

A person in pursuit of excellence

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Any casual talk or serious discussion about music organisations of Mysore and even Karnataka invariably makes a reference to 8th Cross, SPVGMC Trust and CR Himamshu. 8th cross is a unique music organisation, sans a building and an office. It has a mobile office in a music freak called CR Himamshu, the secretary of the organisation and concerts are held literally on the 8th cross road of the VV Mohalla. He started organising concerts at 8th Cross, when he was barely 10 yrs.

Tell us something about your family background

"I belong to a family of musicians. My mother Smt Rajamma was Piteelu Chowdaiah's niece. My grandmother Chandramukhi Chowdaiah's

sister. She was a disciple of Bidaram Krishnappa. She was a very good singer. She used to perform with Chowdaiah. She was a scholar in Sanskrit and a good Harikatha artiste. It was she who taught the art of Harikatha to the cine artiste Pandharibai. She had performed all over India. Once Lalgudi asked me about my grandmother, as Chembai had told him about her. Marriage came in the way of her career. She was not allowed to do anything. Her talent got wasted.

My mother had her initial training from her mother. Later she learnt from T Puttaswamaiah, Chowdaiah's brother and then from AR Krishnamurthy. My mother was a performing artiste. For some time, she was a staff at the Fine Arts College, University of Mysore. My father was CR Gowda. He was working in Sericulture Department. He passed away when we were quite young. My mother was the sole breadwinner. She used to teach music at home.

How did you get into music?

I have been listening to music since I was four years old. We were staying just behind Bidaram Krishnappa Rama Mandira and I used to sit in Chowdaiah's car and go there. I have heard a lot of vintage music. I have heard Ariyakudi during the dasara festivities. He was accompanied by Chowdaiah and TK Murthy. I had been to Chennai in 1957, when Chowdaiah was awarded Sangeeth Kalanidhi. Then Music Academy still did not have a permanent building. programmes were held in the pendal. I had a good knowledge of ragas, because of listening. I did not learn music formally. I was sent to Smt Vasumathi to learn light music. I was very good at mimicry. I used to mimic, many musicians including Chowdaiah. Chowdaiah had seen me mimicking him. I had been exposed to the best music

of all times. This has made me very selective. I am always in search of excellence. For me only good music matters. I am not worried from where it comes. I am not bothered about caste, creed, religion, region, gender, etc.

How did you take to organising music concerts?

When I was young there was a group consisting of Mahalingu, Rama Iyengar, Das and others who were organising music programmes in VV Mohalla. I joined them. I was about 11 years old then. I used to do some chores like getting coconut fronds, collecting donations, etc. With my mother's help we organised concerts of the local artistes. The first programme that I organised independently was of Mysore brothers. Then we started arranging some concerts of local artistes and invited a few from outside. In fact there were two sabhas in which I was active. They were Chowdaiah Sangeetha Sabha and Prasanna Vidya Ganapathi Mahotsava Sangha.

Sahukar Timmappayya was the President of Sangeetharatna Mysuru T Chowdaiah Sabha. My mother was Vice-President and myself and Soundaramma were members. Then out his goodwill towards Chowdaiah sir Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar accepted to perform in the Chowdaiah Sangeetha Sabha. He was accompanied by T Rukmini and TV Gopalakrishnan (TVG). That was in fact a turning point. TV Gopalakrishnan became very close to me. He has helped me a lot. He helped me to fix the concert of KJ Jesudas. TVG's vocal concert was also fixed. Both of them had the same accompaniment of Guruvayur Dorai and MS Gopalakrishnan. To begin with the programmes were in town-hall. Then shifted to Jaganmohana Palace. When Jaganmohana palace was not available, the concerts were held in Sahakara Bhavana. Veena Balachandar, Emani Shankarashastri, Shemmangudi, Nedanuri, KV Narayanaswamy have all performed for the sabha. KVN was accompanied by VV Subramanyam and Umayalpuram Sivaraman. In 1968, I started a competition in Chowdaiah's name. All the top artistes of today's Mysore have participated in those competitions. They were held for three complete

days. Competitions were held in the genres of classical music, light classical and film music.

I had to leave Mysore in 1977 after the demise of my mother. I went to Bangalore to live with my brother. Then I couldn't continue Chowdaiah memorial concerts and the competition. 8th Cross continued without any interruption as I was doing everything from Bangalore. Again Chowdaiah Trust was given a new lease of life and continued for 3 years. A number of workshops were conducted in collaboration with the University of Mysore. First year Madurai TN Sheshagopalan presided over the conference. He was conferred the title 'Gayaka Shikhamani' and was presented a purse of Rs 25,000. During the morning sessions there were demonstrations. On the following years TN Krishnan and Umayalpuram Sivaraman presided over the conference. A three day festival was conducted in Tirumakudalu. Then again its activities were discontinued. Now, again there are efforts to renew the trust.

