

Passion for 'sastreeyam'



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Technology aids sastreeyam iPad stood in for tanpura, tabla, back-up track and lyrics stand rolled into one. He miked a small boombox that was connected to the iPad wirelessly

At ISB, Hyderabad where he is a student, Ragavan can be seen walking around the campus with wireless headphones and holding the iPhone that plays the music. He typically carries a portable boombox in his pockets. So on first sight, you think he is just another regular techie or management professional. He is that, but more interestingly, he is a trained classical musician.

Perhaps Ragavan Manian is what the young, educated-abroad classical Carnatic musician is evolving into — tech savvy, equally comfortable with both Indian traditions as well as the Western cultures, balancing their profession with a passion for the classical arts. . In Ragavan's case, the modern identity does not dilute the classicality, it only enriches his philosophy on classical arts. So you learn that the boom box is actually used to amplify the sound and facilitate impromptu performances, if need be.

Yet, Ragavan's adherence to classicality is impeccable. “Technology cannot and shouldn't replace the concert experience. It is useful for research, to document and make the classical arts accessible and portable, but its music will have a metallic feel, it takes away from the aesthetics,” he insists.

His stand isn't surprising considering his credentials: he was under the tutelage of Mangalampalli Balamurali Krishna for around 11 years, from the age of 10, soon after his first concert. That was after an initial training under gurus Tenkasi P.K. Rajammal and Pallavi T. Narasimha Chari.

Music has been his passion and first love ever since. “Whatever I am today it is all due to the greatness of my Guru,” he acknowledges.

He adds, “My father was an ardent rasika, but he was very clear that IIT was non-negotiable, that I must do my engineering alongside music. I trained under Guruji till I went to the US for my MS.” Throughout his stint at an engineering job in US, Ragavan kept his tryst with music and also taught himself to play over 10 instruments — violin, bansuri, saxophone, clarinet, khandjira, morsing, guitar, harmonica, harmonium, electronic saxophone and the electronic flute.

Speaking of the role of an artiste, soft spoken Ragavan says, “Classical musicians are historians; they teach what endures; classical music has to stem the trends.” Apart from hundreds of music concerts in Carnatic and Hindustani, he is also a vocal accompanist to Balamurali Krishna for concerts in US and India. He has also performed at various jugalbandis with acclaimed artistes visiting the US and is a guest lecturer at Stanford University's Music department. Currently, he is teaching music to some of his ISB classmates.

In true Balamurali tradition, Ragavan has also composed his own tillanas, varnams, krithis, RTPs, tuned songs from ancient and Tamil literature (*Kamba Ramayanam*, *Silaapatikkaram* among others) and set music for dances, documentaries and plays. So how much innovation is ok? Ragavan elaborates, “Depends on why the innovation - is it for the sake of innovation or is it based on ethics, values, aesthetics, to add something? What applies in B-school applies to music too. All innovation must create wealth for society,” he sums up.

Having returned to India for his course in ISB, Ragavan now intends to settle down in Hyderabad and pursue his musical interests here. Music is clearly where his soul belongs, everything else is secondary .