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A New York anesthesiologist records the devotional songs of South India with American flair through his own Amutham record company

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At first glance, the quiet Manhattan suburb of Nanuet, New York, seems worlds away from the sound and spirit of South India. But longtime resident Dr. Winston V. Panchacharam--anesthesiologist by trade, classical music impresario by avocation--has turned the town into a warm oasis of high Carnatic culture. The 60-year-old Sri Lankan native is founder and president of Amutham, Inc., a small, independent recording label that specializes in Carnatic classical vocal music, producing audiophile-quality releases that are winning a worldwide audience.

"Amutham offers extremely high quality in both music and presentation," says Ashu Kataria of the Khazana music store, a retailer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. "And their song selections are especially creative. Pieces that aren't available anywhere else show up on Amutham."

Each Amutham CD features at least 72 minutes of impeccably recorded music, packaged in the European classical mode, with elegantly simple graphics, detailed liner notes on ragas and thalams (melodic and rhythmic frameworks), transliterated lyrics and, occasionally, English translations. These features, together with Panchacharam's use of American recording engineers and production companies, push the cost of an Amutham CD a couple of dollars higher than the imported competition. But Panchacharam refuses to compromise quality standards to enhance marketability.

"This is not a commercial venture," he explains. "It's a labor of love. People mustn't buy your CDs because they're cheap, but because they're good--and Amutham CDs are collector's items. When people hear one or two of them, they want to hear more."

Headquartered in a nondescript row of residential condominiums across the woods behind Panchacharam's spacious home, Amutham Studio serves as a home away from home for its visiting artists. Inside, the savory aroma of South Indian cuisine wafts from the kitchen, where the mridangam player--who also happens to be an expert chef--is preparing a vegetarian lunch. Meanwhile, the violinist and morsing (jaw harp) player lounge in the living room, watching a Julia Roberts video. And upstairs in her bedroom, the popular Carnatic diva, Sudha Ragunathan, is practicing an unfamiliar krithi (composition) while she waits for the proper moment to enter the studio.

"They're very particular about auspicious times,"

Panchacharam explains. "They believe there are certain times you shouldn't start something like music. Then, before they begin recording, they have to worship, perform puja and all that. So it takes a long time to get started."

Downstairs in the studio, sound engineer Greg Mattison sits before the glowing monitor of the digital mixing board, using the downtime to play back and review an earlier session. The sound is startling in its clarity.

"It's a pretty rigorous recording schedule," Mattison says, his eyes fixed on the screen. "Often, we'll start at one or two o'clock in the afternoon and run until one or two at night, and they're singing and playing that entire time. Maybe they'll take a half-hour break to get something to eat or have a cup of tea. But still, that's a lot of singing! And then they come down and do it again the next day."

The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly as the musicians finally enter the studio and take their places in the inner room of the recording booth. Each is separately miked in his own cubicle, but the carpeted half-walls are set with windows to allow essential eye contact between the performers. Donning a pair of headphones, Ragunathan sits cross-legged on a low platform in the isolated voice booth, studying a thickly annotated copy of the song she'll be performing.

"Sudha was the first Indian artist I ever worked with, which is kind of jumping in at the top," Mattison confides. "She expedited my education, because with Sudha you see how it's

really supposed to be done; you can see the experience that's there. And from that point on you have a good standard against which to measure everything else."

As the musicians do their last minute tuning, Ragunathan and Panchacharam discuss the fine points of the krithi with the frank, easy banter of old friends--which is exactly what they are. "Apart from the fact that he's the producer and I am the artist, there's also the reality that he's known me since I was a teenager," Ragunathan explains. "So he's more like a family friend. My children love him. My husband gets along very well with him. He's like a part of the family."

