

ARTS FEATURE

By ADAM KARDASH

Adding spice to the music department's distinctive program is a Guru by the name of Trichy Sankaran who is a master of the South Indian percussion instrument, the mrgandam. Even before founding the South Indian program here at York in 1971, Sankaran was world renowned for his masterful and imaginative percussive techniques.

Although his training took place in the traditional setting of South India, the York music professor has toured all over the world and performed in a variety of musical contexts ranging from South Indian percussion to contemporary jazz. Among his more popular performances were his various appearances with the percussive "fusion band" Nexus and his performance last summer at Expo in Vancouver.

Presently Sankaran is teaching a variety of performance and theoretical courses here at York while constantly enlarging his already extensive publications on the theory and practice of South Indian percussion.

Excal: Professor Sankaran, your biography to date contains many impressive achievements, with this in your past I can't help to wonder why and how you ended up here at York.

Sankaran: Probably as you have gathered I am a reputed mrgandam player, one of the top ranking players from South India. Basically, I received an invitation from York. At that time the music department was preparing to expand and to form a world music program. They were considering bringing non-western courses especially in the performance area. The invitation was brought to me from (Professor) John Higgins. He had heard me and collaborated with me in some of my performances. When he suggested that a university in Toronto was

Prof adds unique musical ingredient

interested in founding a program in the world music area and that they were very interested in having me discuss my specialty, I was more than happy and pleased to accept.

Excal: You have been teaching at York for over 15 years. Did you originally plan to stay this long?

Sankaran: At first I just accepted on a limited time basis. But after mutual agreement we decided to extend the stay indefinitely. Ever since I arrived here I developed an academic interest apart from my keen performance interest. It is this academic aspect that has kept me here. The program here has now earned world-wide recognition because when I perform I very openly discuss York and the program that we have established.

Excal: How does York's music department compare with music departments in other universities?

Sankaran: Well, the South Indian program certainly adds to the uniqueness of our music program. In fact, York is the only university in Canada that offers performance courses in non-Western music.

In general, what we do is much different from the more conservative oriented schools such as the University of Toronto.

Excal: Although your specialty is South Indian percussion your performances have not limited themselves to just that discipline of music; you have performed with African, Jazz and contemporary artists as well. Is it your specific talent that lets you travel from different areas of music with ease, or is it the complex nature of South Indian drumming that prepared you for such musical feats?

Sankaran: I would have to say that this is a combination of my talent and keen interest in music that permits me to do so. It is not normal that a musician can be so compatible with so many different forms of music.

Since I have arrived at York I have developed a keen academic and performance interest in many different forms of music. I have done this in order to discover what each different style can offer. Presently there are several types of drumming that really attract me. I now have a rhythm course which I am trying to expand to include a variety of styles of drumming; a survey course, of sorts. Even if only African and Indian styles are explored the course will still be a major part of the world music program. Both Africa and India are so rhythm oriented and so vast in terms of what they can offer.

Excal: This past summer you performed at Expo in Vancouver. How did that performance come about?

Sankaran: I was invited to perform at Expo in the drum festival that they held. Drummers and percussionists of international repute from all over the world were asked to attend. This turned out to be a very unique and beautiful experience for me. I ended up collaborating with drummers from an array of traditions and styles such as jazz drummer Steve Gadd and the fusion band Nexus.

Expo: Your performance at Expo was only one of the many times you have played with Nexus. How did you originally come in touch with the band?

Sankaran: In 1973 when Nexus was forming as a serious unit I became in touch with them. They set up a workshop at York and they asked me to play with them. At that time I only performed Mrgdangam solo yet I was still asked.

This was not surprising, for the word Nexus means connection, and the group did in fact connect many different styles including non-western music.

Members of the band are trained in many different disciplines. Because of this training, Nexus performances really show how one can benefit from studying other cultures. This benefit is most apparent in terms of understanding the idiom properly and consequently gaining further knowledge about one's own culture.

Excal: Considering the entire span of your career, are there any performances that stand out as the most memorable?

Sankaran: There are quite a few memorable concerts that I have given, especially in my traditional setting in India. I remember one concert in South India that really sticks out in my mind. In that specific concert I accompanied a renowned vocalist named M.D. Rammanatan.

It is really a challenge for any mrgandam player to accompany a vocalist, especially (Rammanatan) because he specialized in slow music and had great depth to his voice. This concert, I remember, was so soul-stirring.

After the concert it was said that my mrgandam sang. This is the ultimate compliment that a mrgandam player can receive. I don't see percussion as 'banging' or 'beating' but rather lyrical and musical in its nature. In that particular performance my playing contained those qualities.

Excal: In your role as professor what style of teaching do you employ?

Sankaran: Traditionally this type of music is studied on a one-to-one basis. The student spends most of his time with a Guru studying under him. In this setting ear-training and imitation are stressed.

I bring the same method here except on a modified scale. In the university environment I cannot expect students to spend all their time with me on a one-to-one basis although private instruction is provided. I also provide the students with writings on the complex nature of South Indian drumming as well as notation.

No form of writing is supplied in the traditional setting. What I try to do is to maintain traditional elements of teaching while at the same time incorporating modern methods such as the one I previously mentioned.

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Professor Sankaran in concert



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