



INDIA'S PREMIER MAGAZINE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

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A day in the life of a teacher of music—via Skype



By Vidya Subramanian

My typical day starts at 5:30 AM with a cup of steaming coffee handed by my dear mother-in-law. I check my Calendar, email, FB page, read the morning news online and then log onto Skype in time for a 6 am conference session. Today, I will be teaching two US based teenagers: Kavya from Texas and Subha from New Jersey. Both girls have sent me a practice log for the previous week via email. I skim through the practice logs and have them sing a varnam in two speeds. Subha is preparing for a competition and sings me her chosen song. We polish up some sangatis. Kavya is participating in the Festival of Nations at her school and we together decide that Lalgudi Sir's scintillating Behag tillana would make an interesting choice for her heterogeneous audience. She sings it quite well but struggles with the tala in the latter half of the charanam. Using a combination of loud hand clapping and webcam, I help her get the patterns accurately. We then proceed with our current work-in-progress, Dikshitar's

Kamalambam bhajare. The class ends with a few rounds of kalpana swarams for the pallavi of the beautiful Kalyani kriti.

The next 90 minutes are spent frantically getting my two little ones ready for school. My seven year old son's science textbook decides to hide itself in a nook and my three year old daughter spills juice onto her outfit, presumably to add color to the day's proceedings. After much scrambling and cajoling, we run down the stairs, breathless but just in time to greet the school van.

My 10 am session is a 45-minute trial class with a Canada based homemaker. Biruintha is a Srilankan Tamil who has received training for a number of years and would like to hone her skills further. I teach her excerpts from a Tyagaraja kriti and then hear her sing a song that she has learned a long time ago. We discuss various learning options as well as pros and cons of online lessons. I then call Ramya, a Bangalore based teacher and performing musician, who is part of my team and check with her if she would be able to teach Biruintha on a weekly basis.

Post lunch, I walk to Pondy Bazaar to finish some errands. I stumble upon Usha, an acquaintance from my days as a CA student. Usha and her mother are sari shopping in T Nagar. We exchange pleasantries and contact info – Usha has settled down in the San Fran Bay area after marriage, done her CPA and now works for a Big 4 audit firm. I brief her on my journey over the past decade – CA, MBA, marriage, two kids, a couple of corporate and consulting positions in California and New York before heading back home to Chennai for good. "So, wow, you did your MBA after your CA. Are you now into management consulting?" asks Usha. "No, I made a career switch – I decided to pursue Carnatic music full time," I say. "That must have been a tough decision – to waste all your academic education!" says Usha, looking at me rather sympathetically. "I don't think I have wasted any effort at all. Carnatic music is very challenging and creative. I am learning a lot and enjoying my experiences immensely! I have always been into it from childhood but decided to pursue it as a serious vocation only a few years ago. In fact, I feel my MBA skills are being put to very good use in my musical activities which include online teaching, podcasting and so on." I am trying my best to sound confident. Usha's mom's eyebrow goes up 1/16th of an inch (Jeeves and Bertie Wooster aficionados will surely relate to my comment!) "So, how come you guys moved back to India? Did you or your husband get laid off or did your Greencard application run into issues?" "Neither, we had always wanted to return to India." Usha's mom looks at me incredulously.

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Sruti Magazine

Sruti is an English language magazine on the Performing Arts, Indian music and dance published from Chennai, India. The first issue was published in October 1983.

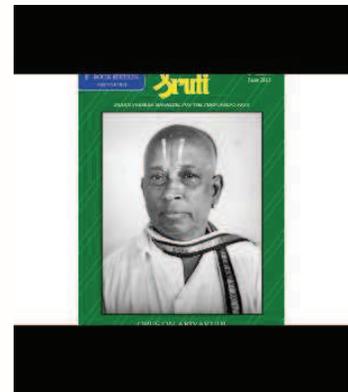
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▼ January (12)

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Before Aunty can pass the next comment, I excuse myself and rush back home just in time for an afternoon Skype session with Gabriela, my Brazilian student. Here is the real interesting part. Gaby doesn't speak a word of English (and of course, I am clueless about Portuguese). How do we communicate? Ah, music is a universal language you may say. True, indeed! But how do we interact, discuss and converse? Google's Translate tool comes to our rescue although I sometimes end up getting rather quaint sounding chat messages (I know she does too). "Can you please explain me what the raga Bhashanga term mean?" types Gaby. And so, we go back and forth, singing and typing. It is a slow process but both of us enjoy our interaction immensely.

3 pm. Kids are back from school. I get Skandan, my older one, started on his homework and look at my rather ambitious to-do list for the day. 1. Need to learn a specific Ramaswami Sivan kriti for a student who wants to sing it at a Composers Day event. I search online and find a beautiful rendition by Sri KVN. I listen to it a few times and decide to come back to it later in the week. 2. Need to plan for a concert this weekend. 3. Need to record and email song mp3s to a bunch of students. 4. Need to gather material for our next episode of Raaga Rasika (the free podcast series I co-host. I jump to item no 4 while feeding my daughter Parvathi her afternoon tiffin with one hand.

4:30 pm – Class with two students (again by Skype conference): one in Europe and the other in Gurgaon. We try out ghanaragamalika tanam, inspired by a recording of Veena Dhanammal.

My inbox by now includes an email from a teacher in my group who would like me to follow up with a student who habitually forgets to show up on time for class and another from a Kenyan of Indian origin who would like to discuss online Carnatic music learning options. While I am typing my response to the Kenyan, I hear a discussion between my husband and my son on whether dinner will be home made parathas or dosas at one of T Nagar's umpteen restaurants! I check the evening news update, my FB page, email, and Calendar for the next day before putting my laptop into a state of hibernation. The thing I like best about being an independent musician is that I can choose and shape my path based on my skills, strengths and constraints, and it is such a fun learning experience each day. For, as the saying goes - "Who dares to teach must never cease to learn!"

About the author: Vidya Subramanian (www.vidyasubramanian.com) is a Carnatic vocalist and disciple of Lalgudi Jayaraman. Also a gold medal winning Chartered Accountant with an MBA in Finance from Boston College, USA. Vidya is based in Chennai and can be reached via email at vidyasubramanian.music@gmail.com. Her free educational Carnatic audio podcasts can be accessed from www.raagarasika.com.

Note: * Student names have been changed to protect privacy.

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Pavithra Srinivasan Jan 12, 2012 11:41 PM

Fantastic!

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SUNSHINE Jan 13, 2012 09:59 PM

Great write up Vidya. There are many of us who depend on you to lead us forward on our musical journey

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