

Lecture Demonstration: Sri A.K.C. Natarajan and Prof.
William Powell

Sponsored by SAMPRADAYA

At the K.N. Shanmugasundaram Hall

Gokhale Sastri Institute

16 Karpagambal Nagar, Mylapore, Chennai

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Topic: The Adaptation of the Clarinet in Carnatic Music

Professor William Powell's Text:

Honored guests, rasikas, ladies and gentlemen:

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to SAMPRADAYA, its President, Mr. Alepey Venkatesan, and the Governing Body, its Projects Coordinator, Ms. Lakshmi Ramakrishnan, and the Administrative Officer, Mr. R. Kasivisweswaran, for allowing me this opportunity to share with you a few details concerning a subject very dear to my heart — that subject is MUSIC. Also, I would like to thank the management of Sapta Swara Musicals for the loan of one of their clarinets for the purpose of our demonstration.

I am delighted to have a chance to share some of my experiences as a clarinetist (and as a student of the clarinet) as well as the opportunity to tell about some discoveries I have come across during the course of my research on the use of the clarinet in South India.

The first time I visited India, which was from August 1993 through June 1994, I came as the recipient of a Senior Research Grant from the Indo-American Fellowship Program of the J. William Fulbright

Foundation. The Fulbright Foundation was established by Senator Fulbright as a government sponsored exchange program designed to foster a better understanding between America and other nations. Himself the recipient of a Rhodes Scholarship to study in England, Senator Fulbright, by virtue of his own experience abroad, was convinced that the best way to foster understanding between the peoples of various nations was to enable citizens of one country to live and work for a period of time in the cultural milieu of another country. My own experience of living in India for a period of ten months has convinced me of the validity of Senator Fulbright's conviction.

The project proposal I submitted in June of 1992 to the Fulbright Foundation for consideration for research and study in India was entitled Musical Influences Across Cultural Boundaries: The Clarinet in South India. Among the objectives I had at that time were the study and documentation of teaching methodologies and performance practices of South Indian clarinetists.

I most especially wished to study with the "Mount Everest" of the clarinet, Sri A.K.C. Natarajan, although when I first arrived in Madras, I had no idea where to begin my search for that "Mount Everest." I had come to India equipped only with the memory of an extraordinary concert I had heard performed by a very great artist during my student days, many years before, in California. It was in 1978 that Sri A.K.C. Natarajan came to the United States and, by some fortunate chance, performed a concert of Carnatic Music at the school where I was completing my Master's degree in music. The memory of Sri Natarajan's concert remained, from

that time on, clearly etched in my mind for several reasons.

First of all, I had never heard a clarinet player perform a concert that lasted longer than an hour and a half. Sri Natarajan's concert lasted over three hours — and at the end of the concert he seemed as fresh as he had at the beginning.

Secondly, during the entire three-hours-plus concert, I never heard a single note played out of tune. Nor did I hear a missed note, a squeak or a squawk that would be the usual result of any fatigue in the performer.

And thirdly, since that concert was my first experience of any music from India, I was completely overwhelmed by the rhythmic complexity, the sheer number of notes and the profusion of melodic ornamentation that was played with such carefree abandon.

Also, I had met briefly with Sri Natarajan after the concert to express my appreciation of his performance, and I noticed at that time that the clarinet on which he had performed the concert was different in many respects from my own instrument. It was quite easy to see that some rather drastic modifications had been made to Sri Natarajan's clarinet. I suppose that the initial inspiration for the project proposal that materialized some 14 years later occurred at this time when I began to question, "How did the clarinet get to India in the first place" and "How do these modifications made to Sri Natarajan's clarinet facilitate or hinder the technical aspects of his playing."

These were the thoughts that followed me from Los Angeles, California to Madras, Tamil Nadu in August of 1993. Still, when I arrived, I had no idea where to begin to search for the one who could satisfy my curiosity about these matters — that “Mount Everest” of the clarinet.

