised my talent and nurtured it carefully. There were never any problems with my upbringing."

He did not go to school till he was nine-years-old. His father did not feel it necessary to have him undergo regular schooling. Instead, he believed that if music was to be the centre of one's existence then it was important to have knowledge of the *Paramas*, which exalt *bhakti bhava* and of languages like Telugu, Sanskrit, Kannada and Tamil as these were the language of the great composers. "He would also teach us science, arithmetic and English. So when I did get to school — straight to class four — it wasn't too much of a problem."

On the other hand, I had developed a great passion for literature and had read all time greats like Kalki's *Ponnaiyan*

Seivam and *Sivakamiyin Sahalam* by the time I was 12."

Having begun with vocal music Ravikiran was drawn to the gottuvadyam due to a strong family tradition. He has now christened the instrument as chitraveena. According to him, the instrument was revived in the not very distant past by one Sakkarama Rao.

Rao used to refer to the cylindrical piece of stone (or other material used to press the strings of the instrument) as the 'gutti' and so stayed the name gottuvadyam.

Ravikiran researched the antecedents of the instrument to ascertain what names were given earlier. Among the many names, fretless stringed instruments such as this were referred to as the 'chitra' or the 'rangan'. It can be stated definitely that the present day version of the gottuvadyam is directly derived from these instruments. For aesthetic reasons, Ravikiran

prefers to end a chitraveena "rather than making gottuvadyam and the like of it." The counterpart of the chitraveena in Hindustani music, incidentally, is the sitar/violin. Also the 'gutti' which refers to the cylindrical piece of wood or stone has been replaced by present day artists with modern materials like Teflon because it induces the least amount of friction. Since his efforts, resolutions were passed at the Music Academy in Madras (the Mecca of Carnatic music) so that it may be officially called the 'chitraveena'.

Ravikiran's music is often referred to as flawless, reflecting a maturity far beyond his age. His music adheres to a traditional structure with its points intact. He often exemplifies the fact that within the framework and structure of tradition there is ample space for improvisation and innovation. He says, "I am basically a vocalist at heart. I believe that an instrumentalist should be able to sing the compositions he plays."

Awards and titles have come his way in great numbers. Amongst the many that he has received, are the Sanskriti Award and the Tamil Nadu Government Kalaimamani award. This year he has been given the prestigious Khanda Gandharva award by the Madhya Pradesh government.

Of late he has started giving concerts on the guitar as well. "It's easier to play *jugalbandi*'s with the guitar and is actually a useful standby if there is any unforeseen problem with the Chitraveena. I realized this in one of my trips abroad when my instrument had a problem and I had to think of an alternative." He has many compositions to his credit — Ariyal, curvans and tilaisam. He is presently composing music for a ballet — *Dev Prakasham* — for a forthcoming festival in the United States of America.

Ravikiran has bid in further the cause of Carnatic music in a practical way by setting up Musicians Welfare and Relief fund to help out indigent musicians in the country.

Honestly, he admits that although he has done the bulk of his love and concern for music, the idea really came from a similar effort made by cricketers in the country which also happened to be Ravikiran's favourite sport. "I just love cricket you know. In fact, I went also and organised a match with musicians last year. I enjoyed it very much. They judged me as the man-of-the-match!"

THIS WORLD 'prodigy' has been labelled about with every facility in the Carnatic music circuit. The term, however, is a technical one and has been interpreted with a high degree of subjectivity by those who have presented it.

Can every talented child attain the title of a prodigy or does the word refer to presence of a more exceptional kind? And what of the title that leaves the stage — or covers? Do they see themselves, in their complacency, as fortune's favoured ones in whom the beauty of genius flows in an unassisted current, or are they plagued by self-doubt, fear of creative falsehoods and the eternal wait for the moment of epiphany that characterises artists made of clay more ordinary?

"It's difficult to be objective about a term that has been applied to oneself," says 25-year-old chitraveena wizard Ravikiran. "I suppose a prodigy is a person who demonstrates extraordinary abilities at an early age and proves it over a period of time. But I believe a child ought to be termed a prodigy only in retrospective since the generation closest to you cannot judge your contribution objectively."

The criteria to judge a prodigy by, he says, are outstanding talent, an inherent maturity and a sense of proportion. He insists that the label be used sparingly and with care. "If children are told they are exceptional at an early age, it can be detrimental to their artistic growth."

Prior to 1969, the word 'prodigy' was used far more stringently to describe the talents of the occasional Balamurali Krishna or Flute Mahalingam. It was Ravikiran's spectacular display of abilities at the age of two that suddenly produced a proliferation of juvenile geniuses in the Carnatic world as he himself is aware.

But two decades after, Ravikiran's credentials are clearly above suspicion and his story remains a fascinating one. Having cognitively mastered the nuances of the Carnatic system at the age of two (when he was able to publicly identify 525 ragams and 175 talams in the classical repertoire), the boy wonder went on to give his first vocal recital at the age of five! "I was put through a gruelling training period of 16 hours a day at the age of four but I never felt the strain. Where other children would have taken weeks, I took only a day to learn two or three compositions, and, as a result, knew over 500 kritis before I was five," he says with the detached air of one recounting someone else's achievements.

