

Tribute to Sri Vechoor Harihara Subramanya Iyer

The Amma Maharani's bedroom? Kawdiar Palace, February 1982. Standing in clusters all around the room, particularly around the bed are most of the members of the Travancore royal family, including the late Maharaja Chithira Thirunal and Princess Karthika Thirunal. Two visitors are also there, standing in respectful silence. A young boy of fourteen years, half dead with fright, is ushered into the room by one of the palace servants. He was to start music lessons that day. The music group from his school had bagged a prize at the district-level youth festival that year and he, incidentally, happened to be in that group. This was reason enough for the music obsessed Maharani to believe that her little great grandson had it in him to become a top-class musician. She immediately set about finding a proper teacher for her great grandchild. True to her nature, she started right at the very top, with Semmangudi R.Srinivasa Iyer, who was and who continues to be affectionately called "Chemban" by the members of the Travancore royal family?

A suspicious Chemban appeared before the Maharani wondering why in heaven's name he was suddenly brought from Madras to Thiruvananthapuram. Coming straight to the point, the Maharani told him "I want somebody good to teach my great grandson vocal music." Being a wizard not just with music but with words, Srinivasa Iyer replied in typical fashion. "But what is the need for another person? I myself will fly down from Madras every week and teach him."

The Maharani snorted a good humoured snort and suggested that he be a little more practical. After one or two minutes of deep thought Semmangudi smiled and said "Harihara Subramaniirrukey" ("Hariharasubramani is there after all!"). Never one to forget a face, the Maharani remembered the thin, weedy young man who sang in front of her around 30 years ago, who used to attend only Semmangudi's concerts during the Navarathri series year after year. She snorted again, "Hmph!" She did not approve of anybody listening only to the music of his/her own guru. She said, "Yes, yes, yes, I know whom you mean. And – I know WHY too ...because he comes only for YOUR concerts during the Navarathri festival!" Unsuccessfully hiding a smug smile, Semmangudi insisted "No, no, no! Honestly, he really does sing very well. I should know, because he is my disciple. And if the boy learns under him it will be just as though I am teaching him myself – the same teaching method, the same set of keerthanams, the same paataantharam..." The Maharani, still not totally convinced, packed off Semmangudi. But only after making him sit and sing for her for three hours.

Then the Maharani set about checking out matters for herself. She invited dozens of musicians of all sorts to the palace and made them sing in front of her, followed by rapid fire question sessions on the various aspects and intricacies of classical

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music. Finally it turned out that the very Harihara Subramani whom Semmangudi had recommended proved to be satisfactory in all respects. And thus Vechoor Harihara Subramania Iyer – popularly known as "Vechoor Saar" – was fixed up to teach music to the Maharani's great grandson. The two silent visitors in the Maharani's bedroom on February 3, 1982, were Kumara Kerala Varma (then Principal, Music Academy, Thiruvananthapuram) and Vechoor Saar himself. And the terrified 14-year-old great grandson was me. I prostrated in front of Vechoor Saar, gave him a token 'dakshina' and started with the Saptha Swarams, sitting in front of my great grandmother who looked at me with a kindly eye and listened with a critical ear. After 15 anguishing minutes of Saptha Swarams, the class was over.

Later classes began in earnest. For nearly a year, teacher and student (not yet 'guru' and 'shishya') hardly ever spoke to each other except maybe when the student wanted to see an Amitabh Bachchan movie and had to cancel a class, faking a cold or a sore throat. Those days, cutting classes never posed me much difficulty because my interest in music classes was, frankly speaking, minimal. I loved music itself but I had no idea that the seemingly endless swaram exercises which he was putting me through would finally lead to raga alapana, thaanam, neraval, manodharma swarams and so on, via geethams, varnams and keerthanams. Looking back now, more than 10 years later, I find that there was only one reason why the music classes never wound up altogether. And that was his unbelievable and infinite patience. If I made a mistake, he would make me repeat the phrase till I got it right, all the while repeating it himself, before moving on to the next line. He was more interested in the student learning a piece thoroughly than quickly. Since Vechoor Hariharasubramania Iyer Sir got me as a beginner, he had to do all the hard work.....to get my notes in place, my pitching in place, my rhythm in place and so on. He also had the painstaking job of firmly, gently, patiently and systematically introducing me to the world of improvisation. By being in every way an ideal guru himself, he convinced me of the fact that there was absolutely no substitute for learning directly from a guru. Financially though never on velvet himself, the number of students he has taught free of cost is staggering. He believed that as a guru it was his duty to teach music to anybody who was genuinely interested and that it was wrong to say no to an eager pupil, even if he could not pay.

Though he was an ardent fan of action packed English films (Especially those of Bruce Lee and James Bond), his own music was utterly sedate, pristine and pure – and totally devoid of (In his own words) "Thrills and suspense". He preferred singing solid pieces by the great masters to modern compositions. His repertoire

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was unbelievable. I only had to make him a request and he would teach me the song then and there without ever having to refer to any books whatsoever. He loved singing the magnificent, age-old, evergreen ragas like Sankarabharanam, Kalyani, Bhairavi and Thodi. He used to say that these ragas became "popular ragas" simply because they sounded so good. And he was a master in singing rakthi ragas like Anandabhairavi, Shahana, Kedaragowla and Saama. He used to joke that because everybody seemed to be going in for apoorva (rare) ragas and krithis these days, he was remaining traditional only to be "different". His sense of humour was also formidable, packed with puns and spoonerisms. He started opening out to me only after I had been his student for four or five years. He used to tell me that once a South Indian classical musician dies, he would be asked a single question at the Pearly Gates, upon which he would be admitted only if the musician were to answer "yes." (Otherwise he would be promptly sent back down to have another go at life). Fifty years back, the question was: "Have you given a concert at the Navarathri Mandapam?" Twenty years back it was: "Have you performed at the Madras Music Academy?" And now the question was: "Have you been on a concert tour of the United States?"

Arrangements were being made to get him go to the U.S. last May, but he had a heart attack and sadly, the whole thing had to be cancelled. Being a believer in destiny, he did not show the slightest bitterness or disappointment when this happened but he did have the pleasure of seeing many of his disciples "go places" which included some giving concerts in the U.S. too. And it is true that it was the success of his disciples that gave him more pleasure than his own successes. If I go on writing, I will probably never stop. And I will probably make the common mistake of shifting the emphasis from paying a tribute to this great man to illustrating with example just how close I was to him. He passed away on November 16 at the age of 69 leaving thousands of music students and music lovers in Kerala shocked and devastated. His death is a personal loss to any lover of pure music. He was one of the very last exponents of that generation of great masters, the likes of whom are becoming fewer and fewer with the passage of time. For me personally, he was more than a parent, a friend, a kindred spirit, a grand parent and a guide, all rolled into one.

In my house where he had been like a member of the family during the past decade, it is a deathly silence that prevails. But memories of his golden voice continue to echo through the silent corridors.