Chapter-7

Seven-stringed Violinists

Of T. Chowdaiah’s Contemporary and Later Periods

Mid 20th Century saw the invention of T. Chowdaiah’s seven-stringed violin. After the successful invention of the seven-stringed violin, Chowdaiah constantly accompanied all the eminent artists of the period with this instrument and made it popular.

It is indeed undeniable that great artistes do carry inherent predispositions that is deeply ingrained in their psyches, and such predilections perceptibly emergence when they are exposed to congenial triggering circumstances. One may trace such circumstances to have their origin inside the family or in the external social environments – both these factors being interrelated and interdependent.

The present chapter is aimed at bringing into fore the external social milieu, particularly related to the world of music, working either directly or indirectly, and may be remotely, in shaping or influencing the musical personality of Piteelu T. Chowdaiah. Further, it is of prime importance to have a clear idea on how such a tremendous musical force could influence other members of the fraternity as well. It is also aimed at establishing or bringing into awareness about the firm pedestal on which the luminary stood in relation to the other personalities who carved their niches distinctly in the Karnataka music scenario.

R. R. Keshavamurthy (1913 - 2006):

Rudrapatna is a small town near Hassan in Karnataka, which has the distinction of having produced many illustrious musicians. R.R.Keshavmurthy hails from this place.
RRK, as he was popularly known, was a legend of seven-stringed violin. He was a disciple of Bidaram Krishnappa, who was also the guru of his contemporary, T. Chowdaiah. Besides Chowdaiah, he was said to be one among the very few to have mastered playing the seven-stringed violin.

RRK's father Ramaswamiah was himself an accomplished musician, and his first teacher. Later he came under the tutelage of Bidaram Krishnappa, who was an asthanavidwan in the Royal Palace of Mysore. Though well versed in both vocal and violin, RRK later took up the violin as the main mode of musical expression. He was a violinist of great repute and precision.

RRK practised and mastered the seven-stringed violin, though it was an innovation of T. Chowdaiah, a senior disciple of his Guru. He was known for his rigorous practice and discipline. His music was scholarly, brisk, and erudite. He was an expert on bowing and fingering techniques.

RRK was very learned in several languages like Kannada, Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil and Hindi through which he was able to interpret the Kritis composed in various languages. He had attended several conferences and made paper presentations and demonstrations on the subject of violin playing and fingering techniques. He wrote over 10 books on "Sangeetha Lakshya Lakshana", which include ‘Keertanegalu in three volumes, “Bālapātha” for learners in two volumes, Piteelu Vadana Krama” and ‘Navagraha Navavarana Kritis. He also made a chart of talas with the combinations of 3,5,7 swaras and so on to help the students develop Kalpanaswaramuktayas.
R.R. Keshavamurthy had commanded a unique position in the field of Karnataka music. He was an ‘A’- top artist of All India Radio. Towards the later part of his life, he settled in Bangalore and started a music school in the memory of his Guru. He taught many students like T. Rukmini and Anoor Ramakrishna, Bhuvaneshwariah, Dr. Jyotsna Srikanth, Jyothsna Manjunath, Dr. Meenakshi Ravi, Nikhil Joshi, Mysore Sanjeev Kumar and Nalina Mohan, who went on to become outstanding musicians themselves. He encouraged his students in education. He himself was a Science graduate from the Mysore University. He would be very happy when his students spoke in English. He had a letterhead even at that time and signed with great style. RRK received many awards and participated as an active member of several organisations. Some of the titles conferred on him are Sangeetha Sahitya Shiromani, Sangeetha Vidyasagara, Sangeetha Shastra Praveena, Sangeetha Kalaratna, Naada Bheeshma Vidwan, Sangeeta Sahitya Shiromani, Veena Sheshanna Memorial Award, Kanaka Purandara Prashasti, The Rajyotsava award and The Sangeeta Natak Academy Award and others. R. R. Keshavamurthy was addressed with the title Sangeeta Vidya Sagara more frequently than others. He was known for his terse and tough expressions. Very rugged in his approach, he had accompanied many stalwarts during his time. He passed away at the age of 93. Apart from K.J. Venkatachar, another disciple of Chowdaiah and M.R. Subbaratnam, R.R.K. is said to be the only seven-stringed violinist to have lived into the 21st century. The Keshavamurthy foundation is launched

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1Interview with Jyothsnamanjunath, his disciple on 16th November, 2013.
in his memory by his disciples. It celebrates ‘Gurusmriti’ annually, in which the title ‘Sadhana Charya’ is bestowed on eminent deserving artists.

