

## Sharing the Musiri legacy – with a smile

On an extended visit of the United States, veteran musician Suguna Purushothaman participated in the recent Cleveland Tyagaraja Aradhana and gave several concerts and lecture demonstrations in California after that.

A veritable storehouse of knowledge and anecdotes about Carnatic music, she launched into explanations on a variety of interesting topics in response to questions during a *Sruti* interview in the US. Frequently, she also sang a few lines to illustrate her point. The conversation included her views on how pallavi-s should be composed and sung with emphasis on the lyrics without overly emphasising the tala; how niraval should be sung, how sruti bhedom can work to slide from one raga to the next by changing one swara at a time; the salient features and differences between the music of her guru-s Musiri Subramania Iyer and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. The interview became a free flowing lecture demonstration on the most intricate of subjects which she made easy to understand. Her love for the art form, her joy in composing, her respect and admiration for her guru-s and other musicians, and her open-minded inclusion of new thoughts, ideas and views were evident. All of it was punctuated by her fun loving witticisms and laughter.

She took me, as it were, on a tour of her musical wonder world. No wonder 'Suguna Mami' is regarded as a master teacher in addition to her well known expertise in singing pallavi-s in intricate tala-s and her prowess with 'dvitala avadhana'.

**How do you maintain the pathanthara of your guru Musiri Subramania Iyer? Is it something you consciously try to retain?**

It is not a conscious effort at all. The music and the compositions I was fortunate to learn from him have




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### Suguna Purushothaman spoke to Shankar Ramachandran

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stayed with me as he taught them. In those days we had daily classes, unlike the weekly or twice a week classes of today. Even if he was not feeling well he would take class and ask us to sing. His style and each of the sangati-s were impressed upon us by rigorous practice and repetition. Even now, when Suguna Varadachari and I sing together for concerts, we do not need to rehearse the items we learned from Musiri Sir. They have stayed intact with us throughout.

**What led you to become a student of Musiri?**

I was learning from the mridanga vidwan Tinniyam Venkatarama Iyer. He requested Musiri Sir to accept me as a student. It was through that recommendation that I had the good fortune of learning from Musiri Sir. This was in 1961 or 1962. In those days Semmangudi Mama travelled frequently for concerts. He therefore sent all his students to Musiri Sir to attend classes during his absence. Musiri Sir would also send his students to Semmangudi Mama on days when he was not able to take class. They were both very particular that classes should be held daily. After I had been learning from Musiri Sir for three or four years, he arranged for me to learn regularly also from Semmangudi Mama.

**When did you and Suguna Varadachari start giving concerts together?**

During the Musiri centenary celebrations Mani Krishnaswami, Suguna Varadachari and I gave a number of concerts together at various locations. Since we had all learned the same compositions and maintained the pathanthara, it was easy to sing together. During that year, there were several occasions when Mani Krishnaswami was unable to join us due to her health. So Suguna Varadachari and I often sang together at these concerts. Since then we have performed as a duo on a number of occasions.

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**What do you think is the reason for the popularity of these joint concerts?**

Because we are both called Suguna? *(There is a twinkle in her eye and a smile as she says this. But one gets the sense she is not entirely joking either.)* Perhaps it is the pathantara. But we enjoy singing together. Of course we each do our own alapana and swarakalpana. But we collaborate on singing interesting pallavi-s. Suguna Varadachari came up with the idea of each keeping a different tala while singing the same pallavi. For example I would do a tala with 7 akshara-s in khanda nadai and she would maintain a tala with 5 akshara-s in misra nadai. This

year the Cleveland festival celebrated the centenary of Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai. So we created a pallavi with a natyam theme using the lines from three popular compositions “*Ananda natanam adinar, Ananda natam aduvar* and *Natanam adinar* in Kedaragaula, Poorvikalyani and Vasanta.

After a concert in California this year, the sabha secretary gave me the honorarium in a cover. I did not open it until after I came home. When I looked at the cheque, it had the name Suguna Varadachari in the note below! Anyway, I was still able to encash it. *(She says with a chuckle).*

**Tell us about your several concerts and lecture demonstrations during this trip.**

I have been invited to give several concerts and lecdems in California. I sang in San Diego and in San Francisco as well as at a house concert. I have also done several lecdems and workshops. Everyone asks me to give lecdems on pallavi. I feel I can also do other things well. I can even sing anupallavi and charanam. *(Smiles)* ! But somehow the pallavi theme has become popular. I am often asked to sing or give a lecture demonstration on ragam-tanam-pallavi.

**What was the main purpose of your US trip this year?**

I was invited by V.V. Sundaram and the Cleveland



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With Suguna Varadachari

Tyagaraja Aradhana to participate in the presentation of the *Ramayana* dance-dramas. I composed the music for one of the episodes. I was also a judge for one of the competitions. Participating in the Cleveland festival was a nice experience. I listened to a lot of music. You are able to meet, interact and discuss with many musicians whom you don't get time to visit in Chennai. On the whole it was a very nice atmosphere and an enjoyable experience with all the musicians and rasika-s staying together. I felt that all the artists were trying to present their best – almost as they do during the music season in Chennai.

**What was the event you judged?**

Several of us, including Neyveli Santhanagopalan and Suguna Varadachari were asked to judge the concert level competition of advanced students. It was an all day event with vocal as well as instrumental participants. It was very interesting and on the whole there were quite a few good participants. We had to test them by asking them to sing raga-s from a list already provided. With hard work and practice some of them can do well as musicians. It was difficult to decide who among them was the best. Several students hero worship some leading artist or the other. They imitate the styles and mannerisms of these artists when they sing.

