

In tune with the universe

Music teacher and community icon T N Bala passes away.

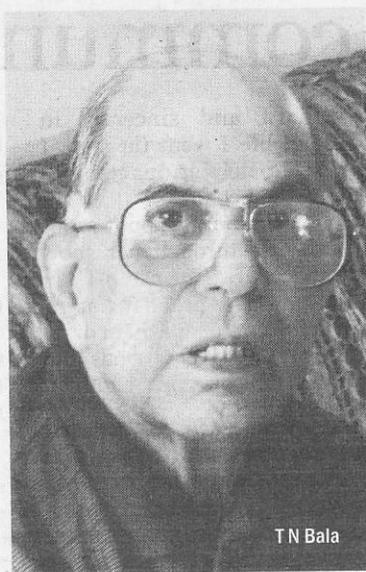
Arthur J Pais pays tribute

Music gave T N Bala some solace to fight personal tragedies in the last decades of his life and the singer, percussionist, journalist, news production manager and former Peace Corps officer — during its pioneering years under President John F Kennedy — continued giving free Carnatic music lessons till his last days. His family said Bala, 85, died of heart ailment in Haverton, Pennsylvania in late May.

He had lived in the area for about 50 years, having come to the United States to work for the Voice of America's Tamil division and gone on to train India-bound Peace Corps volunteers in acclimatizing to the Indian culture and way of life. He had also helped to start the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam in the Pocono Mountains.

"His passion for music and his devotion to Lord Muruga kept him going despite a few sad things he had to face," said Bala's son Chandrasekhar. His mother Susheela, who was also a performing artist and Carnatic music expert, died unexpectedly in 2003. Last year, Bala's youngest son Rama died of cancer. And Bala was left with two sons, Chandrasekhar, who took *sanyas* about seven years ago and has been living in a forest in Tamil Nadu, and Ganapathirama (Gary), an attorney.

"Bala, who hadn't made himself so much as a cup of cof-



T N Bala

fee while his wife was alive, now had to depend on his own resources," said H Y Rajagopal who, along with his wife Vimala, has known the family for nearly four decades. "Amazingly, he learned to cook and very soon became good at it, and from then on he not only taught children music but also fed them!"

Bala never tired of talking about music, Rajagopal and his wife said. "Many musicians are just content to sing or perform and are uncomfortable talking about music or even incapable of it, but not Bala," Rajagopal added. "He took every opportunity to talk about it, discuss it, and instill a love of it in others. I had several such occasions with him; my regret is that I did not have more. Even a month ago when my wife and I visited him he talked more about music than about his health. He showed us the video of a dance performance set to one of his composi-

tions."

Sumanth Swaminathan, mathematician and an engineer whose two passions are math and Carnatic music, studied with Bala for nearly 15 years.

"He taught me to sing," Swaminathan said, "and he introduced me to Carnatic saxophone before I met Dr Kadri Gopalnath in 1997, and he continued to teach me music in subsequent years. He prepared all of the compositions for

my debut concert. He accompanied me on *mridangam* during his annual student recitals, and he accompanied me on *kanjeera*/harmonium in numerous concerts. Moreover, he critiqued and guided my music for my entire life and up until the last days that he lived. I would describe Bala Mama's lessons as a sensory emersion in music. His living room was replete with *tamburas*, *shruti* boxes, percussion and string instruments, and photographs of legendary composers and musicians. His composition scripts were meticulously prepared and photocopied. I used to sit in front of him on the floor of his living room, and he would start class by preparing his *shruti* boxes, dabbing warm water on the bottom face of his *kanjira*, and loosening the keys on his harmonium. He was like a one-man band... teaching compositions and improvisational passages with his voice, dissecting complex phrases into their component *swara*, accompanying me on *kanjira*, playing warm up exercises on his harmonium, and all the while maintaining the communication and disciplinary requirements of a good teacher. Classes rarely stuck to a time limit because he himself would get so lost in his music that he would forget what was happening around him. Studying with T.N. Bala was like taking a ride into a musical world to which only the two of us had access. If one could imagine hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting music all at the same time, one could understand the nature of this world."

In the last conversation he had with Swaminathan a few months ago, Bala talked about the divinity of music for one's self.

"Though music is certainly an art to be shared, it is richest when experienced in a personal way," Swaminathan said, "and the highest standard of art is produced when we ignore the demands of dogmatic and politically charged distracters. Moreover, Mama expressed from his own experience that music remains a source of comfort, motivation, and intellectual fulfillment for all of our lives."

Bala was a tireless teacher, his classes ran for hours and he never charged by the hour, family friend Rajagopal recalled. In fact, he charged no money at all. And Susheela



T N Bala was a noted performer and a devoted teacher

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◀ Page A23

cooked for the dozen or so students always present there and fed them, reminding one of a bit of the ancient *gurukula* system.

"Bala's class was like a community event," Rajagopal remembered many students telling him.

T N Balasubramanian was a disciple of Madurai Mani Iyer whose birth centenary is being observed this year. He was a devotee of Tyagaraja and sang his kritis exceedingly well, Rajagopal and many others pointed out, adding how Bala used to conduct the Saint's annual *aradhana* until some years ago. He trained groups in singing the grand *Navavarana* compositions of Muthuswami Dikshitar as

well as classical Tamil compositions like the *Andal Tiruppavai* and *Tiruppugazh*.

Bala had a master's degree in economics from the University of Madras and began his career with All India Radio as a Tamil news reader in Madras and Delhi, which led him to VoA. Bala and his wife moved to America in 1960 with their two small children and took up residence in Washington, DC. Later, they moved to the Poconos in Pennsylvania where Bala was engaged with Peace Corps training. Bala then moved to Philadelphia area where he was resident for more than four decades. He worked for WFIL Radio 56 and then at WPVI TV (Channel 6, the Philadelphia affiliate of ABC TV) for years as manager of the Film Lab. He was the first one to produce an Indian

music program on the radio in this region. His program *Magazine India* presented Indian classical music

While his approach to music was very classical, he was not rigid in his teaching methods. For the benefit of those students who were too far to attend his classes, he would use Skype, said Rajagopal.

"As another instance of how well he adapted himself to modern technology, one may mention the Web site he started (www.tnbala.com) to write about music, to propagate his ideas," he added. "It was his felicity with technology and the English language that enabled him to become easily accessible to students of the younger generation born and growing up in this country."

Bala composed many songs, mostly on his personal god, Muruga. One particular song, *Vilayada idu nerama*, popularized by the late Maharajapuram Santanam, continues to be heard in concerts in Tamil Nadu. He published two volumes of his compositions in India in 2003 and 2006.