**C.R. Mani Iyer (1915-2008):**

Palghat C. R. Mani Iyer, violinist, was a disciple of Mysore Chowdaiah. He was trained on the seven-stringed violin as well as the four stringed violin. His earlier gurus were his grandfather Annaswami Bhagavtar and then Palakkad Rama Bhagavtar. He was the elder brother of Mridangam SubbaIyer.

C.R. Mani Iyer started learning Karnataka vocal music under his grandfather Annaswamy Bhagavathar. He later trained under the renowned vocalist of the times, Gayaka Kesari Palghat Rama Bhagavathar. It was Rama Bhagavathar who advised C.R. Mani Iyer to learn playing on the violin.

As luck would have it, the young boy was noticed by T. Chowdaiah, who often visited Palghat for music concerts, and took him under his tutelage. For nearly a decade Mani Iyer underwent rigorous training in the gurukula system. Mani Iyer’s stay at Chowdaiah’s home was made memorable by the tender care and magnanimity of Chowdaiah. Chowdaiah’s affection and generosity were complemented with exacting sessions of practice. Mani Iyer’s association with great percussion maestros C.A. Subba Iyer (his paternal uncle), Palghat Mani Iyer and Palghat Raghu helped him develop a strong base of rhythm.
Mani Iyer was equally well-versed in playing on the four-stringed and the seven-stringed violin. The much-deserved break in his musical career came when he was forced to return to Palghat due to poor health and he came into contact with the ebullient singer Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar. This led him to become a much-sought-after accompanist to leading vidwans of the day like Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Madurai Mani Iyer, Alathur Brothers, G.N. Balasubramaniam, Maharajapuram Vishwanatha Iyer, K.V. Narayanaswamy and a host of others spanning over three generations. He also gave solo performances on the violin. The violin trio concerts he played with R.K. Venkatramana Sastri and V. Sethuramaiah, disciples of Chowdaiah, are cherished by connoisseurs.

C.R. Mani Iyer had a brief stint as a staff artist with the All India Radio. But regulations hampered his concert commitments and he forsook a safe, salaried job for the risky career of an artist. He accompanied maestros of the era when Karnataka music was at its peak in prestigious concert halls like the Madras Music Academy, Rasika
Ranjini Sabha, Indian Fine Arts Society etc. at Chennai, Shanmukhananda Sabha at Mumbai and many other venues known for their discerning audience. In the year 1995, Palghat C.R. Mani Iyer was honoured with the Deviprasadam Trust award instituted by the Olappamanna Mana for his contribution to music. The Chowdaiah Memorial Award, Kalashri award of the Karnataka Sangitha Nritya Academy, felicitation by the Percussive Arts Centre during Chowdaiah’s birth centenary are some of the other awards and honours that were bestowed on him.

He sailed through thick and thin. Personal tragedies added to his woes and he spent the last couple of decades of his life in anonymity.\textsuperscript{1} C.R. Mani Iyer is fondly remembered by music lovers for his deft handling of the violin while he gave melodious accompaniment that enhanced the richness of vocal music, and for the chaste music in his solo performances.

He belonged to the hallowed school of artistes for whom pursuit of art is a profound seeking.

V. Seturamiah (1917-1986):

V. Seturamiah was a student of Coimbatore Balasubramanya Iyer initially. He later became a disciple of Sri Bidaram Krishnappa. Through the recommendation of Sri Nanalvar Chetty, he was accepted as a disciple by Chowdaiah in 1925.