By the age of 12 Ravikiran had presented his first chitraveena concert. Star maestro Ravi Shankar is said to have



Ravikiran (left), U Srinivas and Shaashank (below); Fortune's favoured ones

not effusive and proportional. "I favour the term 'genius,'" he says seriously. "All it requires is an intuitive talent — and Ravikiran does have that — but what about the growing that must follow?" The next 10 years for Ravikiran involve a devoted strenuous training if he is to prove himself. That's why I still call him a 'prospective musician.'

A curious situation of self-discomposure over his



graduation is however. "I always knew music was a basic aptitude in my life and I think musicians should make their choice of career as early as possible," he says.

Subramanyam also admits that his son's whiskered countenance has been a 'happening failure'. But acknowledging that the boy cannot be beat cold response is for it. "We attribute this to the pressures of the musical career. If he truly does his homework and never takes his studies, we are not concerned."

One cannot help wondering if the glare of the spotlight at such an early age has aided their adventurous approach. Several concert programmes did not affect him because he never regarded concerts as high-pressure events. "When I see my accompanists and my listeners, I forget everything else. Inevitably comes — the choice is made at the last moment." On why even a successive spate of concerts fail to ruffle him he says, "you repeat a measure over and over again; it brings you strength. Surely the same holds true for music?"

But this does not seem to be the case for Shaashank, whose father admits his son is uncomfortable with frequent performances and limits his recitals to four or five a year in Madras and one extraneous concert a month. "I maintain that every artiste, irrespective of his age, matures only through concerts and the intense and shame they often invoke. But too many recitals make unfair demands on Shaashank's repertoire and creative resources," he says.

Srinivas' response to his immense talent is one of simple awe and gratitude. "In fact, I don't even count the number of concerts I give every month. Somehow such an approach doesn't suit my temperament."

Having learnt the mandolin under his father and Carnatic vocal music under R Subbarao (a disciple of Chennai), Srinivas gave his first public performance at nine. While his father and guru spent hours agonising over the classical possibilities of the mandolin for the Carnatic stage, the lad was confident of his ability to express himself through his chosen medium. "I didn't know if I was gifted or not. I just loved to play the mandolin and I think I have been able to give it a credible and permanent place in Carnatic music," he says quietly.

Despite the bohemian ambience of concert life, these three prodigies do not seem to have had any crises of faith over their calling and all of them acknowledge that mainstream academia has never held any allure for them. "Sometimes I think the flute is just an extension of his arm," he says.

Subramanyam's attitude to his son's remarkable prowess is

questionable. "He makes a clear distinction between 'heat' music and 'profession'. Music need not be just his heat while practising his flute. 'Not a single concert for it has not yet satisfied, but I suppose this can be attributable to my perfectionism.'

While Subramanyam points out that there are long gaps between concerts during which Shaashank rarely practices, he explains that the demanded focus is erratic at best. "I practice when I'm in the mood — either the 10 hours a day or three." Apologised for deriding his creative batches as "going away to Varanasi or some place like that", Subramanyam says just spend time alone with an instrument."

So what are the plans these young geniuses have for the future? According to Srinivas, the solo albums are on cards. "Although I'm a student, I've always had a desire to make an instrument my concern," he says.

Subramanyam, Shaashank's mother, is also pleased with her son's efforts to be the 'Chennai flute' in the creation of a son. Srinivas' first album is due in November. There are very few who can sing into the instrument that convincingly, he discovered in a Subramanyam performance a month ago, proving and hopefully his technique will evolve further.

But the most moving vision of personal fulfillment is the articulated by the soft-spoken and reflective Srinivas. "When one reaches a stage deep involvement with playing one's instrument, the comes a time when one can suddenly create a transcendental moment. It is a moment produced by what Krishnamurti would have called 'effortless effort'. That the elusive moment one waits for, and to achieve it will always be my aim."



Shaashank had grasped the complexities of the Carnatic tradition; by six he had taken to the flute, and by 12 he was playing to an enthralled audience at Shastr Hall, Madras.

What is unusual about Shaashank's abilities is that he has never had a guru or any formal instruction in playing the flute. In an encounter with the legendary Flute Mai in 1985, Shaashank's father received a piece of advice from the eccentric genius that he has since followed faithfully. "He suggested that we move from Bangalore to Madras; that

Shashank learn only vocal music and be allowed to translate these with his flute; that he listen to only quality concerts." Mai also advised Subramanyam to give up his own amateur fluting, presumably fearing that this would hinder the boy's natural development.

According to Subramanyam, Shaashank incorporated the insights gleaned from vocal music into the flute with organic ease. "Sometimes I think the flute is just an extension of his arm," he says.

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