

Sruti

INDIA'S PREMIER MAGAZINE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS



T.K. GOVINDA RAO

He made the Musiri bani his own

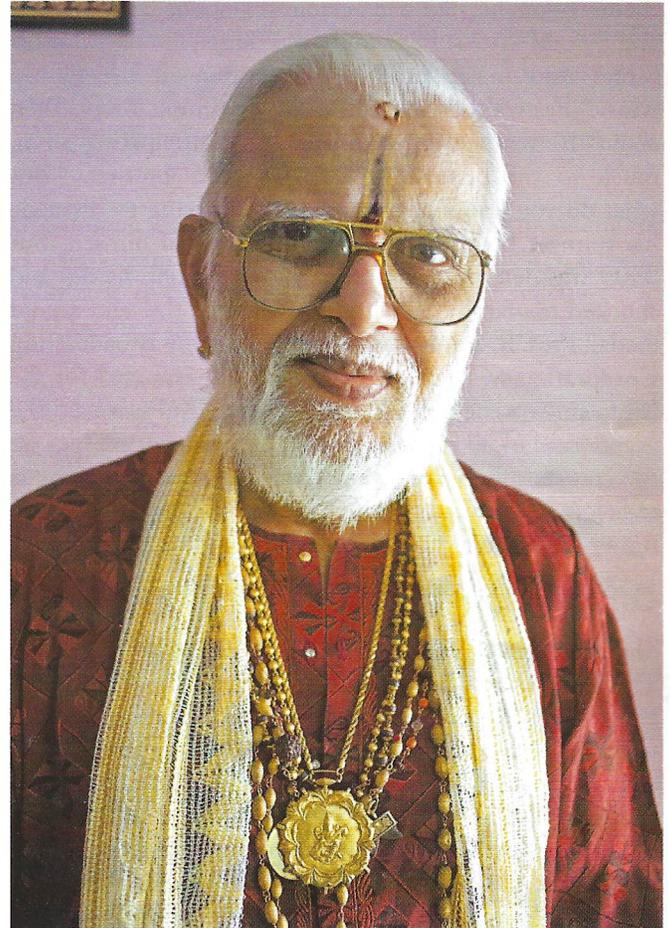
Lakshmi Sreeram

The teacher is seated on a generous sofa. Students of various ages squat on the floor, singing in hush hush tones. Everyone's *talam* is soft. No one dares to sing loudly, yet the slightest lapse is noted by the teacher, who identifies the culprit with unerring accuracy and makes a sharp remark. First the *varnam* – in 4 speeds (*vilamba kalam*, *tisram*, *madhyama kalam* and *tisram*), then *kriti* after *kriti* in that particular *raga*, each followed by many rounds of *kalpana swara* – until the less stout-hearted among the students start crying in the heart. "Ayyo porum!" The expression "bendu nimundidum!" comes again and again to mind as the next round of *swaraprastara* starts. The class had begun at 11 am, and at 2.30 pm, the teacher, 80 years old, is still raring to go, while the students have started squirming and twisting and stretching their bodies. Such is a weekend morning in the house of Sangita Kalanidhi T.K. Govinda Rao.

Torchbearer of the exquisite Musiri bani, TKG is justly proud of his lineage. At 80, he has a sharp mind and ear, and, until a recent health setback, he spent a few hours working on the computer each day compiling his fifth book of compositions. His work in bringing out volumes of the compositions of Carnatic music composers with notations transcribed in both Devanagari and diacritical Roman scripts is a monumental achievement.

Back from a trip to the U.S.A., his first stop the Cleveland Aradhana, he settles quietly for an interview. "I am not a Rao actually", he says laughing. "I was not comfortable being called Govinda! Govinda! When something is gone or lost we say *Govinda*, you know! And so I decided to add the title Rao after my name; it seemed more dignified. Actually, we are Shivalli (pronounced sheevalli) Brahmins, originally from Udupi but settled for generations in Kerala."

