

# Lalitha Kala Tarangini

Premier Quarterly Music Magazine from  
Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira

Volume 2020, Issue 2  
July 2020



**Pazhani Subramania Pillai (1908-62)**

An innovative Gentle Giant





Artwork by AV RaghuPrasad, a direct disciple of Pazhani



## July 2020

This is a special issue devoted to the all-time great mridanga vidwan Late Pazhani M Subramania Pillai. Never in our living memory have we been privileged to hear mridangam playing so sensitively and aesthetically even while retaining all laya intricacies of the Pudukkottai Parampara. No other mridangam player enhanced the value of music concert, vocal or instrumental, to the extent he did. It is difficult to reproduce his bani and, after the first generation of his disciples, the bani has gone for a toss. It is only Sri KS Kalidas, a direct disciple of the Master who absorbed the niceties of his style and taught a number of disciples even at his advanced age with great commitment and missionary zeal. But for his efforts, Pazhani's style could only be discerned only from the few recordings of the Master that have survived.

Sri Kalidas has also written a great deal about Sri Pazhani and it can be safely said that without his efforts and research, even a biography of the Master would not be available to the public at large. He has also conducted many lecture demonstrations on the style & content of Pazhani's playing and has also brought out a DVD on him. Even today, he is approached by a number of persons young and old, to get to know various aspects of the Master's playing techniques. This issue carries a lot of information from his writings, dissertations, and seminars he has conducted. We cannot adequately thank him for his direct and indirect contribution to this issue.

With a view to providing a holistic view of the Pudukkottai parampara, articles on Manpoondia Pillai (father of the parampara) and Dakshinamurthy Pillai have been included. The other articles include Pazhani's profile, lesser-known facts about Pazhani, Pazhani's disciples, voices from great masters on Pazhani, etc. Thanks to Shri Bangalore Shankar's effort, we have included two articles on Karnataka's own maestro's Shri AV Krishnamachar (Padmacharan) and Vallabham Kalyanasundaram.

This edition is a 'Must have' and a 'collector's item' for practitioners of music as well as rasikas. I hope our Laya Vidwans will relish the articles presented.

I am thankful to the Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai Trust whose materials have been used. Thanks are due to TK Murthy, R Vedavalli, M Balamuralikr-

ishna, BM Sundaram, Trichy J Venkatraman whose speeches have been converted into articles depicting various facets of Shri Pazhani. We are thankful to Sruti who permitted us to use the content they published on Shri Pazhani way back in 1987. We are indebted to Lalitha Ram, author of the book on Shri Pazhani 'Dhruva Natchathiram' for allowing us to use the content.

We have had help from an unexpected quarter in bringing out this edition. Dubai based Ms. GS Lalitha, 33 years of age, born 25 years after the demise of Sri Pazhani has been a worshipper of the Master and has accumulated a lot of information from various sources including many rare photos. She has also submitted an article for this magazine as to how, being a lady vocalist, she has exclusively analysed the Master's style. She had even presented a lecture-demonstration on Pazhani Subramania Pillai for over 2 hours in Dubai. Many photos given by her have been used.

I am thankful to Sree Ramaseva Mandali, Chamrajpet for making available vintage photos of Pazhani one of which is used for the front cover page.

We have used short form 'Pazhani' or 'Subbudu' for Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai throughout the magazine for the sake of brevity.

This edition is being brought out despite the prevailing pandemic as SRLKM is committed to its readers. I am glad we could release it now though it is delayed. Happy reading. I wish our readers the best of health. Stay home and be safe.

regards,

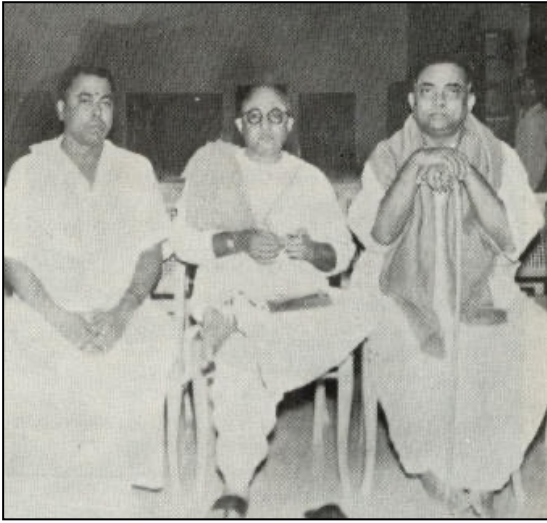
**Anand S**

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Pazhani M Subramania Pillai with Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and Mysore T Chowdiah

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*Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira (SRLKM) founded by Shri G Vedanta Iyengar in the year 1955 is rendering yeomen service in the field of music. In addition to music classes, music concerts are held all through the year. The significant festivals are Sankranti and Spring music festivals. Mandira also takes pride in conducting music awareness program, music workshops, Lecture demonstrations etc. Entry to all program conducted by the Mandira is free as the aim of the institution is to enable everyone to listen to the best of the music and to propagate Karnatic Classical Music.*

*"Lalitha Kala Tarangini" publication is fostered by Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira, disseminates knowledge in the area of Karnatak Classical Music and bring to light talent and excellence in this area. We believe this is just another step towards preserving and promoting this great Indian fine art.*

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### Magazine Committee

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# Lalitha Kala Tarangini

## Inbox

Shri GV Krishna Prasad,

The Silver Jubilee Edition of Lalitha Kala Tarangini is a collector's item! Though we have had a whole series of centenary celebrations of various vidwans and vidushis during the recent past, this particular issue of this magazine, commemorating the 90th birth anniversary year of the Legend, Lalgudi Sri G Jayaraman, would easily be the best and most comprehensive that I have seen.

Packed with archival photos + beautiful and insightful articles written by a perfect mix of people, which includes a few legendary musicians themselves, as well as musicians from the younger generation, students, family members and people who have interacted with the Maestro in various capacities, it succeeds in painting a comprehensive and multi dimensional portrait of this multi faceted artiste.

Lalgudi Jayaraman Sir's own words on the Ultimate Legend Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai and his speech at the Bangalore Gayana Samaja are like icing on the cake. This edition of the magazine is a 'Must Have' for All music lovers, music students, music gurus and performers, for so many reasons!

My best wishes.

Vid. Prince Rama Varma, Bangalore

Namaskarms Anand sir,

I was very much delighted to read the Lalgudi Jayaraman sir special issue of LKT. With a beautifully designed front cover, it welcomed me to a new world of information about the Legendary violin maestro, one and only one, Lalgudi Jayaraman sir. I was fortunate enough to attend some concerts of Lalgudi sir. Even though each and every concert I attended was memorable, I wish to mention about the concert of Shri Pudukkote Krishnamoorthy sir held at Tali Padmasree Kalyana Mandapam, Calicut in connection with Thyagaraja Aradhana Festival on 6th March 1983. For that concert Lalgudi Jayaraman sir was on Violin and Palakkad Raghunath sir on Mridangam.

Words are not enough to explain about the generousness of Lalgudi sir, as an accompanying artist, as solo performer, as a composer, as a teacher etc etc. God will send such a personality, only once in a while to earth.

Thanks a lot to LKT for this issue.

With best Wishes,  
Narayanan Nochur, Calicut.

Dear Shri Krishna Prasad and Shri Anand,

I was delighted to go through the Silver Jubilee Issue of Lalitha Kala Tarangini-March 2020 released in honour of Shri Lalgudi G Jayaraman (LJR) on the occasion of his 90th birthday.

The publication itself is of very high quality. The content brought out the exemplary qualities of the musical giant Shri LGJ. I can fully understand the extent of background work that must have gone in to produce all these articles, photographs and content, from very authentic authors who had directly interacted with the great violinist. We could get a vivid picture of Shri LGJ as a genius, an artist, a guru and more than anything else as an extremely kind person.

May I on this occasion take the liberty of narrating our own experience at Nadasurabhi with Shri LGJ. In 2009, we had decided to bestow the award and title of "Sangeetha Surabhi" on Shri Lalgudi Jayaraman. With some persuasion, he agreed to accept the award. The festival during which it was to be awarded was in November 2009. Unfortunately for us, his health did not permit him to travel to Bangalore to receive the award. He then instructed his children, Vidwan GJR Krishnan and Vidushi Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi to participate and play during the festival on his behalf. The next day he himself telephoned to our General Secretary Smt. Harini Raghavan to convey his thanks and that Shri Krishnan and Smt. Vijayalakshmi were very happy about our meticulous arrangements.

Later, our then Vice-President Brig. NH Narayan visited Shri LGJ's house in Chennai and handed over the award plaque personally, on behalf of Nadasurabhi. He, his wife and GJR Krishnan who was also present were extremely hospitable. Then after enquiring about our organisation, he presented a cheque of Rs.10,000 from the Lalgudi Trust to Nadasurabhi towards our Youth Festival which was coming up. We were truly moved by the magnanimity of this great artist and are grateful, to this day, for his whole hearted blessing which has kept us going all these years.

My sincere pranams to Shri Krishna Prasad and best wishes to Shri Anand for their selfless work for the cause of Karnatic music.

K.S.S.Raghavan, President,  
Nadasurabhi, Koramangala,



Namasthe.

The great Violin master brought to life with wonderful articles and concert pictures. Congratulations to all those whose hard work has made this issue worth preserving.

Vidhushi TS Vasanthamada, Bangalore

Dear Anand,

Thank you very much for forwarding March 2020 edition of the Lalitha Kala Tarangini. A very great compilation about the legend Lalgudi sir. Really this edition is a treasure and it will take a few days for me to read and enjoy every line in this edition.

Regards,  
N.Sekar,

Hon.Secretary, Rasika Ranjana Sabha, Trichy

Dear Krishna Prasad,

'Whenever Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai played in a concert the stage used to attain 'gowravam' reminisces Lalgudi Jayaraman (Lalgudi on Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai. Silver jubilee edition, LK Tarangini).

The same would be the impression his innumerable admirers would carry after listening to Sri Lalgudi sir's concerts spanning over Seven decades. As an accompanist he observed 'Pakkavadhya Dharma' to the core with his uncanny ability of anticipating and absorbing even the most intricate sangati-s the main artist sang and quickly reproduced just on the spur of the moment. But the embellishments he provided would spur the main artist to give his best and the concert would invariably be lifted to dizzy heights. With his illustrious sister Srimathi Brahmanandam and later on with his son and daughter and with stalwarts like Palakkadu Mani Iyer or Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai or Umayalpuram Sivaraman on the mridangam the art of playing the violin solo assumed new dimension.

Lalitha Kala Tarangini has done yeomen service to the rasikas of Karnatak music by bringing out a special commemorative issue on the musical genius Shri Lalgudi Jayaraman who was very dearly and appropriately described by Ramnad Krishnan as 'lalgudi LAYArman'!

Some rare photographs of the multifaceted musical genius make the issue a collector's proud possession.

NS Krishnamurthy,  
Retired Station Director, AIR

Dear Sri Anand (Editor),

Either Valadi or Lalgudi was a less known place till Rama Iyer's birth, a direct disciple of saint composer, Thyagaraja. But after Jayaraman's birth, Lalgudi became globally known in the music field. Belonging to Thyagaraja

parampara (linage) is blissful. To be a versatile musician is a bliss and boon. Jayaraman's father VR Global Iyer was a strict disciplinarian, gave rigorous training on vocal and violin.

One who shapes a person and one who is shaped must have the same vigour and mentality so as to strive perfection. Once our beloved Dr. Radhakrishnan, while teaching philosophy at Oxford, England said to his fellow scholars, "What all I possess has to be possessed by my disciples".

"What does one think, so does one become" is a worthy utterance of Sri Ramakrishna. Jayaraman, at the age of 12, accompanied Sattur AG Subramaniam, at 17 KV Narayanaswamy at the Madras Music Academy and at 22 Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer, a pallavi expert in the presence of Chembai, Ariyakudi, GNB, Alathur Brothers, Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai, Semmangudi and Mysore T.Chowdiah. His raga alapana, rendering Keerthanas, Niraval and Swaraprastharams were well appreciated and he never looked back.

In the souvenir published by you, encomiums and tributes paid by his contemporaries and disciples are befitting. To a certain period, he accompanied all the stalwarts of three generations from Tiger Varadhachariar to TN Seshagopalan. But later like Dwaram and Parur Sundaram Iyer, he wanted to establish a special status for violin and gave innumerable violin solo, duet with his sister Srimathi Brahmanandam, later trio with his son GJR Krishnan and daughter Vijayalakshmi. That is why he wanted to be a violinist in the forthcoming births. Oh! What an attachment to his violin!. His vocal and instrument disciples are the standing examples to his musical mettle, genius and potentiality.

The ultimate aim of the philosophy of composition is the pleasurable elevation of the soul. As long as music lives, Jayaraman will ever remain in the music world. Hence his creations are soul stirring, enthralling, enlivening, elevating and everlasting.

I would like to congratulate the efforts taken by Lalitha Kala Tharangini in removing or narrowing the generation gap that exists between the present day music lovers and the music wizards of yesteryears like Jayaraman. I wish your task a grant success.

PS Subramaniam,  
Perundurai, Erode (Dt), Tamil Nadu

Dear Revered Sri Krishna Prasad Sir,

The yeomen service which Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira is doing for the sake of Carnatic Music and related



matters is very great. Kindly accept my hearty congratulations.

I am also fortunate to receive (only one) Lalitha Kala Tarangini issues regularly. The previous issue 'Lalgudi's special' issue is virtually a treasure, which is to be preserved for era. Kudos to Anandji and his team also.

Kindly take care of your health during this unpredictable Corona pandemic time. I pray for the early coming back of the day to continue our humble services to the cause of Karnatic music.

With deep and affectionate regards,  
K Sankar, I.T.O. (Retd.)

Dear Sri Krishna Prasad,

We thank you for sending the Special Issue of Lalitha Kala Tarangini. The articles on veteran musician, Vidwan Sri Lalgudi Jayaraman were very detailed and this is very informative to all classical music lovers. All our Trust Members would like to congratulate your organisation for the hard-work that you are all taking to bring out the editions. No doubt this is a valuable and interesting magazine.

Yours sincerely,  
Sathyanarayana Rao Katte,  
Hon. Secretary, Nadajyothi Sangeetha Sabha Trust,  
Bangalore

Dear Shri Krishnaprasad,

Trust you are well and safe. The pandemic has unleashed a trail of misery all over disrupting all activities. Your latest LKT issue on Lalgudi brings a much needed diversion and acts as a balm in these troubled times. As usual, it is a fantastic edition, thoughtfully planned and beautifully executed.

Thanks sir and with warm regards,  
A Sadasivam

Dear Sir,

It is a brilliant compilation and a befitting tribute to my father. Your team has worked with passion to achieve this and the outcome is like a jewel. There is a fine balance of articles by musicians and rasikas, veteran and young, family and friends from Chennai and Karnataka.

