

## Strict teacher, loving mentor

Janardan Mitta turned 75 on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2009. His sitar was a permanent fixture in the music of films made in Chennai for some 40 years. A disciple of Ravi Shankar, he has been focussing on classical music concerts in the last few years. He has also been involved in fusion efforts, notably with Carnatic violinist A. Kanyakumari. Excerpts from his conversation with V. RAMNARAYAN.

**Belonging to a Telugu family from Hyderabad as you did, how did you become a sitar player?**

My father, a successful lawyer, had a great interest in music. He could play the tabla and harmonium and used to sing songs like *Mohe panghat pe* from *Mughal-e-Azam*. My elder brother Vidyasagar was a popular singer of Saigal songs and won the first prize year after year in college competitions.

I picked up my sister's sitar after she got married and went away. For a girl of her background, it was considered an additional qualification in the marriage market to be able to sing or play an instrument.

**What was your first break in music?**

I auditioned for Deccan Radio, predecessor of All India Radio in Hyderabad. The tabla maestro from Hyderabad, Shaikh Dawood, was on the committee. He was very happy with my playing. 'After all, you are Vakil sahib's son.' (Those days all musicians in Hyderabad or passing through, visited my father). That gave me the confidence that I was good. I started performing for Deccan Radio.

**When did you first meet Pandit Ravi Shankar?**

Guruji came to Hyderabad to perform in 1955. The Deccan Radio people introduced me to him. He played *Puria Dhanasree* for 90 minutes. I was flabbergasted. I wanted to play for him and ask him to take me as his disciple, but I did so only on his next visit to Hyderabad.

**Did you impress Panditji with your music?**

He was quite happy. There were some sitar players in Hyderabad, but I listened to the great sitarists of the north on radio – Guruji, Yousuf Ali Khan of Lucknow. I suppose it showed in my style of playing.

**When did the classes start?**

I went to Delhi in 1956, after Guruji asked me to apply for a government scholarship. Though I didn't get the scholarship, my father met the cost of my travel and stay in



Janardan Mitta

Delhi, whenever Guruji was available. He never charged his students.

**How did you enter films?**

It happened because of my brother Vidyasagar. He was keen on singing for films, but Telugu film songs were then dominated by the great Ghantasala Venkateswara Rao. My brother auditioned for music director Master Venu on 5 June 1958, and I accompanied him on the sitar. Though my brother sang well, Venu told him, 'I won't give you false hopes. All the heroes like Rama Rao and Nageswara Rao will prefer Ghantasala. They won't take a chance with a newcomer. But I was impressed by your brother's sitar. Ask him to see me at home.'

The next day, I was asked to play sitar at the inauguration of Sarathy Studios in Hyderabad. People like Ghantasala and P. Suseela were very encouraging. Music director Aswattama came for rerecording. I played Malkauns with veena gamaka-s on the sitar. I took a risk and moved to Madras on 20 January 1959, and never looked back.

**Guruji's memory for people and attention to detail are amazing. No concert is too small for him. He approaches every performance with intense concentration. A few days before a Mardi Gras concert at IIT Madras, he went on a recce visit to the venue. On our way, he pointed at a neighbourhood and said, 'This is where Capt. Lakshmi of Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army used to live.' Once we reached IIT's Open Air Theatre, he gave clear instructions to the organising committee. 'This is where I'll sit, Janardan here, Zakir there' and so on. He asked detailed questions on the mike and acoustic arrangements. Among other things, he checked out that there was a toilet right there at the auditorium to make sure that any break during the concert would be brief.**

## COVER STORY



Janardan in concert



With his Guru Ravi Shankar

### Were there many opportunities for a sitarist in Tamil films?

I played for Tamil, Telugu and Hindi films, in fact any films made in Madras. Those days there was plenty of scope for a sitarist in film music. Pooja scenes, romantic scenes, happy scenes, pathos, anything called for sitar music. Now it has all changed.

### Have you retired from film music?

More or less. My auditor advised me for strategic reasons against retiring fully. I don't accept any new assignments except for Rehman and Harris Jeyaraj. They insist that whenever they use sitar music – and that is infrequent – I should play for them.

### Your film music career must have interfered with your growth as a classical musician?

It certainly made depth difficult to achieve, but I never accepted a recording engagement when busy with classical music. Also I did not have the confidence to play freely in the concerts. Even Guruji once heard me and said, "Your playing reminded me of me, but you played safe." Being based in Chennai also made concert opportunities very rare. Now I am fully involved in classical music and strive to achieve depth as a classical sitarist.

### We see you at many Carnatic music concerts, unusual for a Hindustani musician.

I used to think Carnatic music was full of speed and showmanship. Starting with the varnam, essentially a training exercise, and singing 15 songs in a single concert – such things put off north Indian listeners. In Hindustani music, we unfold a raga gradually, and come to the faster speed after expansive treatment of the raga. The way Carnatic music is often presented is akin to running first, jogging next and walking last. To try to please your idea of a layman instead of trying to elevate him is so condescending.

This was the kind of music prevalent amidst the Carnatic music community in the Nizam's Hyderabad. It was my father who opened my eyes to the grandeur of Carnatic music. Only after I heard Rajaratnam Pillai – whose music my father introduced to me – and Balamuralikrishna, I realised that it is not the fault of the music but that of the musician, when a Carnatic music concert lacks depth or feeling. Sruti suddham and voice training used to be absent, though today's musicians pay much greater attention to these aspects.

As a Hindustani musician living in Chennai, I must guard myself against

unwittingly allowing Carnatic touches in my concerts. In the north, I run the danger of being dubbed a "Madrasi sitarist", and I don't want serious listeners to call me a filmi sitarist. This is what made me want to be purer than the purist.

One time I actually did play Carnatic music was at the Tyagaraja Aradhana at Tiruvaiyaru, thanks to the initiative of M. Balamuralikrishna who was at the time presiding over the festival. I played *Aada modi galade* in Charukesi. This was before Ustad Amjad Ali Khan played at the aradhana.

My guruji has great regard for Carnatic music. I too try to recommend this great music to north Indian listeners when I can. I try to tell them language can be no barrier. At any rate, how much importance is given to sahitya in Hindustani music? And what about instrumental music? Why do they need to know the language to appreciate great violin, flute, mandolin or veena?

### A brief description of Ravi Shankar the guru?

A very strict teacher, but a loving mentor. He has answers to every question, however complex, on music. ■