Born 21st April 1929 to Krishnan Ebrandiri and Kamamma, Govinda was one of eight children growing up in his family home on erstwhile Cochin Street of Tirupunitura. His childhood was spent in and around the Poornatrayeesa temple in Triupunitura, where his uncle was an *adhikari*. His father was in the business of collecting the surplus *prasadam* from the temple and selling it outside. "In those days, brahmins were treated very well. We were given two square meals a day everyday



Sangita Kalanidhi T.K. Govinda Rao

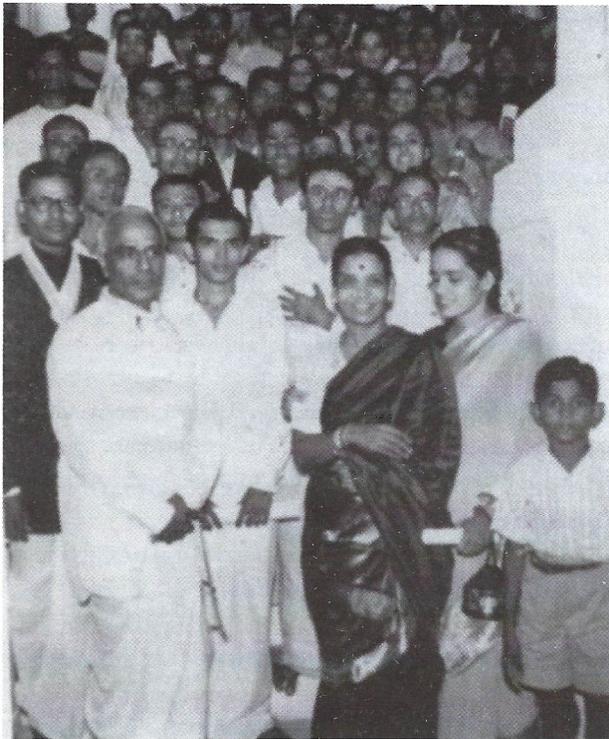
for free, if we had the *poonal* (sacred thread) on. And so it was possible to just be a loiterer, eat at the temple and not do anything. But we also had to be up and about early in the morning. We *brahmachari*-s had to go into the temple at 3.30 am and help around."

The normal course for any male child in his community to follow was to join the Maharaja College of Sanskrit in Tirupunitura after completing the third form in school, gather the title of *Kavyabhooshanam* after a four year course in Sanskrit, and then join the service of a temple! Or run a restaurant! Shivalli brahmins are pioneers of the world famous Udupi 'hotels' – vegetarian restaurants known for serving typical south Indian "tiffin" items like idli, dosa, vada, and uppuma with mouth watering varieties of chutney and aromatic sambar.



Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai

At the music college with Musiri, T. Brinda and others



“My association with Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai was the most memorable part of my stint at the college. He lived near the Mandaveli Bus Stand in Mari Chetty Street on the first storey of a house and suggested I move in with him, since commuting everyday from Triplicane was not very easy. He lived with his wife (much younger to him)

and very young son. I was a little hesitant, as they were not vegetarians. However, on his insistence, I moved in. Such was his love and concern for me that for the whole period (about a year and a half) I was with them, the family never once brought non-vegetarian food into their home. In fact, I would do all the vegetable shopping for him. He called me Aiyya and treated me with utmost affection. He was a “paramparai vidwan” – a traditional musician, flautist in the lineage of both Dikshitar and Tyagaraja swami. He had loads of notated compositions and he encouraged me to take them down. That, in fact, is one of the sources of my repertoire and I have notations of compositions you cannot find in the *Pradarsini* too.”

“Staying with Swaminatha Pillai and learning from him helped me attain depth in Carnatic music, besides helping me collect so many compositions. It is my great fortune to have come into contact with such a vidwan so early in my career.

He made us students sing varnam-s in six speeds – not the regular shatkalam though. First we sang it in 4-kalai chaukham, then tisram in that, then rendu-kalai speed and the tisram of that, then madhyama kalam and its tisram. That was the rigour through which he put us. He was also particular about the sangati-s. For instance, in a song like *Nee bhakti bhagya sudha* he allowed no sangati-s. If I tried even a minor sangati, he would discourage me and say there was no need. But a song like *E papamu* with its many sangati-s had to be sung with all the sangati-s intact, and in the same order.”

At the Music College, TKG took mridanga as an ancillary subject and acquired proficiency in playing the instrument. Fellow student Prof. T.R. Subramanyam recalls that TKG provided mridanga accompaniment for his concerts. While studying in the college, TKG used to spend his evenings at the house of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata and practise along with other students. He knew Chembai from his days in Tirupur. TKG was easily among the best students in his class. TRS recalls that many students would get their doubts cleared from TKG whose nickname was “Guru Govindar” in college.

After completing his course in Music College, he married Haimavati, a girl from near his hometown. Marriage was virtually mandatory if TKG had to earn his livelihood by teaching young unwed girls. He took up a house in Chidambarasami Koil Street. This was very close to Oliver Road, now Musiri Subramania Salai, on which Musiri lived. TKG spent as much time as he could with Musiri,

servicing him in many ways. By the time TKG joined him, Musiri had more or less stopped giving concerts and was mainly conducting music classes from his home.

