

A Masterly Trifecta: Lecture-Concert-Workshop by Dr. Sathyavathi

Lecture Demonstration (October 6, 2018)

A Review by Kamakshi Mallikarjun

Mastery in the world of arts is exceptional. Even rarer, a very accomplished performing musician who is also a great teacher. And exponentially rarer, also a musicologist, Sanskrit scholar and laya exponent. Dr T S Sathyavathi's breadth of expertise is indeed dazzling. Even more wonderful is her passion to share her ocean of knowledge with all students and rasikas with such erudition, fluency and warmth.

As described in various interviews, Dr T S Sathyavathi is one of the premier students of the late Sangita Kalanidhi Shri R K Srikantan; she also learnt to play the mridangam and not only studied Sanskrit, but went on to do a PhD with the subject of her thesis being "The contributions of Abhilashitartha Chintamani (Manasollasa) to Indian music".

A very big THANK YOU to Sruti for arranging this eclectic lecture and thematic concert and also a workshop by Dr T S Sathyavathi. This gave us this incredible opportunity to truly learn and gain so many valuable musical, laya and lyrical insights from this great vidushi and guru.

The topic for the lecture on Oct 6th 2018 was on the compositions of Shri Muthuswami Dikshithar. Smt Sathyavathi's repertoire is so versatile and vast, we could have drawn the name of a composer from a hat and she would have been able to do the lec-dem on the spot! Search online and you will see the plethora of lec-dems on the 'Musical Excellence' of so many composers that Dr T S Sathyavathi has given in India – Dikshithar, Shyama Sastri, Thyagaraja, Svati Tirunaal, Muthiah Bhagavathar, Mysore Vasudevacharya, Purandaradasa; not to mention the online Shaale courses on appreciating the compositions of GNB and master class on Mysore composers. Also, further drilldowns into composers such as Handling of Desiya ragas by Dikshithar, his unique phraseology .

In the workshop conducted here that included a Khamas composition of Mysore Sadashiva Rao, she sang the exquisite swarakshara patterns in his extremely rare Kalyani kriti Pamaruni brova tamasamma in Matya tala; while teaching a kriti of Mysore Vasudevacharya, sang another rare gem – the only composition of Mysore Vasudevacharya in Kannada – Karuniso taye in ragam Sarasvathimanohari. Dr T S Sathyavathi's phenomenal repertoire reminded me of how Richard Feynman touted Hans Bethe's mathematical prowess: "every number was near something he knew."

Lecture – Appreciating the compositions of Shri Muthuswami Dikshithar

As Dr T S Sathyavathi mentions in all her lec-dems, our focus should be to learn about what are the unique characteristics of the composer. It is not about comparison; it is about appreciation and trying to get a better understanding of the musical vision of the composer so that we can pay better respect when we sing or listen to their compositions.

"It is about enjoying the beauty of a fully bloomed flower. We are not here to pluck the petals to see where the fragrance issues from or origin of the color pigment. It is not about analysis; it is trying to go a little closer to the composer and trying to feel what he felt. Awe inspiring is the word when we think of Dikshithar. Compositions as unalterable as the Vedic Hymns. Compositions should linger, haunt you; You keep discovering new insights which is what Dikshithar's compositions do; most are meditative and contemplative. "

Highlights from the lecture on Oct 6th at the Delaware Mahalakshmi Temple with some additional examples from the online lec-dem on Shaale Live YouTube Channel can be found at Sruti Smriti Blog. (<http://srutipbila.tumblr.com/>)

Additional References

- Meaning and explanation of Sanskrit words from Wikipedia and Sanskrit to English Dictionary
- Lyrics and meaning of Dikshithar songs from Shri T K Govinda Rao's book and <http://www.medieval.org/music/world/carnatic/dikshitar.html>

Thematic Concert

Dr T S Sathyavathi with vocal support by her student Nandita

Violin: Sandhya Anand and Mridangam: Keerthi Venkataramani

Dr T S Sathyavathi's unique holistic format helps us gain a complete picture of the composer; starting with her lec-dem highlighting the salient features, followed by a concert featuring the songs of the same composer. It is like learning a new language by immersion.

What is also striking is her amazing clarity; clear explanation of the meaning and references in the lyrics, perfect diction, clarion musical notes and sangatis, razor sharp precision in the chittaswaras.



L to R: Keerthi Ramani, Nandita, Dr T.S. Sathyavathi, Sandhya Anand

Dr T Sathyavathi shared how she approaches the singing of Dikshithar's compositions in a concert. "Alapana, Kalpana svarams are a formality for Diskhithar's compositions. This is my sincere observation; why look to elaborate when the composition is so beautiful; many times it might not be an embellishment. Compositions like Sadachaleswaram, Chetashri – just enjoy the composition. Shri Mooladhara won't take a second speed swara; need to be sensitive to that. You can elaborate with care; it is not a must always. "

Dr T S Sathyavathi's brilliant approach to increase our awareness and sensitivity to what is codified in the Sangira Sampradaya Pradarshini (SSP) was akin to an aural picture is worth a thousand words. She first sang Annapurne Visalakshi, a popular kriti in ragam Sama attributed to Dikshithar but not in SSP, followed by Guruguhaya which is in the SSP and reveals firsthand Dikshithar's more meditative and soulful Sama. I finally understood why my aunt Anandhi Ramachandran gave me her personal Guruguhaya cassette; perhaps, she too was struck by these completely new colors of Dikshithar's Sama when she heard it for the first time at a concert, persuaded that vocalist to record it for her and was determined to share that experience.

The compositions featured with additional insightful highlights from Dr T S Sathyavathi can be read from Sruti Smriti Blog. (<http://srutipihla.tumblr.com>)

Nandita provided excellent accompaniment to her guru and clarity was her hallmark too – open throated singing, clarity in diction and musicality. Sandhya Menon’s violin accompaniment was melodious and she aced the challenge of following the raga elaboration aligned with what the SSP stipulates in the Dikshithar style of the raga. Dikshithar’s compositions and their kalapramana are equally demanding from the laya perspective and Keerthi also aced the challenge with fidelity to nadam.

Kamakshi Mallikarjun is a classical music enthusiast, a member of Sruti and local contributor to Sruti Ranjani.