

Evolution of Carnatic music- a series

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, in last month's column, we looked at some early women composers and their contributions to the field of music; this month, we will look at the contributions of more contemporary women to the field of Carnatic music.

Among the contemporary women composers, Smt. Ambujam Krishna is perhaps the most well known. Ambujam Krishna was born in 1917 to a family of music lovers and was also taught music. Her visit to the *Samadhi* of the composer saint Thyagaraja inspired her to start composing. She composed in several different languages including Tamil, Kannada and Sanskrit. The lyrical content of her compositions was so rich that several leading musicians tuned a number of her compositions. Smt. Krishna also started a music school in Madurai which is currently a well established college.

Andavan Pichai is another contemporary woman composer who composed in Telugu, Tamil and Sanskrit. It is said that her vision of Lord Muruga was the impetus behind her compositions. Of late, many popular musicians have presented her compositions.

Bangalore Nagarathnamma (1878-1952), the daughter of a very successful lawyer could trace her musical lineage to the composer saint Thyagaraja. She not only performed concerts but also gave discourses in Kannada, Tamil and Sanskrit. Nagarathnamma had a dream in which she was charged with the responsibility of building a memorial to the composer saint Thyagaraja in the town of Thiruvaiyaru. In line with this vision, she set aside proceeds from her concerts and built a temple around the *Samadhi* of saint Thyagaraja. She was also responsible for the unified celebration of Thyagaraja *aradhana* (homage to Sri Thyagaraja) in Thiruvaiyaru. This event is now one of national importance; every year, in January, the who's who of Carnatic music gather at the premises in Thiruvaiyaru and sing the saints famed *Pancharathna krithis*. The event is now broadcast live on the television as well as over the internet.

It is interesting to note that despite the fact that it was Nagarathnamma's efforts that led to the development of the shrine for Sri Thyagaraja, she was not allowed to perform during the *aradhana* since she was a woman! Nagarathnamma then started a women's faction that performed its festivities separately. This continued till 1940 when women were allowed to perform on stage at the *aradhana*.

Till we meet next time, do try and listen to Smt. Ambujam Krishna's popular composition *Guruvayoor Appane*- you can find many renditions by popular artistes on the Internet.

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