

Multifaceted vidwan

*The genius of
Thanjavur Sankara Iyer
is threefold. A tribute by
LAKSHMI DEVNATH
on the musician's
80th birthday.*



full-fledged musician. Ever since Sankara Iyer's music has attracted the attention of excellent violinists and percussionists. As a teacher, vidwan Sankara Iyer met with resounding success. Among his students were children, housewives, serious music students and even professional musicians. He also served for a short while as a teacher in the Sangeeta Vidyalaya of the Shanmukhananda Sabha and Fine Arts Society, Mumbai. At Shanmukhananda Sabha's music school, Sankara Iyer's ability to explain the grammar and nuances of Carnatic music in a lucid manner made him popular with the students and their parents. He became a preferred choice for presenting lec-dems, which he reportedly did with aplomb.

Thanjavur Sankara Iyer is a highly respected vaggayakara, that is, one who composes both lyrics and music. He started composing, in the strict sense of the term, when he was about 25 years of age. He recalls, "My first composition was "Ramanamamey" in Desh raga. I love Hindustani music and to me it was natural to choose this raga for exploration. My choice of this raga, however, raised many eyebrows, probably because it did not belong to the Carnatic system." His compositions have been a source of delight both to the vidwans and to the general public.

Sankara Iyer's compositions numbering approximately 75 brim with an admirable variety — a lakshana

ENNUDAYA PRATAPAM irukkattum," (Let my personal history be). I would like to talk about music; maybe what I say would benefit the youngsters," said Thanjavur Sankara Iyer in response to a query on his early life. But Sankara Iyer's 80-year old story must be told for he has donned the rather heavy, three-fold mantle of a composer, teacher and musician for decades though very lightly. Sankara Iyer was born on January 14, 1924 in the village Togamarai, in Tiruchi district. He however has added the prefix Thanjavur to his name as a token of gratitude to the place where he was born again as a musician. The breeding pond of Sankara Iyer's musical excellence was his own family. His father Venkatesa Iyer was a Tamil scholar and an amateur Harikatha performer as well. His mother Kuppaluammal was a good singer. Sankara Iyer's initial training was under his maternal grandfather, Krishna Iyer. Noticing the young boy's immense talent, his uncle arranged for him to be tutored by Sattur Krishna Iyengar, a versatile musician and a generous guru. Sankara Iyer at that point of time was all of twelve years old. Sattur Krishna Iyengar trained young Sankaran with unbridled enthusiasm and sincerity. Sankara Iyer recalls, "I also loved to practise, Sattur Iyengarval used to wake me up at 3 a.m. and I would practice for six or seven hours." It was thus that three years passed. At this juncture, Sattur was invited by the redoubtable vidwan Tiger Varadachariar, to take up the post of professor of music at Annamalai University. Young Sankaran followed them there and also subsequently enrolled for the Sangeetha Bhooshanam diploma under the able guidance of the great 'Tiger' who apart from teaching him at the college also imparted in-house training. At this point Sankaran also learnt to play the veena and his teachers were Gomathisankara Iyer and K. S. Narayanaswamy. "Talking about gurus," recalls Sankara Iyer, "I would like to mention that I also learnt from T. K. Rangachari, a musician who sang to perfect sruti like Madurai Mani Iyer." The result was the creation of a musician of calibre—Vidwan Sankara Iyer.

Sankara Iyer's formal debut as a professional musician actually happened by default rather than design when he substituted for Harikatha exponent C. Saraswathi Bai in 1937 at the Ramakrishna Home in Mylapore. Sankara Iyer's career took shape in Thanjavur as he became a

kriti that defines the characteristics of the raga in which it is composed, a Ganapati kriti in Mohanam rather than the customary Hamsadhwani, another song in the complicated Sankeerna Chapu tala, a ragamalika enticingly labelled as Ranjanimala because it uses many ragas which incorporate the suffix Ranjani in their names — the list is long and certainly fascinating. This traditional musician has a definite penchant for innovation and proof of this comes in the form of creation of new ragas like Vishnupriya, Manoranjitam and so on. Recognition for Sankara Iyer's multifaceted talent in music has come in the form of several awards and titles like Kalaimamani, Sangeeta Kala Acharya, Sangeeta Ratnakara and so on. His uncanny ability to separate the grain from the chaff in any musical phrase has earned for him the epithet 'Essence Sankara Iyer' and it is probably this cryptic phrase that describes most perfectly this 'thinking musician' who has also been given accolades like 'musician amongst musicians' by even the most redoubtable vidwans of today.