

Delving into a treasure house

ARCHIVE T.M. Krishna and violinist Shriramkumar are documenting Sampradaya Pradarshini. What triggered the idea?

GOWRI RAMNARAYAN

A rare kriti in raga Mangalakkaisiki in a Coimbatore concert catalysed the ambitious project. The song was from Subbarama Dikshitar's "Sangita Sampradaya Pradarshini."

A post-concert chat about the need to audio document SSP's treasures produced a concrete result. A cheque arrived from well-wishers to start work. The musician recipients realised that they had to get into action.

"It was not easy," smiles T. M. Krishna. "Formidable experts like T. L. Venkatrama Iyer, Mudicondan Venkatrama Iyer, V. Raghavaya, S. Ramanathan, B. Rajam Iyer took 20 years to translate the Telugu text into Tamil."

Opening his tattered 100 years old copy of the Telugu original R. K. Shriramkumar explains. "The Music Academy's celebration of Subbarama Dikshitar's centenary (2004) had fanned our interest. We wanted to learn more about it ourselves, and make it more accessible to younger artists. We knew that the task was as great as it was intimidating."

Subbarama Dikshitar's was a gargantuan achievement. Prompted by connoisseur Chinmaswami Mudaliar, and patronised by the Ettayapuram ruler, this grand nephew of Muthuswami Dikshitar undertook to put down "in writing and notation everything that he knew, without hiding anything."

Amazing results

The result was astounding: two volumes of 1,700 pages; 76 profiles of historic figures in Carnatic music; sketches of raga, raganga, upanga, bhashanga; guide to tala and gamaka signs so detailed as to differentiate between jarus in ascent and descent; definitive notes on melakarta and janaya.



MUSICAL INTERPRETATIONS: T. M. Krishna and R. K. Shriramkumar with the ancient treatise. PHOTO: K. V. SRINIVASAN.

their sancharis, illustrative lakshana gitas and compositions.

Scattered through are fascinating bits of information — the Trinity went up to the tara sthayi madhyamam in raga La-

litha, diverging from practitioners who stopped with madhyasthayi dhayamam, or that the use of antara gandharvam (instead of sadharana gandharvam) in Bhoopalam ensures prosperity.

The compositions, painstakingly notated, range from prabandha, suladi and chittanam to gitam, varnam, kriti, daru, padam, swarajati, ragamalika. The lakshana gitas are by Venkatamakhin, to whom the Dikshitar school gave adherence.

The book follows his melakarta scheme of Kanakamburi-Phenadyuti rather than Govinda's Kanakangi-Ratnangi system. SSP records 229 kritis of Dikshitar, besides those of Tyagaraja, Syama Sastri and

lesser known Katikaimookku Pulavar and Krishnaswami Ayya.

In this first phase of their work, Krishna and Shriramkumar have displayed a few pearls from the vast ocean. Their first

audio-cassette records 10 Dikshitar compositions from the first book of SSP.

"A tremendous challenge, especially in following the gamakas," Shriramkumar admits, Krishna explains, "It is natural

for a Carnatic musician to INTERPRET — not READ — notation. It was really tough to follow the text with absolute fidelity."

"They were lucky to have musicologists N. Ramanathan and R. S. Jayalakshmi to guide them through the process. Jayalakshmi's doctoral research was on the gamakas of SSP. In the cassette she renders the songs on the veena before the vocal version.

"SSP is based on the veena tradition of Dikshitar, and some of the gamakas are best illustrated in its strings," says Krishna.

There were stumbling blocks. "I wanted to give up when we reached Todi," says Shriramkumar. Krishna laughs and sings "Kamalamb" according to SSP notation. Strange notes waft in, suggesting old film songs and middle-eastern strains.

The startled ears are somewhat healed when the familiar version follows. "See how Todi has changed since then," he remarks. "See how important SSP is for us to understand that tradition is constantly changing, evolving, re-inventing itself."

"This is a treatise of scientific, historical, technical and practical significance," Krishna concludes. "A definitive reference manual for Carnatic music." Shriramkumar believes that audio recording the entire text is a lifetime's labour. "But having begun, we mean to go on."

The cassette produced by Jnanarava Trust, will be released on February 20 (6.15 p.m. Kasturi Srinivasan Hall) before distinguished guests R. Seshasayee, Dr. V. V. Srivatsa and R. Vedavalli. This will be followed by a concert of Muthuswami Dikshitar's kritis from the SSP by veteran vidwan R. K. Srikanth.

SSP IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO UNDERSTAND THAT TRADITION IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING, EVOLVING, RE-INVENTING ITSELF. — KRISHNA

MUSIC ACADEMY'S FUNCTION WAS THE SPARK. IT'S A LIFETIME JOB. BUT HAVING BEGUN WE MEAN TO GO ON. — SHRIRAMKUMAR