### Tell us about the music you wrote for the *Ramayana* episode of *Ayodhya Kandam*.

It was a very challenging project. I had never considered anything like this before. Of course I am familiar with the *Ramayana* and have read a number of translations including Rajaji's *Chakravarti Tirumagan*. But the knowledge that so many great persons had previously done this work was intimidating. I accepted the task and Sundaram gave me a three-volume *Ramayana* as well as a smaller book on *Ayodhya Kandam*. He said he was leaving the rest to me. As I read these and began to think of the project I felt it was very challenging. It was also the first time I was composing music for dance. I decided it should be a traditional margam with sabdam, varnam, padam, and tillana. I felt the main characters in this episode were Manthara, Kaikeyi and Bharata who most impacted the storyline.

V.V. Sundaram got in touch with me in December 2010, as I was thinking about these aspects. He informed me that Ravikiran and Rukmani Ramani had finished composing the music for their episodes. He wanted to know when I would be ready. I told him I would be ready soon, realising that I had better start writing! Over the next few days I was able to write it all down.

### How was it possible for you to compose all this music with the lyrics in just three or four days?

It was not so difficult. I had been thinking about these items for quite some time, mulling over them in my head. For the main varnam I selected the raga Ramapriya. I wrote a pushpanjali to introduce the episode and connect it to the *Bala Kandam* that preceded it. I felt it was important to show that Dasaratha consulted all his advisers before deciding to make Rama the yuvaraja. He did not decide alone. For this I composed a sabdam in ragamalika. To introduce the Manthara I chose the vivadi raga Gayakapriya. When she comes and sees all the preparations – *Kooni vandanale* in tisra gati. This was a catchy tune and Gayathri sang it well.

### Did you intend Manthara to be such a prominent character?

I thought she was a key person

who gives the twist to the story. Rhadha did a wonderful job of bringing the character of the 'Kooni' to life. Even in the simple gestures as she chews betel she expressed her feelings. I used the raga Vachaspati for the scene in which Kaikeyi initially responds happily to the Kooni's message. Rhadha's performance was very impressive. Narthaki Nataraj also did a very good job as Kaikeyi.

For the scene where Dasaratha asks Kaikeyi why she is angry, I used Devagandhari and I tuned Kaikeyi's response in Saramati. And then in Mukhari he asks her: "*Varangal kettaiyō. En uyirai varamai kettaiyō?*" In this manner the story develops. I used viruttam-s to connect the storylines and to introduce characters as a type of patra pravesam. The Ramapriya pada varnam tells the story of the vanavasam in Chitrakootam, the arrival of Bharata as well as the news of Dasaratha's death. Bharata's sorrow is presented in Ahir Bhairav when he says he does not want to be the ruler. For the tillana the theme was a challenge. How to make it joyful at this stage of the story? So I chose the scene where Seeta describes the swayamvara to Anusuya, and composed *Maniranga swayamvara mandapattil* in Manirangu.

### When did you first see the play in dance form? What was your first impression?

I went to one of the rehearsals. It was like a sculpture in progress. It was hard to imagine how it would look. Also many of the parts were going to be performed by dancers and students from other countries who would first meet only at Cleveland. This was V.V. Sundaram's

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idea and I must say I should thank him for this opportunity and inspiration. Both V. Gayathri and Nisha Rajagopal sang very well. Nisha learned some of the items from me and I taught Gayathri all the songs.

### Some of the pieces have such a classical form to them that it is hard to imagine this is your first attempt at writing for dance. Did you study Bharatanatyam?

When I was a little girl I took some Bharatanatyam classes. More than that, I have seen many dance performances and am familiar with the music. Also one of my students, Nandini Anand

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sings regularly for dance programmes and I consulted her. Narthaki Nataraj is from Madurai. Her Tamil is very good. She was able to understand the poetry and give me many good ideas for the scenes.

**Considering the recent awards and honours you have received, and the interest in your concerts and music in recent years, do you consider yourself a late bloomer?**

I have been giving frequent performances in India since the 1960s both in Madras and other cities including Tiruchi, Vizag, Cochin, Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. I used to sing often for AIR and have had a Top grade ranking. I think I have been singing in the same way all along, maintaining the dignity of the pathantara (*pathantara gauravam*) as it was taught to me by my guru-s. In my earlier days it was not the practice to give awards to youngsters. There were fewer sabha-s and fewer opportunities. During the music season, younger musicians had to sing in afternoon concerts under a pandal outside.

**Have you composed any new songs during this trip?**

I am always composing music. Sometimes when sleep eludes me, I compose some items, but by morning I forget them. My daughter keeps telling me I should write them all down. But only some of them get to that stage. My guru did not encourage me to compose. In fact both Musiri Sir and Semmangudi Mama discouraged me from composing *swaya* sahyam. They felt we should only sing the music composed by great saint composers. Prof. Sambamoorthy was the only one who encouraged me to compose songs.

While giving a lecdem in this area (Northern California) I thought of writing something descriptive of nature. So I composed a pallavi about the natural beauty of the bay area in Kambhoji raga and Misra Triputa tala. It goes like this.

*(Here she sings the pallavi line and we can almost hear the leaves rustle in the ocean breeze.*



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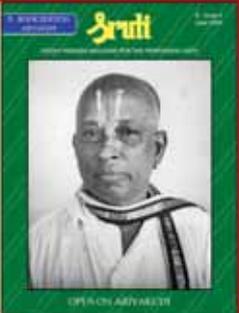
*Gentle lyrical nuances soften the beats of the tala and the whisper soft arudi lands with deceptive ease.)*

*Malaigalum ongum mara ilaigalum,  
Kadal alaigalum kaana,  
Manam allude tullude.*

Suguna Purushothaman concludes on a happy musical note. ■

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