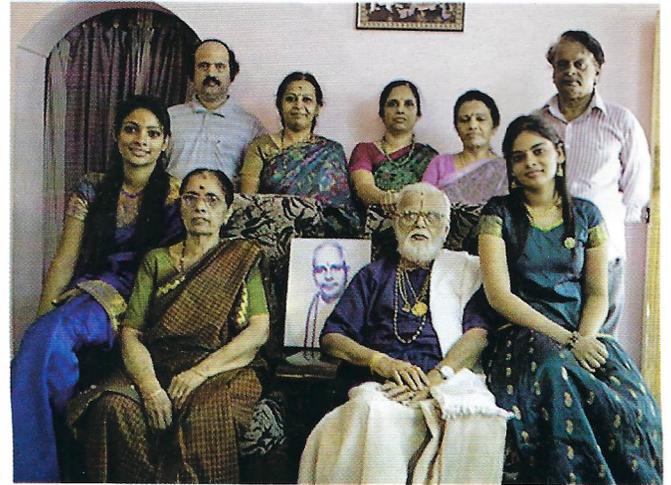
“He rarely taught me one on one. I sat around listening to the classes he conducted for his many students like Suguna Varadachari, Suguna Purushothaman, Mani Krishnaswami, and others and that way I acquired a broad vision in music. He would sing in the Navaratri Utsavam at the Padmanabhaswami temple each year, when he would ask me to dig out some compositions of Swati Tirunal. I would flesh out the song from the notation and he would give it its finer touches. He also encouraged me to tune the songs of Ambujam Krishna and all this widened my musical horizons.”

“As a student of Musiri Subramania Iyer, I belong to the fifth generation in a sishya parampara of Sri Tyagaraja. One of the seniormost disciples of Tyagaraja was Manambuchavadi Venkatasubbier. They were more or less of the same age and at one time Tyagaraja had been a student of Venkatasubbier’s father. Now Venkatasubbier would pass on Tyagaraja’s kriti-s to Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer acknowledged to be the first to give a kutcheri on a platform. Before him was bhajanai music, but a kutcheri as we know it was most probably pioneered by Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer. He received many of Tyagaraja’s compositions directly from Venkatasubbier and propagated them by singing them in kutcheri-s. Sabhesa Iyer was Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer’s disciple; Musiri Subramania Iyer was Sabhesa Iyer’s disciple and I am Musirivaal’s disciple. Thus I belong to the fifth generation of a branch of Sri Tyagaraja’s sishya parampara.”

TKG had a couple of teaching stints in the Government College of Music and also in Singapore before he joined AIR-Madras in the 1980s as a producer and later moved to Delhi as Chief Producer. Haimavati stayed back in Chennai, raising their four children to avoid disruption of their studies. He returned to Chennai after his retirement in 1992.

He has since devoted himself to bringing out volumes of the compositions of the trinity, Swati Tirunal and a volume on varnam-s. He is at present working on a volume of Dasar compositions. He also teaches anyone interested, without charging fees.

As a teacher, TKG commands respect and awe among his students. His legacy is carried on by senior students like Padmaja Srinivasan, Sankari Natarajan, Kalpakam Raman,



Govinda Rao with wife Haimavati and other family members

Sugantha Kalamegam, Subhashree Mani, and many others. Radha Ramji runs a music school in Chennai and Damodaran Namboodari in Kerala. Balamani, who has taught innumerable students in Mumbai, is a very senior student. His own daughter Padmaja Kishore runs a school in the Bay Area, U.S.A. Dr. Prameela Gurumurthy, Head of the Department of Music, University of Madras, too is a senior student of TKG. Younger musicians like violinist L. Ramakrishnan and vocalists T.K. Ramachandran, Prasanna Venkatraman, Dr. Sunder, Visalakshi Nityanand, are his students.

While TKG’s generosity with ‘vidya daanam’ is well known, equally well known is the warm hospitality offered by wife Haimavati. Dr. Prameela reminisces: “We would get ‘gana’ from Sir and ‘khana’ from Hema Mami.” Sankari also recalls: “Classes were marathon events and at the end, Mami would always have tiffin and tea ready for us.” Even today students are not allowed to leave until they have had tea.

