

## Lalgudi: a true love story

Meera Srinivasan

For anyone reading the story of violin maestro Lalgudi G. Jayaraman (1930-2013), marvel is an inevitable sentiment. His accomplishments as a young accompanist were unparalleled, his artistry drew praise from acclaimed practitioners all over the world, and he went on to become a brilliant composer.

Invariably, biographies of the great tend to leave the reader with a sense of admiration for the subject.

However, what makes a biography more gripping is a peek at the toil that produced the genius, the shades of vulnerability, the subject's insecurities and how they were dealt with. In that, *An incurable romantic* is a compelling read, because Lalgudi's biographer Lakshmi Devnath chooses sincere story-telling over glorification.

In the initial chapters, where she traces Lalgudi's ancestry — he was born into a family of musicians, and hailed from saint-composer Thyagaraja's *shishya parampara* — Ms. Devnath takes readers to an era when life seems to have been far simpler. The first few chapters which elaborate his lineage, at times, fatigue the reader. You get a bit restless reading in detail about his ancestors and want to quickly get to Lalgudi's story. But once Lal-

gudi is born, the story accelerates and the author holds your attention right through.

It is a delight to visualise Lalgudi as a little boy, sporting a tuft and a pair of ear studs, forever fearful of his father and *guru* Gopala Iyer. His fascination for elephants and puzzles aside, there are few signs of the joys of the often-romanticised childhood in a rural setting. Contrarily, Lalgudi's initial years were marked by fierce disciplining by his father. Daily violin lessons were rigorous and the learning process, intense. At one point, you wonder what really made this child want to cope.

Without resorting to any quick judgment, the author brings out the interesting dynamic of the father-son relationship. At some level, it seems like Gopala Iyer was living his dream through his prodigious son. He comes across as a very harsh father and at times, even a ruthless one. Leniency did not exist and pardon was unheard of in the Gopala Iyer school of parenting. But it was the same Gopala Iyer who would prevent his son from even sharpening pencils, for he thought those little fingers were way too precious to take any chance.

As the story gradually unfolds, you realise that music captured Lalgudi's imagination like nothing else did.



### An Incurable Romantic

The Musical Journey of Lalgudi Jayaraman: Lakshmi Devnath; HarperCollins Publishers, A-53, Sector 57, Noida-201301. Rs. 599.

It went on to become an obsession, as Lalgudi himself declares. Getting a whack or an earful from his father was incidental to the pursuit of what he loved most.

Also, Lalgudi, throughout his lifetime, emphasised his father's contribution and sacrifice. In addition to giving him the best mix of different styles imbibed by him, Gopala Iyer also trained his son in scientific self-evaluation, something Lalgudi would go on to practice throughout his career. After every concert, he wrote a detailed review of his performance.

Ms. Devnath captures various influences that

shaped Lalgudi's journey — the celebrated G.N. Balasubramaniam and Mridangam maestro Palani Subramania Pillai being significant. Lalgudi's stature as a musician is periodically reiterated by the feedback he received from peers and some matchless seniors, and the author provides ample evidence of this. She employs vivid anecdotes as testimonies to Lalgudi's mastery.

Once, after listening to a young Lalgudi play raga Thodi — very much like his own — Nagaswaram giant Tiruvavaduturai N. Rajarathnam Pillai, or TNR, gave him a big hug, and even lifted him a few inches off the ground.

Whether it was GNB, Ariyakudi, Madurai Mani or Pulghat Mani Iyer — giants of that musical era — all of them were vocal in their praise for this impressive youngster in their midst. Even the initially reluctant Alathur brothers publicly acknowledged Lalgudi's genius at a later point.

### Hard work

In a refreshing departure from common portrayals of genius — either pointing to eccentricities or using abstract descriptions or mystifying the subject — the author clearly spells out that Lalgudi's genius was, in fact, the result of tremendous hard work. The biography also zooms into

some not-so-pleasant episodes about Lalgudi. The author, who read out the entire book to Lalgudi before his passing away, observes that he did not want a single word in any of these sections removed.

Before a 1982 concert at Srinivasa Sastri Hall in Madras, Lalgudi had remarked that he did not want *The Hindu's* music critic SVK to review his concert. He was irked, says the author, by SVK's repeated criticism of Lalgudi's performance as being planned to the last detail and being intellectual rather than emotional in spirit. The newspaper, in response, carried a boxed news item soon after sharply stating that an artiste giving a public performance should be prepared to face public criticism, both favourable and unfavourable.

The author explains Lalgudi's frustration, without attempting to justify it. As an accompanist, Lalgudi had exhibited his ability for delivering incredibly spontaneous musical repartees. As a solo artiste, he meticulously planned his concerts to give the best to the audience. He did not believe in experimenting on stage.

The book also looks at discordant relationships between him and a few of his peers, and tries to place those controversies in context by providing points of view from either side. Among other interesting

episodes that the author presents in detail is the controversy around The Music Academy's *Sangita Kalanidhi* title that Lalgudi refused to accept. Lakshmi Devnath captures with evidence the reasons behind the delay, the manipulation by certain musicians and eventually the amends made by The Music Academy.

The book is also sensitive to the people around Lalgudi and showcases their silent contribution to his career — his grandmother Muthulakshmi who inspired him, his mother Savithri who motivated him, his wife Rajam, who made herself invisible to fully support her husband, his sister Srimathi who collaborated with him and his son and daughter, his prime disciples, with whom he performed later. The final chapters, where Ms. Devnath speaks about Lalgudi's failing health and pragmatic attitude, are poignant.

The style of writing, breezy and precise, aids the author's earnest story-telling. *An incurable romantic* is much more than the success story of one of the best musicians of our times. It is the story of a little boy from a tiny village who pursued something he loved with rare grit, passion and focus. It is a true love story.

(Meera Srinivasan is *The Hindu's* Sri Lanka correspondent)