

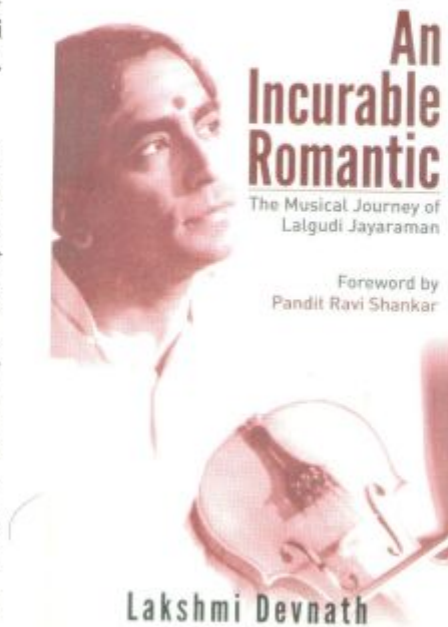
Voice of the violin

AN INCURABLE ROMANTIC
– The musical journey of Lalgudi Jayaraman. By Lakshmi Devnath. [Harper Collins. Pp. 435. Rs. 599]

The book is clearly a labour of love, offering plenty of evidence of both labour and love. The book took five years of which one and a half years was spent on research which involved interviewing over a hundred people, countless hours of conversation with Jayaraman and his family members and visits to the places connected with Jayaraman's formative years. Jayaraman was a biographer's delight. He had a memory which, in the author's words, "attracted inputs like a magnet and retained them like a sponge". His wife was practically a walking biography of Jayaraman.

Jayaraman had an archival temperament which made him not only preserve all kinds of records, letters and photos, but made him an inveterate diarist noting down not merely the date and venue of each concert but even the songs that he played in each! The tone and language of the text throughout show clearly how much the author loved writing the biography and her passion and excitement in doing it.

When his father first gave him a violin, Jayaraman possessed it; from then onwards, the violin possessed him. Every instrument has an individual personality that transcends the mechanics of its technique. Hard work does achieve a measure of virtuosity. But only a genius awakens the personality of an instrument. In fact, he and the instrument become one and indivisible. This is exactly what happened with Jayaraman. His



romance with it and his love for it were of the "until death do us part" kind. He would not allow others even to carry it. It is indeed the good fortune of Carnatic music lovers that Lalgudi's romance with the violin was incurable!

Broadly, the book is in seven parts with some inevitable overlapping:

Family background going back four generations; ambience in which Jayaraman grew up and learnt music; his rise as a musician; as a guru; some notable experiences; random thoughts and reminiscences; and a lecture on the history of the violin.

The book is replete with interesting and insightful stories and anecdotes.

It traces the family history in detail starting with Rama Iyer, Jayaraman's great grandfather. According to Walajapet Ramaswamy Bhagavata's biography of Tyagaraja, he was one of the fourteen disciples who

formed the core of the latter's sishya parampara. During his visit to Lalgudi, Tyagaraja stayed in Rama Iyer's house. He also composed the Lalgudi Pancharatna kritis which, later on, Lalgudi polished into delectable treats and popularised. The whole family regarded the saint as their Adi Guru — so much so that when he forgot to play a Tyagaraja kriti in a concert, Lalgudi felt so guilty that he rushed to the pooja room and played a Tyagaraja kriti there. The book also paints interesting pen pictures of Lalgudi's grandfather who established himself as a leading violin exponent, his wife Muthulakshmi, and his uncles. The narrative is made interesting by many stories through the words of Muthulakshmi Patti, to whose family stories Lalgudi as a boy used to listen avidly. The way her graphic descriptions of those days excited and inspired young Lalgudi is brought out vividly by the author.