Now tell us about the 8th cross

Earlier SPVGMCTrust was called Prasanna Vidya Ganapathi Mahotsava Sangha. It became registered body in 1986. It was registered under the name Prasanna Vidya Ganapathi Mahotsava Charitable Trust. Then in 2003 it was reregistered a SPVGMCTrust because at the government offices they raised an objection that it was a spiritual trust and not a cultural organisation.

We did not have permanent structure, not even a pendal. The programmes were literally on the 8th cross road. we used to bring coconut fronds and make a thatched roof for the programme. Even when Chowdaiah Sir came to play here, it was like this only. On the day of his programme, it rained very heavily. So Chowdaiah told that he would play on the next day. Deshikachar had to perform the next day. Chowdaiah sir understood our problem. He asked us to inform Deshikachar that he would accompany him on the violin. Out of reverence to Chowdaiah, Deshikachar told us that he will finish playing before Chowdaiah sir's arrival and Chowdaiah would play a solo concert. Chowdaiah came and we took him to have coffee. While sipping cof-



File photo from 2019 - TV Shankarnarayanan performing with Nagai Muralidharan on Violin, Tumkur Ravishankar on Mridangam, Sharath Kaushik on Ghatam at the SPVGM, 8th Cross, VV Mohalla, Mysore

fee he told us that he has prayed Kote Anjaneyaswamy not to trouble us. Probably God listened to his prayer. It did not rain.

Did not the artistes ignore you, because you were young?

Artistes were truly great people. They never ignored me or treated me like a young boy. Let me just tell you my experience with TR Mahalingam. I was very fond of TR Mahalingam. Those were the days when Mali was a riddle to most of the organisers. I went to meet him with Dindigul Nataraj and requested him to give his dates. He said ok and told that he would come by bus. I returned. Everybody laughed and told that I was a fool to believe that Mali would come and that too by bus. Mali did come and the programme went on very well. He never played truant to any of his concerts at the 8th cross.

Once during Maharajapuram Santhanam's programme it rained very heavily, and he could not sing. Then he told the awaiting audience that he would stay back and sing the next morning. It was a Sunday. There was a big crowd and he sang for four hours. Parur accompanied him on the violin and our own artiste Srinidhi provided him mridangam support. Our silver jubilee celebrations unfortunately coincided with the unrest related to Venkataswamy Commission Report. There was rasta roko and rail roko. In fact the artistes from Madras and Bangalore took a lot of risk, came and performed here. T Rukmini

came in a lorry and our Khanjeera artiste Bheemachar came on a TVS moped all the way from Bangalore to fulfil his concert schedule. Always all artistes have cooperated with me. All of them were touched by my love for classical music and never insisted on the remuneration or never expressed any dissatisfaction because concerts are arranged on the road.

Why do you struggle so much? You can shift it to some hall?

No as long as I am alive I want to continue it on the road. There is something special about that place. But for the Police Commissioner Kasturi Rangan none has objected to it. We get the highest number of audience in Mysore.

What did you do for money?

What else? Go from house to house literally begging. Fund raising was really a herculean task. Some really treated me like a beggar. But, somehow, we could get enough money each year. We have never failed to pay any artiste. We in fact make spot payment.

How did you fix the artiste's remuneration?

In those days we did not have telephone at home. We had to book trunk call and wait. Sometime there was exchange of letters bargaining the remuneration. But now, none of the artistes invited to the 8th cross speaks about his/her remuneration. In those days artistes were more obliging. Very often they travelled in third class and they were put up in the house of



Sangita Kalanidhi A Kanyakumari being felicitated by SPVGM. Seen here with R Vasudevamurthy, President SPVGM and N Narasimhan, retired IT Commissioner to the right (Photo courtesy - Prabhu Prasad, Mysore)

some music lover. Sometimes we would arrange in Hotel Indra Bhavan. They would ask me to increase the remuneration. In case their demand was not met, they would say, "It is okay this time, but set it right next time." Now the artistes are very particular about the hotel. Earlier most of our artistes would come in tonga or auto. It is only later on that patrons like KV Murthy made arrangements to pick up the artistes in a car.

Why did you start fixing the accompanists yourself?
If you allow the reputed artistes to bring their own accompanists, they will bring somebody, who is less competent, so that they can be paid less. This would affect the quality of the concert. I am more worried about the quality of the concert. So, I started fixing the accompanists. Before finalising, I suggest a few names to the main artiste and ask them to choose one among them. Usually I suggest the best names, so they can never turn down my choice. In those days my first preference was Upendran, Umayalpuram and Guruvayur Dorai. MSG has played for our trust 30 years continuously. Lalgudi and TNK have also played a number of times. Even L Subramanyam, Kunnukkudi have come to 8th Cross. Almost all the mridangam artistes without exception have played in the 8th cross. I have invited artistes from Kerala (Velukutty Nayar, Krishnan Kutti Nayar), Andhra

(Yella Venkateshwara Rao, Patri Sateesh) and Tamil Nadu. We had concerts of KS Gopalakrishnan and Neyyattinkara Vasudevan from Kerala. Neyyattinkara was a class musician. There was one more artiste by name MG Radhakrishna. He was very good, but he became a playback singer.

