

**Prof. Trichy Sankaran on  
“The Logic and Magic of Laya”, Jan 2014**



Photos: S. Subramanian

# The Other Sides of Prof. Trichy Sankaran

P. Venkataraghavan and Santosh Narayanan

Sometimes, opportunity does knock twice. Sangita Kalanidhi Prof. Trichy Sankaran spent the better portion of Jan 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014 with some of us before delivering a fascinating lecture-demonstration on “The Logic and Magic of Laya” at Ranjani Fine Arts. Only after he left did it strike us that we could have featured an interview with him in the RFA Souvenir. Fortunately, our hand-wringing didn’t last long, as he returned to Bangalore for another performance a week later, and graciously agreed to spend an hour with us again, answering all our questions.

Today, Prof. Sankaran is universally acknowledged as one of the world’s best mridangam players. But what’s amazing is that this was true even 42 years ago, when he moved from India to Canada. Says Vidwan G. Ravikiran, who gave a brief vocal performance, to Prof. Sankaran ‘s mridangam accompaniment at the RFA lec-dem, “Half an hour of performing with him is the equivalent of several hours of practice”. Much has been written about Prof. Sankaran’s virtuosity on the mridangam, as he has played with several Carnatic masters over the decades, from greats like Semmangudi Sreenivasa Iyer and GNB, to the leading vidwans of today. However, there’s much more to the professor. He has composed and performed extensively in several genres of world music. His contributions to teaching and research in percussion are phenomenal. Not to mention his approachability, warmth and completely unassuming nature, which bowled us over when we met him.

Not infrequently, we Carnatic music rasikas are guilty of being more than a little insular, and would do well, therefore, to learn more about other genres of music. This made us focus this interview on the several “other sides” of Prof. Trichy Sankaran. Below are excerpts from our memorable conversation.

**What prompted you to relocate to Canada in the 1970s, in the prime of your career as a performer?**

In 1971, the music department at York University, Toronto was planning to create some world music courses, and they invited me to teach South Indian music. The invitation came through Jon Higgins. At that time, I was at the peak of my performing career, accompanying all top artistes like Semmangudi Srinvasa Iyer, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar and others. And I was not really looking to go abroad for better prospects. So, it was a very, very tough decision for me. But, with a master’s degree in economics, I also had an interest in research and teaching, which prompted me to try it out. In fact, I remember that they asked me for a two-year contract, and I said only one year. Jon Higgins and I became founders of the South Indian music programme at York University. And then the rest is history (*laughs*).

**You have come from the traditional Gurukula system of learning music, where the student follows the Guru. This is very different from the education system in western universities, where students actively question the teachers as part of the learning process. Did you find this disturbing? If so, how did you adapt to it?**

Absolutely. That's one of the important things there. I soon understood that questioning is part of their upbringing, which is also a part of the music education there. In the beginning, it was probably a little disturbing. Rather than taking it negatively, I learnt to adapt to it quickly which resulted in my own learning of Western notation. Unlike our oral tradition, they are so used to reading and writing music in the west. So I underwent some training to learn how to read and write music, so that I could show them how *korvais* and *moras* can be learned from paper by transcribing them in western notation. What I always aimed for, from the beginning, was a hybrid system that combined the oral and written traditions. This method proved to be very successful over the years.

**Could you tell us more about your contributions to teaching, the pedagogy for percussion that you have developed?**

At York, I wanted to take this music to an academic level. So I started giving lectures, about the theory of our music. I published several papers and wrote a book on "The Rhythmic Principles and Practice of South Indian Drumming". In our Gurukula tradition, there was no written system. So, I have created my own notation for all the drum strokes, which was something unique. This way, people could understand the fingering techniques and how the patterns should be played with each hand. With this notation, the Patantharam can also be well maintained with proper fingering. Since I am a performing artist, I also bring the performance experience into the classroom, which is unique and highly respected.

Teaching rhythms and drumming is done through "Solkattu" - the vocabulary of percussive sounds, like "*tha-ka-dhi-mi*". Solkattu can be taught at all different levels, from basic to advance. The human voice is supreme - by vocalizing these syllables, you can sound like a drum. Solkattu was attractive because students found it easier than learning all the techniques of drumming, which takes years. I pioneered in introducing the first course on Solkattu many years ago, and now we have some students doing their PhDs on this topic. Students have even switched to "thakadhimi thakajonu" for counting time (*laughs*). I have developed many study pieces for students, dance compositions and many of my *korvais* -all written in Solkattu, and published in my book "The Art of Konnakol".

To trace back recent history, decades ago, we used to have a "full bench" in percussion – mridangam, ghatam, khanjira, konnakkol and morsing, and I remember listening to Mannargudi Vaidhyalingam Pillai, son of Pakkariah

Pillai, a great exponent on konnakkol. Unfortunately, barring nattuvangam in dance performances, Solkattu and Konnakkol are almost lost today, and this was another reason why I took an interest in reviving this art. I also designed a course “Rhythms from World Music Perspectives” in which I have incorporated rhythms from different percussion traditions such as India, Africa, Indonesia, Afro-Cuban, Jazz, etc.

**Does the effectiveness of these methods, particularly the notation you have developed, have a cultural dependence? For example, if notating mridangam strokes works well in the west because they’re used to a written tradition, would it work equally well in India?**

That’s a good question. In fact, I did bring this up at one of the sessions at the Percussive Arts Society of Bangalore. But we have an issue here. Even though all strokes played on the mridangam are spoken in Solkattu syllables, the reality is that the same stroke is identified by different syllables by different schools. Regardless of syllabic differences, the notation will work very well from the practical performance point of view, in my opinion.