The two first met in the late 1970s, when the singer--then known by her maiden name, Sudha Venkataraman--was studying under the great Carnatic vocalist, M.L. Vasanthakumari, who had come to New York to perform for a function at Panchacharam's home. In those days, Panchacharam used to host an elaborate annual Saraswati Puja in Nanuet, drawing hundreds of visitors from all over the northeastern US, and featuring performances by such icons of the South Indian classical tradition as M.S. Subbulakshmi, M. Balamuralikrishna and M. S. Gopalkrishnan. During Vasanthakumari's stay in New York, Panchacharam asked her to sing for a series of benefit albums that he was planning to distribute among Sri Lanka's Tamil diaspora. Vasanthakumari politely declined due to the political undertones of the project, but she suggested that her young student, Sudha, was fully qualified for the job.

"I was a real novice back then," Ragunathan recalls. "Whatever

my guru told me to do, I would take her word for it. If she had said 'Jump into a well,' maybe I would have. She told me that all that these songs needed was a good voice, and so I did it."

Between 1979 and 1986, Ragunathan sang on four of Panchacharam's benefit albums. To express his gratitude, Panchacharam offered to produce a purely artistic classical CD to help raise her professional profile outside India. The resulting work, Sri Ranjani, was Amutham's first commercial release. "I did it as a favor for Sudha, just as a promotional thing," Panchacharam says. "But it became such a big success that I released a few more."

More than a few, in fact. Throughout the 1990s, Amutham's catalog continued to expand. It now encompasses more than three dozen titles, about a third of them recorded by Ragunathan. Along the way, the label picked up additional artists, some of whom are well known in the Carnatic world--such as Unikrishnan, Nithyasree Mahadevan and Sowmya; and others who are young unknowns just beginning their careers. Their fame wasn't the point, so far as Panchacharam was concerned: His vision for Amutham focused not on singers, but rather on composers and themes.

The label's early releases featured classic compositions by Thyagaraja and Dikshithar, the Mozart and Beethoven of the Carnatic repertoire. Later, Panchacharam moved on to more recent composers, such as Bharathiyar Padalhal and Papanasam Sivan. For each composer, songs are parsed out to artists on a first-come first-served basis. So it happens, for instance, that Nithyasree sings Papanasam Sivan Krithis, Vol.

1, whereas Sudha performs Papanasam Sivan Krithis, Vol. 2. And no piece recorded by one Amutham artist can be re-recorded by another. "Why should I repeat a song?" Panchacharam asks. "There are thousands of unrecorded songs yet to be explored, and people are dying to hear something new."

Similarly, Amutham theme recordings focus on a song's subject rather than its composer. Among these are two of Amutham's top selling CDs: Sudha's Dance of Shiva, a collection of songs for classical dance (proceeds of which go to the San Marga Iraivan temple in Hawaii), and Nithyasree's Ragam, Vol. 1, made up entirely of songs in which the governing raga is itself the subject of the composition. "It's all very interesting from an artistic viewpoint," Ragunathan says. "But it's difficult if you happen to come in at the tail end of a theme, because the list of familiar songs is mostly exhausted, and then you have to sit down and take a lot of time to learn new ones."

Panchacharam himself also spends a tremendous amount of time researching and preparing for each new Amutham CD. But he says that, until he built his studio in 1998, these artistic tasks were dwarfed by the sheer logistical nightmare of organizing recordings in India by long-distance from New York. After all, his artists were in Chennai; the recording facilities were there--but Panchacharam was in the US, a busy anesthesiologist working days, nights and often weekends at New York Hospital's Medical Center of Queens. "I spent so much money and time trying to get things done in India," he recalls. "When the studio would be ready, Sudha wouldn't be ready; when Sudha was ready, the studio had to reschedule.

Or Sowmya would have one song left to finish, and her mridangam-ist would leave for the Middle East and not be back for a month. Everything kept getting put off."

Then Panchacharam's daughter, Arabhi--a college student who does much of the graphic design for her father's label--came up with the idea of building a studio in Nanuet. She had noticed a new condominium development being built down the road from their house, and wondered if perhaps the entire process could be brought to the States. Whenever Amutham artists were in New York, they could stay in Nanuet and record an album or two for later release.