While fixing accompanists, sometimes accompanists like Umayalpuram, Lalgudi had to be paid more than the main artiste. Similarly Mani Iyer and Chowdaiah were always paid more than the main artiste.

In today's generation there are many who are good singers but nothing comparable to the old stalwarts. None probably to compare with either Lalgudi or Umayalpuram. The depth of their music is something different. If GNB sings a raga that was ultimate. MLV was one such name. Among the next generation there is only TN Seshagopalan. He is unparalleled as far as raga delineation or swaraprastara is concerned. He used to sing Kambodhi or Shankarabharana for an hour. I don't have any name to compare with him. He used to sing such rare sangatis filled with raga bhava. Even in terms of calculations he is unparalleled. His pallavis are very special. His singing was almost like playing nagaswara. Real music is in Nagaswara hence it is the yardstick. Nobody can elaborate either Bindumalini or Dwijavanthi like he did.

How do you recognise whether an artiste is good or bad?

Usually I get some feedback from some senior and trustworthy artistes from Madras. For example Lalgudi. If Lalgudi speaks good of some artiste, he/she will be really good. Now KV Prasad tells me. He, in fact, makes me to listen to those youngsters. All the artistes, who used to come to the 8th cross as young boys like Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Vijaya Shiva, Balaji Shankar, Rajkumar Bharathi, TM Krishna, Mandolin Sreenivas, Abhishek Raghuram have now soared to such great heights. Of all these people, the most unfortunate ones are Mandolin Sreenivas who passed away at such an early age and Rajkumar Bharathi who lost his voice.

By 1970-71 all the top artistes of the time were performing in the 8th Cross. Umayalpuram Sivaraman has played for almost 50 years. MSG for more than 30 years TR Subramanyam used to come from Delhi. So was Emani Shankara Shastri. As they were in good jobs, they never demanded exorbitant fee. Hindusthani artistes like Lakshmi Shankar, Rajeev Taranath, Vishwamohan Bhat, Hariprasad Chourasia, Ronu Mujumdar have performed in the 8th Cross.

Have you observed any special feature in In Madras, which you don't find here?

I have found a phenomenon in Madras, which I have not seen here. Usually all the senior and veteran artistes attend the concerts of the youngster, which is a real test for the youngsters. Similarly, they also attend the concerts of their peers, which is a real challenge to those, who are on stage. In Karnataka I have not seen artistes doing this.

Tell us about your relationship with other sabhas in Mysore.

I do have a good relationship with all the sabhas. Sometimes sabhas request me to fix up artiste and I will do it for them. I fix artistes for my friend Sriram who organises Ramanavami concerts. Sometimes, sabhas from Mangalore and Doddaballapur too request me to arrange artistes.

Why did you not do conferences under the auspices of SPVGMC Trust?

Even though we have not organised conferences, we have conducted a number of workshops, demonstrations. Scholar musicians like S Rajam, Chitraveena Ravikiran, TN Sheshagopalan others have conducted workshops. I think SPVGMC Trust is the only organisation in Mysore, which has conducted so many workshops.

Apart from SPVGMC Trust have you worked with any other music organisation?

I held the office of the secretary in the JSS Sangeeth Sabha for two years. Then I resigned. Even there I tried my best to arrange good concerts. Even now I am organising Moonlight music concerts for the JSS. All great artistes have performed in the Moonlight music concert series. Many rare jugalbandi like that of Praveen Godkhindi and the pianist Anil Srinivasan have been organised there. I try to arrange good concerts wherever and whenever I have an opportunity.

You were a member in the syndicate of Gangubai Hanagal performing university. Tell us something about it.

MLA Vasu was instrumental in nominating me to the Syndicate. Everything is not alright there. There are a number of scandals. No Vice-Chancellor has taken any interest in developing that university. No permanent staff is there, neither does it have a campus. Even the Government has not taken any interest.

What are your future plans?

I have plans of setting up a gurukula. You cannot think of local, regional and such things there. You can only think of quality and excellence. A few years ago, my friend Guruprasad had bought 100 acres of land near Tumkur. We were working finer details by involving stalwarts like TN Seshagopalan, TN Krishnan, Pandit Rajeev Taranath and others. Unfortunately, the untimely demise of Guruprasad put an end to the whole project. Now I have approached vidwan Kumaresh and he has approached some sponsor, who has promised to give 20 acres of land.

(HS Venugopal is an author and has to his credit a book on MS Subbulakshmi)