Warm regards,  
Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi, Chennai

We have received an overwhelming response to our Lalgudi special edition (March 2020). More letters will be published in the next edition.

Editor (S Anand)

## Our Upcoming Programmes (SRLKM Facebook Live)

08 Aug '20 4.30 pm Saturday	HK Venkataram and Master Vishnu Venkataram (Violin Duet), Arjun Kumar (Mridanga), G Guru Prasanna (Khanjari)
15 Aug '20 4.30 pm Saturday	Adithi Prahlad (Vocal), S Janardhan (Violin), C Cheluvaraju (Mridanga), N Guru Murthy (Ghata)
05 Sep '20 4.30 pm Saturday	Krishna Jayanthi Concert - Heramba and Hemantha (Flute Duet), Vaibhav Ramani (Violin), Akshay Anand (Mridanga), Sukanya Ramgopal (Ghatam)
12 Sep '20 4.30 pm Saturday	Eeshwar Aiyer - Pallavi Sammela First Prize Winner (Vocal), Mattur Vishwajit (Violin), Nagendra Prasad (Mridanga)
19 Sep '20 4.30 pm Saturday	Musical Tribute to Dr. M.S. Subbulakshmi - Kalavathy Avadhoot (Vocal), Sindhu Suchetan (Violin), BR Srinivas (Mridanga), Anoor Sunad (Khanjari)
10 Oct '20 4.30 pm Saturday	Pattabhirama Pandit (Vocal), Mathur R. Srinidhi (Violin), HS Sudhindra (Mridanga), Phaneendra Bhaskara (Ghatam)
17 Oct '20 4.30 pm Saturday	Kanchana Sisters (Kanchana S Shriranjani and Kanchana S Shruthiranjani), BK Raghu (Violin), KU Jayachandra Rao (Mridanga), UN Giridhar Udupa (Ghatam)
7 Nov '20 4.30 pm Saturday	Bangalore Brothers - MB Hariharan and Vidwan S Ashok (Vocal duet), Nalina Mohan (Violin), HS Sudhindra (Mridanga), G Omkar Rao (Ghatam)
21 Nov '20 4.30 pm Saturday	R Raghuram - Disciple of RA Ramanani (Vocal), TS Krishnamurthy (Violin), Anoor Anantha Krishna Sharma (Mridanga), Karthik S Mani (Ghatam)
12 Dec '20 4.30 pm Saturday	SR Vinay Sharva (Vocal), BK Raghu (Violin), Bangalore Praveen (Mridanga)
19 Dec '20 4.30 pm Saturday	Vighnaraja S Sampagodu (Vocal), HM Smitha (Violin), Anirudh Bhat (Mridanga), ASN Swamy (Khanjari)



# Shri AV Krishnamachar (Padmacharan)

*Narayana Achutha with Source Material from Vidwan S Shankar, Bangalore*

The year was 1950. A man in his teens was elated to hear an excellent rendering of bhava geete - 'Udugana Veshtita' on radio, while having his lunch at a hotel in Birur Bus Stand. The announcement after the bhava geete said "the song composed by Lyricist - Sri GS Shivarudrappa, was sung by Smt. HR Leelavathi and music composition by Padmacharan".

This teen was none other than Dr. Shivarudrappa, who went on to become, 'Rashtra Kavi'. The said lyrics reverberates even after 7 decades, in heart and minds of music loving Rasikas.

The credit of imbibing the essence of this bhava geete, in both letter and spirit, goes to none other than Shri Padmacharan.

Shri AV Krishnamachar was born in "Gooty", in the present Andhra Pradesh State, to a very conservative Srivaishnava family of musicians, his father Shri Veera Raghavachar, and his mother Smt. Janakamma, who were themselves vocalists. He was fondly called "Kitti" in his younger days. His mother Janakamma was very fond of Devaranamas and used to sing in both Telugu and Kannada Languages. This had a great influence on young "Kitti", which finally lead him to formal initiation of Karnatic Classical Music under the tutelage of Vidwan Pacca Hanumantacharya, while he was residing in Penukonda, who was his 1<sup>st</sup> Guru. He was incidentally Guru of Vidwans Chintanapalli Venkata Rao and Sandhyavandanam Sreenivasa Rao. During his stay in Bellary, Kitti was trained by Vidwan Amidala Venkataswamy, Venkappa and B Venkatappa, in both vocal and violin.

When his family started residing in Mysore, he was under rigorous training of Vidwan Rallapalli

Ananthakrishna Sharma for 12 years, during which time he reached the pinnacle of learning, in both Karnatic and Hindustani Classical Music. He had a brush with Western Music under the guidance of Shri Divyanathan, who was in the Mysore Palace Musical Instrument group. Padmacharan learned the nuances of Karnatic, Hindustani and Western Classical for nearly 24 years under the guidance of above 6 gurus. Under able guidance of Vidwan Ralapalli Ananthakrishna Sharma and his intense training, he was able to pass the Mysore University "Vidwat" exam in Karnatic Music. His inquisitive research oriented mind gave a fair indication of Kitti's unique talent and earned high expectations from his Guru. Padmacharan later went on to perform many solo concerts and as a violinist accompanied Sriyuths/Smt Mysore Vasudevacharya, Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar, Tiger Varadachariar, Thirupamburam Swaminatha Pillai, TR Mahalingam, Chittoor Subramania Pillai, Madurai Mani Iyer, GNB, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, M Balamuralikrishna, ML Vasanthakumari, RK Srikantan and many more in Karnatic Music and also as violin accompaniment for Hindustani vocalists which included Sriyuths/Smt. Bhimsen Joshi, GV Bhavé, Lakshmi Bhavé, Shankara Joshi Devagiri, Jawali, DB Harindra and many more artists.

Shri AV Krishnamachar later worked as Programme Broadcaster in both Madras and Mysore All India Radio. He had a strong ideological influence of Mahatma Gandhi, which had an impact by the way of his simple clothing. He also maintained a traditional outlook with his tuft of hair along with a "Namam" on his forehead. In the year 1940, he was highly impacted by Dr. Shivaram Karanth and provided violin





*AV Krishnamachar with Dr. Shivarama Karanth and MK Ramamurthy, Ex. Hon. Secretary of Bangalore Gayana Samaja*

assistance for his “Kisa Gautami” music-drama. This association with Dr. Shivaram Karanth, led to an indomitable bonding for over four decades he travelled far and wide along with his “Yakshagana” team.

In 1949, he was recruited as Station Artist in AIR Mysore. During this period, he freed himself from his tuft. He provided the violin assistance/direction and accomplished the tasks assigned to him with great eloquence, whether it was programmes related to Children, Youth, women folk, Janapada, Harikathe or Drama.

In 1950, he started teaching Smt. H.R Leelavathi classical music, Bhavageete, Hindi songs, Bhajans, songs in various other languages and this continued for about 24 years as his disciple.

Even though his mother tongue was Telugu, he had a great interest for learning Kannada literature through “A Na Kru” novel “Sandhya Raga”, which proved to be a gateway to gain foothold in Kannada Literature. In a similar way, he used every opportunity to compose music for songs in Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Kodava, Kshatriya, Tulu languages and developed prowess in them.

Having spent considerable time with Shivaram Karanth, he had developed a great respect towards him and considered him to be an ideal personality. In 1956, he took up a challenge and directed “Nadhi Yatre”, a Percussion extravagan-

za at AIR, depicting wind, hurricane, drizzle, downpour, flowing water, floods, waves in the sea and its production through the use of only percussion instruments. Padmacharan can be credited for bringing alive the capability and impact of percussion instruments to forefront and explored the limits of the same. During one of the performances of Yakshagana Programme abroad accompanying Shivaram Karanth, a vivid listener was so enthralled with Padmacharan violin that he presented 500 Dinars to him.

He was awarded with Karnataka Kala Tilaka, Sangeeta Kalaratna, and Dr. Shivaram Karanth honoured him in 1994 supporting his admirers.

### **Padmacharan and Film Music**

In 1970, Padmacharan proved his mettle in Film Music by providing Music Direction for two songs in Kannada Movie “Papa Punya” based on V Seetharamaiah’s drama “Sreeshaila Mahatme” directed by Shri MV Krishnaswamy.

In his childhood, he was greatly influenced by Marathi Ranga geete, along with many prominent Andhra theatre personalities and vocalists like Kapilavaayi Ramanatha Shastri, Sthanam Narasimha Rao, Jonnavittula Sheshagiri Rao, Tungala Chalapathirama Anjaneyalu, Eelavata Raghu-ramaiah, Vemuri Gagaiah, to name a few. He would never miss any of Harikata Programme conducted by Mulugunda Shri Rama Shastri.



Padmacharan used Geegi Pada “*Navu Bandeva*” in Papa Punya movie, which was a direct influence of his constant usage of Geegi Pada in Harikhatas of “Chatrapathi Shivaji”.

He experienced the real tribute and fulfilment of his Geegi Pada “*Navu Bandeva*”, when he happened to listen to the same from an unidentified youth while climbing Devarayana Durga Betta (hillock) along with his friends. His happiness knew no bounds. There was also a special mention of his excellent music direction by well-known critic, UAK Ranga Rao. He has also provided music direction to Dr. Shivaram Karanth’s movie “*Maleya Makkalu*”. He rendered his sincere services as a Jury member for Karnataka State Cine Films Award.

### Music for Documentaries

Padmacharan’s versatility is pronounced in his ability to provide music for even documentaries like “*Nectar in stone*” (about Belur-Halebedu-Somanathpura) by Smt. KS Hemalatha for Bangalore Doordarshan. It received National and International awards. He also provided his music direction for documentaries like ‘*Water comes to Bangalore*’, ‘*Tungabhadra*’, ‘*Karnataka Bandarugalu*’, ‘*Karnataka Heddarigalu*’, and ‘*Navalagunda Kambagalu*’, which was well received.

As a Vaggeyakara, he has composed Varnam, Krithi-s, Keerthana-s, Devotional Songs and Patriotic Songs apart from few bhava geeta-s. His ‘*Sringapuradeeshwari Sharade*’ and ‘*Manave Mantralaya*’ are very popular and has touched the hearts of listeners world over.

### Music for Drama

He also provided his music direction for dramas which includes Poulastyana Pranaya Kathe, Endaro Mahanu Bhavulu and many more.

### Views from Stalwarts

**Shri S Krishnamurthy:** Padmacharan’s words are few, limited smiles, though looks ominous for strangers, was really a pleasant, down to earth personality with a great flair for prose, literature and was predominantly witty.

**Shri Karemane Mahabala Heggade:** Padmacharan was shrewd in presenting his views,

which often attracted wrath from many contemporaries. But he stood for his principles and did not lose sleep over it.

**Smt. HR Leelavathi:** Padmacharan embodied a rare combination of proper understanding of literature, nuances of particular languages, always alert about the proper pronunciation, rendering and dictions, which evidently get pronounced in all his music directions.

**Prominent Cine Artist - Late Shri Sampath:** AV Krishnamachar is a very sensitive artiste of high order. He has an open mind and brought success to my plays always with his music.

**Prof. RN Doreswamy – Eminent Veena Player:** Padmacharan never indulged in blame game, hatred, self-admiration, selfishness, asking for favour, etc. In all, he was a cultured figure to look up to, by one and all. He had a mastery over Vedas, Upanishads, Shastras and Jothisya. He never hesitated to enter a new domain and research.

**Vidwan Shri Mahadevappa:** Listening to Padmacharan’s violin from my childhood, was my source of inspiration and propelled me to learn violin. He is my role model.

### His Life Philosophy

- a) Be like a child
- b) Leave all baggages of life
- c) To work dispassionately
- d) As man grows, he gathers dirt like unnecessary stereotyped mindset and suffers a lot as a result of closed mind.
- e) Things will happen, when it has to happen

He firmly believed that embedding these characteristics, will definitely help the person to enjoy his/her life to the fullest. Though he left for abode on 27.07.2002, his soulful music creation is eternal.

On the occasion of his Birth Centenary, many programmes highlighting the glory of his compositions through Vocal / Dance Programmes are already underway both in Bengaluru and Mysuru under the guidance of Vidushi. HR Leelavathi and Vidwan S Shankar.



# Vallabham Kalyanasundaram - A life shaped by music

*Tarangini Balasubrahmanian (Granddaughter of Kalyanasundaram)*



Some people live a life of Adventure and for others life itself becomes a never ending adventure. The latter was true in the case of Smt. Vallabham Kalyanasundaram. Born in a Ganapatigal family in 1912 as the youngest sister to five brothers, her adventures began as early as when she was hardly an year old, when both her parents passed away.

Raised by her adoring brothers, her love for music was possibly genetically imbibed, especially when one of her older brothers happened to be Sri Mayuram Viswanatha Sastry, the renowned musician and composer.

Since formal education for young girls was still not the order of the day in the early 20th century, Vallabham also grew up without one. But her sharp brain started picking up even the finer nuances of music before the age of five. It was the fierce passion she had for this art and her incredible willpower that drove her to turn every adversity into an opportunity.

By the age of twelve the young girl was married to Kalyanasundaram, the eldest of eight brothers. Now kitchen was her new domain and her responsibilities as the eldest daughter-in-law also included the care of her husband's younger siblings. Music as an art was not encouraged at her in laws place, but music is where she found her strength from. Every social and religious function she attended became her learning grounds for new songs. Her mind sponged up the new songs she heard and this was practiced and perfected within the walls of her kitchen.

Such was the potent combination of her innate talent, passion and determination that by the time she was in her teens she had mastered the 72 Melaragamalika of Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan.

Because of the threat and the dangers of the second world war, Vallabham along with her family moved to Bangalore. A new place, a new start and yet another adversity that she deftly turned into an opportunity. Financial constraints gave her a chance to start teaching music to students and her own music started growing wings here as she broke the shackles of restraints to soar to new levels with her powerful voice.

The story of her winning her very first award is rather an interesting one. Though she was al-





*File photo of a concert in Chennai*

ready adept at the art, she still did not have the approval and permission of her perfectionist brother Sri Sastry to take part in competitions. In 1944, it was her other elder brother Sri Kuppuswamy Iyer who helped her take part in the music competition organised by Mylai Sangeetha Sabha, without the knowledge of anyone else in the family. Only after her proud victory and her winning a gigantic silver cup did the rest of the family come to know of her true capabilities.

The judges for this competition were none other than Tiger Varadachariar and Musiri Subramania Iyer. Once her renditions were over, they asked her to sing the Raga Atana, which was not included in the original list of Ragas required to be sung. Undeterred, she sang it with equal aplomb, ensuring her first place in the competition. Tiger Varadachariar also happened to be the judge when her brother Sri Sastry won his first competition in 1929. Fifteen years later, Sastry's sister had managed to follow the legacy.