To test the idea, Panchacharam convinced Sowmya--who was touring North America at the time--to try a recording session at the home studio of an American friend, Manfred Knoop, in New Jersey. The experiment was a resounding success. Five hours after entering the studio, she had completed an entire new album. Sowmya was enthusiastic about the speed and concentration of working in a private studio and impressed with the quality of the final recording. "There was a myth that the Americans don't know how to 'punch in' Carnatic music," Panchacharam says. "I think we exploded that myth." [Punching in is the common practice of recording over just a portion of a song to correct a mistake or make an improvement.]

Arabhi's idea was vindicated; Panchacharam bought one of the condos and installed a state-of-the-art, digital studio, specially designed for recording Carnatic music. It's a compact "project room" that packs the power of a traditional full-size studio.

"The digital sound can be slightly more sterile, so we use a lot of vintage tube amplifiers to warm things up and give the music a more resonant body," Mattison notes, as he continues his work at the mixing board. "We're raising the bar with every recording."

The Digidesign Pro Tools digital system allows Mattison to easily isolate and re-record individual phrases without having to understand the different languages--usually Sanskrit, Tamil or Telugu--used in Carnatic songs. As for the music itself, Mattison says it's a universal language he has little trouble understanding. "The Carnatic scales are more involved and complex than Western scales," he explains. "But when something's wrong--when something's flat or a little bit out of time--I can still hear it. I'll look up and say, 'Was that a mistake?' and everyone gets a kick out of the fact I was able to pick that up in a completely different context."

Shifting operations to the US has not only saved Panchacharam time and money. The shift has also improved the speed and flow of the recording process--and, as a result, the overall quality of Amutham CDs. "Here, the artists can sit and practice without distraction," he says. "They have more concentration, so the recordings have more continuity. They don't have to worry about scheduling studio time; they can record whenever they wish for as long as they desire. Also, I don't have to run around and gather the accompanists whenever the singer is ready, because they're all here under one roof. They never stay all together like this in India."

Ragunathan echoes Panchacharam's sentiments. "In a way, it's

much more relaxing here," she says. "In India, your mind is so preoccupied with the house, and what are the children doing. I have to get back home! I have to do this; I have to do that! These sorts of thoughts keep bothering you subconsciously. But here, there's nothing. All you have to do is sit and do your homework, get to the studio, and try and do your best. Music and quality are the top priority."

Now that Panchacharam has his studio in place, he says it's time to concentrate on marketing so that he can keep Amutham thriving. For now he plans to focus most of his promotional efforts on his top sellers--who all happen to be women. "Somehow the male singers just didn't catch on," he says with a shrug. "They didn't sell well at all."

Amutham CDs are currently available mainly in North America, India and Singapore; but Panchacharam is working on a deal to get his CDs into shops in the UK, Europe and the Middle East. On the do-it-yourself front, he's also developing a website ([www. amuthaminc.com](http://www.amuthaminc.com)) to facilitate direct sales.

Ultimately, Panchacharam says, he'd like to bring to Carnatic music the same level of respect and recognition in the West that Hindustani classical music already enjoys. So, for instance, when his artists tour in North America, Panchacharam steers away from the usual low-rent, suburban auditoriums, aiming instead for more mainstream

concert venues and mixed audiences. Thanks to his efforts, Ragunathan has already performed at Manhattan's prestigious Lincoln Center; and he vows to take her to Carnegie Hall before he's through.

"Normally, South Indian concerts are never held in such places," Panchacharam says, "because historically, Carnatic music has not been promoted that highly, and the people who support Carnatic music don't want to spend that kind of money. As a result, the audience hasn't grown as much as it should have. But I intend to change that."

For the more immediate future, Panchacharam is planning an eight-volume collection of Ramayana songs, as well as a themed set of CDs about love and another about dreams. On the subject of dreams, Panchacharam says one of his fondest is to retire from medicine in a few years and devote his full energy to Amutham, the one-off recording idea that has inadvertently become his life's work.

"It was never meant to be like this!" he says, laughing as stands looking around his studio. "It was all because of that first CD of Sudha's! But people love what we're doing. And you know? I really love it too."

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