

# ARTICLES

A seventh generation musician in his family, popular veena artist Phani Narayana talks about his humble beginnings

BY MADHURI DASAGRANDE

## Made for the veena



— Photo: Hrudayanand

**B**orn and brought up in Kakinada, Phani Narayana was not keen on learning music. But, growing up in a musically-inclined home meant he began training in vocal music pretty early. His mother was a vocalist and a veena player, so learning to sing came easy as he watched her teaching the other kids. He shifted to playing veena upon the advice of his uncle who told him there was a glut of singers in the field.

Talent was perhaps ingrained in him, which can explain his being counted among the fastest veena players down south, adding gamakas to musical phrases.

"I never planned anything in my life, everything happened automatically, my good friend and singer Nemanani Partha Sarathi, who owns Keerthan Studios, one of the oldest recording theatres in the city, invited me to Hyderabad. He suggested moving to Hyderabad, as Chennai at the time was home to many musicians and I would be one among the many veena players there. So, I shifted to the city in 2004," says Phani.

I AM THANKFUL TO MOST OF THE MUSIC DIRECTORS WHO STILL BELIEVE MANUAL MUSIC ADDS A LOT OF VALUE TO THE SONGS OR THE RE-RECORDING. IT'S BECAUSE OF THEM INSTRUMENT PLAYERS ARE STILL ABLE TO GET WORK

— PHANI NARAYANA VADALI, VEENA ARTIST

Word of his flair for the instrument spread rapidly after his first recording and he became a sought after veena player in the city. Sharing one instance from his recording days, he says, "Once I went to play a veena bit in a folk song recording, it so happened that what I was playing was sounding very classical and I wasn't convinced. I saw a guitar kept in the corner and picked it up and played the bit on it. To my surprise, the music director liked it and finalised the music. So, I also became a classical guitar player," laughs Phani Narayana who is also an All India Radio (AIR) artist. Among his experiments with the instruments is trying to play in a standing position.

**Success streak**  
In his career, Phani has worked with

the most popular music directors in the South Indian film industry. Since travelling for recording is not possible always, he also owns a recording theatre beside his residence, where he records the bits and sends it to the music directors. "I am thankful to most of the music directors who still believe manual music adds a lot of value to the songs or the re-recording. It's because of them instrument players are still able to get work," says Phani Narayana who also runs a band, besides a YouTube channel called String Wings.

"Once I was in Chennai for a programme, but a music director named Linus called me for a recording, and I told him that it will take around 15 days to come back to Hyderabad. But, they still wanted the veena music in a devotional album, so they waited for

me to return and literally postponed their release. Such incidents make me feel special and I will cherish it lifelong," he says.

Phani has trained a few students both in vocal and veena music, one of them being anchor-turned-veena player Veena Sriyani. "As of now, I stopped taking classes, as I don't know how my day will turn out, and I don't want somebody to wait for me. Once I take care of my commitments, maybe I will continue to take classes," says Phani Narayana who also enjoys composing classical dance ballets.

Crediting his success to his better half Pavani, Phani says, "My wife is also a very good veena player, but she is the one who has taken up my role in the family and takes care of my children. We performed together many times. But, right now, she is focusing on family," says the artiste. Despite having a good command on classical and western music, he refuses any plan of composing music.

"I am not very keen on composing music for films. But, if it's a music-oriented subject, then I wouldn't miss the opportunity," signs off Phani Narayana who learnt veena playing techniques from Paacha (Partha Sarathi) from Chennai.

n King

Art & Culture

## Veena and Vocal - An exponent of both!

AMBIKA ANANTH

**G**reat happiness is a thing to be practiced reverentially... like playing the Veena, Veena, Viola they say!!! Imagine the hours of joyful yet strenuous practice it takes for a musician to carve a niche, make a mark!

Vid. Phani Narayana, a seventh-generation Veena Player, is the founder of the music band 'String Wings'. With 25 years of experience in teaching the veena and vocals, he is a musician par excellence. He has been associated with TTD from 2005, and with 'Art of Living', where he led a 2000 artists Veena Concert Association with Divyashaktam as a music director and core performer. He is also deeply involved with the south Indian film industry from the last 20 years.

**Excerpts from the interview:**  
**What were your initial influences and your learning trajectory?**

My musical journey is deeply rooted in tradition, as I come from a seventh-generation family of Veena players. I began learning organically at home, absorbing the nuances of Veena from my elders. My learning also involved assisting my mother in teaching, which helped me grasp the importance of teaching as a method of learning. I studied the works of maestros like Dr. Chitti Babu and S. Balachandrar, and Padukottai Krishnamurthy played a pivotal role in guiding me toward a more formal musical path. My unique learning experience combined the traditional guru-shishya parampara with a more collaborative approach, where teaching and observing became integral parts of my growth.

**Please talk about your individual style - Manodharma aspect as a performer!**

My style is rooted in the Gayaki tradition of Veena playing, a hallmark of our Vadali lineage. What sets me apart is how I make the Veena 'sing', focusing on its lyrical qualities and the nuances typically associated



Vid. Phani Narayana

ated with vocal music. Manodharma, or the art of spontaneous musical elaboration, is central to my performances. I adjust my playing according to the audience's energy, creating a unique dialogue at each concert. A memorable moment was when the legendary S.P. Balasubrahmanyam compared my style to Ustad Raees Khan's sitar playing, a compliment that affirmed my emphasis on melodic fluidity and vocal-like expressiveness.

**As a guru, what teaching methods do you adopt to teach students to play with high proficiency?**

I focus on transcending the traditional guru-shishya relationship by fully investing in my students' growth. My teaching methodology blends theoretical knowledge with practical experience. My development as a teacher also evolved by mentoring others, and this approach has led to remarkable results. Starting with 60 students in Kakinada, I've mentored notable artists, and today, I teach over 200 students in the United States. Many have gone on to become professional performers, with several achieving high levels of success. For me, being a guru is about nurturing each student's individual journey, blending my experiences as both a learner and a teacher.

**In a world of increasing fusion music, do you see the potential for the veena to hold its global audience?**

**Explain about your well-appreciated tours abroad.**

My relationship with the Veena took a transformative turn with international tours in 2009 and 2013. I began incorporating fusion and Western elements into my music,

resonating with a diverse audience. While American audiences appreciate the traditional essence of the Veena, the Indian diaspora enjoys how the instrument adapts to modern expressions while preserving its classical soul. A particularly memorable performance in 2022 at the State University involved fusion performance with university students, highlighting the Veena's growing appeal globally and proving that traditional art forms can evolve and transcend boundaries.

**Talk about your 'String Wings' initiative.**

Founded in 2014, StringWings began as a classical ensemble but has since evolved into one of South India's leading music bands. We expanded from classical music to film scores, blending various genres to create unique musical experiences. Our adaptability has set us apart in India's contemporary music scene, where we've redefined how traditional and modern elements can coexist.

**Your multifaceted interests and how do you time manage them?**

My musical journey is multifaceted, encompassing roles as a composer, performer, and teacher. I've created a space in my recording studio where vocal performances, intricate recordings, and creative compositions come together. I have also composed music for 25 major dance ballets and created albums for TTD. The convergence of my passion and profession has given me the luxury of time to experiment and evolve, deepening my connection to my art and allowing me to continually create new experiences for my audience.