From there, there was no stopping her. As more awards continued to pour in, including a magnificent tambura that was won once again as the 1st prize in a competition organised by Indian Fine Arts Society in Chennai.

The multifaceted woman that she was, she also managed to master the Veena all by herself and start teaching others too. Among her many stu-

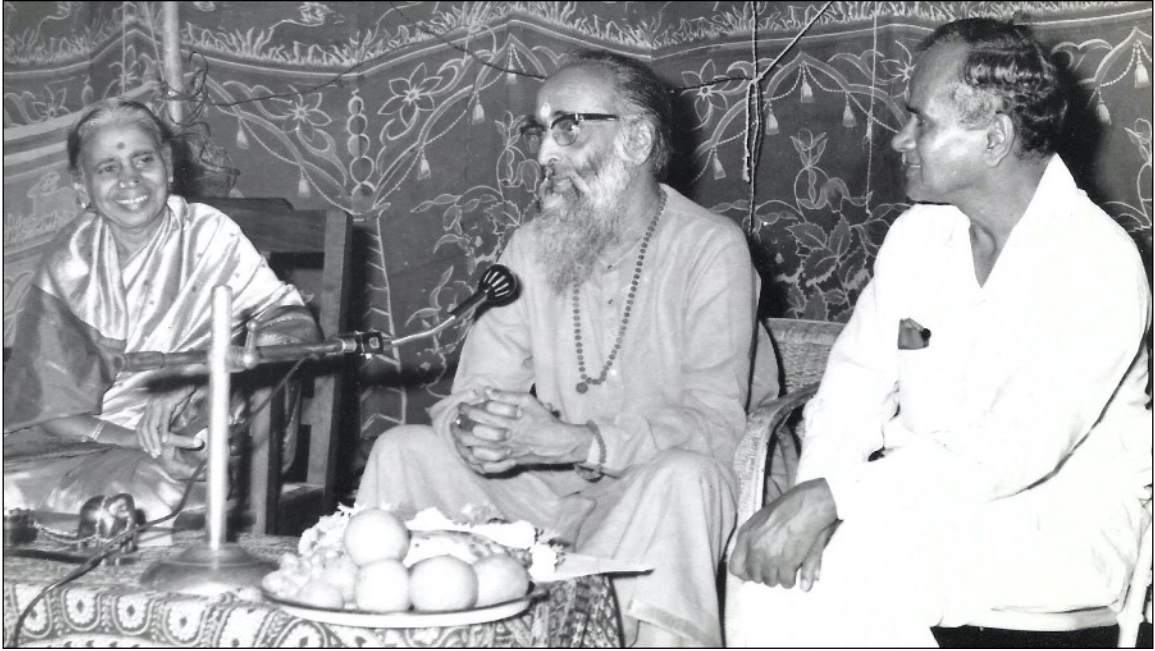
dents in Veena was also her own niece and renowned Veena player, Parvathavarthini Balasubramaniam. In vocals her disciples included Y.S. Indira, Jambu Kannan, Tilaka Sampath, her own daughter Rukmini Paushpavanam and Vidwan S. Shankar, who is now among the leading artists in Carnatic music.

Her association with AIR started in a very interesting way too. She had escorted her niece Parvathamvarthini to Mysore for an Veena audition at AIR in the 1950s. Once there, she enquired whether she could audition in the Vocals section too. They told her she could do it right away and the rest is history. AIR soon shared her voice with the listeners and it was not long after that she was inundated with requests for performances not just in AIR, but also in various social and religious functions.

This was indeed a long way to come from being the newly married twelve year old whose only connection with music was confined within the four walls of her kitchen. As she grew, so did her courage and confidence and with each sweet success, she took on more challenges to conquer. And Conquer she did.

In fact at one time Shri DV Gundappa, renowned poet, writer and composer visited her at her residence and discussed his compositions with her at length, so she could lend her





*With Swamy Chinmayananda and late VS Krishna Iyer, former MP, Bangalore South*

voice to his elegant compositions while performing in the AIR.

Being in Bangalore meant more opportunities, but that also meant she had to equip herself with more knowledge, not only in the field of music but in academics and other fields too. She took it upon herself to learn Sanskrit and pass the 'Visharada' exam, master Kannada, pass the 'Rashtrabasha' exam in Hindi and also pass the SSLC exam, at no less than 60 years of age.

Among the many anecdotes that surround this amazing lady is the way she used to get lost in her music, mumbling swara combinations and coming up with new ways to teach her students at all times. So consumed was she with these thoughts that it is said once as she was walking down her street she suddenly heard her neighbor call out with a loud alarmed voice asking her to look down. It was only then she noticed that a large cobra was slithering away slowly between her feet as she was walking. But the only thing she was aware of was her music.

Her style of teaching was unique, tailored to the skills of each student, ensuring each one them had the chance to discover their own strengths and overcome their weakness, if any. As the number of students increased they had to be divided in morning and evening batches, time management became a necessity.

An expert in multitasking, she used to weave garlands out of the flowers in her garden, clean rice needed for the next meal and even sew clothes while teaching music while ensuring no quality was compromised in either.

During India's war with Pakistan in 1965, in a bid to raise money for the troops she donated all her silver cups and medals that she had won as prizes over the years, without a second thought. Only the very first cup remained at the insistence of her family - Her very first award, as a token of all her other wins. She also gave multiple charitable concerts to benefit the cause.

A staunch devotee of Swami Chinmayananda, she used to attend each of his discourses on Bhagavad Gita. Even in the Bangalore of those days, she used to travel to as far as Indira Nagar all the way from Chamrajpet, twice a day for these lectures while still managing her classes and housework effectively.

With the blessings of Swami Chinmayananda, she also started BalVihar classes every weekend at home which was attended by over 20 children each time. Her music Institute was also known as Chinmaya Sangeetha Vidyalaya..

To add another feather to her cap, she also formed an all ladies drama troupe. She directed and enacted in the play Bhaktha Jayadeva that



was written by her brother Sri Sastry. This was once again with the permission and blessings of Swami Chinmayananda, who was also seated in the audience for the performance. Apart from this she has enacted in a few other plays as well, all in leading roles.

Wanting to popularise the compositions of her brother In Karnataka too, she took up the challenge of publishing all his compositions in Kannada. Not just that, for the first time ever his Bharat Bhajan was brought out in cassette form by Vallabham and her students in the mid 80s.

Her music, her voice and her soulful renditions had reached a wide audience by now. This did not go unnoticed as various honours started pouring in. In 1982 she was Honoured at the Gayana Samaja and her last honour came in from 'Sri Jayendra Lalitha Kala Academy' in 1992.

The years in between were filled with many more such acclamations bestowed upon her for her tireless contribution to music and self made artiste that she was.

Even as her health started giving way in the last couple of years before her passing, she still found her strength in humming her favourite songs. The voice not so powerful now, but the music still soulful. Her last breath came on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1993 but before she had made music world richer multiple times over.

Her disciple Vidwan S Shankar, along with the family members and disciples of his guru, continues to honour her memory each year on her death anniversary by holding a music concert at the Gokahle Institute in Bangalore, featuring new and upcoming voices.

## Facebook live concerts by SRLKM

When the whole world welcomed 2020 joyously, little did anyone know of the challenges that we would all face.

SRLKM held an almost month long musical festival in January, which was a real treat to the ears. This was followed by a musical discourse by Dushyanth Sridhar and the concert of Vid. Sanjay Subrahmanyam. Beginning of March, there was the pallavi sammela conducted by Mandira. The pandemic by then had spread its tentacles and the lockdown that followed was inevitable.

With the mantra to stay home and stay safe, there was no way there could be social gatherings of any kind. Life's problems wouldn't be called hurdles, if there wasn't a way to get over them.

SRLKM has made use of the facebook to bring in live streaming of the concerts. It has started conducting concerts regularly and able to reach out to a large number of rasikas who can enjoy the concerts in the confines of their home. The facebook concert series started

with Vid. Anagha Yoganand giving a lively vocal concert followed by a veena recital by Vid. Pushpa Kashinath. There was vocal concert by Vid. Dr. Sheshaprasad and a mandolin recital by Vid. Vishnu Venkatesh, and a vocal concert by Vid. Manasa Nayana. SRLKM has already chalked out the concerts till December.

Moreover, we have also uploaded many of the concerts in SRLKM YouTube channel to be listened and enjoyed by the rasikas all over again at their leisure.

This is a small effort by mandira to make use of the available technology and able to connect with a large number of rasikas. For a true music aficionado, there can be nothing better than listening to a live kutchery in a sabha, but the silver lining is that the technology has helped us to at least livestream facebook concerts for all to listen. We have to thank God for these small mercies.

The link to our facebook page : [facebook.-com/srlkmandira](https://www.facebook.com/srlkmandira).

*Rajashree Yogananda, Bangalore*



# Pazhani's Style - can we allow it to become extinct?

*Vidwan KS Kalidas, Chennai*

In the process of evolution, the old order perishes and in its place, a new one takes over. This is true of all things in life; indeed civilizations themselves rise and fall. We mourn the past but reconcile with the present.

In classical music, however, the past never entirely dies out but is continuously renewed, refined, or even morphed, but a basic continuity does remain across generations. From the time of Sangeetha Pithamaha Purandaradasa to the present day, the basic format of carnatic music has remained much the same but peripherally, many things have changed, for better or worse.

In the case of mridangam, speaking for myself, after about 5-6 years of learning and practicing the art in Kolkata, I came under the tutelage of Sri Pazhani Subramania Pillai, when I joined the engineering college, Guindy in 1956. I was with him for but 2 years due to clash with my academics but the nuances of his style, the 'vallinam' and 'mellinam', the balance between valanthalai and thoppi, the ghumkis, the arai chapus and the arithmetical patterns that he wove had a magical influence on me. This ONE MRIDANGAM eclipsed all others and to me, he was the SUPREME vidwan. This position has not changed till now, and at 82, it is not likely to, during the rest of my life.

To those who think that one can absorb the 'secret of secrets' (guhyatu ghuyatamam) of a guru's philosophy and style in a period of 2 years, the answer would be a resounding NO, but in my case, it occurred! Probably my 'punyam' earned in the previous 'janma' or guru's "anubhoodhi". Pompous probably, but true nevertheless.

My concert career in mridangam was an adjunct to my duties as a railway officer with stops and starts and transfers. But in spite of all limitations, my passion for keeping the style alive and passing it down to posterity was fierce. As to my fidelity to the master's style, Madras Kannan, Coimbatore Ramaswamy, Guruvayur Dorai, Thanjavur Shankara Iyer, M.A. Kalyanakrishna Bhagavathar, D.K. Jayaraman and others have endorsed on various occasions.

Although I had started training a few students more than forty years ago, and my own son, Ashok himself had his arangetram in 1982, an intense period of coaching started only from 2007 when a US-based lad started coming over to India during vacations. I never taught students online, as I do not believe in it. Fortunately, among the 15-odd students who were trained by me after 2007, about half of them have become concert artists and some have even performed in the Music Academy and AIR. The most prominent one is Akshay Anand of Bengaluru, whose dexterity, melodiousness and adherence to Pazhani's style has been appreciated by all rasikas and vidwans who have heard him. He has been performing continuously in Music Academy for the past 8 years and is graded as an 'A' grade artist of AIR. Following closely behind him is the US boy I spoke of, L. Subramanian, who has since returned to the USA. He had also performed in the Academy for 3 or 4 years and the AIR. There are others too. I only hope that Ashok and they, in turn, will train younger generations in the same style when they do start teaching.

My passion for training youngsters in this style (allowing for manodharma) is mainly because although the disciples of Sri Pazhani did follow



the style to the extent they could, the next generation has not exhibited even a semblance of it, although they are busy concert artists with frequent opportunities. This I am saying with full responsibility, and I do not mind who gets offended.

On many occasions, both in print as well as lecture demonstrations, I have tried to bring to the notice of the public Pazhani and his style.

Regarding the times that my guru lived, the transition of music from the traditional music and dance community had been more or less complete with the brahmins taking over; dance followed a few decades later. This of course caused the evolution of brahmin rasikas too who constituted about 95% of the audience. The non-brahmin communities constituted a minuscule number. The rasikas, promoters, and opinion makers were landlords, media barons, advocates and organisers were all brahmins except for a handful of non-brahmins like Nat-

tukkottai Chettiyars. Pazhani was always circumspect, serious, parampara-oriented and an undemonstrative vidwan; he never was an exhibitionist and never ever cared for the gallery. He was always a friend of the main vidwan on the stage and was never intimidative. In his community of 'Isai Vellalars' there was no leadership, no opinion-maker, none with any clout. This was the main reason why he did not get the recognition of Institutions and the Government of the day which he richly deserved. In spite of this, he did find a place in the hearts of rasikas, biased or otherwise, only due to his vidwath and melodious playing. This statement of mine should be considered merely from the historic point of view and not from the caste or group angle.

Can we afford the extinction of this Mahavidwan's exquisite style?

## Pazhani - Chembai at Govt. Music College, Madras, 1958

There was a concert of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar at what is now known as the Government Music College in Madras, in 1958, in which MS Gopalakrishnan (Violin) and Pazhani (Mridangam) accompanied the maestro from Malabar.

This concert was arranged for the benefit of the music students of the college was attended by Musiri (the Principal), Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai, Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer, Varahur Muthuswami Iyer, Karaikudi Muthu Iyer, Mayavaram VV Krishna Iyer, MA Kalyanakrishna Bhagavathar, TK Rangachari, Budalur Krishnamoorthy Sastrigal, T Brinda, T Mukta, MS Subbulakshmi & Sadasivam, DK Pattammal, MLV, Radha and Jayalakshmi, and many more.

An ata tala varnam in Kamboji was followed by 'vatapi ganapathim' and then 'etavunara' in Kalyani during which tani was played. And what a tani it was!!! Chembai was full of 'sabash' and 'besh' and demanded that Pazhani play in the gaits of tisram, misram, and kandanam apart from chatusram. He wanted the assembled vidwans to hear Pazhani at his best.

The tani lasted a full hour and Chembai concluded his four-piece concert of three and half hours with a ragamalika and slokam.

(Courtesy - Sruti, June/July 1987 edition)



# Pudukkottai Manpoondia Pillai, The Inventor of Kanjira

*Excerpts from AIR Trichy programme delivered by Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai.  
Original manuscripts provided by Pallattur Ct Lakshmanan and article published by KS Kalidas*



*Manpoondia Pillai with his invention 'The Kanjira'*

*(Article is the translation of a speech in Tamil over All India Radio, Trichy by mridangam and kanjira maestro Pazhani M. Subramania Pillai. The manuscript was given by Pallattur CT Lakshmanan, a disciple of the maestro, Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai and published by Vid. KS Kalidas, for Pazhani Shri M. Subramania Pillai Trust, Chennai. Both Lakshmanan & Kalidas are disciples of Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai.)*

## **Birth, Childhood and Youth**

'Layabraham' Pudukkottai Manpoondia Pillai, the inventor and exponent of Kanjira was born

in the erstwhile princely state of Pudukkottai on December 14th, 1859 to the couple Ayyaswamy Servai and Nallamal. They belonged to the 'Ahamudaya' caste, a community of agriculturalists.