Having been captivated by his Guru’s seven-stringed violin, Seturamiah prevailed upon his master to make one for him. After examining his worthiness and steadfastness, in 1934, Chowdaiah manufactured the second of his seven-stringed violin through Rangappa of Mysore and gave it to Seturamiah with his blessings, bidding him never to forsake the violin even in trying periods. Seturamiah played only on that violin till the end.\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}The Hindu, Friday, April 4th, 2008.
\textsuperscript{2}Article ‘Happy moments’ by V. Seturamiah in the journal of The Chowdaiah memorial
One day in Madras, oblivious of his surroundings, Seturamiah was immersed in his rigorous practice on this violin. Chowdaiah happened to enter the house. He signalled Seturamiah’s mother to be silent and heard his disciple play for about 20 minutes and overcome by joy, leaped into his presence and embraced him fondly, showering his blessings.¹

Seturamiah also rose to tall heights in music and played accompaniment for most of the top ranking musicians of the time. He served in All India Radio, Madras for many years. When Seturamiah accompanied Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar for the first time at The Pudukkotai Sangeeta Sabha, Chowdaiah went all the way from Mysore to encourage his student, stayed till the end of the concert and exhibited his joy over his success.

Seturamiah was a favourite disciple of Chowdaiah.² He accompanied V. Ramaratnam also on several occasions. When Prof. Ramaratnam was the Principal of the Ayyanar College of music, he had arranged a music festival in memory of his guru hall released on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the hall in the year 1980.

¹ Article ’Happy moments’ by V. Seturamiah’ in the journal of The Chowdaiah memorial hall released on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the hall in the year 1980.

² A musician’s reminiscences’ by Professor V. Ramaratnam .
Chowdaiah. Seturamiah not only attended the function but also provided accompaniment and played solo concerts.¹

**K.J. Venkatachar (1939-2010):**

Venkatachar was born on 2-3-1939. He had his training in music under B. S. Srinivas Iyengar, V. Ramarathnam and B. K. Rangaswamy Iyengar and under T. Chowdaiah intensively for 8 years. He was a B.Sc., graduate.

He learnt to play the 7-stringed violin from Chowdaiah and played this instrument in his own style and became one of the top 7-stringed violinists. He accompanied Chowdaiah in many of his concerts on the seven-stringed violin.

He served as the Principal of the Mysore Ayyanar College of Music after Chowdaiah’s demise in 1967 and trained several students in music successfully, including Mysore Sanjeevkumar.

He was conferred The Karnataka Sangeeta Nritya academy award for the year 2007-2008. During the birth centenary celebrations of Chowdaiah, Venkatachar was felicitated by the Percussion Arts centre.

Venkatachar accompanied his guru Chowdaiah in many of his concerts. He lovingly recollected that at a concert at Bangalore, where he played with his guru, Chowdaiah implored the audience to applaud encouragingly for his disciple.²

Venkatachar breathed his last in July 2010.

¹A musician’s reminiscences’ by Prof. V.Ramaratnam.
²interview with K.J.Venkatachar on 6-10-2009
A.K. Muttanna (1914-present date):

A.K. Muttanna was also known by the name Venkatanarayana. He played both seven-stringed and four-stringed violin. He not only contributed a lot to Karnatik music through his music, but also trained and gifted a family of musicians to Karnatic music. His son A.V. Prakash and his grandson Krishna Prasad are well-known flautists and grandson A.P. Srinivas is a violinist.

P. Shyamanna (1917-2005):

Shyamanna was born on 26-11-1917. He belonged to Karur Ramaswamayya’s parentage. His father Sampi Ramaswamiah and uncle, Chikka Ramaswamiah were musicians. Shyamanna began his music training from his father at the age of ten. At the age of seventeen he became a music director. Shyamanna was the first music director in Kannada. He has since directed music for about 30 films. ‘Tillottame’, ‘Sreenivasa Kalyana’, ‘Ayyannar’ (Malayalam), ‘Dallali’, ‘Gandharvakanye’ (Kannada, Tamil and Telugu), ‘Muttiddela Chinna’, ‘Madiddunno Maharaya’, ‘Prabhulinga Leele and’ Varadakshine’ are some of the films for which was the music director.
In 1957 he won the presidential award as music wizard by Naushad for the film ‘BhaktaVijaya’. He worked under Hiranniah for four years in his Mitramandali and then served in the Mysore palace as a sub band master for six years. He is one among very few who played seven-stringed violin. He had the knowledge of a wide variety of instruments. Shyamanna formed ‘Vijayashree’ orchestra which included the members of his family. Music director Rajan Nagendra and Gunasingh (flautist and music dorector) and Shyamanna’s daughter Mysooru Veena Rajalakshmi are some of his disciples.

Shyamanna breathed his last on the 2nd of December, 2005.

