

House Concerts · The Beginning of Rāgā-Mālā

Jagannath Wani

Back in the early seventies, Indian classical music was not at all a notable activity in Calgary. There were well trained musicians scattered around in Calgary and Edmonton. Vocalist Nanda (Jhuma) Banerjee and her husband Mohit had just moved to Calgary. Afzal Hanid-Awan was teaching sitar to nine-year-old Seema Ganatra. Gerald (Jerry) Olynyk had developed some skills on the tabla. Gregory Levin, a composer who had keen interest in classical Indian music, had just joined the Music Department at the University of Calgary. In Edmonton, Sucheta Rao (vocal), Wasanti Paranjpe (vocal), and Sunita Kumar (sitar) used to meet on and off and perform for a small group of classical Indian music lovers.

Though Jhuma, Afzal, and Jerry were in the same town, they were not aware of each other's existence, let alone of their artistic skills. They were hidden music gems for Calgarians. Music lovers were missing the opportunity to enjoy classical Indian music though it was very much present in their midst. I personally had a great desire to propagate classical music and dance of India in Calgary. In 1974, the Wani family moved into their spacious home in Varsity Estates. This provided an opportunity to discover these musical gems and present them to music lovers in the form of cozy *baithaks* (house concerts). The first baithak was organized in early 1975. The artist was Jhuma Banerjee, a well-respected performer. Suresh Gurjar provided amateur tabla accompaniment. All those who attended enjoyed the music and Indian food prepared by Kamalini Wani. They wanted more of these gatherings and thus was born the Rāgā-Mālā Music Society of Calgary. Music critics Eugene Chadbourne and Randy Hutton, of the *Calgary Herald*, savored Indian music and food at these baithaks. They were a great help in publicizing Rāgā-Mālā activities. They brought along George Lyon to one of the baithaks, and George then

became a permanent fixture at Indian music concerts in Calgary. After Eugene and Randy moved out of Calgary, George started reviewing Indian classical music and dance concerts for the *Herald*.

Officially, Rāgā-Mālā was registered in May of 1975. On November 29, 1975, Rāgā-Mālā moved into a concert hall. Dr. Jon Higgins of Toronto's York University was the artist of the evening. Dr. Higgins was an American attracted to Indian music. His interest grew and led him to become a *Carnatic*¹ music vocalist. He was accompanied on *mrudungam* (drum) by Trichi Sankaran. Eugene Chadbourne borrowed a quotation from LeRoi Jones in describing Sankaran's playing: "Every note he plays is like fistfulls of dollars being handed out to the poor." In 1976, the Society presented Pandit Ravi Shankar and Ustad Alla Rakha, and in the following year it was Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and Pandit Jnan Prakash Ghosh. No wonder, in a short period Rāgā-Mālā was described by the *Calgary Herald* as "the single brightest cultural beacon in town."

Around 1979, Carnatic vocalist Kamala Kumar and percussionist Chini Doraiswamy moved to Calgary. They already had heard about Rāgā-Mālā and its success story. They joined the group, bringing along a South Indian musical component to Rāgā-Mālā's music talent bank. These new members introduced an annual event, the Tyagaraja Festival.

Kamala Kumar started teaching Carnatic music and Chini began his classes for students of *Bharatnatyam* dance. There was a group of members with keen interest in learning Hindustani music. To encourage this group, Rāgā-Mālā awarded their first scholarship to Brian Martin, a music student at the University of Calgary. Later, in collaboration with the Music Department at the Mount Royal College, the Allauddin School of Music was launched under the guidance

of Ashish and Pranesh Khan, the sons of Ali Akbar Khan. To encourage the performance of Indian music, Rāgā-Mālā sponsored a national music composition competition. Competitors included several well known composers from all across Canada. The list of winners gives an idea of the scope of the competition. The winners were Udo Kasemets (first prize) of Hamilton, Ontario, and Cathia Pine-Bluestein (second prize) of Calgary. Honorary mention was awarded to Gregory Levin, Chandrakant Kapileshwari of Edmonton, and Geza Farkas of Toronto.

