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[Entertainment](#)



Music is in his genes

Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, turning 75 tomorrow, decided to become a musician when he was a child. LAKSHMI DEVNATH describes the zeal with which he pursued his goal.



Nedunuri Krishnamurthy being presented the 'Sangeeth Samrat' title. Seen from left are B K Krishnaraj Vanavarayar, Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, G K Sundaram and Thulja Ram Rao.
— Pic by K. Ananthan

KRISHNAMURTHY WAS amazed at the sudden turn of events in an otherwise mundane life that he led. Kothapalli was a small village. His father held a small job, at the estate of the Raja of Pithapuram and slogged for a princely salary of Rs. 20 a month. With a brood of eight children, his family members were an awesome ten in number and he (Krishnamurthy) was the youngest of them all. "Learn anything; but only if taught free." Probably there was a note of plea

Archives

- [Datewise](#)

- #### Classified
- [Lead](#)
 - [Cinema](#)
 - [Film Review](#)
 - [Music](#)
 - [Dance](#)
 - [Theatre](#)
 - [Arts & Crafts](#)
 - [Heritage](#)
 - [Miscellany](#)

News

[News Update](#)
[Front Page](#)
[National](#)

Regional:

- [Southern States](#)
- [Other States](#)

[International](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Business](#)
[Sport](#)
[Miscellaneous](#)
[Index](#)

in his father's words. Krishnamurthy did not bother to analyse. His father was desperate; he knew that. He learnt Hindi and Sanskrit. They came free. Could it be an instance of right learning for the wrong reasons? Krishnamurthy was talented in music. That also came free for he was born with it. It was enough that he heard a song once. He sang it to perfection and thrilled all those who cared to listen to him. It could be that he got his musical genes from his mother for she certainly had a good voice and sang the Ashtapadis, Tarangas and the Adhyatma Ramayana kritis with religious fervour. Her music had a favourable impact on her young son and he took an important decision — that was to formally learn music.

Appa Rao, a good vidwan, taught Krishnamurthy about ten varnas and then there was the father like figure in Kalluri Venugopala Rao who taught him many Ashtapadis and Tarangas. It was at Venugopala Rao's house that on one occasion Krishnamurthy sang to a visitor — a retired tahsildar of Vizianagaram. Things now started happening!

Appalanarasimhan, the tahsildar, was deeply impressed by Nedunuri's music. Krishnamurthy had by now come to be known so for Nedunuri was the name of the village where he spent his childhood. The next thing, the boy realised, was that Appalanarasimhan had got him admission in the Maharaja College of Vizianagaram. The college offered him free boarding, lodging and tuition. The parental stipulation of free education having been taken care of, it was now left to Nedunuri to take a decision. He was only thirteen and for a fleeting moment flinched at the thought of going to a remote place. But then, he decided to go and never looked back after that.

Sangita Kalanidhi Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu was the principal of that college. On hearing young Krishnamurthy sing, he suggested, "Why don't you stick to vocal music? Your voice is very good." His nephew Dwaram Narasinga Rao, a reputed violinist in his own right, seconded his uncle's opinion. But Nedunuri was firm in his choice. The violin fascinated him and that was what he was going to learn. Narasinga Rao knew the psychology of adolescents. He tried a different strategy. In the class, he made Nedunuri sing and accompanied him on the violin, and one fine day, managed to convince the boy that his focus should be on vocal music. Five years went by. Nedunuri's wealth of music increased manifold. But he had his share of privations too. Krishnamurthy's boarding, lodging and college fees were paid for but for his other expenses his father gave him a sparse amount of Re. 1 per month, that at best managed to get him half a cup of coffee a day, for a month, and nothing more. Years passed thus and one day...

The audience at the Saraswati Gana Sabha, Kakinada, was restless. Flute Mali was scheduled to perform there but his train had been delayed. "Nedunuri Krishnamurthy is in the audience. Why not ask him to sing? He can fill the time until Mali comes." This suggestion came forth from someone in the crowd to appease frayed nerves in the audience. And the young musician rose to the occasion. Nedunuri Krishnamurthy conquered the hearts of the public with his mellifluous music. To use a modern phrase Nedunuri Krishnamurthy had indeed `arrived'.

