

## Learning the Karnatic Tradition *by Lisa Young*

Classical Indian music is predominantly an oral tradition with students listening, imitating and then committing the syllabus to memory. Students rarely ask questions during lessons, rather they are devoted listeners. In the last 100 years or so, notebooks have been used as a memory aid for students, but they are not used in performance. Today, if students may also record lessons to assist their progress.

Traditionally in the study of Indian classical music there is a highly formal relationship between guru and student and it is considered an honor to receive lessons in music. Historically the system of gurukula existed, where the student would live with the guru as part of the family during the years of study. Today students rarely live with gurus (unless they are relatives) but the relationship remains formal and Indian teachers are very much revered. The guru is often thought of as a spiritual guide as well as a musical one. Particularly in India, students often travel long distances to learn from a particular guru teaching a favored tradition.

Mridangam is a very popular instrument for young boys to learn. They start classes around the age of seven, and usually have two or three half hour lessons per week. As with all classical Indian musical traditions, it takes many years of study to be able to understand and perform the complex variations of the music. Teachers often wouldn't accept payment for tuition, rather they were content to see their tradition continued by select gifted students. Outstanding musicians were supported by a system of patronage by Maharajas (kings) and wealthy landlords holding private concerts. Over the last 300 years the teaching of Karnatic music has broadened and gradually people from many casts have been able to make their mark as performers either through the guru/disciple system or by being self-taught.

Today, most outstanding musicians earn their living giving public concerts where many people can enjoy the music by paying an entrance admission. There are government scholarships awarded to highly regarded musicians, and salaried positions for outstanding artists to work as performers with establishments like All India Radio. It is acceptable now for teachers to receive remuneration for providing lessons. Today students from many casts are permitted tuition and in some cases scholarships are given to students who may be unable to pay for tuition but show 'promise' and dedication.

In Chennai, Karaikudi R. Mani's school ('Sruthi Laya Kendra') provides tuition that is paid for by the students' families, and the school provides scholarships for young musically gifted students from local areas and also from interstate. To receive an inter-state scholarship the student must be keen to learn as the scholarship requires they leave their family, board near the music school in Chennai, attend 3 or 4 lessons per week and go home only during school holidays. In some cases, it may also mean that the teacher and student only have the language of Konnakol in common, as the student comes from a different state and speaks a language other than Tamil or English.

Students work towards an 'Arangetrum' - a debut recital - where they have the opportunity to display their talents in a formal concert setting. In many ways this is a celebration of all their hard work and announces them as an artist of concert standard to the community. Families go to great personal expense to make this an exquisite and memorable event, inviting hundreds of people and including the most highly respected artists as associate performers and guests of honour. In Australia it is commonplace to 'fly in' the associate artists and revered guests of honour from India.

Whilst Konnakol is a recognised art form of principle study and has its own position within the percussion section of the Karnatic ensemble, over the last 100 years there has been a diminishing number of artists pursuing principle study in Konnakol. This is probably due to the diminished employment prospects for Konnakol artists as they are seen as an extra - rather than essential - member of the percussion section. Due to the diminishing number of Konnakol artists, some percussion artists intersperse Konnakol with their percussion playing to add variation in solo sections.