

## Versatility is his middle name

*NIVEDITA NARAYANAN interviewed DR. S. SUNDER, medical doctor, Carnatic vocalist, convener of the Madras chapter of Music Forum and TV anchor, a few months ago, on the occasion of the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> episode of his popular TV serial Maithreem Bhajatha on Sankara TV.*

When I walk into his office, he is talking into the phone, fixing the date for a concert, discussing *Maithreem Bhajatha* (his weekly TV serial on Carnatic music appreciation) with a prospective sponsor and analysing a patient's X-ray, all at the same time. As I watch him juggle multiple tasks with charming ease, I realise that he is a powerhouse of energy and passion. As we get talking, I discover that beneath the charming exterior, complete with a subtle sense of humour, is enormous grit and determination and a very strong desire to achieve.

Dr. Sunder is a physician, musician, social worker, founder of the Freedom Trust (which trains handicapped children in the arts), convener of the Chennai chapter of the Music Forum, the producer and anchor of *Maithreem Bhajatha* on Sri Sankara TV and a guru.

Dr. Sunder got involved with YACM in 1987. He was the founder-editor of *Dhwani*, very popular among the youth in those days. He used to interview musicians for the magazine. He spoke to us of those days and his later initiatives.

### When did your association with Music Forum begin?

The idea of music propagation started in 1987, when I got a call from Vijay Siva. He wanted me to do a lecdem on music appreciation, in Children's Garden School. I spoke about the basics, including sruti, sthayi, manodharma, kriti and sangati. My lecdems were successful because I used to make them fun. I used to sing songs like *Maraindirundu paarkum marumam enna* from the film *Tillana Mohanambal* to stimulate the interest of the kids. There was another concept called Build A Rasika (BAR) that YACM started. Once in a while, we would go to schools to propagate music.



Meanwhile, I mooted the idea of bringing out a cassette for music appreciation. R.T. Chari of TAG Corporation funded it. Vijay Siva, T.M. Krishna, Savita Narasimhan, Preethi Mahesh, Varalakshmi Anandkumar and I got together, did the recording in a studio in Mylapore and brought it out.

Later, HMV brought out a double-cassette album along the same lines. Vijay Siva did the original script, I edited it and P.C. Ramakrishna lent his voice. Overall, it was more professionally done.

Ten years ago, R. Thyagarajan, the Chairman of the Shriram Group of Companies, offered me the post of Convener of the Chennai Chapter of

the Music Forum and I accepted. In 2003, I decided to revive the music propagation concept all over again. On February 26<sup>th</sup> that year, we did a big workshop at Rani Seethai Hall, attended by hundreds of students. Once we started doing these workshops in Chennai, we were invited to do them in other places. We have done 20 mega workshops so far, in places like Mayavaram, Tiruchi, Neyveli, Tiruvarur, Tanjavur, Vellore, Kumbakonam and Rajapalayam. In all these places, between 500 and 1500 students attended. The only limiting factor was the size of the halls. The mega workshops are day-long affairs where we invite artists to speak to school children about music appreciation. We provide lunch to all the students. The artists include R. Vedavalli, T.N. Krishnan, Lalgudi Jayaraman, Chitravina Ravikiran, Sudha Raganathan, Sriram Parasuram, Unnikrishnan, Neyveli Santhanagopalan, Vijay Siva, T.M. Krishna, Shashikiran, Suryaprakash, Ghatam Karthick and Seetha Narayanan. The school teachers and local coordinators have always been very helpful. We have also done 30 monthly workshops for rasika-s on various topics in Carnatic music. Artists make presentations on specific topics in the monthly workshops. We have also conducted workshops for corporate houses like the Shriram Group and Ashok Leyland.

We have brought out a book on FAQs in Carnatic music. We've distributed cassettes free of cost among students.

We have encouraged sabha-s to give free passes to students. Hamsadhvani and Narada Gana Sabha did give out these student passes.

### **Has Music Forum achieved what it set out to do?**

Where nothing was being done, Music Forum has been putting in mammoth effort. We have definitely made an impact, but I cannot quantify it.

### **The general public doesn't seem to know much about Music Forum. Do you think being in the public eye is also necessary to be able to achieve Music Forum's goal?**

Yes. In today's context, publicity is very important, for the media have the power to make or break. All along, being in the press has never been Music Forum's priority. But I think the time has come now to make ourselves more known and visible.

### **What is the idea behind Freedom Trust?**

I started Freedom Trust with the idea of helping the handicapped. I used to conduct assessment camps for the handicapped, usually in rural areas. After the camp, I would distribute mobility aids, like artificial limbs, calipers, tricycles and walkers.