Lalgudi's story, in a sense, really starts with the advent of his father, Gopala Iyer. The author describes in detail how multi-talented Gopala Iyer was and what a martinet he was. Gopala Iyer emphasised certain values like punctuality, modesty, austerity, commitment, hard work, and respect for elders. Silence was his usual sign of approval but his criticism and punishments could be very harsh. The author also points out that though Lalgudi often felt hurt by the harsh words of his father, he considered him the architect not merely of his career but his life. Recalling an earful Gopala Iyer once gave him, Lalgudi said, "It was harsh, but I admired the fact that he never repeated a single word in his tirade!"

The author traces how, under Gopala Iyer's strict tutelage, Lalgudi went on to explore and master not only the violin as an instrument but also the depths and nuances of Carnatic music. In addition, it was Gopala Iyer's taraka mantra that a musician should be fame-proof, money-proof and flattery-proof, something that Lalgudi followed till the end.

Thereafter the book progresses mainly through the narration of various incidents and anecdotes involving Lalgudi's performances at various fora, accompanying leading musicians of the day, how some of them tested his ability to match them and finally how they were all amazed at the talent of such a young boy still in his teens. The author brings out quite dramatically and effectively how, more than any other senior musicians that Lalgudi interacted with, GNB had the greatest impact on him both as a person and as a model-in music. The book records the amusing incident in which GNB paid Rs. 10 as advance to book Lalgudi for his next performance. In fact, referring to the personal and musical rapport between the two, in one of his lectures on Lalgudi's music, Dr. N. Ramanathan went to the extent of saying, "Without GNB, there was no Lalgudi, and without Lalgudi, there was no GNB" – high praise indeed! The author aptly describes this phase of Lalgudi's career as "high voltage entry and vertical take-off".

In spite of her undisguised admiration for Lalgudi, the author is objective enough to include critical comments that some musicians and critics made about Lalgudi's music. The author mentions a remark of Dr. N. Ramanathan, a great admirer of Lalgudi, that sometimes Lalgudi's attitude towards the vocalist appeared to be impatient and restless and his playing too aggressive. She

also mentions a rare instance of Lalgudi losing his cool with a music critic of *The Hindu* and inviting criticism from others for this.

The book chronicles the innovation of a violin duet with his sister Srimathy and how it became a roaring success leading to a golden jubilee celebration at the 50th concert. Then follows another experiment – the violin, venu, veena (VVV) concerts which, though initially very popular, later attracted some controversy and were given up. One prevalent criticism mentioned in the book was that the VVV trio concentrated more on technical gimmicks than on quintessential music. Veena virtuoso Balachandar once told me that Lalgudi had degraded the veena, the flagship instrument of Carnatic music, by making it just another instrument in an ensemble and that too subservient to the violin.

Lalgudi's visit to the Edinburgh Music Festival as an Indian musician delegate is dealt with in detail, especially his meeting and interaction with Yehudi Menuhin which was to continue even later.

In between, Lalgudi's creativity had turned towards composing. Tillanas, varnams and kritis flowed from his musical genius exploring hitherto unexplored ragas and nuances therein. His tillanas re-wrote the very concept of a tillana and his dance-drama musical was a path-breaking effort. The book deals adequately with this phase. In fact, the book comes with a CD in which items are included to illustrate the points made about Lalgudi's style at various places in the book with cross references. Lalgudi also composed music for the film *Sringaram* and won a National Award.

Lalgudi had many facets — violinist, composer, choreographer, music director and guru. In the last role,

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he inherited many of the qualities of his father, particularly that of being a strict disciplinarian, and tried to instil in his students the same values his father had instilled in him. He had a burning desire to communicate to his students everything he knew about music and, according to S.P. Ramh, his disciple, even life. It was, of course, left to the student to absorb whatever he or she could, depending on his or her learning capacity. This is brought out in the book through small, amusing incidents of chastisement of errant students and advice to them. "Teaching gives me as much satisfaction as sight to a blind person. I want to teach till my last breath," Lalgudi is quoted as saying.