The Bombay Sisters C. Saroja and C. Lalitha first learnt from Musiri Subramania Iyer and later continued their musical education under TKG. “We have been learning from him since 1960. He is more like an elder brother to us and he has taken immense interest in our welfare. For instance, he went along with our father to assess prospective bridegrooms for us. He was concerned that marriage should not put a stop to our musical career. He has been a wonderfully generous teacher. If we needed a particular song for a recording or concert, he took pains to dig it out and teach us. And there was no limit to the time he would spend teaching us. Once Lalgudi Jayaraman



Bombay Sisters - C. Saroja and C. Lalitha

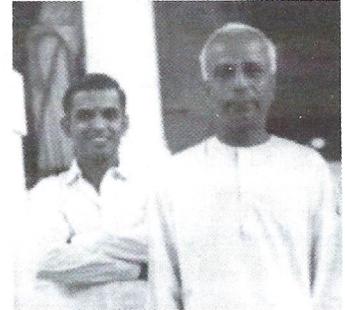
Sir remarked that it was our good fortune to learn from a stalwart like TKG who looked at neither money nor *mani* (time in Tamil) while imparting music. We would say again and again that we have been blessed to find such a teacher.”

Rare fidelity

T.K. Govinda Rao’s music reflects a complete absorption of the Musiri bani. Such is his admiration for Musiri’s music that he has imbibed his style and aesthetics with rare fidelity. Sitting at Musiri’s home on Musiri Subramania Iyer Salai with his grandnephew Tyagarajan, we are listening to a priceless recording of kriti-s rendered by Musirivaal to the accompaniment of the tambura alone. TKG and K.S. Venkatraman, another student of Musiri, are accompanying him. (TKG and KSV gave concerts together as “College Brothers” for a short time). Tyagarajan tells us that this recording was done at the home of the late UN official C.V. Narasimhan, a student of Musiri. Anai-Ayya’s composition in Neelambari *Kaana kannayiram vendum*, and Patnam Subramania Iyer’s *Marivere dikkevarayya Rama* in Shanmukhapriya are some of the songs sung. At times during the niraval or swaraprastara, it is impossible to tell who is singing – Musiri or TKG. Such complete absorption is astonishing. How many sishya-s of eminent musicians do we know who have made their guru’s style completely their own? “Musiri thought Govinda Rao was one of the finest products of the Music College,” says Tyagarajan. “When Govinda Rao came to my uncle, he was already an accomplished musician and he absorbed his style through exposure to his teaching and singing rather than by learning from him directly.”

But TKG is no imitator; he has absorbed the Musiri bani and made it his own. When he sings, the audience is spellbound by the effortless intricacies of his niraval and swaraprastara. Like all great music, it sounds easy and unlaboured but is very difficult to reproduce.

If he has absorbed Musiri’s style, it is because of his unreserved admiration for it. That music drew him and still draws him like nothing else does. Even today when he sings or teaches a patented song of his guru, his eyes turn misty: “*Idu vadyar paduvar.*”



With guru Musiri

Impact of Musiri’s music

“My teacher gave great importance to sahitya bhava. He insisted that we should know the meaning of the song and keep that in mind as we sang. For instance, take the song *Orajoopuchu cheti nyayama?* It means: “Is it right for you to look at me through the corner of your eyes? When will You show me grace?” The bhava of the song is a gentle plea and so the song should be rendered in a pleading manner and not in a strident style, as it often is.

Musirivaal discouraged elaborate alapana. He would say: *Oorai valachindu padade*. His swaraprastara too was brief, but his niraval singing was elaborate and his supremacy in this area is acknowledged by all. Controlled manodharma with highly imaginative use of the ghana naya (volume control and modulation) aesthetics made his niraval singing breathtaking and unforgettable.”

“He cast a spell over listeners. At Tiruvaiyaru, for instance, he would take the stage last. Many violinists and mridangists would not have had a chance to play and he would take all of them along. A hush would descend as he started *Santamu leka, saukhyamu ledu*. It was an experience to cherish for years. Everyone in the audience would be absolutely still – eager to catch the faintest nuance. You couldn’t stop the tears. Coming after all the aradhana din over the previous days, it was absolute amritam (nectar). The accompanists would be trembling in awe. Accompanying him was a great challenge because he disapproved of loud accompaniment. It should not be obtrusive and yet it should be audible – but barely!”

While TKG’s guru bhakti is well known, he is also a great bhakta of Tyagaraja. Very often, while appreciating a kriti of the great composer, he exclaims, “*Adu dan Tyagaraja!*” (That is Tyagaraja!) TKG has been involved in conducting the Tyagaraja aradhana including an akhandam for Sadguru Tyagaraja Sangeeta Samajam for

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over 50 years now. The venue used to be the Srinivasa Perumal temple in Purasawalkam, but has recently been moved to Karpaga Vinayagar temple in Adyar.