It is a circumstance for which I shall be forever grateful that, almost immediately upon my arrival, I had the great good fortune of meeting Dr. K.S. Subramanian, who in August of 1993 had just begun to establish the Brhaddhvani Research and Training Center for Musics of the World. Dr. K.S.S., as he was affectionately called by his students, was kind enough to take me under his wing. He generously became my mentor and guide for the entire duration of that first stay in India. And he arranged in a matter of days for me to meet with Sri A.K.C. Natarajan.

Although it was my desire to study the clarinet with Sri Natarajan, he wanted to hear me play something on the clarinet before he would accept me as his disciple. I was certainly not prepared to play any kritis, so I played several Western Classical compositions and he very graciously accepted me as a disciple — perhaps more as an experiment than for any other reason.

It was only after beginning my studies with A.K.C. that I realized to the full extent the differences between his clarinet and mine. Rather than following my original naive plan of making mechanical alterations to my own French-made instrument, it became clear that I would have to start completely from scratch by purchasing an

Indian-made clarinet and making the necessary modifications to that instrument.

But before going into the specifics of what I call A.K.C.'s "reinvention" of the clarinet, I would like to give a brief historical background on the instrument that we call the "clarinet." It could be said with some accuracy that the "concept" of the clarinet is a very ancient one. Fundamentally, a "clarinet" is defined by two specific characteristics. First of all, the sound that is produced on a clarinet is the result of the column of air inside the body of the instrument being set in motion by the air stream of the performer passing between a single reed beating against another "non-vibrating" surface. This surface is what we call the mouthpiece, or beak, and it is usually made of hard rubber or wood. This situation is quite different from most other reed instruments in which the sound is produced as the result of two reeds vibrating against each other — as is the case with the nagaswaram, or the Western oboe or bassoon.

The second criterion that defines a clarinet is that the column of air which is set vibrating exists within a cylindrical tube, rather than inside a tube which is more conical in shape — as is the case with the flute, saxophone or nagaswaram. The acoustic feature of a vibrating column of air within a conical tube is that each fundamental tone on the instrument can be overblown to the interval of an octave above, the so-called "first" overtone. It can be further overblown to the octave plus a fifth, or the "second" overtone. In a cylindrical tube, the fundamental tone cannot be overblown to the octave. It goes directly to the second overtone — the interval of an octave plus the fifth. In fact, the clarinet is missing

every other overtone [alternating overtones] in the overtone series, which is why it produces its unique sound.

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So-called “double clarinets” that are still being made and performed on in Egypt meet these two criteria — a single beating reed and a cylindrical tube. Identical instruments have been excavated from Egyptian tombs of the first century B.C. Further, this same instrument has been recognized on a sculpted relief in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo known to be from a time as early as 2700 B.C. This indicates that the “double clarinet” has existed without the slightest change for almost 5,000 years. The Indian equivalent to this ancient Egyptian instrument is the Tamil MAGUDI or the Hindustani PUNGI with the difference being that the mouthpieces of the Indian instruments are concealed in a large gourd.

The instrument that we today refer to as the “clarinet,” or sometimes “clarionet,” is actually just over three hundred years old. In 1690, the instrument maker Johann Christian Denner of Nuremberg, Germany, devised an instrument made of wood tubes turned on a lathe and cut into several joints, with a separate bell and two keys — one above the front holes to produce an “a,” and another, opposite in the rear, for “b.” Denner’s son, also named Johann Denner, shifted the “b” hole towards the top in order to facilitate overblowing and at the same time diminished its size so that it produced “b-flat.” Then he pierced an “e” hole into the lengthened lower joint and covered it with a long key to be pressed by the small finger of the left hand. This hole, when overblown,

produced “b,” an octave and a fifth above “e,” and secured a complete fundamental scale from “e” to “b-flat,” and an overblown scale from “b” on. During the early 1800’s, several other modifications were made to the clarinet, but not until 1839 were certain qualities of the Boehm system flute adapted to the clarinet — primarily the ring keys.