**So there is no consensus among people on this?**

That’s right. For example, one school may identify a series of strokes as ‘*tatha chatha kita thaka*’ while another may say “*thaka tari kita thaka*.” And yet another may call it ‘*Dhiku thaka thari kidu*’, just because this is the way they learnt from their masters. If there’s a consensus on accepting some notation, then I think we will all be fine. In my book, I have shown the correlation of the drum syllables to the actual drum strokes and pointed out how the syllables change names for reasons of fluid recitation and to maintain percussive aesthetics.

**How has your time in the west changed your perspective on our music? Is there anything that could be adapted from there that would improve our methods of teaching and learning?**

Oh, definitely. Form is one of the things I always talk about, like how to structure, or create form in a *thaniavarthanam*. There are guidelines that we see in many western classical pieces. Western notation is perfected to the greatest extent possible - you can see in which tempo a piece should be performed. They are absolutely brilliant when it comes to showing all the various shades, the dynamics of a piece, etc., which we lack. Whether in mridangam or singing, the dynamics are not really marked, as to when to play something softly, like a *pianissimo*, or when to play it loudly, like a *forte*. Perhaps we may not need all the details as ours is based on oral tradition and improvisation.

**Can you tell us about your compositions and performances in other non-Carnatic genres? Is there a genre that you particularly admire?**

My first non-Carnatic experience was with electronic music, surprisingly, through collaboration with a Tai Chi dancer. In Tai Chi, when the mind is in a meditative state, the brain is said to produce more alpha waves. We had a Moog synthesizer, which would synthesize some seemingly random patterns when electrodes were connected to the brain of the dancer. I wanted to find any underlying rhythms in these patterns and highlight them through mridangam patterns. This was my first experiment - the "Alpha Tai chi Tala" - and it was a fascinating experience.

My second experiment was with Gamelan music, which I really love. I was in Bali on a sabbatical and became very interested in Balinese and Javanese music, which have distinct styles. Actually, my first interest in going to Bali was to witness the influence of Hinduism there, which I had read about in books. But their music is quite different, so I wanted to study. I collaborated with a contemporary Gamelan group in Toronto, The Evergreen Club Gamelan Ensemble, and started composing for them. My first written composition, "Swaralaya", was premiered in 1984. Since then, I have written 7 or 8 more Gamelan compositions in one of which I have introduced "mridanga tarang" tuned to the Gamelan scale as well as featuring solos. It was fascinating to tune the mridangam to the Gamelan scales, which is somewhat similar to an Indian raga. But the important thing is to appreciate Gamelan music in its own context, rather than comparing it with Indian music.

Jazz music is also close to my heart. A jazz combo is similar in size to a Carnatic music group, and they improvise similarly, taking up a particular line. Then the drums improvise, and they come back to what they call the 'head', just like returning to our pallavi. It's the same idea there too, and I have collaborated with many jazz groups. I have written a piece called "Jazzadorian", using Dorian mode of western music, which is akin to our *Kharaharapriya* raga.

**Now, a somewhat tough question. If you were to pick a single accomplishment that you are most proud of, what would it be?**

It's hard to answer that... (*laughs*). Many years ago, I ventured into writing "Mridangam Concerto". This involved writing a whole western classical piece for violin, viola, cello, piano, western percussion, mridangam, khanjira and other instruments. Normally writing for a small chamber group of 3 to 4 instruments is not too tough, but writing a concerto for an orchestra is highly challenging. It came out very successfully, and after its premiere in Winnipeg in 1998, people wanted it to be performed in several other places. This, I felt, was most gratifying, from all angles. Right now, I'm working on another variation of the Mridangam Concerto, which is to be performed in May 2014 in Toronto,

What I'm saying is that there is so much scope if one has the ability and the inclination to adapt. I really take a delight in these things. Using Indian

instruments in a western orchestra is not easy, but with the elevated status of the mridangam and khanjira, they are finding a place now, and this is so gratifying to me.

I have had so many opportunities to be creative, innovative and express my ideas, which sustained my interest in staying in Canada, while maintaining my art. At the same time, I respect our tradition. My constant advice to youngsters is: Be strong in your own tradition whether it is classical, jazz, or pop and do not diversify at an early stage. If you are strong in your tradition it will enable you to diversify easily later.

### **Looking back over the decades, any regrets?**

The brutal Canadian winters! (*laughs*) Other than that, perhaps no regrets at all. In a way, being away from India and being exposed to so many forms of music like jazz, gamelan, African and others has helped me discern and understand our music and culture from a different perspective. To me, it is most important to have an open mind and absorb the best of other cultures. Speaking of regrets, perhaps I missed out on all Padma awards and other national honors in India.

### **Prof. Sankaran, it has been an honour to have you at Ranjani Fine Arts. Thank you so much.**

Thank you. I truly enjoyed myself at Ranjani Fine Arts, and really admire the way it has come up in less than two years. The response at RFA was wonderful - there was a very good turnout and some excellent questions were asked at my lec-dem. The topic of *laya* is so vast, and unfortunately there wasn't enough time at the lec-dem to do full justice to it. Maybe I can do a 3-day workshop there the next time, with one day each for beginners, intermediate and advanced percussionists. I wish you all the best in your efforts to propagate our music. You have a wonderful team - my best wishes and blessings to RFA. I also look forward to participating in coming years.

*(P. Venkataraghavan is a trustee of Ranjani Fine Arts. Santosh Narayanan serves on the Executive Committee of Ranjani Fine Arts)*