Pillai had his basic education in a home school and learnt a little Tamil. As such, he did not have any formal or higher education.

Pillai's father was an employee in the palace as a lantern lighter (there was no electricity then and the lighting was by means of gas and oil) and when Pillai attained youth, he followed his father's profession at the then princely salary of Rupees two and a half per month.

Although Manpoondia Pillai's job entailed lighting of the lanterns in the palace, his extra-curricular activities included wrestling, participating in dramas and folk dances like 'laavani' and kalinga thuraa' in which he played a folk percussion instrument called 'tape' (a large frame drum on which simple but repetitive and vibrant patterns were played). In fact 'tape' was to become the fore-runner of kanjira with all its sophistication and classicism. The playing of simple patterns on the 'tape' established in him the necessary control of 'laya', or rhythm.

His co-employees in the Pudukkottai palace used to call him 'Laander Mamundi', Laander being the Tamil word for lantern and Mamundi being the corruption of Manpoondi.

Manpoondia Pillai used to listen with rapt attention to the nagaswaram concerts that used to take place in the palace and also to the concerts of palace artists, Nannu Mian and Chotu mian, who had migrated from the North and settled in the royal courts in South India. The



Mian brothers used to simultaneously sing and play the north Indian percussion instruments, the dholak.

Such was the obvious relish of Manpoondia Pillai while listening to the Mians that he himself was a sight for others. His co-workers in the palace would tease him, saying, “Laander Mamundi has become a great vidwan (exponent) and hereafter he can resign from his job as a lantern lighter”. This forecast indeed came true later!

As days passed and Manpoondia Pillai became enveloped in music without any formal training, he happened to hear at length the playing of thavil by one Mariappa Pillai in a marriage procession. Incidentally, Mariappa Pillai or Mariappa Thavilkar as he was known, was a talented thavil artist who was a member of the palace Nagaswaram troupe. Pillai was so impressed that he approached the thavil vidwan and requested that he accept him as his disciple and to “open his eyes to the world of music”. Mariappa Thavilkar readily agreed as he had noticed the interest displayed by the young man in the aspects of laya. From then on Manpoondia Pillai became as beloved as a son to Mariappa Pillai and an ‘in-house’ disciple.

### **Gurukulavasam**

Whenever he got free from his service in the palace, Manpoondi would spend his time with his guru as an ‘in-house’ disciple. This system of a disciple residing in his guru’s house while learning an art was widely prevalent in the past and was known as ‘gurukulavasam’. As days passed, Mariappa Pillai realised the extreme intelligence and diligence of his disciple and was quite amazed that the latter could play on one hand, whatever he had demonstrated by using both his hands - undoubtedly due to the prowess that Manpoondi had earlier with playing the ‘tape’.

He asked Manpoondi whether he would like to play on a one-sided instrument without sacrificing the dexterity associated with double handed playing. The disciple replied with great humility, “if this be my guru’s command, I shall obey implicitly”.

He immediately got hold of a block of wood, scooped it out as a ring, got the skin of a monitor lizard pasted around the ring, added a few coins around the wooden ring for sympathetic oscillations and sound production, wet the skin with a few drops of water splashed on the inside and played this one-sided instrument in his guru’s presence. He inquired of the guru whether the instrument qualified to be played as a percussion accompaniment in concerts and the guru readily agreed that, kanjira, as the instrument was called, was best suited to Manpoondi’s talent and style and prophesied that he would become a great vidwan.

Manpoondia Pillai then started practicing on the Kanjira the various ‘nadai-s’, ‘mohra-s’, ‘korvai-s’, ‘tadinginathoms’ and laya patterns that sprang from his fertile imagination. The quality of his playing and the content were absolutely unique and had neither been heard earlier to his time nor later.

According to Pudukkottai Dakshinamoorthy Pillai, an eminent mridangam and kanjira artist who was also among the prime disciples of Manpoondia Pillai, the latter’s contribution to ‘laya’ was as important as that of Saint Thyagaraja’s to musical compositions; no mean praise this!

Pillai started playing in various ‘bhajan’ congregations and gradually introduced ‘solkattu-s’ employed by mridangists in the kanjira playing also.

But Pillai wanted to find a place for the kanjira in classical music concerts and thus gain recognition for the instrument from musical stalwarts of the day. Just as the great Tamil poets of yore, Thiruvalluvar and Kambar who had to present their poetry before learned assemblies of men to obtain recognition after a great deal of struggle, Pillai too felt that it was necessary for him to demonstrate his skill on the kanjira before established stalwarts in various fields of music and gain not merely personal recognition but also expose the full potential of the kanjira. ‘Arangetram’ is the introduction of a musician to the public at large and in the case of Pillai, it was the introduction of the kanjira to the music



world that mattered and this is what he proceeded to do.

### **Kanjira's Arangetram**

In those days, Thanjavur was considered the music capital and sure enough, mridanga vidwan, Narayanaswami Appa, the doyen among percussionists lived there. So, to Thanjavur, Mamondia Pillai went, taking with him two kanjiras and the meagre amount of cash available with him. He introduced himself to Appa as Mamundi from Pudukkottai who had come to him to demonstrate his playing prowess on the kanjira that he had invented and obtain his approval for its introduction in music concerts.

Appa bade him to spend the night in the verandah of the house and also gave him the simple food available at his home which Pillai ate and slept. He was to play the instrument in the bhajan to be held in Appa's house the next evening.

The next evening there was a large gathering of 'bhagavathars' (bhajan troupe) and Appa invited Pillai to play on his kanjira for the bhajans. In the vast gathering, Manpoondia Pillai got a place in a corner and none in the crowd took any notice of him. However, when Pillai sprinkled a few drops of water on the inside of the kanjira and fine-tuned it to the drone of the tambura, it almost sounded like the mridangam and Appa and others immediately were drawn to the sound of the kanjira. It was more so when Pillai started playing for the keerthana-s and employed 'solkattu-s' and beats that were unique and totally novel to those assembled. Appa then asked Pillai to play a solo on the kanjira which he did. Initially about fifteen of those present started keeping tala but as the playing got more and more complex, all but Narayanaswami Appa gave up. Pillai not merely played complex solkattu-s and the like, but played 'nadai-bedham' which was changing the 'jaati' while keeping the 'kaala' intact, a practice none had heard earlier. An overwhelmed Appa exclaimed that if kanjira could be played thus, even mridangam would become redundant. He foretold that manpoondia Pillai would become a world-renowned maha vidwan, presented him with a shawl of

honour and an amount of Rupees ten, feasted him and bade him farewell with his blessings.

The next stop for Manpoondia Pillai was Kumbakonam, a place about thirty miles away, also known for its pervasive music culture. He met a famous and well-to-do Nagaswara vidwan, Sivakolundu Nayanakaarar at his house. The latter thought that Pillai was a wandering mendicant and bade him wait as food was not yet ready. Pillai said, "Sir, my hunger is not for food for the stomach but for music for the soul. I have come to demonstrate the playing of the instrument, kanjira that I have invented and get your approval and recognition". Sivakolundu Nayanakaarar replied, without much enthusiasm, "Is that so? Let us see. Tomorrow there will be a bhajan at Thirupalanam Panchapakesa Sastri mutt when vidwans will sing. You may play for their music." The next day Manpoondia Pillai played on the kanjira while the assembled vidwans, with impeccable talent sang. He played on the kanjira several patterns that were novel. Sivakolundu Nayanakaarar praised Pillai to the skies and said that this instrument with such potential was a welcome addition to classical music and who could handle it better than Pillai himself? Pillai was honoured with shawls and cash presentations and a feast in his honour. Pillai also toured a number of places where there were important and influential vidwans, demonstrated the kanjira, entered into discussions, dialogues, and even verbal arguments but emerged victorious in his mission to gain recognition for his invention. He finally came to Chennai and stayed there for a while under the patronage of one Bhoja Naidu of Tiruvattesvaranpettai, an admirer of Pillai.

Around this time there lived a musician, a vocalist, by the name of Tiruvaiyaru Subramania Iyer in Chennai, who was prone to throwing his weight around. Manpoondia Pillai was scheduled to accompany Iyer in a concert but before the concert took place, Iyer, who was cocksure of his own talent (and Manpoondia Pillai's lack of the same!) challenged Pillai to a musical duel and said that they should agree in advance as to what each of them would be required to do if they failed to live up to the standard during the





*Vintage file photo of Manpoondia Pillai accompanying Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer with Dakshinamurthy Pillai on Mridangam (file photo of late 1910s).*

concert. Pillai said that the challenge was all right with him but since his only worldly possession was his kanjira, he would toss it into the sea if he found it impossible to perform his role as an accompanist in the concert. Subramania Iyer sang a novel and difficult 'pallavi' which he had rehearsed and perfected over a long period of time. Pillai not merely decoded the pallavi immediately after it was sung once, but introduced several variations using his rich imagination. Beaten in his own game, Subramania Iyer caught hold of Pillai's hands and informed the audience that it was Pillai who should adorn the centre stage (in the place allotted to the vocalist), which he would relinquish and retire from the music field. Pillai immediately remonstrated that he was able to display his talent only because of the opportunity given by Iyer and that he (Iyer) should not give up his profession and that he (Pillai) himself would always be happy to play the accompanying role on the kanjira. The audience appreciated the noble gesture of Pillai as well as his humility in contrast to Iyer's vanity. After this event Manpoondia Pillai and Tiruvaiyaru Subramania Iyer teamed up in many concerts in and around Madras as well as in the South.

Thus Manpoondia Pillai toured various places in Tamil Nadu and gained recognition for the kanjira as an important percussion instrument in concerts.

Many students learnt at the feet of Manpoondia Pillai but the prominent among them were Pudukkottai Dakshinamoorthy Pillai, who was also my 'maanaseeka' guru, Pazhani Muthaiah

Pillai, my father and guru and Seithur Zamindar. The doyen of Tamil drama, Sankaradas Swamigal was also a disciple of his.

Manpoondia Pillai wanted to groom a vocalist who could bring out the best in Kanjira accompaniment and Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer, a gifted vocalist was chosen by him and given intensive training in laya intricacies. In many concerts throughout the state, Manpoondia Pillai accompanied Vaidyanatha Iyer on the Kanjira while one of his disciples, Dakshinamoorthy Pillai or Muthiah Pillai played on the mridangam. Thus he brought fame and popularity to the trio.

Manpoondia Pillai's favourite deity was Lord Muruga and in order to conduct daily prayers, he installed a 'vel' (spear) which is the weapon associated with Muruga, in his house. Each year he used to conduct a ten day festival in which all the famous musicians of the day used to participate.

Karaikudi brothers, Subbarama Iyer and Sambasiva Iyer, the eminent veena vidwans and Jalatharangam Subbaiyer were fascinated by Pillai's kanjira playing and very often had him accompanying them in concerts.

Whenever Dakshinamoorthy Pillai spoke about his guru Manpoondia Pillai, he would become emotional and say that "to describe the greatness of Manpoondia Pillai's expertise, one should have a thousand tongues just as Adisesha, the celestial serpent, on whose back rests the God Mahavishnu. Just as there is no weapon equal or greater than 'Pashupatastra' the arrow of Lord Siva, there has never been, nor will there ever be an equal to Manpoondia Pillai and his art. This is God's truth."

Today, the pre-eminence of percussive art and the stature that those of us like me have achieved in the profession is all due to Pillai.

Even while he was at the peak of his career, Pillai did not compromise on the quality of his art to gain monetary benefits. Each time he played on the instrument, he dedicated it to his favourite deity Lord Muruga and to his own conscience.





*Manpoondia Pillai Shrine at Pudukkottai*

At his sixty second year, aware that his end was near, Manpoondia Pillai took 'sanyasa' or renunciation from things material and adopted the name 'Murugananda Swamigal'. On the 17th of January, 1922, he asked his disciple and devotees to sing bhajan and Tiruppugal songs and while this was being done, he breathed his last.

As is customary on the death of a 'sanyasi', Manpoondia Pillai's body was buried and a 'samadhi' (tomb) built over it. The 'samadhi' was located at Rajamalai, just outside Pudukkottai. Although his disciples Dakshinamoorthy Pillai and Muthiah Pillai wanted to erect a shrine over the 'samadhi', somehow they could not do so and it appears in retrospect that they left this task to me so that I could inherit the blessings of the great soul.

On my father's command in his old age, I undertook to build the shrine over the 'samadhi' and completed it in 1945. To my great fortune, my father and guru Muthiah Pillai was alive to be present during the shrine's consecration in 1945 and bless me.

## Mridanga, Kanjira Maha Vidwan Sri Dakshinamoorthy Pillai

*Excerpts from AIR Trichy programme 'Isai Ninaivugal' delivered by Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai on April 1, 1953*

*(A speech was delivered by the exponent of mridangam and kanjira, the late Pazhani M Subramania Pillai in the A.I.R. programme 'Isai Ninaivugal' conducted by the Trichy station on April 1, 1953. This was obtained from the collection of the late Ramanathapuram MN Kandaswamy Pillai, and has been translated and published by Vidwan KS Kalidas)*

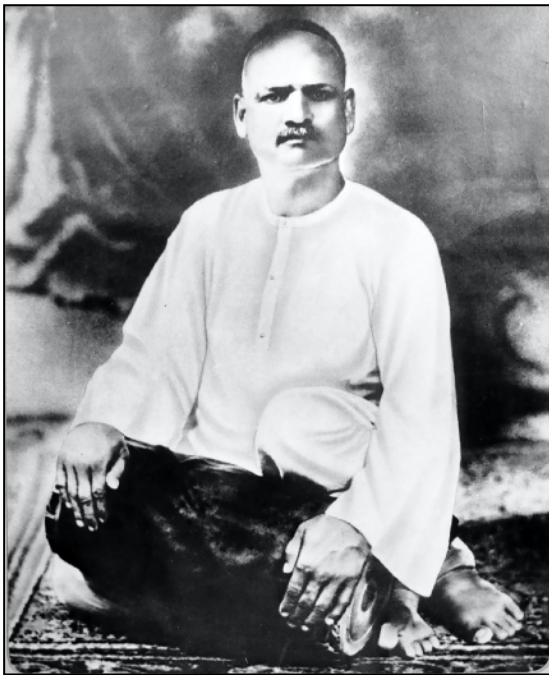
Carrying a rifle in hand, the sentry was walking in and out and to and fro of the Raja's palace at Pudukkottai.

