

The Divine Music of Sangeetha Kalanidhi T.K.Govinda Rao
By, Arathi Satish

Music is intrinsic to all cultures. Carnatic music, the divine form of South Indian Classical music, has reached its present position due to the contribution of many creative and talented musicians and composers. It indeed takes a master musician to understand and interpret the music of such great artists. We found such a genius in Sangeetha Kalanidhi, late T.K. Govinda Rao, who passed away on September 18th, 2011.

Music was always the breath of life for Tripunithura Krishna Govinda Rao, who was born on April 21st, 1929, in Tripunithura, Kerala to a Tulu speaking Udupi family. His interest in music grew from childhood when he listened to his sisters singing Carnatic music. At the age of eleven, he participated in Chithirai Thirunal Festival at Trivandrum and won the gold medal which in turn gave him the opportunity to sing for Trivandrum Broadcasting Corporation. Later, he studied in Sanskrit college in Tripunithura. He studied music for a brief period from his uncle Sri Mani Bhagavathar in Coimbatore and then came to Chennai and joined Central College of Carnatic Music where he completed the course of "Sangita Vidwan" under the care of great musicians like Sri Thiruppampuram Swaminatha Pillai and Smt. T.Brinda. Later Sri MusiriSubramanyaIyer, who was the Founder-Principal recognized his talents and took him as his disciple. In the music college, he was one of the best students in his class. Many students would get their doubts cleared from him, thus giving him the name "Guru Govindar" in college. He underwent Gurukulavasa for fifteen years under Musiri.

T.K. Govinda Rao's music was a reflection of his guru's musiribani as he had totally absorbed his guru's style and made it his own to the extent that sometimes it was impossible to distinguish between their singing. The devotion and admiration he had towards his guru was well known and he used to say, "My teacher gave great importance to SahityaBhava. He insisted that we should know the meaning of the song and keep that in mind as we sing". Apart from his gurubakthi, he was known for his devotion to Tyagaraja and had been involved in conducting the Tyagarajaaradhana for Sadguru Tyagaraja Sangeeta Samajam for over 50 years. He was a generous musician who shared his knowledge of music and guided those interested. It is also interesting to note that he was the first Malayalam film playback singer and was felicitated for this by the Cochin Film society, but he realized that film music was not what he was looking for and his goal was to pursue classical music.

For T.K. Govinda Rao, nadayoga was the way to lead life. He used to adore compositions of Sri Tyagaraja and Sri Purandaradasa. The rhyming beauty, simplicity and deep spiritual philosophy of Purandaradasa had a great impact on him and he tuned many compositions of Purandaradasa, Kanakadasa and other dasas such as "VenkatachalaNilayam", "BaroKrishnayya", "Innu Dayabarade", "Karedarebarabarade", etc. which have been popularized by Smt. M.L.VasanthaKumari and his disciples, Bombay Sisters. He has also tuned many compositions of Periasamy Thooran including famous "MurugaMuruga" in Saveri, "Taye Tripura Sundari" in SuddhaSaveri, which were sung by Smt. M.S. Subbulakshmi, Smt. D.K. Pattamal and many musicians today.

This master musician always emphasized that one should sing with 'ragabhava' and not with swaras in mind. He used to quote Sri Tyagaraja's "Nadasudharasambalanu" composition in Arabhi which says that raga is like the khodanda (bow) of Rama and swaras are just the bell hung at the corner of the bow for decoration. He was also known for saying that we need to have "sahaja bhakthi" while singing and used to quote phrases such as "sahajabhakthitho ragajnana sahithudu" in the composition "Swararagasudha" in Shankarabharanam, "suddhamaina manasuche suswaramutho" in the composition "Kaddanuvariki" in Thodi.

TKG was a lecturer at the Govt. of Tamilnadu Music College, Chennai and later joined All India Radio, Chennai as Producer (Music) and as Chief Producer of Music at Akashvani Bhavan in New Delhi. He was also an examiner at the University of Benares, Delhi, Madras, Annamalai, Bangalore and Telugu University.