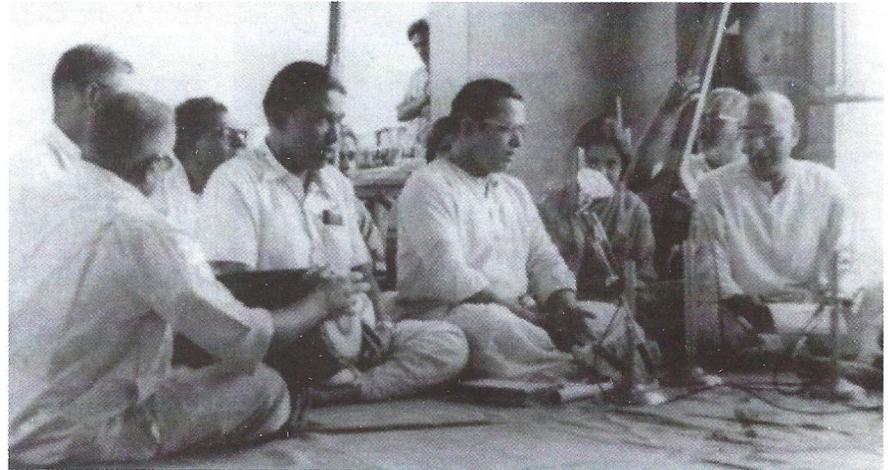
TKG is also an admirer of composers who came after the trinity, like Patnam Subramania Iyer, saying that these composers had the benefit of having heard and sung great songs of Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastry. As for Purandaradasa, TKG always has at hand one or two pada-s to quote by way of comment on any issue. He draws his life's philosophy and deep religious convictions from the songs of the saint.

TKG's music

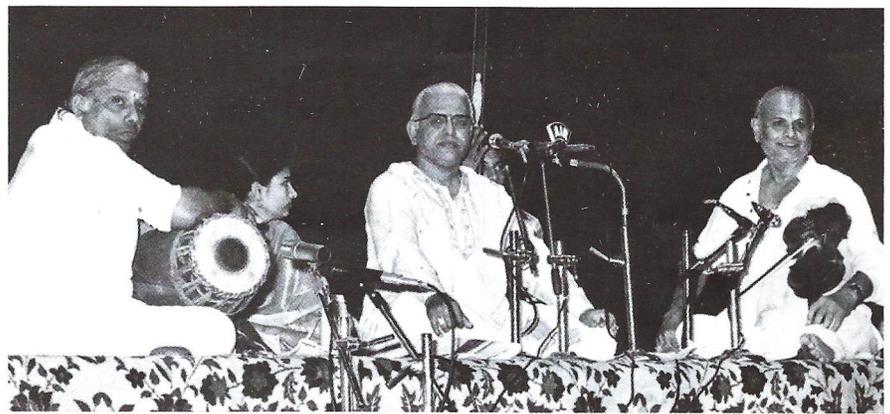
TKG's admiration for his guru's music is reflected in his own music. It is characterised by a tight economy of phrases, a preponderance of karvai-s. When the karvai is broken, it is to deliver a sharp and very brief but bhava evoking phrase – and above all, by pervasive and controlled use of naya-ghana aesthetics.

His singing of kriti-s does full justice to the sahitya bhava. The preferred layam is vilamba and madhyama kala and almost never durita kala. Words are handled with great care. His alapana uses plenty of zoning, with sustained alapana around important notes. Dominance of the veena bani over the briga-filled nagaswara bani gives it a tranquil texture. His niraval too is more oriented towards bhava than fireworks. It has karvai-s but none so long as to be a mere exercise in or exhibition of lung power.

One of the distinctive features of TKG's music is the magnificent style of swaraprastara which also he draws from the Musiri bani. There is little room in it for premeditated



At the akhanda ganam conducted by Sri Sadguru Sangeeta Samajam



Govinda Rao in concert with Venkataramanujam (violin), Erode Gururajan (mridanga)

Govinda Rao, Chalakudi Narayanaswamy (violin),
Mavelikara Raja (mridanga) and Udupi Sridhar (ghata)



calculations or kanakku, something he holds in contempt. Elegant patterns are spontaneously developed and finished with aesthetic appropriateness. There is nothing flashy about it – it is quiet, controlled, tight and elegant and each swara or phrase seems to be linked to the previous one, almost organically

– such is the ‘poruttam’ or auchitya. It is a step by step progression from simple to complex patterns which seems much simpler than it actually is. According to him, this style of swara-singing has evolved, has been perfected, beginning with Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer. Nothing is ever out of place or unnecessary. Where a lesser musician might labour over a couple of avartana-s, TKG will deliver in half an avartanam. Economy marks great art.