Although music written for the clarinet began to appear with increasing frequency after 1760, acceptance of the clarinet as an integral member of the standard Western orchestra was quite slow in arriving. In fact, it was not until the Austrian musician / composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote several masterworks for the instrument during the years between 1785 and 1791, a hundred years after its invention, that the clarinet came to be regarded as a legitimate solo and orchestral instrument in the West. Fortunately for clarinetists, Mozart counted among his friends during this period a great virtuoso of the clarinet — one Anton Stadler. By listening to his friend’s performances, Mozart developed a deep understanding of the melodic and technical potentialities of the instrument. One could almost say that Mozart, by virtue of his extraordinary musical genius, his fame and the example he provided for future generations of composers, single-handedly ensured the survival of the clarinet in Western music.

To illustrate the kind of music that was played on this early clarinet, I will play for you a few bars of a work written by the clarinetist for whom Mozart wrote his masterworks. This is a “Caprice” by Anton Stadler.

DEMONSTRATION

By way of further illustration, I will play a few bars of a quintet for clarinet and string quartet written for Stadler by Mozart so that you can see how Mozart improved on Stadler's efforts.

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As far as the introduction of the clarinet into India, the earliest documentation I have been able to find thus far about the subject is reported in Dr. S. Seetha's book entitled "TANJORE AS A SEAT OF MUSIC (During the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries)" which was published in 1981 by the University of Madras. Dr. Seetha, in her book, makes several references to the "Guide to the Records of Tanjore" that contains a number of documents, including letters dated between December 26, 1803 and May 5, 1804, written to the Scholar Prince of Tanjore, Sarabhoji II, that make specific mention of the availability of four clarinets and also establish the fact of the existence in the royal palace of a regular Western band with violin, clarinet, tambourine, bass drum, harp and piano.

I believe that it is perhaps no mere coincidence that during the same period of time (the late 18th century) when three of the most important composers of Western Classical music (namely Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven and Franz Schubert, who all lived and composed in the city of Vienna, Austria) were winning the hearts and minds of music lovers in the West, the musical Trinity of Carnatic music (Tyagaraja, Muttuswami Dikshitar and Syama Shastri) were setting musical standards in South India. It is also interesting to me that during the same period when the clarinet was

finally gaining acceptance in Western Classical music, the clarinet made its entry into Carnatic music.

It is generally acknowledged that the latter part of the 18th Century — the time of Sarabhoji's reign in Tanjore as well as the period of the three great composers (the musical "Trinity" of Carnatic music) — is not only considered the most important period in the history of South Indian music, but it is also at this time that there can be pinpointed a recognizable influence of Western music on the music of South India. It was in Tanjore, which was already an important cultural center of South India, where a certain Reverend Schwartz, a Danish missionary, came to have his headquarters. Sarabhoji II's father Tulaja, who was a religiously very tolerant man and a friend of the Danish missionary, entrusted the early education of his son to the Reverend Schwartz. Dr. S. Seetha has pointed out that it was through the influence of the Reverend Schwartz that the young prince received the benefits of Western culture. By the time Sarabhoji II came to rule the royal court of Tanjore (between 1798 and 1832), the highly cultured and enlightened prince had apparently developed a great liking for Western music. This fact is attested to by his organization of the Tanjore Band and his extensive collection of Western musical instruments. Dr. Seetha has mentioned in her book that Sarabhoji "Himself learnt Western music and received printed lessons on Western music from great music masters in London."

As far as the clarinets acquired by Sarabhoji are concerned, it must be assumed that these instruments were those that had only 3 or 5 keys, since it was not until later in the 19th Century that more keys and rings

came to be added. The clarinet which is currently popular in India, the so-called “simple” system — or Albert system — clarinet, a clarinet with 13 keys and 4 rings, came into existence only by the middle of the 19th century. The simple system clarinet, which is still the main clarinet played in India, held prominence in the West also, up until the early years of this century. The most convincing proof of that fact can be best demonstrated by playing a short excerpt from the composition entitled “Rhapsody in Blue.” This opening cadenza from the “Rhapsody in Blue” was written for the simple system clarinet in 1923 by the American composer George Gershwin. As you will hear, Mr. Gershwin used the jazz idiom in his works.

