

**Sangita Kalanidhi-elect Sanjay Subrahmanyam's acceptance speech
at the inaugural ceremony of
The 89th Annual Conference & Concerts of The Music Academy
Madras, December 15, 2015**

We are all gathered here today, despite the recent setbacks, in the true spirit of Chennai, the city that we all love. The city's resilience, character and culture will definitely take us forward quickly into the New Year.

At the outset, I would like to thank The President and Executive committee of the Music Academy for having chosen me to preside over the 89th Annual conference.

This honour is probably the highest that I can aspire to in terms of a recognition for my efforts. I was at a complete loss for words when Shri Murali called me to give the news. Even before I had started performing here, I have walked that lobby outside looking at the photographs of those great masters and for a moment even daring to think: just maybe? Today I stand before you feeling on top of the world and slowly getting used to this massive responsibility that has been thrust upon my young shoulders. Yes, I consider myself young and I think everyone of you should too. As they say these days, 47 is the new 32.

I grew up in a typical middle class Brahmin family. We loved Carnatic music and were passionate rasikas. My grandparents led a battalion of Mylapore-based family rasikas to the concerts at the Music Academy every year. All my uncles and aunts on both sides learnt music. This meant that when I started performing, I was very much a target of that special brand of Tanjore district's biting sarcasm and humour. Every raga sung, every failure detected would be immediately subject to comments and critical dissection. Even in the family there was a clear lakshya and lakshana divide. There was my maternal grandfather and several uncles who sang raga alapanas and hardly knew the names of the composers of songs. There were the aunts who dominated the oonjal sessions during weddings with their entire repertoire.

My mother had learnt music for many years and I knew several kritis just by having listened to her sing even before I formally started learning. The radio in the house played either Carnatic music or cricket commentary. My father it was who introduced me to the likes of GN Balasubramaniam & Alathur Brothers at the same time as Gary Sobers & Gundappa Viswanath. My parents wanted me and my siblings to learn music so that we could appreciate and enjoy this wonderful art form. My brother learnt to sing and play the mridangam, while my sister also sang and learnt to play the violin. However, there was no real intention to make musicians out of us or to see us perform in public.

Singing in music competitions was the first real steps towards public performance. It gave me exposure to sing before many stalwarts who sat in as judges. It ensured I had a sufficiently large repertoire to be able to compete. Winning the Gents Vocal category in the Music Academy's Annual Competitions would ensure that you had a good enough standard to be considered for a concert in the afternoon slot. Entering a Tyagaraja kritis competition back then, you could be mistaken into thinking you were in a women's college. There were hardly two or three boys in a field of over 150 participants. Thankfully for me, there were a few judges who gave us boys consolation prizes to encourage us to not give up in frustration.

I gave my first concert in 1986 under the auspices of the YACM, Youth Association for Classical Music. The late eighties and early nineties was an exhilarating time for a young carnatic musician in Madras. Powered by the YACM and its members, organizations and sabhas started having exclusive youth festivals. Even here the Music Academy took the lead in establishing the Spirit of Youth Festival in 1987. Our enthusiasm and fiery idealism was welcomed and encouraged by the wise old masters and received spontaneously by the open-minded rasikas. This helped me and my generation to quickly gain experience from concert singing and establish ourselves, taking up music as our only source of livelihood.

A performing carnatic musician during his learning years has multiple skills to acquire. One of the most important aspects of singing is the

ability to understand the note or swaragnanam as it is known. The knowledge of the swara gives a better understanding of what one is singing and learning to play an instrument is a great advantage in this respect. My years of learning the violin under Shri V Lakshminarayana has stood me in good stead, I should say. Thankfully the violin was difficult enough for me to not spend too much time on it. Having a large repertoire is a big bonus. Learning and singing compositions in a disciplined manner contributes immensely to successful performance. If the raga occupies primacy in Indian classical music, then the compositions provide the window into the raga lakshanams.

My grand aunt and guru, Smt Rukmini Rajagopalan, knew a huge number of compositions, having learnt them from several great masters. She stressed the importance of repeated singing of kritis at home to achieve perfection. It is necessary to sing a composition at least 50 times before you can sing it on stage. The finish and sheen that the song acquires when practiced in this manner is unmatched. Learning from a Guru is one thing. Later on, my own personal curiosity and the thirst to learn newer compositions drew me to the wealth of published material that is available. It was my good friend, historian and writer V Sriram who goaded me to actually visit libraries, look into the past and seek inspiration. Digging through the books and written manuscripts of my Guru as well as scholars like VS Gomathi Sankara Iyer motivated me to learn, practise and polish several beautiful compositions that had not seen the light of day.