Humble by nature, Nedunuri always had feeling that there was still a lot more to be learnt — a view that persists to this day. One day in 1949, he heard the music of Dr. Sripada Pinakapani. Pinakapani expressed admiration for the refined and gamaka-filled rendition. And he wanted to learn music from him.

The doctor was touched and replied, "I appreciate your desire to earn though you are an established performer." Nedunuri now came under the tutelage of the doctor and the doors opened into a land of soulful music.

Sripad Pinakapani was a teacher, friend and brother to Nedunuri. He generously taught all that he knew and Krishnamurthy lapped it up. His concerts now caught the attention of even `the special people.' In 1951, after he had sung in the 3 p.m. slot, violin virtuoso Lalgudi Jayaraman walked up to Krishnamurthy and said, "Nedunuri garu, I would only be too happy to accompany you henceforth... " In the subsequent years, they made a `hit' pair — both emerging as maestros in their own rights.

Nedunuri Krishnamurthy has sung for 52 years at the Music Academy, taking a short break only when his health did not match up to his enthusiasm. His father died in 1959 and his mother in 1968, both happy that their son's dream had been fulfilled. Over the years great honours have been conferred on him. Sangeeta Kalasagara, Swar Vilas, Gayaka Choodamani Sangeeta Samrat, Sangeet Natak Akademi award, the Sangeeta Kalanidhi are but a few in the long list of awards that he has received. In May 2003, he received the Dr. K. V. Rao and Dr. Jyoti Rao Award conferred by the Telugu Fine Arts Society, U.S.

His music has carried him from the by lanes of Pithapuram to distant shores. But, he retains a soft corner for the discerning music audience of Tamil Nadu and considered it a compliment when once long ago someone asked him, "Are you a musician from Thanjavur?"

On another occasion, critic Subbudu admiringly asked, "Has Carnatic music migrated to Andhra?" Andhra-born he certainly is, but

Krishnamurthy sings Tamil songs with comparable relish and equal attention to lyrics. "These are not special qualifications but necessary requisites for a singer." Reveals Nedunuri, "while singing, the intention of the composer has to be conveyed and that can only be done by correctly enunciating the lyrics and I do think that many of Papanasam Sivan's songs are comparable with those of the `Trinity'.

Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, who will be 76 tomorrow, evaluates the music scene around him dispassionately. "Today, everybody can get a platform. Undoubtedly, there is a lot technical skill in the music heard but why are they (musicians) not able to depict the flavour of ragas? Is it because they lack ideals, guidance or devotion to the art?" This remark kindles memories of an incident that happened years back. At a concert in the Krishna Gana Sabha, Nedunuri elaborated the Kapi raga. When it was violinist Lalgudi Jayaraman's turn to delineate the raga, he declined to do so. After the concert, Jayaraman graciously said, "Nedunuri garu, you had exhausted the potential of that raga. What was there for me to play?" Not only that, Nedunuri adds, recalling the moment, "Lalgudi called the Secretary and gave a generous compliment, `Nedunuri is a very great artiste.' Coming from a great artiste like Lalgudi I have not forgotten these incidents."

M. S. Subbulakshmi once said, "Nedunuri garu," `Just for this one song in Revathi "Nannatu Batuku Natakamu" (an Annamacharya kriti) I think you should be awarded the Sangita Kalanidhi." Nedunuri returns the compliment gracefully, "But, the Annamacharya songs that I tuned attained popularity because she sang them.

Today, Nedunuri Krishnamurthy has established a trust called Nadasudha Taragini and under the auspices of this Trust, three volumes of Annamayya's songs, set to tune by him, have been published with notations. "I have also set some of Bhadrachala Ramadas's songs to tune." Nedunuri reveals in a matter of fact manner, "I don't think I have the capacity to compose new songs. Isn't it sufficient that I learn to sing the songs of Trinity to perfection?" With every passing year, his fans aver, his music gets increasingly emotive and soulful. "Once on stage, and with the tambura tuned, I just forget myself. I do sing before the audience but not for them. I enjoy my music, I do accept money but have never employed my music for personal gains."

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