

Steps ahead of music

Well-known Carnatic singer Sudha Ragnathan is not just known for her spontaneous recitals but also her contribution to society, says L SUBRAMANI

Whenever Sudha Ragnathan visits Bangalore, she is overwhelmed by a flood of memories. Unforgettable were those long walks from Palace Orchard (where she lived with her parents) to her school, Sophia Convent, which never seemed longer due to the thick tree cover and the fresh scent of green in the air.

The aching realisation that the city's greenery is fast-fading prompted her to take refuge in the past again – this time in the memories surrounding Seshadripuram, Vyalikaval Extension and Chamarajpet, where Sudha had quietly followed her mother into the concert halls and listened to the greats of the day.

Little did she know then that those tender steps into the illustrious sabbas were the beginning of a great journey that would take her to the summit of Carnatic music, with hundreds of CDs and cassettes in her name and around 250 awards and accolades.

The journey had given her the best of gurus and opened the gates of the world's most famous musical arenas like the Lincoln Centre (New York), Theatre de La Ville (Paris) etc. And, like any great journey, it had difficult challenges too.

Initial reluctance

To begin with, Sudha, as a young child, had to shake off her own reluctance and protestation, a natural reaction to her mother Choodamani's insistence that she should learn music.

"I often thought my mother was thrusting music on me and wanted me to do something which she hadn't done herself," Sudha says. "Only later, I realised she had given me a real gift – the gift of reaching out to people through this great classical music."

With the family's relocation to Chennai and a few years of learning under T V Viswanathan and B V Raman-B V Lakshmanan, came the 'turning point' that was to set her up for stardom – the central government scholarship that brought her to 10 years of tutelage under M L Vasanthakumari, the stage when learning had to be sustained more by her own interest and drive.

"Imagine working with such an illustrious guru? I had to be a disciplined disciple to pick up whatever (note) M L V sang in an instant," Sudha recalls. If she needed a greater challenge, it came after her beloved guru's passing away in 1990. After a decade or more of being a support



(Top and above) Sudha Ragnathan.

singer, she had to prepare herself for the role of a main one. Those moments, when Sudha sang the *Dasa Padha* or *Dikshitar Krithi*, listeners would tell her that she sounded more like her guru.

"It was either like M L V or not up to that," she says.

Besides, the apparent sense of pride on hearing it, Sudha realised passing her guru's distinct style, finesse and spontaneity to posterity, without embellishing it with characteristics of her own, would only be a far-off dream. What sustained her in those moments was her ability to add more substance to the "MLV" style she had come to represent – by expanding her repertoire.

"The discipline was there; the *par-ampara* was there. All I needed to do was understanding my strengths and shifting my focus towards it. Certainly, the evolution of my style was made easier by the 10 or so years of investment but it also demanded hard work and preparation," she says.

Shifting of gears

Like her mentor, Sudha's strength has been spontaneity – the smooth shifting of gears to suit the pulse of the audience in a concert. Be it a music festival or a religious occasion, the compositions of her choice must fit the mood and the context. As she says, the "practice" or preparation for this approach is much more challenging, because preparation for spontaneous

singing is a lifetime endeavour.

If planning for the concert ahead is work of the evening chef, learning one composition after the other – in the hope and knowledge that they would come handy in an unknown concert of the future – is work of an architect. In reality, spontaneity is a fine facade that conceals the hard work and enormous mental effort that goes with it.

"So, preparation for me doesn't only mean the early-morning *sadagam*. My strength is my voice and I need to preserve it before a big concert. What matters more is shuffling through the compositions and getting ready with the ones for the audience of the evening," Sudha says. There is a note of caution for the aspirants here: "Don't get me wrong, *sadagam* is very important and without it you don't evolve to be a good singer."

Room for nuances

Of course, spontaneity seems like a strange word for a music that is more regimented than romantic. Carnatic music, people generally tend to believe, conceals its beauty in the golden cage of its *swara* and *laya*. "Not romantic?" Sudha gently chides.

"I agree that Carnatic music is more regimented, but, like any music, there is room for nuance. You can capture the mood or the feeling by singing with full understanding of the lyric and bringing in the *bhava*. The feeling the artiste leaves behind, that is his/her gift to the listener, not the musical grammar they usually adhere to, despite its importance."

Singing apart, Sudha's effort to lure more *rasikas* and young talent towards Carnatic music includes her informative (needless to say enthralling) lecture demonstrations.

"Even here I prepare only the outline, the rest is impromptu," she laughingly notes. A singer whose voice has revealed the meaning of divinity to many, Sudha's journey is still defined by her musical endeavour, constantly looking to add a *krithi* or two to the piling collection and preparing the mind to pick out the right ones at the beckoning. But once off stage, she looks at and understands the society, its poverty and deprivation and feels responsible to do something.

"It's not something I, or anyone for that matter, can change by working alone," Sudha explains. "But we can do what's possible in our own way. That's why I started 'Samudhaya', a non-profit organisation."

Helping underprivileged

Besides donating money to disaster funds set up after Orissa floods and the Kargil war, 'Samudhaya', like its founder all those years ago, is keeping its tender steps – into helping underprivileged children.

But, as Sudha notes, it's still a long way to go. "I feel there has to be a team to handle Samudhaya's activities and only then will it become effective. I am thinking over it and am hoping this would happen sooner."