



Music of the pots

Sukanya, through her innovation and experiments in classical music, has elevated Ghatam from an accompanying percussion instrument to the status of a main instrument says

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THERE is rhythm in everything that exists, from breathing pattern to thinking pattern. Our walking or working pattern are naturally adjusted to the rhythm of an appealing music. For Sukanya Ramgopal it was natural to respond in a similar way to music.

Sukanya at an early age started off with Carnatic vocal music, then shifted to violin; then to Mridangam and finally with Ghatam, when she was just twelve. Having been approached, initially Shri Vikku Vinayakram (now a recipient of the most coveted Grammy Award and Padmashree) hesitated to teach her since no woman had ever played on Ghatam before. But after her continuous pleading, he consulted his father, Shri Harihara Sharma, founder of Shri Jaya Ganesha Thala Vadya Vidyalaya regarding the issue. On his approval, Sri Vikku Vinayakram started her lessons although initially suspecting if she could produce appropriate sounds from the pot. However, she astonished him with her extraordinary skills and abilities.

Most often percussion is sidelined, whether in Indian or in Western music. It is usually given the position of accompaniment. It is rare to find a concert of percussion instrument alone. Thankfully in Carnatic classical music concerts, *taniavar-*

tanam, percussion artists can perform solo. However, in a concert, Ghatam artist has to follow the Mridangist. There is little scope for a Ghatam artist to exhibit talents if the Mridangist chooses to play simple beats. Another challenge is that the accompanying artists seldom know what will be sung on stage and they have to be ready for anything the vocalist chooses to sing. In a way, every concert is a challenge. Apart from this, there is discrimination between male and female artists. Many artists prefer to have men as accompanying percussionists.

About Ghatam artist not getting enough importance, "generally Mrudungist accompanies the vocalist and when violinist plays in jawab (reply), Ghatam artist normally accompany. However some violinists gesture and ask the Ghatam artist to stop playing and ask the Mridungist to continue instead. I do not like to spoil the mood of other artists and the spirit of the concert, so I keep quiet," says Sukanya in an uncomplaining tone.

Instead of compromising with such situation, she has tackled the problem in a creative way. Taking center stage in her concerts she plays on six Ghatams simultaneously to produce melodies. Playing melodies (*raga*) on a percussion instrument 'Ghata Tarang', her own invention, is quite challenging. Not only has Sukanya proved that

there is ample space for innovation and experiments in classical music, she has also elevated Ghatam from an accompanying percussion instrument to the status of a main instrument of a concert.

She has a collection of nearly hundred Ghatam stacked up on slotted angle shelves in two rooms. To play all the melodies fifteen Ghatams of different pitches are required. Ghatams are made in Bangalore and Chennai too. But the ones she buys from Manamadurai are heavier and more difficult to play on. Choosing Ghatams however, is a skill for it requires a sharp sense for sound, pitch. Potter bakes many pots of different sizes at a time. He is unaware of the pitch of sound that would come out of each pot. It is up to the musician to find out its pitch and buy. Once a pot is made, its pitch is constant and it is a factor that can not be measurable before baking.

Ghatam has evolved from a folk form to a classical instrument, in Carnatic music, in South India. It is a folk instrument everywhere else other than in South India. It is however an interesting story how Ghatam became a musical instrument. Sukanya has accompanied almost all the stalwarts in Carnatic music on her magic pot and has also released an audiocassette called 'Rainbow'.

Her all women concert team 'Stri Taal Tarang' is composed of such members as Bhagyalakshmi M Krishna on Morching, Latha Ramachar on Kanjira, M K Vasavi on Konnalol, Durga on Western Drums, Jayashree Mahesh on Veena and Geetha Gopal on Flute. Rajani Venkatesh, a Mrudangam artist is a new addition to the team. "Being a woman percussionist I know the problems other women in the same field face. So I thought of 'Stri Taal Tarang', where women percussionists playing on different instruments can come together to perform," says Sukanya.

Since all these women are busy performing artists, marked with many tours and concerts on their calendar, they all meet up at least twice a month to practice together. Sukanya practices her music for at least for three to four hours a day. When she does not get to practice, "I keep thinking of new ways to play or compose. Sometimes if I am cooking and I hit upon a new idea, I stop cooking and sort out what is on my mind by playing on my instrument and then get back to kitchen," she says. Sukanya's music room is located right opposite her kitchen! About her next ventures Sukanya says, "I want to create a fusion music with, Carnatic, Hindustani and Western. I want to include Nadaswara, Dholu and Guita."

Sukanya has not only entered the male bastion, but also created waves with her achievements.