DEMONSTRATION — Opening Cadenza from Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue”

Not long after this period, the simple system clarinet gradually came to be replaced in the West by clarinets with different fingering systems — which is to say that keys and rings continued to be added to facilitate the technical complexities arising from a music based on the concept of harmonic movement.

DEMONSTRATION — different major scales (E, F, F#, etc.)

DEMONSTRATION — Igor Stravinsky’s “Three Pieces”

DEMONSTRATION — Joji Yuasa’s “Clarinet Solitude”

Currently, there are three different fingering systems used by clarinetists in the West: the Boehm system clarinet, which is the one I am performing on today and

the one that is most used for the classical and contemporary art music of Europe, the Americas and Australia; the Oehler (or Auler) system clarinet that is preferred in Germany (and is used to some extent in Japan); and the Albert system (or simple system) clarinet which is still used by many of the older generation of American jazz musicians, Jewish Klezmers (or the musicians who play the traditional wedding and folk music of the Jews) and musicians who perform the folk music of the Balkans (Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria, etc.).

While alterations in the mechanism of the clarinet have continued to be made to keep pace with the demands of the evolution of musical styles in the West, I am aware of only one clarinet artist in India who has made modifications to the technical mechanism of the simple system clarinet to increase its potential for felicity in executing the special demands of Carnatic music. That artist is Sri A.K.C. Natarajan. To quote from N. Rajagopalan's "Biographical Dictionary of Carnatic Composers & Musicians, Book II" entitled "ANOTHER GARLAND" published in 1992: "With his training in nagaswaram and clarionet and music from a celebrated vidwan, he (A.K.C. Natarajan) was the one artiste who was competent to give classical exposition on the non pliable clarionet with capability and merit. . . . A.K.C. Natarajan is an eloquent exponent of Carnatic music on clarionet . . . with few competitors for over four decades."

What Mr. Rajagopalan does not go into is the fact that A.K.C. is not only "an eloquent exponent of Carnatic music," he is also an excellent craftsman who virtually "reinvented" the clarinet, in that he made modifications to the technical mechanism which allowed him to bring

out those “shades of raga swaroopas and swaras with maximum felicity possible on the instrument.”

Before turning the podium over to Sri Natarajan who can describe in some detail how and why he has made the changes that he has to the clarinet, I would like to take this opportunity to say a few words about an extraordinarily powerful concert that was performed by A.K.C. just last evening (December 27) at the A.V.M. Rajeswari Kalyana Mandapam. In this concert, which was organized and presented by Valayappati’s Naadha Laya, A.K.C. proved beyond any doubt, over and over again, that he is not merely a force in clarinet, but remains one of the great treasures of Carnatic music. Indeed, he proved over and over again that he is not only a national treasure of India, but is in fact one of the treasures of all music throughout the world.

As I was listening to that performance, I was struck by the immense power of A.K.C.’s concentration. He seemed to be totally absorbed in some Divine Inspiration. The audience was utterly transfixed. After attending so many concerts in Madras (where there are always a few members of the audience who seem to be immune to the fact that something worth listening to is being performed, where their own needs to converse with their neighbors in the audience takes precedence over their consideration of others who might like to listen to the music, and where at any moment someone may get up and wander to and fro to find another friend to talk to) — after observing all these “normal” happenings at music concerts during this season, I couldn’t help but be struck by the absolute silence and attentiveness of the audience at A.K.C.’s concert. No artist who has acquired only a

momentary fame is capable of so totally captivating an audience. Only an artist of the very highest caliber, that artist who, if you will, is honed to such perfection as to be a worthy vehicle for the descent of that Divine Essence which is the true, the supreme, nature of what we call “music,” only that one is capable of commanding such a pure attention from the devotees of our Art. It is my very great honor to be able to present that one who was, and who remains the only “Mount Everest” of clarinet: Sri A.K.C. Natarajan.