He places great stress on raga bhava. “Don’t sing with the arohanam and avarohanam in mind. *Ragattai nenacchundu paadungo*. Think of the raga and sing. Swaraprastara should not be a delivery of the arohana-avarohana in different ways; there should be raga bhava in it.”

While listening to his swaraprastara, the phrase that comes to mind is “a-prithakyatna”. This is from the world of Sanskrit rhetoricians and is deeply insightful. Attempts at creativity must not be laboured. Creativity in art must flow spontaneously without any separate (prithak) effort (yatna). Endless patterns are created, each of them fresh, but none that is set into tadinginathom-s. Of course, this comes only with years of experience and also the irreplaceable artistic spark or pratibha. “Art is a collaboration between God and the artist, and the less the artist does, the better,”

As Chief Producer, AIR-Delhi



said Andre Gide. In the exquisite music of TKG, we see a total absence of deliberate effort or labour, in alapana, swaram, niraval.

Not everyone can accompany such music. Veteran violinist V.V. Subramaniam who too learnt from Musiri and has provided accompaniment to TKG many times, says: “I always cherish accompanying Govinda Rao because he is a vidwan we can always learn something from and go back to, having gained something. There can be no musician who does not have respect for his music. Even hard-to-please Brinda and Veenai S. Balachander had great regard for his music. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer was a great admirer of his music too. He once said, “The raga devata-s come to dance when Govinda Rao sings.” Once at his home, Semmangudi started singing Neelambari raga which ran for an hour or so and then he sang the Dikshitar kriti *Amba Neelayadakshi*. When I commented on the Musiri-like nuances in the song, he said: ‘Go listen to Govinda Rao sing this song and you will know how magical it can be when rendered in the Musiri bani.’”

VVS continues: “Govinda Rao’s music is not for popular consumption and he never sought that kind of popularity, because above all, he is a worshipper of music. Bhakti is lost in the quest for popularity. Isn’t there a difference between going to the temple with a clean mind and body to stand in front of the deity in the garbhagriham on the one hand and having the darisanam of the utsava moorti during a street procession? Populist music is like the latter and those who seek popularity can only offer us that kind of experience. The music of people like Govinda Rao or M.D. Ramanathan who never sought popularity is capable of giving the former kind of experience – a true spiritual experience.”

Veteran mridanga vidwan Guruvayur Dorai recollects TKG’s generosity in sharing his knowledge and guiding him on occasion. He says, “It is always a pleasure to accompany Govinda Rao and especially play a tani with him keeping talam. It should not be a mechanical matter of keeping the beats accurately. It is important to understand the korvai, the bhava of the mridanga player and keep talam accordingly, and this Govinda Rao does perfectly.”

Compiling songs of the Trinity

TKG has rendered a signal service to Carnatic music in bringing out volumes of the compositions of

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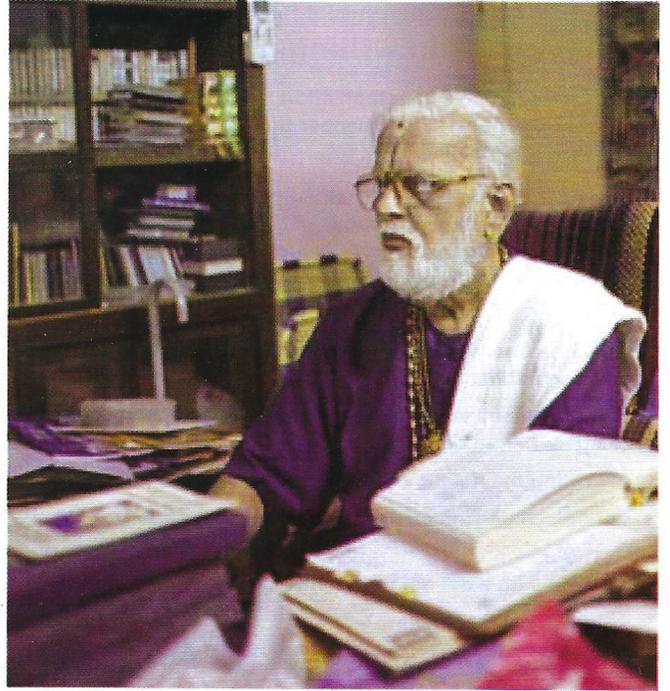
Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar, Syama Sastry, Swati Tirunal, and a volume of varnam-s. He is now working on compiling the compositions of Purandaradasa and other dasa-s.

