

Transcending *his* beat, *her* beat

BY RAJNA SWAMINATHAN

The issue of gender in Karnatik music is one that has followed me persistently throughout my musical career. The question of what it is like to be a woman playing the mrudangam is an inevitable aspect of how my music and personality are framed and experienced by others. Although I generally try to transcend it within my own musical journey, I will address it here in the hope that our collective assumptions and habits can be challenged and transformed.

I have never once felt strange playing an instrument that is usually played by men. While I'm playing, I'm not thinking about my gender – either intentionally or subconsciously. I don't seek to create specifically “feminine” or “masculine” music: I create music that I feel personally invested in and moved by, which reflects the myriad influences that have crossed my path.

Growing up in the U.S. did shelter me from a lot of the cultural baggage around Karnatik music, although American culture has its own scripts, which I had to deal with. Many people have come up to me and said that I can be a role model for young women who want to pursue percussion. I agree that seeing a woman like me on the stage, sitting with a mrudangam and sporting very short hair and a kurthi, can significantly expand the possibilities for a young initiate into the Karnatik tradition. However, we should be wary of letting this fall into the trap of the gender binary. Someone once told me that I'm introducing a new “feminine” style of mrudangam. Not only am I not the first woman to play mrudangam, but that is also a dangerously reductive way of thinking about art!

In my case, I initially studied from my father and then did the majority of my training with the great master Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman, but the fact that they are men did not



Rajna with her guru Umayalapuram K Sivaraman

keep them from being role models for me. Luckily, I never thought, “They are men, so they must be capable of achieving more.” It seems trivial, but this is a very common thought process for young girls in the face of a world that tells them they are weaker and that their only value is in the domestic sphere. I have had other role models, too – men and women from all walks of life, remarkably creative human beings who have greatly influenced me. I have to stress the importance of identifying with those who may not be of our same gender/ community/ identity/narrative. Our common humanity is what gives us the same inner potential.

Gender constructs only mask and minimize the true diversity and uniqueness that exists in society. Notions of femininity and masculinity are linked and defined in opposition to one another, and thus gender informs the way both women and men act and perceive their potential in society. In reality, all humans have a combination of “masculine” and

“feminine” aspects, and the more we learn to find the balance, the more genuinely and freely we live our lives. Our tendency to put things in boxes and binaries applies not only to gender, but also to culture, religion, class, and other social categories. Such cognitive patterns are fundamental to the way we construct a sense of Self and Other, and they exist in all cultures. This is not to condone them, but simply to acknowledge that they are ubiquitous and need to be transcended in order to lead a more conscientious and compassionate existence.

That being said, I believe it is cliché for women percussionists/ instrumentalists to be the poster child for gender discrimination in the Karnatik scene. Gendered expectations impact all people and all arenas of music making. All musicians need to introspect about the way they “perform” their gender/ identity, and how that affects their professional relationships and musical aesthetics.

Many believe that the problem in the Karnatik scene is simply solved by giving women (or “all-women teams”) more opportunities to perform. That may help, but I think there is more to the solution: I am not concerned with visibility so much as the symbolic bearing of that visibility. Women’s performances (regardless of frequency or popularity) are still framed within very specific expectations: their improvisation is not expected to be very rhythmically driven, they are expected to embody bhakti and chastity in every aspect of their presentation (from the way they render compositions to the way they dress), and if for some reason they don’t fit this image they are said to be performing at a “masculine” level or posturing. In order to truly transform the situation, we need to alter such perceptive frames.

So, there is all of this and more underlying the statement, “You play well for a girl!”

At 24, I am probably still too young to have a time-tested perspective on how to “make it” in the world of Karnatik percussion as a woman. But I am figuring things out slowly. There is a lot that I attribute to luck in my life: the fact that I grew up in an environment where I was free to explore my interests, that my guru chose to train me intensively, that I have received support from established artistes not only in Karnatik music but in other fields like jazz and bharatanatyam, and that I grew up in a family that insisted that I pursue my passion and promised me financial support if needed. We take much of this privilege for granted, or assume that merit will automatically bring such opportunities, but I do feel blessed to have such a situation.

Over the years, I have been traveling and playing in many different contexts in the U.S.: Karnatik music, bharatanatyam, collaborations with Western and jazz musicians, composing my own hybrid music, etc. I am invested in each of these art forms on a deep level, and they have opened up a whole new world of perspectives that inform the way



Pic credit: Jaimie Milner

I approach my instrument. I realize this professional versatility also enables me to be fairly independent of the gender/culture disparities of the Karnatik scene.

I do believe the system (in India and in the U.S.) needs to change on the whole, in a way that deals with multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination and privilege. But we can start by working on ourselves as individuals: by recognizing and expressing the potential within, we start to ignite the radical possibilities in others, and eventually transform society itself. □

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