Young, well built, ruggedly handsome, captivating every one passing by, he walked up and down immersed in deep thought, keeping rhythm on the wooden butt of the rifle while doing his rounds. Those who were observant, those who were of sharp minds did conclude that the

young man was trying to protect not merely the precincts of the palace but something else, a far more important thing, too. That indeed was the truth and what the sentry was trying to protect, we shall see presently.

Well, the practice on the rifle butt was the prelude to his becoming a great exponent of mridangam and ghatam (an earthen pot used as a percussive instrument) in later years – indeed a savant and saviour of these art forms. The young man was none other than the late maha vidwan Pudukkottai Dakshinamoorthy Pillai, the greatest exponent of mridanga and kanjira that the world has ever seen.





*Sri Dakshinamoorthy Pillai*

Pillai was born in Pudukkottai as the son of Ramaswamy Pillai and Amaravathy Ammal among two siblings who were elder to him. Unfortunately, his mother died within three days of his birth. The infant was brought up by his father's elder brother, Muthu Adigal (also known as Yoganandar) who was residing in the outskirts of Pudukkottai as a swamiji. Pillai grew up under the benevolent eyes of the great man.

When he was seven, Pillai was admitted to a Tamil school where he picked up elementary education but neither school nor books interested him. He was drawn naturally to sports and physical activities and to wanderlust that took him to new and exotic places. And raised as he was by Swami Yogananda, he had a deep spiritual yearning which made him visit temples near and far. Thus his body and mind developed in harmony.

Thus he passed into manhood. His relatives and acquaintances urged him to take up some job, preferably one in the palace for regular livelihood. Although he was not quite happy about it, Pillai took up the job of a palace guard but his

mind constantly dwelt on something else. All the while, he was feverishly tapping on the rifle butt, the rhythmic patterns that were springing up constantly in his subconscious mind.

During his free time, he used to play on the earthen pot kept in the palace for watering the plants. The sounds produced by the ghata (earthen pot) fascinated him. While the palace job ensured his livelihood, Pillai was eagerly awaiting a new dawn that would fulfil his heart-felt desire.

He approached many great musicians of the day and requested that he be given opportunity to accompany them on ghatam in their performances. Some agreed and Dakshinamoorthy Pillai seized such opportunities most eagerly and, though totally lacking in any formal training in the art, evoked such spontaneous appreciation from the audience that many musicians started giving him frequent opportunities, astonished by his inborn talent.

He, however, realised that to reach his full potential in rhythmic art, he should receive sound and systematic training under a guru and he began his search for the best one in the field.

In those days, Pudukkottai Manpoondia Pillai, the inventor and exponent of kanjira, was ruling over the world of percussion. Drawn by the brilliance of Manpoondia Pillai, Dakshinamoorthy Pillai approached the former to accept him as his disciple, which was readily granted. Under the tuition of Manpoondia Pillai, the young Dakshinamoorthy absorbed the breadth and depth of the art of percussion (laya vidya) as the benighted absorbs unexpected riches and the parched land soaks up abundant rainfall. Just as he was drowned in the sea of music, he became determined to spread the same joy to the world at large.

He decided to go to Sethi Naadu (land in the south east corner of Tamil Nadu) ruled by the Sethupathis who were great connoisseurs of art. He reached Ramanthapuram and took his abode at the Tayumanavar Swami Math. Each day, he would indulge in practice, producing sonorous waves of musical sounds (naadha) on the ghata, which drew the local inhabitants in



droves to experience the musical feast and get mesmerised.

In time, the news of a ghata vidwan playing astoundingly in the math reached the ears of the ruler Bhaskara Sethupathy who lost no time in inviting Pillai to the palace to play for him and the assembly of elitist personages. Pillai did so accordingly and the king who was highly satisfied with Pillai's performance showered presents on him and also appointed him as a resident ghatam artist of the palace, a great honour in those days.

When Pillai was thus in the employment of the king, a distinguished mridanga vidwan who was captivated by Pillai's artistry and who was also attached to the palace was the redoubtable Thanjavur Narayanaswami Appa, who was many years senior to our Pillai. Indeed he was a contemporary of Pillai's guru, Manpoondia Pillai.

Narayanaswamy Appa was a seasoned vidwan who had intricate knowledge of both naadha and the science of percussion and he could readily appreciate and wonder at the versatility of Pillai. Both had frequent occasions to interact with each other and came to appreciate each other's talent.

One day Narayanaswamy Appa took the liberty of suggesting to Pillai to give up the practice of ghatam playing and instead, to take up the mridangam. He said that with Pillai's abundant 'gnaana' and imagination, it was the mridangam rather than ghatam, which would enable him to reach his full potential. With deep and sincere humility, Pillai said, "Sir, no doubt your suggestion is based on best intentions, but my fingers and hands have gotten so toughened by playing on the ghatam and I do not know how they can be used to play on the mridangam, a much softer and sensitive instrument than the ghatam." Narayanaswamy Appa reassured him that with his immense skills, he would certainly become a performer par excellence with none to equal him, and he presented him with one of his own mridangams.

Thus began Pillai's practice on mridangam in earnest. As his earlier training had given him deep insight into all aspects of percussive art, he

could easily adapt himself to playing mridangam. He also excelled at playing the kanjira, which had been introduced into the music world and nurtured by his guru, Manpoondia Pillai.

Later, he joined the drama troupe of 'Nadigamani' Balamani Ammayar and enthralled audiences with his exquisite tonal virtuosity. He also played on the mridangam and kanjira for katha kalakshepam (musical discourse) and in all programs in which he participated thousands of listeners attended and partook of the musical feast that Pillai provided.

This great exponent left the world on the thirteenth of Vaikasi in the year Dadu, according to the Tamil calendar. The world of rhythm had lost its leader.

His talent was immeasurable and words are not adequate for this purpose. Many mridanga vidwans try to show off their talent by means of playing intricate rhythmic patterns, including korvai-s, mathematical calculations, etc., but they conveniently overlook the fact that they are accompanying a vocalist and that they are playing for an audience; in short, their exposition would not jell with the ambience. Pillai, however, was totally conscious of the need to raise the overall effect of the concert and to that effect, would play as the occasion demanded, taking with him the vocal or the main artist as well as the audience. Although he was the greatest exponent of laya at the time, he would never show off and played aptly to blend well with the song being sung. Even when the vocalist or the main musician was of a lesser standard, Pillai would effortlessly fill the void and project the same musicians as well skilled in their art to the audience.

Mridangam, kanjira, and thavil have common as well as individual 'sollu' patterns called solkattu, and Dakshinamoorthy Pillai would never attempt to play solkattus that were foreign to the ethos of the instrument he was handling at the moment. When he was playing the mridangam, he would play on the 'thoppi' side innovative strokes that would produce novel solkattus, without ever negatively affecting the mellow



and rich tones of the mridangam's right side or 'valantalai'.

Whenever the vocalist sang kalpana or manodharma swaras, Pillai would play apt patterns and would aid his own creative imagination to coincide with the 'take-off' point for the pallavi or song. He would also add a lot of variety so that these creations were never repetitive. His playing also used to make use of 'vallinam' and 'melinam' strokes, roughly translated as assertive and soft strokes.

Pillai and kanjira were made for each other, so to speak. Good physique is required to play the kanjira and Pillai possessed it in abundant measure. Mridangam being played with both the hands, it is not difficult to translate one's imagination to rhythmic patterns, but this is very difficult to achieve with the one-handed kanjira. Pillai, however, had the extraordinary gift of such reproduction on the kanjira.

While playing the tani avarthanam, or the solo piece, kanjira tends to sound flat, especially in comparison to the rich tonal quality of the mridangam. However, with his deft and special handling of the kanjira, Pillai, in his turn, would outshine the other instruments in the ensemble.

The secret of his success was also due to the fact that Pillai was always in tune with the audience's expectations. Each stroke of his shone with life. Apart from the exquisite way in which he accompanied vocal artists, his accompaniment techniques for stringed instruments included tone production, whether on the mridangam or kanjira, which blended perfectly with the music. His fast tempo passages were absolutely lovely and even in this tempo, the clarity and beauty of solkattus were not lost. When he participated in a concert, his face was illuminated with the inner light of his soul and one could witness his total involvement and joy.

Even in vocal music, it is difficult to move audiences unless the singer possesses a sound knowledge of music and its literature and has enough experience in the field. With instruments, where there are no words, it is even more difficult to communicate with the listener. However Pillai had the unique gift of communi-

cating with his audience by means of the quality of his music. Such people are called "karuvil tiruvudayaar", roughly translated as "one who has greatness imbibed in every cell of one's body". Some would take this to mean "one who is blessed by God even at one's conception in the mother's womb".

Generally people gather to listen to the main artist - vocalist or instrumentalist – and not to the accompanying artist such as the mridangam or kanjira player. Pillai changed all this as far as he was concerned. In all the concerts he accompanied on the mridangam or kanjira, the concerts ended as percussion rather than vocal concerts; this in spite of the fact that he avoided a domineering attitude and played only to embellish the vocal artist. He maintained this tradition till the end of his career. He never felt threatened that others might steal intricate patterns of his art, which might impair his own future; he never entertained such petty thoughts.

Pillai did not utilise his abundant talent for selfish reasons. Whatever he earned in his profession was used for development of his art and for worship, as he was an intensely spiritual person. Such was his detachment. He was a staunch devotee of Lord Muruga and visited all His sacred abodes with utmost devotion. In his personal life, he was the epitome of goodness and honesty. His life which was filled with devotion to God, love for his art and self-control was thus an example for everyone.

Long live the fame of Dakshinamoorthy Pillai and his contribution to art.

#### **Trichy J Venkatraman passes away**

J Venkatraman, a disciple of Alathur Brothers, adept at singing complicated pallavi-s passed away on 30 July at Trichy. He was 86. Shri Pazhani supported and hosted him at his house in Chennai and got him an opportunity to perform at the Music Academy which won him a Tambura prize during his younger days.

Team Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira conveys heartfelt condolences to his family members, admirers and disciples.



# Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai - An Innovative Gentle Giant

*Certain excerpts are taken from Sruti June/July 1987 edition on Pazhani  
Vidwan KS Kalidas, Chennai*



*Young Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai*

Lord Subramanya, the 'ishta-devata' of most Tamils resides on the top of Pazhani hill, according to Hindu tradition. An agricultural town at the foot-hills of the western ghats on the leeward side, is a famous place of pilgrimage right round the year. Although technology seems to have caught up with Pazhani town recently by means of a rope-way up the hill and a motorable road to Kodaikanal, people are still quite old fashioned and tradition-bound - one can still see bullock carts in Pazhani in the 21st century!

## **A Rasika on Pazhani**

SR Krishnamurthy, a connoisseur of music had this to say.

"Illustrious son of an illustrious father, the late Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai (henceforth Pazhani) was a man of few words, of genial temperament, and a lovable personality on the social plane. His handling of the mridangam was soft, almost like a caress and was devoid of the loud and demonstrative flourishes favoured by some. Steady, unruffled and balanced, even a most intricate tani avarthanam left him fresh and cheerful. It was always a privilege and a pleasure to hear him produce the wonderful nadam and it is well known that some of the top ranking vocalists who specialised in highly complicated 'laya' patterns preferred Pazhani for their accompaniment. He could unravel the most intricate laya manipulations and follow the musician with a felicity and grace that greatly embellished the effect of the whole performance. He belonged to a tribe of giants in the field of mridangam and Kanjira".

This was deeply felt tribute from a lay listener, not an analysis by an expert, not an obligatory expression of praise, It was, moreover, a fair assessment of the core of Pazhani the musician and the man. It drew attention, if indirectly, to the fact that Pazhani - as the vidwan was popularly known - represented all that was aesthetic in music : a rare sensitivity, introspection, balance, finesse and classicism. All these and a keen intellectual approach as well.

Too, Krishnamurthy's statement that pazhani belonged to "a tribe of giants" in the field of mridangam and kanjira playing was absolutely correct. The men who represented what is known as Pudukkottai school or tradition in laya, the tradition to which Pazhani belonged, were indeed giants.





*File photo of Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai (late '30s)*

But a pleasant smell about the place greets a traveller entering Pazhani - a smell of flowers, vibhuti, incense and even a whiff of the famous panchamrutam, the exquisite concoction of fruits, honey and jaggery. And there is the sound of music too - not merely Nagaswaram and Taval but - vocal, string and percussion instruments.

Pazhani cannot be compared to centres of music like Thanjavur, Pudukkottai, Ramanathapuram etc. but the Pazhani temple and its environs have kept the town buzzing with musical activity fostered by generations of traditional vidwans assigned to the temple and secular duties. As is usual with famous temples, Nagaswaram and Taval artists have held sway over centuries and a great Taval vidwan, Muthaiah Pillai by name lived there from the closing decades of the nineteenth century. He had traveled all the way to Pudukkottai to do 'gurukulavasam' with the legendary laya vidwan, Manpoondia Pillai. At a fairly early stage of his career, he seems to have given up playing Taval and instead, chosen to play the mridangam and Kanjira.

Muthaiah Pillai married Unnamalai Ammal of Chennimalai, another important Subramanya kshetra nearby and had two sons, Nageswaran and Subramaniam by her. Subramaniam was born on 20 April, 1908. She seems to have died soon after Subramaniam's birth and Muthaiah Pillai married again and had a son Soundarapandian by his second wife.

Muthaiah Pillai was no doubt a great laya vidwan but he was short tempered and domineering and somehow did not take to young Subramaniam with filial affection. Subramaniam was by nature left handed - a southpaw - and although there were left handed Taval vidwans by the dozen, a left handed mridangam vidwan was virtually unknown; such was the blind prejudice prevailing in those days! All attention of Muthaiah Pillai was bestowed on Soundarapandian who however was not talented. Young Subramaniam, was born in this world to play the mridangam as no one ever did, and he was not put off by his father's indifference. He practiced on the sly what his father taught Soundarapandian and in spite of the hostility at home (his step mother, as in most anecdotes, did not treat him with love and kindness), progressed rapidly in absorbing the art. Pudukkottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai, a co-disciple of Muthaiah Pillai under Manpoondia Pillai, heard Pazhani practicing in his father's absence and spoke harshly to Muthaiah Pillai about his neglect of his talented son, Pazhani. Properly chastised by his friend, Muthaiah Pillai started teaching Pazhani at a furious pace so as to gain back lost time. His teaching methods were indeed harsh even by the standards prevailing then and even for the smallest mistake he did not spare the rod. But this intensive coaching did do a lot of good to young Pazhani and prepared him very well to meet future challenges in his illustrious career.