It is not all motherhood and apple pie though. Perhaps, the most unsavoury experience in Lalgudi's life must have been the Sangita Kalanidhi episode and the surrounding controversy attributing a title-seeking motive to him. (In this connection, Semmangudi fans may find some points in the book unpalatable if true). Luckily, it all ended on a pleasant note with the Music Academy finally admitting its mistake indirectly and conferring a Lifetime Award on Lalgudi, the only one to receive it so far.

Lalgudi's own ideas on what is good music are given at various points in the book. His topmost priority was perfection — and melody. The next was consistency without undue experimentation on the stage. The artist should know the meaning of the lyric and the emotion which the kriti is trying to express and bring it out through his violin. (No wonder the newspaper headlines on his demise said "The violin will sing no more"). Virtuosity was only a tool, not for showcasing the ego of the artist but to bring out the full grandeur of the music.

'Disciplined creativity' (though it may sound like an oxymoron) was what Lalgudi's music was all about. It has also been described as 'innovation without iconoclasm'.

The biography ends with an essay by Lalgudi on the history and evolution of the violin. Lalgudi believed that the violin originated in India and also gave a lecture on the subject.

Incurable Romantic was intended to come out during Lalgudi's lifetime but it was not to be. It is a delight to read, particularly because it is rich in contextual anecdotes and stories. The author's style is easy and flowing but passionate, and brings to life and vivifies some of Lalgudi's ancestors who laid the foundation for such a genius to arise and flourish in the family. Lalgudi is portrayed, and rightly so, as the embodiment of what Tagore wrote:

"Where the mind is led by Thee into ever-widening thought and action,

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection"

P.K. DORAISWAMY

(A retired civil servant and connoisseur of music)

BOOKS RECEIVED

Pallaki Seva Prabandhamu. An Opera by Shahaji Maharaja. The C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, Chennai. Hardbound (with CD). Pp. 176. Rs. 450.

The Dictionary of Hindustani Classical Music. By Bimalakanta Roychaudhuri. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi. Performing Arts Series. Hardbound. Pp. 194. Rs. 350.

Veena Seshannavin Uruppadigal. Compiled by Pappu Venugopala Rao. The Music Academy, Madras. English and Tamil. Pp. 107. Rs. 250.

Vishwa Mohan Bhatt — The Musical Messiah. By Kanchan

Mathur. D.K. Printworld, New Delhi. Hardbound (with CD). Pp. 132. Rs. 695.

Harikatha Chakravarti Embar Vijayaraghavachariar. By Shankar Venkatraman, Chennai. Ph. 99429 90839. Tamil. Paperback. Pp. 160. Rs. 100.

Sree Krishnam Bhaja Maanasa (A collection of kritis on Sree Krishna). Compiled by Parvathi Sankaran & G. Sankaran. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai. Paperback. Pp. 467. Rs. 300.

Nritya Geeta Arpanam. By Vaggeyakara 'Bombay' S. Krishnamurthy. Thane. Ph. 9323706560. Tamil and Sanskrit. Paperback. Pp. 182 (With Audio MP3) Rs. 300.

Fields in Motion — Ethnography in the worlds of dance. Editor - Dena Davida. Wilfrid Laurier University Press. Hardbound. Pp. 472. Rs. 900.

My Journey in Dance. By Guru Pratap Pawar. Ekah-Bios/Printways. Ashish Khokar Series. Hardbound. Pp. 141. Rs. 1500.

Nadha Tharangini. By Sidharthan. Pann Mozhi Pathipagam, Chennai. Tamil Fiction. Paperback. Pp. 240. Rs. 105.

Hindustani Music — 13th to 20th Centuries. Edited by Joep Bor, Francois 'Nalini' Delvoeye, Jane Harvey, Emmie te Nijenhuis. Codarts - Manohar. Hardbound. Pp. 736. Rs. 2750.

Eazhu Swarangalukkul Ethanai Raagam. Bombay Jayashri, T.M. Krishna. In Tamil - VSV. Vikatan Publications. Hardbound. Pp. 152. Rs. 165.

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