

## **Rendezvous with dimpled Guru**

- Sunita Bhat

### **Vision**

As a child, my first vision of what I wanted to be when I grew up was that of Mirabai - sitting with a vertically held tambura in one hand. My worship to God is through my Bhajan/Vachana/Dasara pada or even a *bandish* – I can never be as learned as the vedic scholars, but my approach to God is through my love for Her – sheer *bhakti*.

### **What brought you into Hindustani Classical Music?**

As a child, my dad, Shri K. L Subba Rao, noticed that I could imitate film songs played on radio. He decided to put me through the formal system of learning; since he had stayed in Hubli during his early years, he had been influenced by Hindustani music and local cuisine/culture. When he explored the possibility of getting a guru for me in Hindustani Classical, he was very overjoyed.

If not for my father, I would have never started learning music; but for my mother – Smt. K.S.Susheela Rao, I would not have continued with the drive and energy that I have today. My late parents have made me what I am today, and I looked up to them as role models. Later, my husband Shri Harsha Bellur and my in-laws Shri. B.S.Hiriannah and Smt. Nirmala, have taken over the role from my parents and are supporting me.

Initially, some people in the family thought it unconventional that I should learn Hindustani and not Carnatic music, but my father felt his choice was right, as he wanted me to emulate a Vid. Kishori Amonkar, or Ashwini Bhide.

At the age of 12, my father took me to my first guru late Shri. P R Bhagwat. My guru 'nana' (marathi for father) was himself an interesting mix of musician, teacher (train the trainer), photographer and origami expert. I practically lived there in the holidays, learning music, and getting exposed to various arts such as photography, and teaching aids made by Shri. Bhagwat.

For a teenager, I was able to appreciate the various facets of our society – from teachers to artsites; it taught me basic values such as respecting people of every strata, being accommodative and understanding the value of hardwork and understanding a subject deeply.

### **Why classical music?**

Many people ask me why I don't get into film music or pop music. My answer to that is all music is music. Each genre of music brings in its own flavour and has its listeners. I am open to singing for films or teleserials, but classical music is my staple food.

I like Hindustani classical to an extent that it forms my identity.

When I sing or listen to classical music, I get into a very strange kind of meditative mood, although the emotion in the raga rubs off on me heavily. I also listen to all other types of music and have my personal favourites too.

### **Role of schools/colleges in promoting talent**

We tend to underestimate the role played by schools in shaping the minds of youngsters who are training to become artistes. Approval and recognition by the teachers and fellow-students can make a huge impact on the psyche of the budding artiste who will for sure take it as his/her mission later.

### **Professional education, career alongside art**

I could never call myself an outstanding student, although I managed to get a degree with a distinction in Medical electronics engineering. While the pressure of studying is always there for a student, it's the constant focus lent by parents, teachers and the guru, which shapes the mind of a youngster. My first guru used to say that I could be one among the thousands of engineers who graduate each year, but through my music I could be one among several millions – that rings so true. Nevertheless, I am glad I am qualified to be an engineer today. Employability strengthens a woman; creativity defines her very existence.

Though my mother died at a very young age, I remember her last words, 'to continue to progress in the field of music, with untiring energy and resolve'. There were trying times, but my (late) dad and siblings encouraged me.

After college, I had the opportunity to learn from Pt. Arjuna Nakod.

Taking up a job as a software professional came naturally after studying engineering. Although my first guru did want me to be only an artiste, I was keen that I pursue academics. My parents left the choice to me, but I am glad I did seek employment. The worth of my job is apparent, as I can never be coaxed to do programmes that only give a lot of money but not a good audience.

While a job is necessary to give financial backing, creative urge can only be satiated through music.

Often people ask me why I fit so many things into my life like performing, writing about music, learning, and organizing concerts. The answer is sheer passion - I am committed to my music cannot think of a life without it. Yes, there is no substitute for hard-work. The all-important skills of the new age woman are: time-management skills, relationship skills, managing her finances and constantly updating her knowledge-bank. It is a challenge to fit in regular riyaz and travel along with house-keeping and family time – but hey, the ships are not meant for harbors where they are the safest – they have to venture into the high seas.

I travel to various parts of the country on performances and find myself enriched by each experience. I would gladly travel to the remotest of villages if I can get a good audience. Singing northern Karnataka is particularly fulfilling as the audiences have a well-cultured ear for listening being true connoisseurs of Hindustani classical music - budget can be happily traded off for a good audience.

## **Performances**

My first stint on stage was at the age of 6 for (inter-school competitions), then, at age 14, I gave my first classical concert in Rastrohana Parishat, Chamrajpet Bangalore. The response I got from there urged me to take it seriously, although during the peak years of 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, music did take a back-seat in the exam time.

Thereafter, I did give a few recitals such as Muzaffar Ali's 'Shaam-e-Awadh', punyatithis and later at almost all music festivals across the state.

From year 2000 till now, I have given more than 125 concerts, and have traveled across the country. My most memorable performances are at Gudgeri, Nagpur, Tavergere and at Sursagar Bangalore.

## **Guru-shishya parampara**

I see the Guru as a combination of parent, teacher, friend, philosopher and guide. My gurus have greatly shaped my life and gave me the values of modesty, instilled the feeling that all humans are equal regardless of caste, creed, race or wealth, importance of hard-work, a fresh enthusiasm to face each new adversity and most importantly not to compromise on goodness, even in the toughest/most demanding situations of life.

Pt. ArjunSa was exemplary in his outlook to life - nothing could make him cynical or bitter as he weathered poverty, struggle, and loss of voice with cheer. He was known to be a saintly man among his peers – he was truly inspirational.

Pt. Sontakke has taught several people and doesn't even expect them to be grateful – taught me a big lesson about giving.

## **Importance of listening**

All my gurus and every artiste that I have interviewed (I write on music related topics for a couple of local English dailies) have one common advice to budding performers – they all advocate listening as an integral part of training - just as much as *taleem*, *riyaz* and imagination. I spend a minimum of 20 minutes a day listening to Hindustani Classical vocal music. With advancement in technology, we have abundant resources for listening – be it on the Internet, or availability of CDs, high capacity storage with mp3 players, satellite radio channels such as Worldspace's Gandharv and AIR recordings.

My singing style is a product of my listening to various artistes. Among my favourites are Kishori Amonkar, Ashwini Bhide, Rashid Khan, Ustad Nissar Hussain Khan, Ustad Amir Khan, Ustad Barkat Ali, Pt. CR Vyas, Soma Ghosh, Pt. Ajay Pohankar, Pt, Omkarnath