

GIRIDHAR UDUPA

A gifted young percussionist

Veejay Sai



Master Giridhar

It was the summer of 2004. Far away in Reunion Island, off the Mauritius coast was one of the biggest music festivals in the world. Artists from all over flocked to showcase their talent. The violin maestro Dr. L. Subramaniam was also invited with his entourage of artists. Giridhar Udupa who took a flight from Bangalore to the venue via Mumbai was excited to be a part of this international summit. As he checked out of the airport with his baggage and into the plush venue, he got the biggest shock an artist could get. He opened his baggage to find his instrument shattered to pieces, because of the rough handling of baggage in transit at airports. He sought help from every possible artist he could. But far away, in that part of the world, there was almost no hope of finding his instrument, or even a remote replica of it. As news of this mishap spread amongst the artist community, all that little Giridhar could do was to sit back panic stricken and make a silent prayer. “I probably put in the prayers of

my lifetime which I never did before, like investing all the punya of your deeds of a lifetime”, he says. Someone told him that a Tamil-speaking family in that island had a similar instrument, but with a big fat crack running right across its body. “I knew that a certain gum could do the trick of fixing the instrument. So I tried it”, recollects Giridhar with the same amount of anxiety in his eyes, almost half a decade later. “And it worked! It also matched the right pitch of the great maestro’s violin! I couldn’t believe myself. Added to this, an artist who was touring around came forward to donate his instrument on seeing my plight. To my surprise that too had the same pitch,” recollects Giridhar. That was one of the memorable concerts by Dr. L. Subramaniam on the violin and Giridhar Udupa on the ghatam. “I think it was the blessings of my guru-s and God that I was lucky enough to overcome such a trauma”, he adds with a sigh of relief.

The ghatam or the pot is not a popular instrument among students of music for several reasons. It is hard to master it and a ghatam vidwan is always an accompanying artist. Very few have taken to it with passion and commitment. The one name that immediately comes to everyone’s mind is that of Vikku Vinayakram who popularised the instrument among Western audiences, while a part of the ‘Shakti’ group along with John McLaughlin, L. Shankar

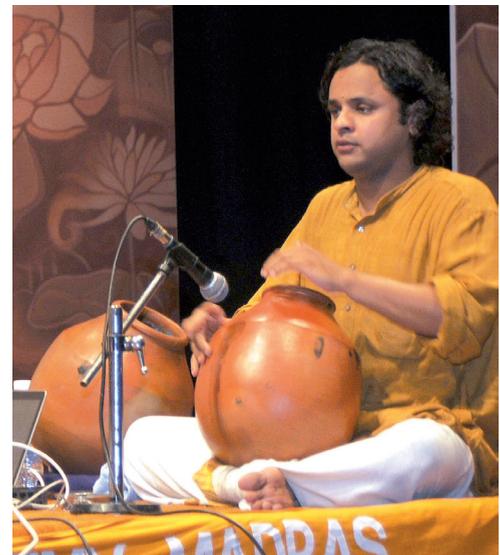
and Zakir Hussain. Amongst the current generation of youngsters the name that stands out is that of Giridhar Udupa.

Born into a family of musicians, Giridhar’s father vidwan Ullur Nagendra Udupa was a renowned mridanga artist. Having accompanied some of the stalwarts of Carnatic music on stage, he trained his son from the tender age of four to appreciate percussion instruments. Giridhar was attracted to the ghatam. He was sent to learn from his guru-s vidushi Sukanya Ramgopal and vidwan V. Suresh. Under their guidance, he blossomed and mastered the instrument.

“There are three main places where the ghatam is made. The Bangalore ghata-s are more rounded in shape, weigh about one to two kg and produce an entirely different sound. Then there are those in Madras. The best ones

Giridhar Udupa

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Following the leaders

Over the years, Giridhar Udupa has accompanied numerous Carnatic musicians like L. Subramaniam, M. Balamuralikrishna, M.S.Gopalakrishnan, R.K. Srikantan, T.N. Krishnan, T.K. Murthy, Palghat Raghu, Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman, A.K.Palanivel, GaneshandKumaresh, Mysore Nagaraj and Manjunath, Mandolin Shrinivas, N. Ramani, K.J. Yesudass, T.V. Gopalakrishnan, T.V. Sankaranarayanan, Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan, Trichur V. Ramachandran, Hyderabad Brothers, O.S. Thyagarajan, T.M. Krishna, Neyveli Santhanagopalan, P. Unnikrishnan, Sanjay Subrahmanyam,

N. Vijay Siva, Kadri Gopalnath, Jayanthi Kumaresh, R.K. Suryanarayana, Bombay Sisters, Nityashree Mahadevan, Sudha Ragunathan, S. Sowmya, and Aruna Sairam.