In 2004, I started a scholarship scheme for visually impaired children. I did a test on a group of children who were not learning music, some of them visually impaired. I found that the aptitude that the visually impaired children had for sruti and identification of a tune was very high in comparison with the other children. I even presented this as a paper at the Music Academy and in medical conferences.

Two of Freedom Trust's children have won national awards for being the most creative individuals in their category. We are trying to help these children build self-sustaining careers. Last June, we started two orchestras with these children – one for light music and the other for Carnatic, both called the Darshan group. These children now perform in public functions and are slowly getting more opportunities. Two of our hearing- and speech-impaired children are doing their B.A. in fine arts. A visually impaired child, Sathyanarayana, is learning music at the Music Academy. We have also started a gallery, where paintings done by these kids are displayed. They are available for sale. Several companies and individuals have bought these paintings.

Some of these children are still in school. I am not sure

if these children can pursue a mainstream career and compete against normal people. The activities we train them in give them a decent amount of money and the confidence that they can make a good living for themselves.

Our latest project is a centre for ocular prostheses (artificial eyes). The prostheses will be made by our own hearing and speech impaired children.

### **How did *Maithreem Bhajatha* happen?**

I wanted to take the idea of music appreciation to the masses. People in the interior parts of Tamil Nadu and in the villages and towns don't have easy access to music or musicians. TV is an excellent medium for reaching out to these people. *Maithreem Bhajatha* happened through a good friend of mine, who suggested that I ask Sankara TV to do a programme on music appreciation. The first



**Sunder, Vedavalli and Murali**

episode was telecast on Deepavali last year. *Maithreem Bhajatha* is telecast every Saturday from 9 to 9.30 pm.

### **How did you come up with the format of the programme?**

I felt that merely talking about music would be boring. At the same time, there are many channels that telecast full concerts or excerpts from concerts. So I wanted to offer a combination. The show's format is very simple. It starts with a short nama sankeertanam section, because appreciating nama sankeertanam is a good way to start appreciating Carnatic music. We try and reach out to as many children as possible. So we invariably have young students singing in the nama sankeertanam section. For the past two months, Udayalur Kalyanarama Bhagavatur has been teaching nama sankeertanam in the south

Indian bhajana sampradaya paddhati. Each episode has a guest who speaks about a particular composer, his life, compositions and composing style. Over the past year, we have covered all major composers, starting from those in the Sangam era. Following this is a segment in which I sing a composition of the composer being discussed with my students.

In another segment, I answer questions about music from viewers. If I went to a painting gallery, the best I could do is look at the colours in awe. But if the painter were around and explained the idea behind each painting, and the choice of colours, I would be able to appreciate the paintings much better. Similarly in music, some concepts need to be demystified for the audience to appreciate the music better. That is the idea behind the QA session in *Maithreem Bhajatha*. We have decided that there will be no film music in *Maithreem Bhajatha*.

**Tell us about *Maithreem Bhajatha*'s 50<sup>th</sup> episode celebrations.**

Usha Bharadwaj, the coordinator of the Music Forum, Freedom Trust and *Maithreem Bhajatha* – came up with the idea of celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> episode in a grand manner.

The function was held at Rani Seethai Hall. Sangita Kalanidhi R. Vedavalli and N. Murali were the chief guests. The function began with 500 school students singing the immortal composition *Maitreem bhajata* in unison. We screened a documentary on the past episodes of *Maithreem Bhajatha*. Then there was a full-bench concert in which I sang all 31 stanzas of Adi Sankara's masterpiece *Bhaja Govindam*. This was followed by a concert by T.M. Krishna. The response from rasika-s was phenomenal.

**What can viewers of *Maithreem Bhajatha* expect in the forthcoming episodes?**

We plan to discuss such topics as raga lakshana, instruments, prosody and the beauty of improvisation in the forthcoming episodes. I have a wonderful team — Usha Bharadwaj, her children Sruthi Sagar, Keerthana – and a few more volunteers. The Shriram Group has also been supporting me in all my activities.

**Where would you like to go from here in your musical journey?**

My ultimate ambition is to compose light music. In Carnatic music, I wish to be an instrument by which the audience appreciation of aesthetics improves. To develop that level of gnanam, I want to educate rasika-s on the aesthetics and subtlety of our music. I am proud that I have been able to make my students good rasika-s. They are also rasika-s of their own music. They love the music they produce, which is very important for a musician. I am open to ideas and want to work further to propagate Carnatic music and develop good rasika-s. I know there are many other people working to propagate music, but as they say, small drops make an ocean. ■