Manodharma sangeetham, as is seen in raga alapana, neraval, kalpana swara and in the composite musical form, the Ragam Tanam Pallavi, is the true test of the vidwath of a musician. My Guru, Calcutta Shri KS Krishnamurthi, was a master of kalpana sangeetham. He knew exactly how to tap into a student's mind. He encouraged me to think out of the box, to come up with ways to expand and elaborate a raga, keeping the aesthetic framework intact. Finding a new phrase or two was quite a challenge and my Guru guided me through this phase with his brilliant insights.

Singing with abandon is another important aspect of public

performance. Whilst introspection is a sign of maturity, the spirit of freedom connects you to the listener instantly. Nadaswaram music, played in the open, achieves this perfect blend beautifully. Musicians like Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer & Madurai TN Seshagopalan have waxed eloquent on the importance of listening to the music of the Nadaswaram maestros.

My years of learning from Sembanarkoil SRD Vaidyanathan opened my eyes to many of these subtle features that characterize their music. Shri SRD encouraged me to sing the Mallari and several other compositions, laya exercises and pallavis that were part of his musical domain. I can never forget the relationship I enjoyed with Flute maestro Shri N Ramani, who has inspired me so much. Over the course of several conversations and interactions, he has conveyed so much in terms of valuable musical and professional inputs. He was really looking forward to being here today, but unfortunately left us earlier this year.

Just as how education has been structured to include primary, secondary, graduate, masters and doctoral studies, so too it is in music. One needs to go through all the above phases to be a complete musician. All my gurus in their own ways gave me a taste of these different aspects of learning. Sometimes you repeated verbatim what you were taught, sometimes it was learnt by observation and inquiry, sometimes it was shown and you had to slog it out at home on your own to master the skill sets. My Guru, Shri KSK, also encouraged me to teach music, and I should say that the experience has helped me to understand myself better and hopefully my students would have also gained in the process.

The accompanist plays a very unique role in the conduct and success of a carnatic music concert. It is interesting to note that all the accompanists get a chance to play alone on stage, be it during an alapana by the violin artiste or the tani avartanam by the mridangam or upa pakkavadya artistes. The singer is always accompanied by one or all at all points during a concert. If you want to listen to my voice without any accompaniment, then it would be during a speech of this nature!

I am always grateful to every accompanying artiste who contributes to my concerts. Violin maestro Shri Nagai Muralidharan not only accompanies me on stage; he has also taught me several compositions and given me insights into the intricacies that marked the music of an earlier generation. Mridangam maestros Mannargudi Easwaran and Srimushnam Raja Rao are two others whom I have looked up to and benefitted from over the years. Senior mridangam artistes like Shri TK Moorthy, Shri Palghat Raghu, Shri Guruvayur Dorai, and Shri Vellore Ramabhadran spontaneously showered their blessings and affection on stage. Each concert was a different learning experience for me. Whether it be their maintenance of kalapramanam, their sparkling upliftment of kritis or their gentle prodding towards laya intricacies, they simply made you sound much better than you really were.

For an accompanist, there is a constant tug of war between one's need to excel individually and controlling one's ego to offer value to the singer. Violin maestro Thiruvallangadu Sandaresa Iyer once said about the great Mridangam exponent Pazhani Subramania Pillai - “ பழனி மடேலை த்யாகம் பண்ணுவார ” [Pazhani medayilai thyagam pannuvar]. I have been very fortunate with the artistes who accompany me on a regular basis. I am specially thankful to every single artiste who has and will continue to appear on stage with me. I would like to acknowledge the relationship I have with Shri S Varadarajan and Shri Neyveli Venkatesh, who share the stage and much more with me.

Carnatic Music has been criticised differently by people as being highly restrictive and claustrophobic even, to a creative mind. I am reminded of a comment by Reiner Knizia, one of the great boardgame designers. His response was to a question on how he designs board games when he receives so many guidelines and restrictions from the game publishers: “Restrictions breed creativity.” Each art form comes with its own set of constraints. A painter, for instance, has to limit his creativity to the size of his canvas. A photographer to the frame of his camera lens. Even a writer has to limit oneself to a particular language or a word limit. Artists thrive in

the face of such self-imposed restrictions. The grandeur of Rajarathnam's Todi was not restricted by the holes in his instrument or the notes of the raga. The magical flow of Madurai Mani Iyer was not restricted by the unique articulation of the syllables he used. The brilliance of Dikshitar was not limited by the vivadi nature of the raga he composed in. As far as I am concerned, "Freedom is in the mind, not in the material".

