

In their own voice - Best of both worlds

Trichy Sankaran



The Hindu Mridangam vidwan Trichy Sankaran. Photo: S.R. Raghunathan

Having been trained in the traditional gurukula system, I made my debut at an Alathur Brothers' concert, with Lalgudi G. Jayaraman on the violin. Here, I had the honour of playing in tandem with my guru Palani Subramania Pillai, says mridangam virtuoso Trichy Sankaran

I had my early training on the mridangam at the age of four, first under my cousin P.A. Venkatraman, and then with the legendary mridangam maestro, Palani Subramania Pillai. I fondly reminisce the days when the inimitable Palghat Mani Iyer listened to my playing when I was barely seven years old and blessed me. Having been trained in the traditional *gurukula* system, I made my debut at an Alathur Brothers' concert, with Lalgudi G. Jayaraman on the violin. I had the honour of having played in tandem with my *guru* Palani. Since then I had the rarest honour and privilege of performing duos with my *guru* for seven years for many top rank artists of the time including Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and others. I was able to imbibe Palani sir's style (the Pudukkottai *bani*) that was known for delectable designs of patterns, *laya*-oriented *mohras* and *korvais* and *gumuki* techniques through exemplary training which enabled me to embellish further and to imprint my own style over the years. I believe it is this individual artistry that has earned recognition for artists from different traditions and not mere imitation.

When I was at the pinnacle of my concert career, Jon B. Higgins invited me to teach at York University, Toronto, Canada. We both founded the Indian Music Program in 1971. This was left entirely under my direction after Jon left Toronto in 1978. My academic training as a postgraduate of Madras University alongside my performance career enabled me to slip into teaching and research. In the last 39 years at York University, I have trained several hundreds of students in the history, theory and performance of Indian music, many of whom have become professional performers and educators over the years. It was gratifying to be honoured with a doctorate in music by The University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, in 1998 and earlier with the coveted OCUFA (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Association) award for teaching excellence. I have published several articles and two major text books, one on the '*Rhythmic Principles of South Indian Drumming*' and the other on the '*The Art of Konnakol*'.

My interest for collaboration with world music artists resulted in many new creations with noted world musicians in the genres of Western Chamber music, Symphony, Jazz, African, Indonesian and other ensembles. Noted among these are, the '*alpha Tai Chi Tala*' which I introduced in 1973, embodies the culmination of three different cultures, Indian, Chinese and North American. One of my sabbatical trips to Indonesia in 1982 resulted in creating compositions for a contemporary Gamelan group in Toronto (The Evergreen Club Gamelan Ensemble). My interest

for writing compositions did not stop with non-Indian musical types. In fact, a special piece that I was commissioned to write for a leading dancer in Toronto titled '*Time Scape*' was premiered in 1996. This highlighted both traditional Indian dance and the percussive elements. Another major work was '*The Carnatic Concerto*' that I was commissioned to write for The Winnipeg Chamber Orchestra in 1998. The piece was scored for piano, violin, viola, cello, clarinet, Western percussion, kanjira and mridangam. The highlight of this piece is the excursion into different ragas and different talas more like a *raga-tala malika*. When this piece was performed again by the Toronto Symphony in 2007, *Chitravina* N. Ravikiran was featured as a guest artist.

As a torchbearer of the Palani style of mridangam playing, I enjoy coming to the music season every year, purely out of passion for music and to spread this style among the younger generation. Living, teaching and performing our music abroad, has given me a unique perspective to look at my own culture and the music of India and share it with a global audience. It is thanks to my good fortune, God's grace and my hard work, that I have been enjoying the benefits of the best of both worlds.

Professor Trichy Sankaran is a percussion virtuoso, Indian music scholar and composer, and the founding director of Indian music studies at York University.

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