When you ask TKG about what impelled him to take on such a task, he says that it was his concern that sahitya bhava should be maintained in Carnatic music.

“When I was Chief Producer, AIR, I had the opportunity to listen to singers from all over the country and I 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, 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.”

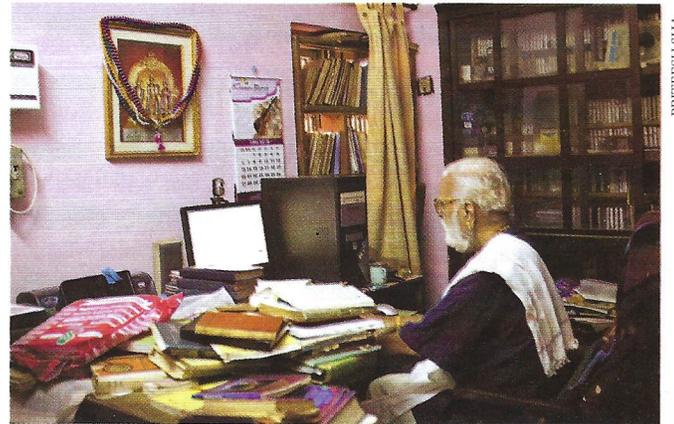
TKG was well equipped to take on such a task. His musical education under stalwarts like Musiri and Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai who had passed on many rare compositions in notation to him was an important factor. TKG also commands fluency in many tongues. An Udupi brahmin, whose ancestors had for generations settled in Kerala, whose music education happened in Madras, and who lived in Delhi as Chief Producer, AIR – he acquired an impressive command over the four South Indian languages. He speaks Kannada, Malayalam, Tulu, Tamil, English and enough Hindi to get by, and also has some proficiency in Sanskrit. “My formal education is actually 3rd form in school before the Kavya Bhooshanam, a four-year course in Maharaja Sanskrit College. After coming to Chennai, I passed the Matriculation exam of the Andhra Board. But to me, more important than university degrees is the ability to understand the languages in which our great compositions have been couched. As a singer, I need to comprehend and feel the intensity of the lyrics.”

His compilations of the compositions of the Trinity are exhaustive. All the known compositions have been included, not just compositions known to him. His sources have been the notations he gathered during his association with Swaminatha Pillai, Musiri’s collection of old publications of compositions apart from Subbarama



PRITEESH SHA

At home with his books and his computer



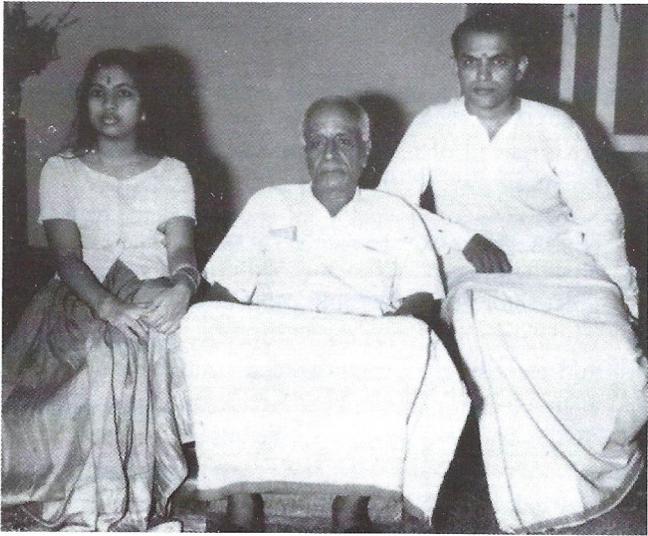
PRITEESH SHA

Dikshitar’s *Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini* and other well known sources. The *Varnasagaram* is truly remarkable in that it has set out in notation 415 varnam-s composed during the last four centuries, from compositions of Karvetinagar Govindaswami (17th century) down to ‘Chitravina’ Ravikiran of our own time.

Notation

TKG’s books do not have exhaustive notation in the manner of the *Pradarsini*. And this was a deliberate choice. “I decided to make it simple. I remember that when a book with very detailed and meticulous notation came out, my guru Musiri Iyerval appreciated the work but also wondered if it was practical. For