Pazhani's elder brother Nageswaran had landed a job with the then Madras State Government and Pazhani, not too comfortable with his domineering father and loveless step mother, too left for Madras (Chennai) to live with his elder brother. But before this, a very significant meeting and friendship with the Taval wizard Iluppur (a.k.a. Malaikkottai) Panchapakesa Pillai (Taval





*Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai accompanying Alathur Brothers (Alathur Sivasubramania Iyer and Alathur Srinivasa Iyer) with Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer on Violin*

Panchami) gave a new fillip to his idea of laya intricacies. It was in a Nagaswaram concert of Madurai Ponnusamy Pillai with Panchapakesa Pillai on the Tavil that they met and Panchami, years senior to Pazhani, was captivated by the accurateness of tala that Pazhani kept up while others had given up when he was playing tani.

While in Madras, Pazhani also stayed along with the entire Veena Dhanammal clan at the residence of 'Jalatharangam' Ramanaiah Chetti who acted as his patron.

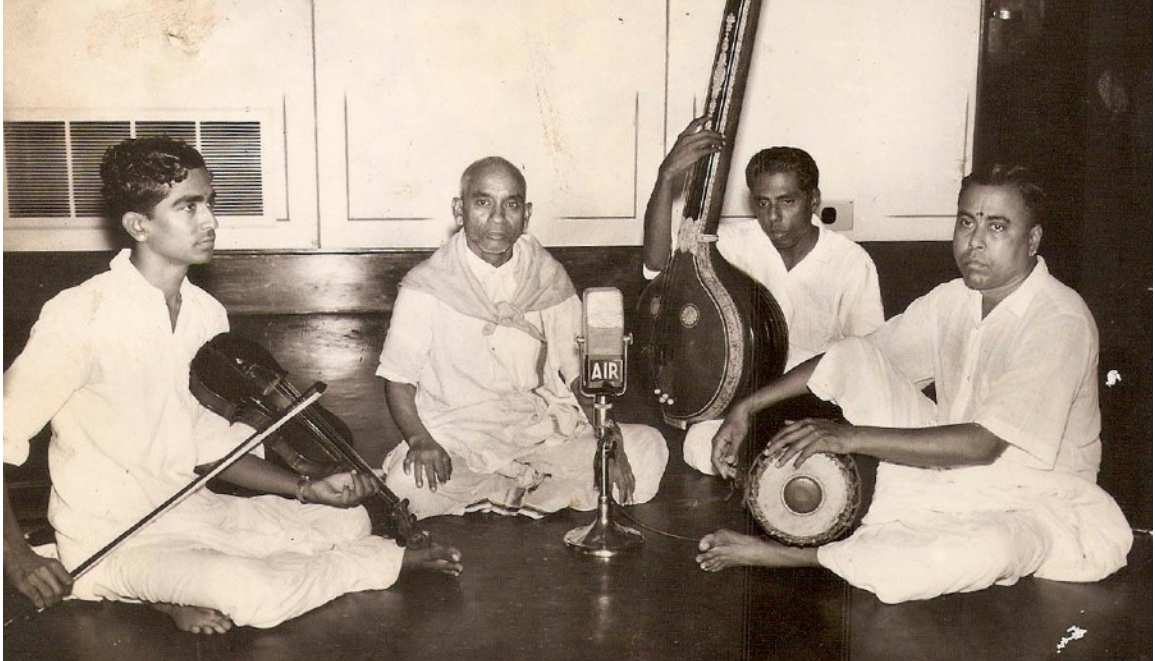
In Madras, during the first few years, Pazhani did not get too many opportunities to play and out of those he did get, most were to "laya-heavy" vocalists like Kanjeevaram Naina Pillai, Chittoor Subramania Pillai and Alathur Brothers. Of course there were a few sporadic concerts with Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Madurai Mani Iyer, Musiri Subramania Iyer, Mazhavarayanendral Subbarama Iyer. However, the number of concerts that he played was nowhere near those that his prodigious talent merited. The reasons for this 'lack-lustre' opportunities were his being left handed and his playing technique being 'laya-heavy' a factor not welcomed by vocal artists who preferred a mridangam artist who would play 'sarvalaghu' - an easy array of nadais without too much 'laya-structuring'.

Here we should pause to consider the professional relationship that Pazhani had with Naina Pillai, Chittoor Subramania Pillai and Alathur Brothers. In the closing decades of 19th century

and the first few decades of the 20th, Naina Pillai reigned supreme as a vocalist and his music was known for his 'laya-intricacies'. Very often, he would fox the accompanying players on the violin, mridangam, kanjira etc. with his carefully prepared and rehearsed pallavi-s and korvai-s and would gloat over his "victory" over them. Sometimes he would even hide the tala under his angavastram. Although his (Naina Pillai's) talent was no doubt super, he was essentially a "terrorist" who could, if he so wanted, put his accompanying artists on the mat. Pazhani, all of 15 years of age accompanied this awesome vidwan in Saraswathi Gana Sabha at Kakinada, the oldest sabha in existence and according to reports, did very well. This itself is not surprising as his father Muthaiah Pillai and his 'maanaseeka guru' Dakshinamurthy Pillai provided frequent accompaniment to Naina Pillai. Pazhani also played in a fair number of concerts with Naina Pillai and even more with his (Naina Pillai's) disciple Chittoor Subramania Pillai.

With Alathur Brothers, his relationship was even deeper. Alathur Venkatesa Iyer, the father and Guru of Sivasubramania Iyer (one of the "brothers"- the other, Srinivasa Iyer was not a sibling but the two sang duo as 'brothers') was also a great admirer of Dakshinamurthy Pillai and Muthaiah Pillai. For him, the younger Pazhani represented all that was great in laya - sensitivity, intricacies, traditional values and great dignity - and was very happy to dispatch





*Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai accompanying Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer with Lalgudi Jayaraman on Violin (during an AIR recording in January 1957)*

the 'brothers' to Madras (Chennai) at the instance of Pazhani, who had at last settled down as a reputed vidwan with clout. In fact, it was due to the efforts of Pazhani that the brothers gave a concert at the Music Academy in the senior slot. It not only clicked but the brothers became a sensation in Madras and Pazhani's mridangam support was a major factor in the success of this and several later concerts of the brothers. The threesome were inseparables and they had many practice sessions according to veterans like TK Murthy. Pazhani was responsible in setting up many pallavi-s, korvai-s etc. for the brothers. Pazhani himself had a very deep knowledge of vocal music and it is said that vocalists of the time like the 'brothers', GNB and Semmangudi used to request Pazhani to sing alapanas and kritis.

To continue the discussion on Pazhani and the brothers, Pazhani had also taught the brothers many Tiruppugazh songs with proper 'chandams' as also a format called "dhruvats". This was disclosed by a very aged vidwan by name Tirugokarnam Ramachandra Iyer but we do not know at this time what this format represented. Pazhani used to revel in playing for Tiruppugazh songs and he and Alathur Brothers gave concerts exclusively devoted to Tiruppugazh. In

variably Pazhani used to play tani avartanams in rare chanda talas in these concerts.

The break in personal relationship between Chittoor Subramania Pillai and Pazhani was more than compensated by his association with the then immensely popular Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar (Chembai) whose regular mridanga vidwan had deserted him for greener pastures. Chembai advised Pazhani to cut down on the 'vyavaharam' content and focus on 'sowkhyam' (melody-orientation) aspects in order to become popular with vidwans and general rasikas. Pazhani heeded to Chembai's advice and there was no looking back after that. Subsequently, it was due to Chembai's support Pazhani claimed his rightful place.

Ironically there was also a personal rift between Pazhani and Alathur Sivasubramania Iyer for a few years and Pazhani chose not to accompany the brothers but Venkatesa Iyer, for whom the only mridangam vidwan worth listening to was Pazhani, brokered peace but although they got together, the old camaraderie was gone and the number of concerts became few and far between.

But with Chembai's enthusiastic backing, Pazhani got into the mainstream and Pazhani was soon the preferred accompanist to most





*Pazhani M Subramania Pillai accompanying Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer with TN Krishnan on Violin at Sree Rama Seva Mandali, Chamarajapet, Bangalore*

top ranking artists including GNB, Madurai Mani Iyer, Semmangudi, Musiri, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer and others.

Whether Pazhani was playing for a melody-oriented musician or a vyavaharam-oriented musician, he was totally supportive of the main performer. He would not project himself separately. For this reason, Madurai Mani Iyer described him as a 'tyagi' - a self sacrificing person.

Because of his totally supportive role, Pazhani was in great demand accompanying such instrumentalists as Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu, Thirupamburam Swaminatha Pillai, TR Mahalingam, T Chowdiah, MA Kalyanakrishna Bhagavathar, S Balachander etc.

In the Pudukkottai tradition, the lyrics were not reproduced on the mridangam and Pazhani did not change this. But, he used thoppi to a great effect. This, and the soft touches he brought to his playing for songs sung in the post pallavi session of the concerts, were the result of the way tabla masters handled the twin drums.

Among other innovations of Pazhani, one pertain to the fingering techniques. Instead of using the ring finger on the valantalai, Pazhani used his middle finger as fulcrum. This apparently gave him the control over the sound (nadam) that he wanted.

Apart from this new technique, what imparted the special flavour to his playing of the mridangam - and kanjira - was the style he adopted for playing for kritis.

Pazhani's distinctive style won him, over the years, the respect and admiration of the connoisseurs and common people alike. Great vocalists of '30s, '40s and '50s recognised him not only for his mastery over laya but also as a perfect accompanist who strove to enhance the quality and appeal of the concert as a whole.

Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, one of the great vocalist reminiscing about Pazhani has said that none provided better rhythmic accompaniment to the rendering of the kriti-s than Pazhani and that there couldn't be anyone in the future to best him in this respect. Pazhani's accompaniment invariably added an extra measure of vitality to the rendering of the kriti-s. He has further said that Pazhani played without awkward pauses. 'adaichu vasippar' were Semmangudi's exact words which in Tamil describe this last aspect.

With the increase in concerts, Pazhani's income also grew manifold. He bought a palatial bungalow with lots of open spaces in Boag Road, an aristocratic locality in upscale T.Nagar in Madras (Chennai). Actor Sivaji Ganesan who was the uncrowned king of Tamil Cinema then lived a few houses from Pazhani's. Pazhani lived life in





*Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai accompanying TR Mahalingam with P Bhuvaneshwariah on Violin (during Rama Seva Mandali, Chamarajapet, Bangalore). Flute support by Dindigul SP Natarajan, Bangalore Manjunath is on Ghatam and SV Narayanaswamy Rao the doyen organiser is on Tambura.*

great style but never was his taste outrageous; it was always refined, exquisite. Only the best perfumes would do for him. The whitest of muslin shirts and the best khadi dhotis were for him. He was very fond of cars and at that point of time, Fiat Millecento was considered the best indigenous car. Not only did he own one but changed for a new car every two years or so. Only he would drive the car; no bumbling driver for him. He had no issues himself but his wife's sisters' children formed part of his extended family. There were hardly two or three vidwans who enjoyed similar life-style.

His presence in a music concert was majestic; spot-less white attire, well-groomed hair, costly perfume, fair and handsome personality, glittering diamond ear studs.

He was a very religious person and would visit swamiji's, famous or otherwise very often. When he sold his Boag Road property and bought a very spacious property in Venkatanarayana Road, also in T Nagar, he gave away a major portion of the land to the Sringeri mutt where it stands even today as 'Shree Sharada Peetam'.

May be because he had been an underdog himself before achieving stardom, Pazhani had no hesitation in supporting junior musicians. He

gave off his best, whether it was KV Narayanaswamy, M Balamuralikrishna, Ramnad Krishnan, TM Thyagarajan, TV Namasivayam, Manakkal Rangarajan, or any one else. His promotion of Lalgudi Jayaraman is no secret and is known to everyone.

Pazhani's influence extended beyond his disciples. His style had an impact on number of mridanaga vidwans who did not train under him. Among them was Coimbatore Ramaswamy, who many thought mistakenly was a disciple of Pazhani. Palakkadu Raghu belongs to this group, considering Pazhani as his 'maanaseeka Guru'. Others vidwans influenced include, SVS Narayanan, TK Murthy, Mavelikkara Krishnan Kutty Nair and Suchindram Krishnan.

Pazhani trained a large number of students and in most competitions, whether conducted by the Radio or other institutions, his students would come out first. Many of his students became very successful concert artists. Among them were Trichy Sankaran, T Ranganathan, MN Kandasamy, Dandamudi Ramamohan Rao, and others including this writer (included in the edition, a dedicated article on this). They have more or less retained their master's style.

Unfortunately Pazhani's health was never very good. At least on three occasions he is reported



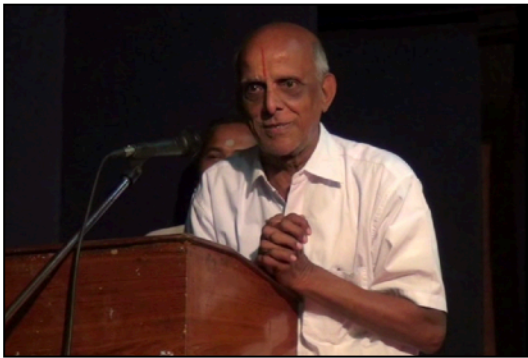


*Pazhani along with his disciples in front of his house at No.4, South Boag Road, T.Nagar, Chennai*

to have suffered heart attacks and the one that finally got him was a massive cerebral haemorrhage which resulted in a coma from which he did not recover. He was admitted to Isabella

Hospital in Mylapore and the end came on 27 May 1962. He was merely 54 and Surely God takes away those he loves early!

## Guru pooja and homage



*Trichy J Venkatraman delivering a speech during a Guru Pooja in the year 2012*

Pazhani erected a shrine on the samadhi of Manpoondia Pillai at Pudukkottai in 1945 at the behest of his father Pazhani Muthaiah Pillai. He started the tradition of offering homage to Guru Manpoondia Pillai on his death anniversary every year on the Bagulapanchami day (a day before Saint Thyagaraja aradhana). This continued till he passed away in 1962. Ever since, his disciples took this over and have been offering homage to Guru Manpoondia

Pillai as well as started the Pazhani Guru pooja both of which continues to date.

Pazhani Guru Pooja in Chennai was spearheaded by MN Kandaswamy Pillai who passed it on to KS Kalidas and today Mannarkoil J Balaji is at the helms of affair. Similarly Udu-malai T Mayilswamy started the Pazhani Guru pooja tradition in Coimbatore. In Johannesburg, South Africa, P Rajan, a disciple of MN Kandaswamy Pillai who runs a laya vidya school in the name of 'Manpoondia Pillai Laya Ashramam' has been conducting the Guru Pooja for several years.

The Pooja is a low-key but a very sincere attempt by the disciples forming the Pazhani family. The resources are pooled from the family members and the pooja is conducted in an earnest manner.