In Hindustani music he has accompanied famous artists like Shivkumar Sharma, Amjad Ali Khan, Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, Anindo Chatterjee, Sultan Khan, Niladri Kumar, Lucky Ali, Ranjit Barot, Bhavani Shankar, Fazal Qureshi, Swapan Chaudhuri and Birju Maharaj (Kathak).

He has played with Western musicians

like Larry Coryell, George Brooks, Ernie Watts, John Kaizan Neptune, Hubert Laws, Corky Siegel, Ivory Gitlis, and Lewis Pragasam. He has also worked with leading music directors in India. He has been a part of several global symphony and chamber orchestras including Fairfax Symphony Orchestra (U.S.A.), Kwazulu-Natal Philharmonic Orchestra (South Africa), State Philharmonic Orchestra of Sibiu (Romania), Sinfonia Baltica (Poland), Leipzig Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra (Germany) and the Royal Symphony Orchestra of Oman.

come from the little remote village of Manamadurai in Tamil Nadu. They weigh about 8 to 10 kg and are somewhat oval in shape. Even the sound they produce is unique,” says Giridhar. “It takes a lot to make a proper ghatam. The soil has to be of the right kind, it has to be heated at the right temperature and still maintain its humidity. If you make about 100 ghata-s, only 15 may come out decent. Picking the right ghata is not easy says Giridhar. “I usually go to the village and play all the ghata-s available to pick about 10 good ones of varying pitch, scale and tone for me. Moreover, the ghatam is truly a vegetarian instrument, made purely out of the five elements,” he adds in excitement.

Giridhar is a bundle of energy on stage throughout a concert and not just during the tani avartanam. He helps to elevate the concert experience through his involvement with his chosen instrument. Over the years, he has accompanied a veritable who’s who of artists, worked with leading music

directors, and been a part of several global symphony and chamber orchestras.

In addition to playing the ghatam, he also recites the konnakol and plays the mridanga. The finesse of his fingering, the dexterity of his playing, and the mindboggling speed of his intricate rhythmic designs go a long way in enhancing a concert.

Giridhar has also experimented with jazz and fusion bands. He was the founder member of a band called ‘Laya Tharanga’ which experimented with Indian fusion music. He teamed up with Fabrice de Graef and Mishko M’Ba to become part of the global band ‘Nasha’ that offers Celtic music fused rhythmically with Indian percussion. As the core percussionist of the band, Giridhar adorns Celtic music with rich Indian rhythmic patterns. He is also a member of the Poland based Flamenco band ‘Indialucia’ featuring Miguel Czachowski, Jan Kubek and Adam Glosnicki. A long list of international concert tours, an impressive line-up of awards and several wall-shelves filled with a good number of ghata-s fill his

terrace house in old Bangalore. Radio France, Polskie Radio (Polish Radio), Radio Luxembourg and several radio networks have broadcast his solo concerts and interviews.

This commerce graduate has an untiring will to innovate. When not on concert tours, you can find Giridhar sitting at home, relentlessly tapping and trying out patterns on the ghata-s or drums around him. Among his latest favourites is an innovative bamboo percussion instrument invented by John Kaizan Neptune called the ‘Uduboo’ which Giridhar flashes with excitement. “It is a combination of a double-headed drum and the African Udoo drum which is a ceramic pot with two sound holes. Hitting the hardened membranes produces sharp percussive sounds, while modulated bass sounds are made by forcefully covering the sound holes.” Watching the energy and enthusiasm of youngsters like Giridhar Udupa, you feel Indian percussion is in safe hands. For Giridhar, it is a way of weaving magic with his nimble fingers.

(The author is a writer, editor and culture critic)