Shyamanna’s daughter Mysooru Rajalakshmi is a well known Veena artist, who started performing at the age of nine. Presently she works for All India Radio, Mysore.

**Ratnagiri Subba Shastri:**

Subbashtra was born on 31-7-1909. He belonged to an orthodox family.

Subba Shastrī’s violin playing under the guidance of Gana Kala Bhushana L. Raja Rao was in great demand then. He served as a teacher in the Mahila Seva Samaja for a long time. He was known for his seven-stringed violin playing and accompaniment.
He was greatly appreciated for his rendering of neraval, bowing, effective usage of the bow, and the vocal style in the articulation of the text in kritis. His hold on laya was precise. Subba Shastri was very simple. He played for young and upcoming artists too and added color to their concerts with his encouragement. He was like a bridge between the old and the new. He was a great step stone in carrying the heritage forward. He had a beautiful handwriting. The kritis he wrote with notation in notebooks was pretty and accurate.

Subba Shastri trained a large number of students in violin and vocal. Anoor Ramakrishna B.R. Anantaramiah were the disciples of Subba Shastri.

**M.R. Subbaratnam (1929-today):**

Subbaratnam was born in 1929 to Kannambadikatte Saraf Sri Venkata Ramiah and Seetamma. He started learning violin at an early age from his elder sister Smt. Venkata Lakshmi and Smt. Seetalakshmi and continued his training under Sri Subba Rao of Holenarasipur. Later he became the disciple of Sri R.R. Keshava Murthy and achieved expertise in playing the seven-stringed violin. Today he is the only player of Seven-stringed violin. Subbaratnam has performed for various platforms and music conferences. He has accompanied great musicians like B. Devendrappa, Bombay Sisters Maharajapuram Santanam, T.N. Sheshagopalan, Titte Krishna Iyengar, Chintanapalli Ramachandra Rao, etc. He is a ‘B’-High artist in All India Radio since 1979. He also served in All India Radio as a programme
executive for three decades. He has been honoured with the titles like ‘Vidyanidhi’ and ‘Piteelu Vadana Vinoda’ by music associations.

Subbaratnam has also trained a number of Disciples in vocal and violin - Nataraj and VenkataRamana to mention a few.

**Jyothsna Manjunath (1973-present):**

Born on 16-05-1973, Jyothsna is the daughter of Sri Kadaba Subramanya, well known Gamaki of the state. She was a child delegate to represent Karnataka in the 6th international film festival at Delhi in 1991.

Jyothsna started learning violin at the age of 12 from Sangeeta Vidyasagara Sri R.R. Keshava Murthy. She also had vocal training in music under Smt. NagavalliNagaraj and training in Gamaka from her father Kadaba Subramanya. She had rigorous training for twenty years under RRK in both seven-stringed violin and four-stringed violin. Jyothsna has accompanied several leading artists of repute since then. She has been performing both as an accompanist and a soloist. She has performed for various sabhas like The Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai and The Bharateeya Vidya Bhavan. She has also performed during the Ramanavamiseason in the Fort high school, Sri Rajarajeshwari Kala...
Niketan Trust. In addition she is featured on the Doordarshan, Karnataka in the AraluPrathibe section many times, in the orchestration of Annamacharya’s Compositions, Samskrita Saurabha, Karnataka Music on Udaya Channel, World Space, and Gyan Vani Cable network. She has taken part in the All India Radio, Bangalore in musical features, instrumental Orchestras conducted by the BharatiyaVidyaBhavan and also in an audio cassette on Ballets.

She is the recipient of “Ananya Prathibe“ award in 1997 for best Violin accompaniment in the concert competition held during the annual music festival of Sri Nadajyothi Sangeetha Sabha sponsored by ‘Ananya‘ Cultural Sabha. She is also a recipient of scholarship from The Karnataka Sangeetha Nrithya Academy twice for a period of 3 years each in the Vocal and Kavya Vachana category. In the year 1994 -95, Jyothsna was bestowed with an honour ‘Aryabhata Yuva Prathiba Puraskar ‘by Arya Bhata Cultural Organisation, Bangalore in recognition of the achievements in the youth category.

**Other Seven-stringed violinists:**

Shivaramiah and Chilakunda Srinivasa Murthy were also some of the few seven stringed violinists of Chowdaiah’s period.

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