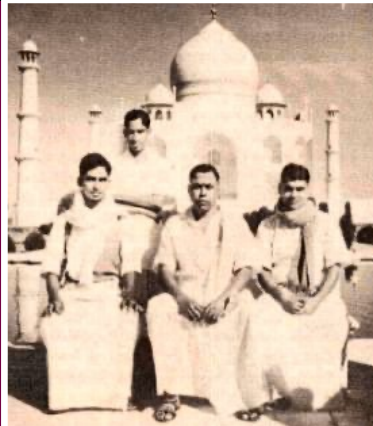
The function includes 'Isai Anjali', kriti rendering by young and talented artistes, a speech by a senior musician and a full fledged senior musician concert.

*S Anand, Bangalore*





Pazhani and Trichy Sankaran accompanying Lalgudi Jayaraman and Srimathy Brahmanandam



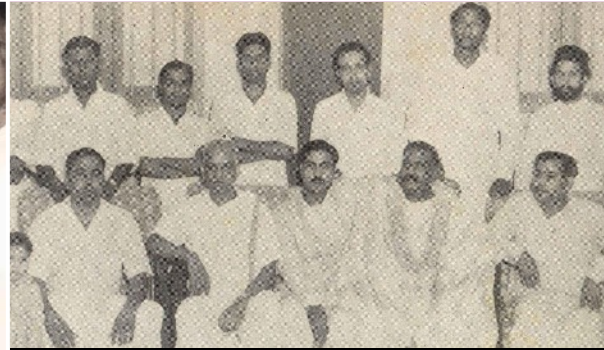
Pazhani, Lalgudi, KV Narayanaswamy



Madurai Mani Iyer, Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer, Pazhani at Nandrudayan Koyil, Trichy



Pazhani with Dandapani Desikar and Seerkazhi Govindarajan



Pazhani with GNB and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan



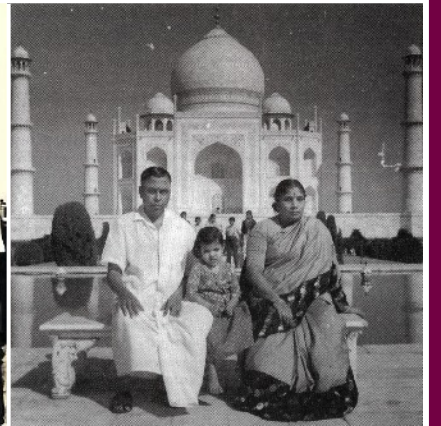
Pazhani with Lalgudi at Thiruvaiyaru Thyagaraja Aradana



Pazhani centenary - Balaji, KS Kalidas, Lalgudi, M Balamuralikrishna, Dorai, MS Ramanujam, V Murali, R Krishnaswamy, TK Murthy



Disciples of Pazhani presenting a photo to Shanmukhananda Sabha, Bombay



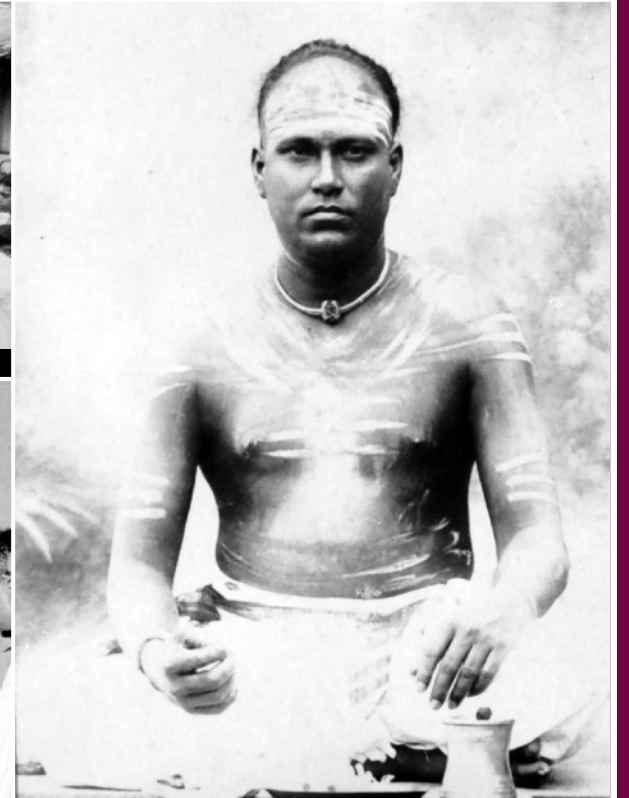
With wife Kolar Rajammal



Pazhani participating in Thyagarajaswamy Utsavam



Pazhani with Madurai Mani Iyer, Chowdiah at RSM, Chamrajpet



Pazhani Muthaiah Pillai (father of Subramanya Pillai)



# Dr. M Balamuralikrishna on Pazhani

*Excerpts from Dr. M Balamuralikrishna speech during  
Pazhani's centenary celebrations in 2008  
Translation credit : S Anand, Bangalore*



*Dr. Balamuralikrishna delivering a speech during Pazhani centenary celebration on 11 May 2008*

Pazhani Subramania Pillai had a 'Pillai' (son) that was me, punned Dr. BMK. He treated me as such. I am really very fortunate that he accompanied me in many concerts. What can I say about the greatness of his mridangam playing? It was very unique, as unique as his personality.

He would take a minimum of 20 minutes to comb his hair but even after playing for over three hours, not even a single hair would be out of place. He himself used to look fresh as ever.

He was the person responsible for me to come to Madras as Madras was the happening place and your fame and future is in Madras and not in Andhra. In retrospect, I feel that it was God's command and blessings to me.

I used to give a lot of concerts in temples in Kerala. After one such concert, I boarded the train at Cochin. I was sitting in the third class compartment and Shri Pazhani also took the same train but boarded the first-class compartment. He saw me sitting in third class. In the next station, that is Aluva, Pazhani sent words

through the guard to fetch me to the first-class compartment. He received me and said 'don't travel by any class other than first-class, promise me' and I am keeping up the word even today.

I was spellbound by the enormous affection he showered on me. He enlightened me on the intricacies of Layam and I was overwhelmed. For the first time ever, I understood the difference between 'layam' and 'talam' and it was the first time I came across a person with so much knowledge.

He was always like a father to me and I considered him my Guru for the vast knowledge he possessed. In one of the performances in Vijayawada, when he accompanied me, a rasika asked me to sing the Mukhari raga and I rendered the raga for about 20 min. Soon after this, Shri Pazhani asked me 'which kriti are you planning to render?'. I replied saying, I am intending to sing 'entani ne varnintunu shabarl' but he advised me to sing Tanam and follow it up with a Pallavi. After the Tanam, he further asked me to take up 'entani ne varnintunu shabarl bhagyamu' in the pallavi format in any talam in sankeerna nadai. I did as per his advice and completed rendering the pallavi in 'sankeerna nadai' and 'rupaka talam'. Post-concert, he explained to me the sanctity of Ragam, Tanam, and Pallavi which was always intended to be extempore and how it was used by knowledgeable maharaja's to set up competitions among vidwans.

Although he was a left-hander, he always proved to be the right-hander to the main artist. Even today, if I see a mridangist, Shri Pazhani comes to my mind and I think of him. My pranams to this great man.



# Pazhani Ayya

*Lalitha GS, Dubai*



An incomparable legend, Nada Yogi, Musicians' musician, Mahavidwan - these are how Pazhani. M. Subramania Pillai, is still described. Such was his vidhwat that, even the musicians whom he accompanied would be awestruck by his gentle yet sprightly accompaniment. No wonder, the naadam originated from his mridangam could enthrall both pandithas and paamara rasikas as well. I am the one among the paamara rasikas. I am neither a mridangist, nor do I know even the basics of mridangam, still I am taken by the whirls of his mridanga naadam to the depth of the ocean of his playing.

Though I am a vocalist, since my younger days, inclined to percussion instruments especially mridangam. As a child, I used to attend many

concerts and was attracted to this instrument because of its tones. Reading many music related books was one of my hobbies then. Once I happened to read a book "Irubathaam Nootrandin sangeetha medhaigal" (Carnatic Legends of 20<sup>th</sup> century), which contains the biography of many musicians including Shri Pazhani. After reading his biography, particularly about the hardships he underwent even as a child, his father's and stepmother's harsh approach towards him, I instantly developed a compassion towards him. He was my cinderella!

As I grew listening to many musicians, the fondness for mridangam also grew. My guru Smt. Meena Subramaniam (disciple of Dr. ML Vasanthakumari) blessed me with opportunities to accompany her in her concerts as vocal support. Thus, I had onstage exposures of listening closely to mridangam. Slowly I started appreciating many aspects of mridangams such as its various captivating tones and its major role in embellishing the music. Tani avarthanam became my favourite session in concerts.

Years passed and I was 30 then; once I listened to a concert recording of Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, accompanied by Trichy Sankaran Sir, on the mridangam. I was spellbound by the tani, especially the tisra nadai, played by Sankaran sir in that concert. Instantly, I was curious in listening to Pazhani just to know how Sankaran sir's guru would have played a tani. The lecture demonstration of KS Kalidas Sir, about the various laya traditions, in which he spoke about the dignity and humility of his guru Pazhani, the way Pazhani revered his gurus and ancestors of his baani, added fuel to the fire of my eagerness in listening to Pazhani. What a great human being! Slowly, his stature started growing within me.





*A file photo of Pazhani accompanying Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer with M Govindaraja Pillai on Violin*

That was the tani avarthanam in the concert of Madurai Mani Iyer in Music Academy, 1959. Never did I ever hear such a stately tani avarthanam! The naadam, the flow of rhythmic patterns like a river, Gambheeryam, madhuryam, the blend of valantalai and thoppi, the ghumukis; I was inundated with awe. How could a human produce such a naadam!

Truly a wizard. I could realise that I was entirely captured by this naadam. Yes, enslaved to Pazhani's playing. I searched hard for his recordings in internet, the more I heard the more was I impressed. His accompaniment for kritis, the way he embellished the music of the main performers, like this, from any dimension he stood the tallest. But I also had my own fall in the searching process - would believe wrong labelling of accompanists or wrongly identify them.

Thanks to the footage of Pazhani released in youtube. It was through this video I got the acquaintance of Kalidas sir, who encouraged and guided me right from identifying and understanding the baani of pazhani. He literally taught me the finest aspects of Pazhani's playing both technically and aesthetically. But for his guidance and continuous motivation till this blessed moment, how would it be possible for a woman like me to appreciate and drench in the mahavidwan's playing?

Now, having listened to Pazhani, my ears and mind will never let any other mridangam. Whatever recordings available are enough for this entire life of mine. It's hard to believe that such a man walked upon this earth, as THERE IS ONLY ONE PAZHANI, ISN'T IT?

## **Pazhani and Hindustani Music**

The prolonged stay at the house of Ramaiah Chetty during his initial years in Chennai had made Pazhani a fan of Hindustani music as well. Chettiar and his free lodgers from Dhanammal downwards loved it. The 1954 visit of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan saw GNB and Pazhani in the forefront of organising his travel itinerary and stay. Khan was to proceed further south from Madras on a series of performances, but the police refused to give him permission owing to some tension in the region. Pazhani coming to know of this, spent an entire day to resolve the issue with the then commissioner of Police, Parthasarathy Iyengar, a close friend and an admirer. Pazhani's arguments won the day and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan obtained his permission just as he boarded the train to the southern districts.



# From a Vidwan to Vidwan - Pazhani on Chembai

*Excerpts from the message in Tamil by Mahavidwan Pazhani M Subramania Pillai to "ELLARVI" for his book "Chembai Selvam"*

*(We shall use Chembai or Bhagavathar for Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar and Pazhani or Subudu for Pazhani M Subramania Pillai for the sake of brevity)*

Chembai was a devout spiritual person. He not only taught his disciples with great involvement but he showed the same involvement in supporting a number of young vidwans. He brought to the fore many pakkavadhyam artistes. He had no concern for the caste or community or status but only went by the talent of the youngsters. What I am today is entirely due to his magnanimity.

Initially, he made me agree not to demand any substantial fee for performances and accept whatever the organisers gave me. This went on for two to three years and I played a large number of concerts with him. At the end of this period, I had attained fame and popularity and started fixing my own fee for my concerts with him. Chembai explained to me later that the reason he had made this arrangement was that the listening public should notice me in a large number of concerts and therefore would come to appreciate my talent, and money should not stand in the way.

My first concert with Shri Chembai was in 1926 at Buchiredipalayam and he greatly appreciated my playing but for some reason for the next ten years, I did not have the opportunity of accompanying him. It was only in 1936 that I again played for Bhagavathar at Jagannatha Baktha Sabha in Chennai and this was the turning point for me. Mysore Shri T Chowdiah played on the violin. As the Valantalai should face the audience, I, as a left handier sat in the place generally occupied by the violinists, that is, the left side of

the Bhagavathar. Chowdiah was visibly unhappy but did not make a fuss but after the concert, he complained to Chembai that this was against the 'sampradaya'. Bhagavathar just smiled and said amicably that the success of the concert was the only factor and not where the accompanists were seated; he repeated this arrangement with Chowdiah and me in many succeeding concerts with Chowdiah grumbling each time. Chembai calmly told him "Chowdiah, everything in this world happens due to 'Eshwara sankalpam' and you will yourself seat him in your place when you organise a concert in the not distant future". However, this pattern continued in this same fashion for several years.

This being so, I had my first concert in Mumbai (then Bombay) in 1941. The vocalist sang very well but he did not allow me to play a tani avarthanam and after waiting almost till the end of the concert I requested him to allow me to play a tani. Without showing any grace he allowed me a few minutes that was the time listeners were preparing to go home. I felt hurt and shared this experience with a friend of mine who had also known Bhagavathar. This was without my knowledge. When Bhagavathar was to sing at Bombay after a few months, he fixed me up to play for him and gave me five tani avarthanam in that concert. It became a mridangam concert rather than a vocal concert and received a warm welcome from the Bombay audience. I was filled with gratitude for Bhagavathar and thereafter I received several invitations from Bombay.

I played two concerts in Palakkadu in 1943, the first for Alathur Brothers and the second for Chembai on consecutive days. In the morning





*Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai accompanying Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, with Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer on Violin. File photo from Pallattur Lakshmanan's Arangetram (seated by the side of Pazhani)*

before Chembai's concert, I experienced extreme chest pain which increased every minute. After local treatment, a leading doctor was brought in to treat me and Bhagavathar who had come to know about it rushed to my side and told me "Subbudu take a vow to play at Guruvayurappan temple and pray to him. You will be able to play in the evening concert without any strain". Believe it or not, I was fully restored to good health and in the evening I played for Bhagavathar with the usual gusto! I played in the Guruvayurappan temple for a number of years thereafter with Bhagavathar and I had no reoccurrence of the chest pain.

As I was living in Trichy in the '40s, my concerts were broadcast from AIR Trichy. Due to a mutual misunderstanding, I had stopped performing for AIR for some time. Bhagavathar had come to know of this and tried to make a compromise but AIR officials did not budge. Bhagavathar made a vow that he too would not sing for AIR till I was given due respect and invited to play. At this AIR Trichy saw his point and invited me. After this Bhagavathar also started performing in AIR.

