



GRANT'S DESI ACHIEVER

GRANT'S IS PROUD TO PRESENT THIS
SERIES ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ARE MAKING
A DIFFERENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

In 1971, York University invited **Trichy Sankaran**, a top-ranking percussionist in India who had been performing since 1955, to come to Canada to co-found Indian Music Studies at the university with **Jon Higgins** (renowned in India as a scholar and exponent of Carnatic music, honoured with the title of Bhagavatar).

Today, the program is one of the most reputable in performance and theory at the under-grad and graduate levels in the country, and owes much to the celebrated percussion virtuoso, music scholar and composer.

Professor Sankaran has bridged eastern and western styles and has influenced generations of students. He has made valuable contributions to many scholarly conferences across North America

Prof. Trichy Sankaran
RENOWNED MUSICIAN

and has published two books: one on the theory and techniques of South Indian classical drumming, and the other on the art of *Konnakol* (*Solkattu*).

He has accompanied top artistes of India and performed in *jugalbandis* (duets of two solo musicians) with famous artistes. He has composed in the genres of gamelan,

THE TORCH-BEARER OF A RICH LEGACY



jazz, traditional western classical orchestra and world music.

Professor Sankaran has been honoured with prestigious awards in India and the west.

In January 2012, he received the coveted Sangita Kalanidhi award from the Music Academy of Madras. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by University of Vic-

toria, has received the Muriel Sherin award for International Achievement in Music; Maestro Honorary from Facultad de Musica in Mexico, to name just a few, and has been a Canadian national heritage adjudicator for the Canada Council.

Yet, the pioneer responsible for making South Indian music

a university course in Canada holds a masters in Economics from MacRas University.

“Those days, a degree in music was not available at university level,” he explains. “Also, the best learning comes from the *guru-shishya parampara*.”

This was what Professor Sankaran wanted to impart to the 20 students who signed up for the first course. In the *gurukul* system, the emphasis is on hours of practice. But there's only that much practice a university course can provide and the curriculum he designed balances theory and practice.

“I tell my students that it's up to them to immerse themselves in the music. My doors are open for them to gain from me.”

Asked to comment on the perception that Carnatic music appears to have remained a South Indian brahmin pursuit, Professor Sankaran has this to say:

“There has actually been an increase in interest in other quarters. Some of our students are South Indian, but most are Canadians of varied ethnic origins. They are learning about Indian culture through our Music of India course. Many of my past students tell me the course had a tremendous impact on their cultural thinking and on their music compositions. They import elements of our drumming into different disciplines including jazz.”

Indian music follows an oral



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tradition and Professor Sankaran learned western music in order to be able to translate Indian music into western notations.

"I impart knowledge as I learned from my guru and use my writing as a supplementary tool."

He created a hybrid system which he has become known for, bringing together elements of not only North Indian and Carnatic music, but western classical music, and performing with Nexus, gamelan, jazz, electronic, African music ensembles and world drums, as well as his own group, Trichy's Trio.

Thus it is interesting to hear his take on fusion, dismissed by purists more as 'confusion' than music.

"Fusion is big these days," he acknowledges. "But there is scope for much work. For fusion to succeed, for it to be meaningful, one must know one's idioms perfectly before embarking on another genre. If you dilute your own music, what can you expect? A marriage between different music cultures can succeed – I've done it with gamelan (traditional music ensemble from Indonesia) – but only after perfecting my own music."

It used to take a musician years of devoted practice to polish his craft, and the guru or the master decided when a student was ready.

"I began learning at the age of four and used to put in six to eight hours of practice daily," says Professor Sankaran. "I had my *arangstrom* (debut) at 13, performing in tandem with my guru. I take time to place my students in concerts and do so only when they are ready. But the modern trend

is such that students get impatient and don't want to wait. Even in India it is difficult to compel a student to practice for several hours a day. Academic pressures lead to quick diploma courses. Gurus are pressured to present students before they are fully ready. It is sad. But perhaps one can also see it as a way of encouraging students.

"Just as instead of looking at distance learning negatively, one



"My mind is always in rhythm." – Professor Trichy Sankaran with his wife Lalitha

can appreciate the demand for knowledge, and the fact that distance is no longer a deterrent. I have a student in Seattle who learns from me via Skype! You have to go with the times!"

He visits India every year to participate in concerts and present papers and says because he is able to experience different kinds of music, he is in a position to compare and contrast cross-cultural movements in music. He is better able to understand the rhythms of the world.

"It's strenuous keeping one foot in India and one here, but being away gives me a better perspective of Indian culture. A fresh look. New ideas that I pass on. What I gain, I

take back to India and also share with my students here. This keeps me moving forward. There's no end to knowledge.

Professor Sankaran was instrumental in launching the Thyagaraja Festival in Toronto – in his friend's basement. Just 50 people attended the first one, but now it is a much-looked forward to event in Toronto's cultural calendar.

He is married to **Lalitha**, a trained classical singer who not only taught their daughters **Bhavani** and **Suba**, but also assisted him in teaching vocals at the university.

"She is an admirable person," he says.

Bhavani is an accountant and Suba is part of the well-known, award-winning musical group, Autorickshaw.

In their early years in Canada, Professor Sankaran and Lalitha made many adjustments. Butter-milk, a staple of South Indian diet, was not available – they made do with sour cream. He learned how to drive after coming to Canada and the first three years here, they were without a car.

"There were very few Indian grocery stores. The subway went only up to a point, beyond Steeles, there were only corn fields!"

Professor Sankaran, who continues to perform and write compositions for contemporary and world music ensembles, looks back at his first *jugalbandi*.

He wanted to meet the *tabla* artiste he would be playing against. "I was a puny young man and obviously, **Pandit Shantaprasad**, who was to play with **Ustad Vilayat Khan**, wasn't impressed. He showed no interest in speaking to me when I asked him what he

would be playing that evening. *Shun ko dekheenge* (we'll see)! He didn't want to rehearse with me. That evening, when I played my portion with **Lalgudi Jayaraman**, I could see him sit up and take notice. Later, he acknowledged my ability and we went on to become friends."

In his free time, Professor Sankaran composes music.

"My mind is always in rhythm. I also love listening to younger musicians of different genres as well as the greats of North Indian classical like **Bhimsen Joshi** and **Pandit Jasraj**. Their music is so calming, I love cricket, but never really played as I had to protect my hands as a percussionist."

Professor Sankaran finds maintaining his guru's tradition – making students better composers and better educators in turn – extremely rewarding.

"God placed me in a position to be able to share my knowledge. The legacy continues."

– SHLAGORIKA FLASWAR