Rāgā-Mālā's reputation was spreading far and wide. CBC got wind of it. They were particularly interested in the broad base of the society. A noticeable aspect of Rāgā-Mālā was the participation of non-Indians, not only as members and performers, but also as executive members, including the presidentship of the society. For the first three years, Gregory Levin, and later for two years Ruarie MacKenzie served Rāgā-Mālā in the capacity of president. Impressed by the success and the broad base, CBC recorded a one-hour show on Rāgā-Mālā, which covered the activities from the beginning to the

formation of the Allaiddin School of Music. It was broadcast several times on their national program, *Identities*, from coast to coast. The premier broadcast was on November 8, 1981.

The success of the Rāgā-Mālā Music Society of Calgary led to national interest, and in 1982 was formed the Rāgā-Mālā Performing Arts of Canada. To concentrate on the new, national Rāgā-Mālā, I ended my eight-year association with Calgary Rāgā-Mālā as a member of the executive committee, to take up the task of the President of the new national society. The national Rāgā-Mālā expanded on the activities of Calgary Rāgā-Mālā. The national body undertook to organize North American concert tours of well known artists from India, to publish a unique journal/magazine, *Bansuri*, with a North American focus, to establish scholarships in Jon Higgins's name, and to launch annual showcasing in different cities of Canada of upcoming Canadian artists performing in Indian musical traditions.

Indian music now has become a prominent activity in North America. However, we feel proud that so many of the roots of this activity originated in Calgary.

Dr. J. Wani has recently retired from the Statistics Department at the University of Calgary. Much of his energy at the present time goes into the Maharashtra Seva Samiti, a foundation which supports social, environmental, and charitable activities in India.

¹ The music of northern India is called "Hindustani"; that of southern Indian, "Carnatic." Hindustani music, represented by such performers as Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan, is generally better known in the west than is the Carnatic tradition. However, such representatives of Carnatic music as L. Supramaniam, as well as westerners influenced by Carnatic music, such as guitarist John McLaughlin, may ultimately help this tradition to gain the attention it deserves. Jon Higgins, a fine American scholar and vocalist in both European and Carnatic traditions, did much to enhance the reputation of Carnatic music in North America. Sadly, he died in an automobile accident in 1984 at the age of 45.

Ukrainian country weddings carried a reputation in a class by themselves for conviviality, good food and merriment to which Dad contributed several years of his skill on the violin. He was usually accompanied by others skilled on an accordion and dulcimer. William E. 'Buck' Buchanan of the Alberta Provincial Police detachment in Smoky Lake often participated with his drums when occasion would release him from his duties, rapping out a staccato up-beat tempo that was certain to stimulate a crashing foot stamp to the floor by the males, whilst the ladies 'soft shoe' dipped into the beat as only the grace of a female dancer allows it. All this was rendered in the way that a 'Hopak' was intended, as a sure fire cure all for rheumatic or work weary muscular aches. In the stimulating atmosphere of these events, the E string on Dad's violin frequently broke as he enthusiastically laid his bow to the tune. He always carried a couple of spares in his pocket.

It was not uncommon at winter weddings, for that seemed to be the generally accepted and convenient time from work for such bliss, to see guests dancing outdoors in the cold on a wooden platform built for the occasion. Usually the violin and dulcimer were the only instruments that would take the punishing temperature, which nevertheless added zest to the dance, which we five and six year olds (this was over sixty years ago) ogled in awe at the joy and performance of the dancers. I do recall Dad fiddling the violin with woolen gloves from which the fingers of the left hand were removed so that he could finger the notes. Yes, our pioneer ancestors played hard, but undeniably they also worked hard and this served to even things.

William Chahley, Our Legacy (Smoky Lake, Alberta)

Ian was a practical joker. One of his favorites was the one he told about being at a dance and somehow having a clove of garlic which he put in the lining of Genie Poda's coat, and it was days before she could figure out where the awful smell was coming from.

Author unknown, Wagon Trails Grown Over (Sexsmith, Alberta)

The dance hall was up over the pool room, but Dad never charged a cent for its use, so no one had to pay to go to these dances. One evening about seven o'clock, my chum, Irene Cady, and I were out walking around in our bare feet when we saw people going to the dance hall. We decided they must be having a dance, so away we went in our bare feet to the dance. I remember that night that I never missed a dance, and everyone was so careful not to step on my toes.

Author unknown, K.I.K. Country (Keoma, Alberta)