

TRIBUTE

SUGANDHA RAMAN

Gifted musician, giving teacher

The portrait showed a woman in her early seventies, wispy white hair framing piercing eyes that still burned with a hunger for knowledge. In a way, the candid gaze stood for vidushi Sugandha Raman's no-nonsense approach to life. On 25th March, she passed away quietly at the age of 93. We, her students and her immediate family, had gathered to pay homage to her with the songs she had taught us. We also remembered with a mixture of fondness and awe what was undoubtedly a remarkable life.

Born in 1919 in Kanchipuram, Sugandha was launched into the singing circuit of Madras early, gaining concert experience under the careful scrutiny of the audiences of the Madras Music Academy, where she and her sister performed regularly. A *Sruti* issue of the year 1993 carries an account of appreciation of her singing from no less a personage than Tiger Varadachariar. The stalwart applauded her Bhairavi alapana with many a *bash*.

Sugandha's mother Lakshmi Ammal, her first teacher, trained under Salem Doreswamy Iyengar and musicians of the Walajapet line of the Tyagaraja parampara. In the 1930s, mother and daughter took lessons from Tiger. Sugandha learnt further from Dr. Srinivasa Raghavan, scholar and nephew of Tillaisthanam Rama Iyengar (a disciple of Tyagaraja), Ettayapuram Rajagopala Iyer (a disciple of Ramnad Srinivasa Iyengar) and Papanasam Sivan. Sugandha's versatility was ingrained early as she learnt the tabla from Pandit Lokman and the violin from her own mother.

She was largely self-taught on the veena. Once, her veena recital on AIR-Delhi so impressed vichitra veena expert Ustad Ahmed Raza that he gave her formal lessons in Hindustani music and she became the first lady to perform Hindustani music on the south Indian veena. In the 1940s she was also the only woman artist in the vadya vrinda, which was formed for the first time at AIR-Delhi, conducted by stalwarts Pandit Ravi Shankar and vidwan T.K. Jayarama Iyer. Not content with such wide learning, she designed a veena that combined the deep tones of the vichitra veena with the additional resonance of 13 strings. Ustad Raza christened it the 'Narada Veena'.



A screenshot of the 'Carnatic Radio' mobile application interface. At the top, it says 'Rudrapatnam Brothers - Sakala Graha - RUDRAPATNAM BROTHERS Atana'. The main content area features the 'Carnatic Radio' logo with musical notes and an image of a veena. Below the logo is the website address 'www.carnaticradio.com'. The interface includes a play/pause button, a progress bar, and a speaker icon. At the bottom, there are icons for 'Radio', 'Facebook', 'Twitter', and 'Email'. The footer contains two buttons: 'Available on the Android Market' and 'Available on the App Store'.



Sugandha

Sugandha's tenacity of purpose was common knowledge among her students. She once trained daughter Sakuntala (now Sakuntala Narasimhan, exponent of Carnatic and Hindustani music and consumer activist), who knew nothing of Hindustani music then, for the AIR Hindustani music competitions in a mere month. The training was of such calibre that Sakuntala created a stir by bagging the top prize.

Compared to other brahmin women of her time, Sugandha was perhaps lucky. Both her parents and her husband encouraged her in her pursuit of music. Raman's transferable job meant Sugandha broadcast from AIR Delhi, Madras, Bangalore, Vijayawada and Hyderabad. At the time in 1967 when, distraught by the untimely death of her second son, she retired from public appearances, she was performing not only Carnatic vocal and veena but also Hindustani on the veena.

The later part of her life was devoted to teaching. With her treasure of rare kritis, it was a rich bounty that she offered the student. She taught ragas as though they were vital nutrients; they were to be slowly absorbed and derived nourishment from. The mysteries of each raga would unravel as she showcased the various nuances of that raga across her amazing fund of kritis. The glimpses she offered of a kriti would prompt the student to plead with her to teach it in the next class. And like magic the entire kriti would be written very neatly with precise notation. If the raga was Sankarabharanam, a surprise bonus in the form of a rare kriti like *Nannu karuninchi brovu* would also be kept ready. Like many of her generation, she considered it a sin to waste anything. So the songs were invariably written on the back of calendar sheets carefully saved for such use.

A little paper clip held small sheets of recycled paper for jotting down little bits of information.

In the 1970s and 80s, the Jayanagar extension of Bangalore not only benefited hugely from Veenapani Sangeeta Vidyalaya, the music school started by her, but also from the various musical features she choreographed around interesting themes, quite a novelty then and not really the norm as they are now. *Krishnam Vande Jagadgurum*, a feature which had 18 compositions by 13 saint composers, performed by an all-women ensemble, was special. Her own compositions were often inspired by a unique

idea; for instance, her varnam in raga Sunadavinodini carries a perpetual motion effect as it weaves together only short notes or hrsva swaras. She was fascinated by orchestral preludes which had a continual effect as Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*. I still remember the rapture on the faces of the audience when it was played by her son Rajnarayan (flautist, inventor and founder of Radel Electronics) and daughter-in-law Radhika (vainika) at a programme exclusively on varnams, organised by the Karnataka Gana Kala Parishat.

Letters preserved by the family reveal the high regard in which she was held by Carnatic greats like GNB and Musiri. The famous critic Subbudu wrote to convey that he was wrong about a technical viewpoint and that she was right. Eminent musicologist Rangaramanuja Iyengar praised her musical skills saying, "The music world stands in need of many more like you". K.V. Narayanaswamy wrote to thank her for specially recording for him select kritis of Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar, one of which he chose for a lec-dem in the Gayana Samaja at Bangalore.

To me, Sugandha Raman was for the longest time the "mami next door" who was my grandmother's neighbour. Then she became the teacher who taught me such gems as *Syama sundaranga* (Tyagaraja, Dhanyasi), *Sringara rasamanjari* (Dikshitar, Rasamanjari) and *Natavarataruni* (Oothukadu Venkatasubba Iyer). Indeed, she filled my cup with the sweet richness of her musical knowledge of which I partake with fond and grateful remembrance each day.

MANGALA KARTHIK
(Disciple and musician)