செந்தமிழ் நாடெனும் போதினிலே இன்பத் தனை வந்து
பாயுது காதினிலே [Sentamizh Nadenum Podhinile Inbath Thain
Vandu Payudu Kadhinile], said Subramania Bharati. I get truly
excited when I can enjoy the honeyed nectar of the Tamizh language
when set to the beautiful ragas and talas of our music. Innumerable
poets and composers have written songs and verses and singing
them in concerts is one of the great joys that I have experienced and
hope to share the same with all of you. Singing in your mother
tongue can change the very aesthetic of the music right from the
way the words are articulated to the motivation of musical phrases to
suit the meaning and comprehension of the lyric. Many listeners who
are unfamiliar with a language can always enjoy the same when
expounded upon by a native speaker.

When I sat down to write this speech, I promised myself that I will
not mention any appeal or suggestions to the Government about
how music should be encouraged. Certainly no advice to youngsters.
Primarily because I am still a youngster in the eyes of many and the
artistes who are younger than me are smart, hard working, and
extremely focussed in what they are doing. They are also innovative
and constantly looking at newer ways of doing things. I am a positive
individual.

I do not subscribe to the view that the standards of music have fallen,
even though this has been a documented refrain from the time the
British published an official gazette and noted the same in the
middle of the 19th century. After all, an art form is an evolving
tradition. Novelty and innovation are an integral part of artistic
evolution. People will always find ways of doing things to suit their
instincts and the success or failure of the same can be seen over

time. I believe in accepting change with an open mind. As GNB said in his 1958 address – Nothing new should be rejected merely on the score that it is novel.

The last 20 years and more have been significant in the way technology and the internet influence our lives. Listening to live concerts was a primary source of learning and absorbing music. Access to vintage material especially music has never been as easy as it is today. Thirty years ago, to get even a single C90 cassette of a Ramnad Krishnan or Kalyanaraman recording from a collector, I had to listen to a three-hour lecture on “how things were in the old days.” Today a click is all it takes before a thousand concerts are downloaded on to your hard disk. A lifetime may not be enough to listen to all the terabytes of music but at least they are available for the discriminating listener and the hungry student. The music production industry has also undergone rapid change, eliminating the middleman completely. Carnatic music is ideal for self-distribution whereby musicians are able to interact and reach their listeners directly. Digital music has replaced the physical medium of distribution very quickly, and the faster we adapt the better it is for us all round.

We have also witnessed rapid change in the way Carnatic music is being presented to the public. The worldwide community of rasikas have been doing a sterling job by supporting the artistes and keeping the art form alive. The Music Academy, for the last 89 years, has been a beacon of excellence in the way it has presented and promoted Carnatic music. Under the guidance of its current President Shri N Murali, the institution is blazing a new trail. Several initiatives in the recent past have clearly shown how Shri Murali and his team have succeeded in maintaining the high standards set by the founding fathers. After all, it was the Music Academy that heralded the December season that we all look forward to every year.

I have been fortunate to have a close circle of friends. Life is like a journey where some get added and some disappear. It has been a rewarding experience sharing and living life with like-minded people.

My family has been a pillar of strength and support from the time I started learning and performing. My parents fully supported my decision to become a professional musician. I did practise as a Chartered Accountant for some time and I have to thank my partners at Karra & Co, who respected and encouraged my greater desire to pursue music full time. Twenty-two years ago, my in-laws trusted in their 19 year old daughter's decision to embark on a roller coaster ride with just a promise of love and excitement. My wife Aarthi has stood by me and continues to do so in everything that I undertake. My children Shreyasi and Sushant both insisted that I sing for them when they were little, and today they complete the circle of confidence, trust, and love that keeps me going.

I am thankful to Sangeetha Kalanidhi Shri TV Gopalakrishnan for spontaneously agreeing to propose my name this year. I can never forget his benevolence, love, and encouragement for me right from the first day he heard me sing at All India Radio in 1985. I would also like to thank Sangeetha Kalanidhi Smt C Saroja for graciously consenting to second my name. The writer William Faulkner in his 1949 Nobel acceptance speech said, "this award is only mine in trust." I would like to dedicate this award to all the great masters who have enriched this art form with their brilliance and generosity and all you rasikas for accepting me and my music. Thank You.