After retiring as Chief Producer of AIR at the age of 60, he came to visit his daughter Padmaja Kishore in California and was thrilled to learn how he could use the computer himself to publish the books on various composers with notation and meaning. In a short period of time he became an expert in Adobe Pagemaker and in the span of 15 years, he published the books on Trinity, Swathi Thirunal and Varna Sagaram in diacritical Roman and Devanagari scripts with meaning in English and SRGM notations in Roman scripts that help in bridging language barriers and generation gap. The essence and identity of the original composition remain characteristically and traditionally Indian. The compositions of Sri Purandaradasa that contain more than 1000 songs is almost complete and will be published soon. He visited the Bay area many times and has given performances in SIFA, Livermore temple, Sanathana Dharma Kendra, lectures at Stanford University and UC Berkeley and has conducted many workshops during his visits.

When T.K. Govinda Rao was questioned about the reason behind taking on such a great task, he used to stress that 'sahityabhava' should be maintained in Carnatic music. He said, "When I was Chief Producer, AIR, I had the opportunity to listen to singers from all over the country and was quite dismayed at the distortion of the sahitya of our compositions by many singers. When I probed into the cause, I found out that many did not have access to the correct lyrics or their meanings. Most extant publications are in a regional language, such as Tamil or Telugu, which restricts their accessibility. So I thought of making the correct lyrics available to Carnatic musicians the world over in a single book. To this end, I decided to use two scripts – Devanagari and Roman – with diacritical marks. This way, any educated person anywhere in the world can access the lyrics of the great compositions of the Trinity."

T.K. Govinda Rao was well known for the tremendous effort that he put in for embellishing each composition by taking into account the composers' feelings. He stressed the right syllables, used correct pronunciation when he sang so that the true meaning of the lyrics was highlighted. He was very logical in his approach, using correct grammar. His creativity and imagination in singing was extraordinary.

As a teacher, T.K. GovindaRao was held in reverence by his students. Senior students like Sangeetha Kalanidhis Saroja and Lalitha (Bombay Sisters), Padmaja Sreenivasan, Sankari Natarajan, Kalpakam Raman, Sugantha Kalamegam, Subhashree Mani are carrying on his legacy. Many of his students run music schools all over India and abroad. TKG Gurukulam is run by Radha Ramji in Chennai and Damodaran Namboodiri in Kerala. Balamani, a very senior student, has taught countless students in Mumbai. Dr. Prameela Gurusurthy, Head of the Department of Music, University of Madras is one of his other senior students carrying on his musical legacy. Younger musicians include Prasanna Venkatraman, T.K. Ramachandran, Dr. Sunder, etc.

Padmaja Kishore, daughter and disciple of T.K. Govinda Rao, is the director of Gana Mandir Fine Arts in San Jose and has been teaching music in the Bay area for over twenty years. Her students have sung in many local events and won prizes in many competitions. Under TKG's music direction, Padmaja has also given three CD recordings, that is, Compositions of Purandara Dasa, Dasa Gana Manjari and Rama Gana Manjari.

It is indeed rare to find a composer, singer, guru, musicologist and a great human being like T.K. Govinda Rao. In the present day world of art, which has become extremely commercialized, he stands out for his dedication and knowledge, which he was always willing to share. His enthusiasm to discuss and debate about music, his open heartedness helping people in trouble, and his hospitality to his students and guests were unique characteristics. Today and forever, T.K. Govinda Rao will live through the music he has taught and the books that he has written.

TKG was conferred with various titles. Sangeetha Choodamani, Sangeetha Sasthra Rathnakara, Gana Kala Thilaka, Nadakkanal, Swara Samrat, Sangeetha Acharya were some of them and he was also the recipient of the Akademi Award from the Central Sangeeth Natak Akademi. In the year 2000, the prestigious title of "Sangeetha Kalanidhi", one of the highest awards in Carnatic music, was awarded to him by the Madras Music Academy.