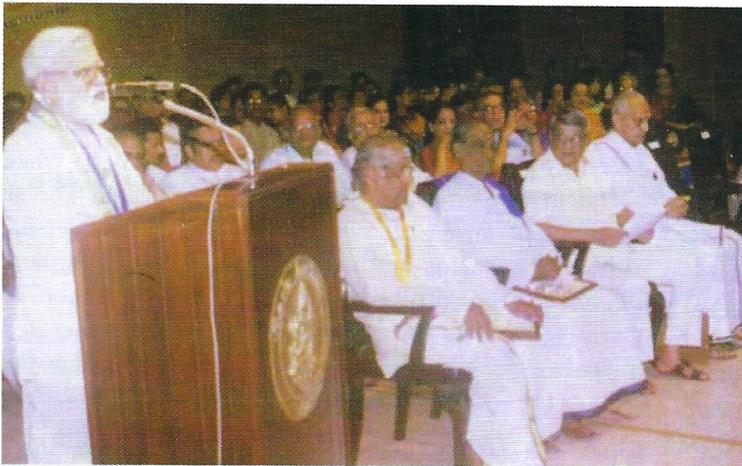
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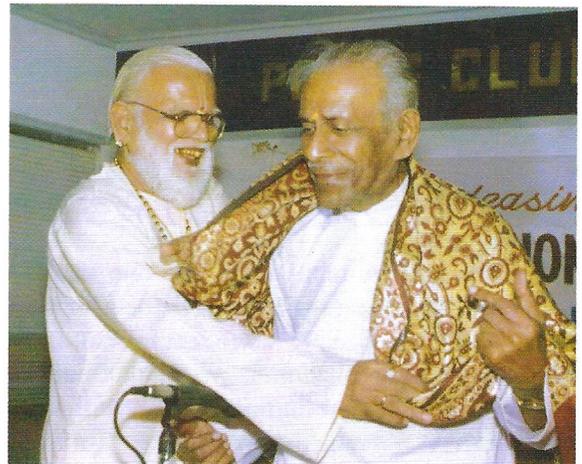
With Musiri and young Prameela in Sri Lanka on the occasion of her debut



Semmangudi honouring Govinda Rao



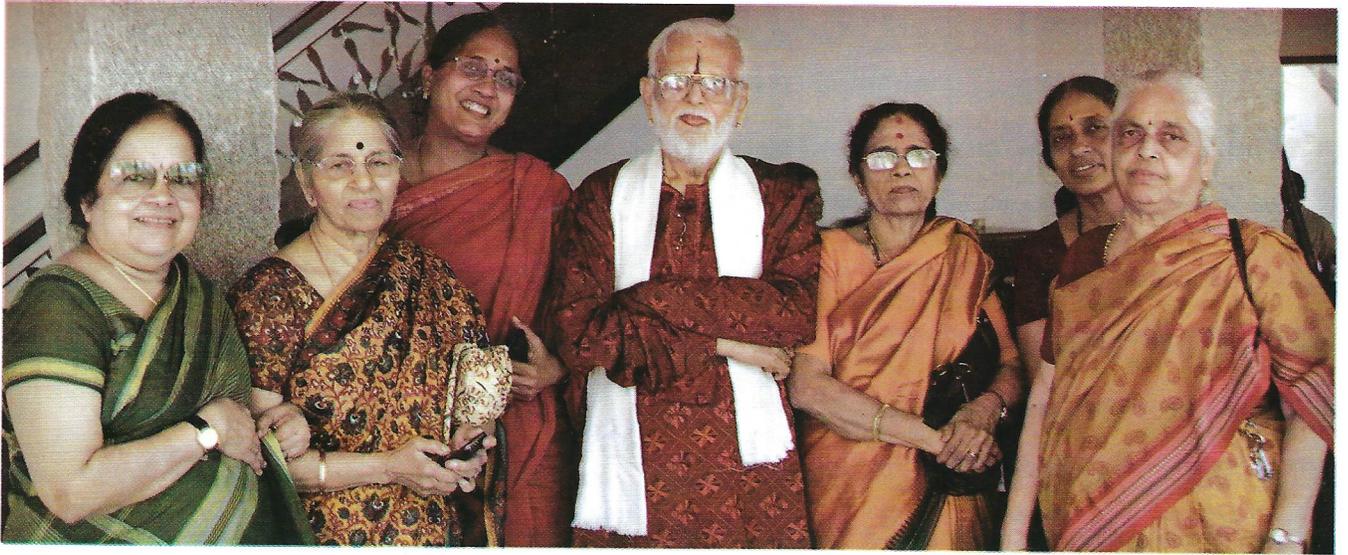
Delivering the presidential address at the Music Academy



With Marthanda Varma at the release of the book *Swati Tirunal's Compositions*

At the Rashtrapati Bhavan with Rajiv Gandhi, Shankar Dayal Sharma, President R. Venkatraman and his wife, Sonia Gandhi, Guruvayur Dorai and others





Govinda Rao with his disciples