In 1950 Chowdiah arranged a series of concerts to raise funds for a hospital in Bangalore. I was invited to play mridangam in a few concerts and Kanjira in a few others. In Chembai's concert, Chowdiah played on the Violin, Palakkadu Mani Iyer on mridangam with me on Kanjira. Chowdiah himself arranged the seating arrangements on the stage with Mani Iyer to the right of Chembai, himself to the left of Chembai and I, directly opposite to Palakkadu Mani Iyer.

Chembai burst out laughing and told Chowdiah "Chowdiah, do you remember 1936 and there after when you made a big fuss about seating Pazhani in your place? At least on that day, he played on mridangam; today he is playing on Kanjira and you have seated him in your place! This is what is called 'bhagavath sankalpam'. Today as an organiser you know the need to arrange the stage and this responsibility has made you act this way! Did I not tell you earlier about this?" Chowdiah smiled broadly and conveyed his pranams to Bhagavathar.

Chembai firmly believed in team spirit among all performers on the stage and was happy to share the credit for the kutcheri with his teammates. He especially arranged the tani avathanam to be played as soon as the concert had settled down to an even keel and the mridangam tonal quality had settled down. Most vocalists would reach the climax when the listeners were already saturated and would ask the laya vidwan to play the tani. Not so, with the Bhagavathar. He would be always on the alert when the tani was being played and keep encouraging the laya artiste. He had a deep knowledge of intricacies of laya and therefore his tala would have anchor-like stability.

He was a mahanubhava in every sense. My pranams to him.



# Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai - Fusion of Intellect and Aesthetics

Vidwan KS Kalidas, Chennai  
(Extract from Sruti June/July 1987 edition)

The first thought that crosses one's mind when one thinks of Pazhani is his handling of the thoppi, the bass end of the drum, and the exquisite gumkara-s or gumki-s he produced, like no one else-any of his contemporaries or his numerous disciples-could. His gumki, in deep bass, had a long karvai and a cooing pigeon could take a lesson or two from it.

This is no exaggeration. As a youngster, I personally saw him many times tuning the mridangam upside down (!!) after applying 'ravai' paste and then tuning the thoppi so that all areas of the thoppi produced the same frequency. This puzzled me no end, as tuning is usually done only on the valanthalai face of the mridangam that is aligned to the basic sruti of the singer. On the few occasions when the thoppi did not come up to his expectations, the mridangam, made of wood and leather, is a highly capricious instrument-he could never settle down in the concert and play feely.

Pazhani laid a great deal of emphasis on 'vallinam' and 'mellinam' or modulation in playing. This had the effect of adding colour to the proceedings. Although he would not resort to long pauses which would result in discontinuity and a certain awkwardness, he knew the value of silence and understatement and the importance and weight of 'vilamba kala' or slow tempo nadai-s vis-a-vis the nadai-s in medium and fast tempos. Unfortunately, many of our present-day mridanga vidwans overindulge the fast tempo with the intention of creating "effect". What however results is a lot of decibels and consequent mental fatigue!

Pazhani was the first mridanga vidwan to play tisra nadai using chatusra patterns repeated

three times, instead of the usual tisra pattern four times, thus masking the obviousness of tisra nadai. For example, in a half-avarta of four akshara-s of Adi tala, he would play the chatusra pattern 'ta dim dee na' thrice (4x3), rather than the tisra pattern 'tha ki ta' four times (once for each akshara). While 4x3 equals 3x4, the first mode is elegant and conceals the obvious tisra nadai. As well, he extended this approach to intricate korvai-s which, played once, would finish at the end of one-thirds or two thirds of the avarta and which would reach the 'eduppu' only on conclusion of the third round. This was in contrast with the general pattern of korvai-s structured for tisra nadai.

In kanda nadai and misra nadai again, Pazhani played combinations of sollu-s or syllables arranged in very aesthetic and attractive sequences of 2+6+2, 3+7, or 6+4 (khandam) and 5+5+4, 5+4+5 (misram) in preference to the straight five's and seven's which would make the gait obvious. He would cleverly interweave a korvai into this framework and build it into a 'yati' pattern. Many present mridanga vidwans follow this practice established by Shri Pazhani.

Pazhani was uniquely successful in fusing the intellectual and aesthetic aspects of mridangam playing in his style. A very involved and deft korvai would sound pleasant and be easy on the ear due to proper selection of sollukattu-s and their arrangement in a carefully planned format.

Pazhani did not play 'verbatim' for songs, though his drum literally sang along with the vocalist. He followed the sangati-s, chittaswara-s and korvai-s of the song faithfully as he should, but his forte was sarvalaghu for the most part. It was replete with impromptu variations rather





*Pazhani M Subramania Pillai accompanying Madurai Mani Iyer with Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai on Violin*

than characterised by a monotonous beat. He often embellished the sarvalaghu gait with what is known as 'edir nadai' or counter-gait, shifting the same eduppu by one or three matra-s in order to enhance the effect.

In playing for kritis also, he used the thoppi to great effect. He would play the exact swara-s sung by the vocalist by exerting varying amounts of pressure on the thoppi while appropriately playing on the valantalai. One can

never forget how his mridangam literally sang with Madurai Mani Iyer in the niraval, kalpanaswara-s of 'Kaaliniil chilambu konja' in the song 'Taye Yosadha'. He anticipated and reproduced each swara on the mridangam which is essentially a 'dumb' instrument and can produce only the adhara swara. However, being a vidwan with a highly dignified approach to music and shy of playing to the gallery, he did this with a great deal of circumspection.

## **CS Murugabhoopathy on Pazhani**

My recollection of Pazhani focusses first on his intellectual and highly vyavaharam-oriented playing for such stalwarts as Chittoor Subramania Pillai and to the special style developed by him while still adhering to the Pudukkottai tradition. It would take knowledge and effort to understand what he was playing at a particular moment since he would camouflage the tisram and kandan. Palakkadu Mani Iyer on the other hand, used to indicate clearly what he was going to play, by demonstrating the three-s and five-s and seven-s even while switching from Chatusram to other nadai-s.

Pazhani was very good at adopting his performance to the peculiarities of each vocalist. His playing for Alathur Brothers and Chittoor and others like them contained a lot of vyavaharam, while he played more of 'tekka' sollu-s and sarvalaghu-s, etc. for the more lakshaya - oriented music.

What is the secret of sunaadam in Pazhani's mridangam playing? I should know. (Sunaadam has been a feature of Murugabhoopathy's mridangam too). Naadam produced by mridangam artist is akin to the resonant voice of a singer; it is God-given and is not due to anything special that the vidwan has done to produce it.

Courtesy Sruti June/July 1987, Recorded by KS Kalidas



# Calcutta KS Krishnamurthy on Pazhani M Subramania Pillai

*Extracts from a Tamil article written by Calcutta KS Krishnamurthy  
in Bombay Shanmukhananda Sabha's magazine in 1987*

*(For reasons of space we shall use Pazhani in place  
of Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai)*

Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar, Tiger Varadachariar, Sattur S Krishna Iyengar, Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavatar of yore vouchsafed that only Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai followed 'sasthra suddham' and 'satyatvam' in mridangam playing.

Pazhani's thoppi tone and the Gumuki (hoomkaram) that he produced were unmatched. Similar were the tones on the valantalai and he once demonstrated in Annamalai University the Sapta Swaras on the mridangam by playing the thoppi with varying pressure and hoomkaram.

Pazhani's vyavaharam (grammatical calculations) remains unmatched. Once he played for Tiger Varadachariar in Annamalai University for a four Kalai Pallavi with the singer not putting the tala explicitly but moving his left and right shoulders to indicate the place in the Tala cycle. Tiger was overjoyed and kept mentioning 'bhale' and 'shabash' repeatedly. As already stated by me, 'satyatvam' in Pazhani's playing in sarvalaghu and vyavaharam stood out.

He was also a master in playing for the 108 tala scheme as well as in 'Chanda' Talas. Once when my Guru Sattur S Krishna Iyengar sang a Pallavi in 'Lakshmeesa' tala of 25 beats, after the Pallavi was finished satisfactorily, Pazhani himself extended it with a tani avarthanam on the spot and played a specially conceived Mohra and Korvai. Similarly, he had played for the longest tala 'Simhanandana' (128 beats) accompanying Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer in the year 1952 at the Madras Music Academy.

A very handsome man of impeccable taste, he was always clad in spotless white. He was also a man of sterling character with love towards all and malice towards none.

Pazhani was also at the forefront of encouraging talented young artistes and furthering their career prospects. He heard Lalgudi Jayaraman's violin when he (Jayaraman) was quite young and had extended his concert opportunities to a great extent.

Pazhani who was a master of fiery laya in his early stages mellowed down in the last 20 years of his playing and the exquisite way in which he played for Madurai Mani Iyer not only received much acclaim from the audience but from Mani Iyer himself. However, when he played for Alathur Brothers he let loose his laya patterns; when he played for GNB it was the use of farans to match GNB's brighas. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer stated in one sentence "Pazhani is mridangam and mridangam is Pazhani"

Pazhani was one of the few mridanga vidwans who played 2 or more 'Tani Avarthanams' in a kutchery of 4-4.5 hour durations. He had played for all major vidwans of the bygone era Mahara-japuram Viswanatha Iyer, Ariyakudi, Musiri Subramania Iyer, GNB, Alathur Brothers, Madurai Mani Iyer - the list is endless. Later he also played for Lalgudi-Srimathy violin concerts as well as newcomers like KV Narayanaswamy, Ramnad Krishnan, and TM Thyagarajan.

With all his mastery over Layam, did he receive the proper recognition from the Govt., a doctorate, or a title Sangeetha Kalanidhi? Sadly, NO. But there have been many who have not been honoured thus. This lack of recognition did not





*Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai accompanying Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar with TN Krishnan on Violin*

come in the way of the recognition that he received from the listeners. Further, the Guru pooja conducted by his disciples each year tantamount to the greatest honour that any vidwan could receive.

*(Calcutta Shri KS Krishnamurthy was a great vidwan and Guru and a personal friend of Lalgudi Shri Jayaraman. Among his students are celebrities like Sanjay Subrahmaniam, Sudha Raghunathan and others)*

## **Pazhani synonymous with ‘Gowravam’ (Dignity)**

One small incident I can recall about Pazhani. 1954, Allepey, Marriage concert in the family of a wealthy local patron of arts. Semmangudi mama's concert was arranged with Rajamanickam Pillai and Pazhani, and yours truly on the thampurA. The patron, though wealthy, lacked ingeetham (decorum) and remarked straight into the face of Pazhani, that unfortunately Palakkadu Mani Iyer was not free and hence Pazhani was arranged. But Pazhani as usual just smiled casually and walked straight to the dias, always inquiring about the welfare of others on his way. The respect which he had for his seniors and affection with which he spoke to youngsters (as a matter of fact, there was no "vAdA pOdA" ever in his speech towards youngsters - only "thambi, vAnga pOnga etc..") remains a surprise to me for I still cannot believe a vidwan of such a towering status could be so humble.

Semmangudi mama sang a divine kharahapriya that day, followed by "rAma nee sam-Anamevaru" and thani followed that. Pazhani

played a misra nadai, with sparks flying around and never did I see Semmangudi mama again in such an exited state with volleys of "bales and besh"... At the end of the concert, the patron with tears in his eyes, profusely apologised and handed over the remuneration envelope to Pazhani, which he didn't even open and see. Finally when we returned to Trivandrum the next day, Pazhani opened the cover only to find out that he had received double the amount than his usual concert fee. Before catching the train back to Madras, he returned the excess amount to Semmangudi mama to get it delivered to the patron, prompting Semmangudi mama to say "Pillaival, ungala madhiri gowravama thozhil panna, innoruthar porandhu varanam".. ("a person should be born again to carry himself with such dignity").

*Source: Varadharajan, (rasikas.com), who strummed the Tampura for Semmangudi mama in that concert*



# Everlasting contributions of Sri Pazhani - A perfect blend of the Head and the Heart

Shailesh Ramamurthy, Bangalore

Sri Pazhani's resonant blend of the bass and tonal components from the two heads of the mridangam, use of dynamics (*vallinam-mellinam* i.e. *forceful vs soft*) in a style that never intruded but enhanced music and melody, can never be overemphasised. In addition to these ingredients which made his mridangam style uniquely appealing, Sri Pazhani made several everlasting, deep, technical contributions to the intricate world of *laya* and *kanakku* (rhythmic mathematical formulations). Though describing them in writing has its challenges, this article highlights a few of these.

## ***Fluid and aesthetic naḍai-bhedams:***

It has often been remembered about how Sri Pazhani aesthetically typically transitioned into slow and majestic *tiśra naḍai*, not by showing the threes explicitly, but by grouping the slow *tiśra naḍai* pulses into groups of fours to maintain the natural elegance and poise of a *chaturāśra naḍai* - developing this into exciting patterns that syncopate and contrast the rendered syllables and the main rhythmic beat. For instance, hearing this clip from the 5<sup>th</sup> minute would exemplify how the transition to *tiśra naḍai* takes place at 5m 5s - <https://youtu.be/PPdmfeZav0s?t=300>

Sri Pazhani developed this elegant style of *naḍai bheda*m (change of *naḍai*) in many further ways.

In a concert featuring Shri GN Balasubramaniam, Sri Lalgudi and Sri Pazhani, 'Aragimpave' has been essayed in a teasing *kaalapramaana*, slower than the conventional *madhyamakaala* the composition is generally sung in, but not as slow a *kaalapramaana* used for conventional *vilamba*

*kaala krtis*. All the three Mahavidwans have handled this tempo-tight presentation nonchalantly and aesthetically. In the *tani* which follows, Sri Pazhani plays his beautiful *korvai* (rhythmic formulation) which starts in *chaturāśra naḍai* and transitions to *miśra naḍai* and fast *tiśra naḍai* in a most fluid and subtle manner. (Please listen to <https://youtu.be/59AfAmXOuOg?t=1186> from time instant 19m 45s). Such a transition from *miśra naḍai* into fast *tiśra naḍai* seamlessly is possible only for maestros like Sri Pazhani, endowed with supremely precise sense of timing, since it involves a transition from 7 pulses per beat to 6 pulses per beat - moreover, in this *korvai* the rhythmic patterns do not trivially align to the beat in the said *naḍai*-s.

## ***Intuitive 'Tiśra-chaturāśram' (triplet-groups):***

*Tiśra-chaturāśram*, also called *Chaturāśra-tiśram* today, refers to use of basic *chaturāśra naḍai*, grouping three inner-units into a pulse, and rendering the said groups with stylistic doubling or quadrupling of speed. In other words, it involves *tiśra kaarvai*-s and inducing second or third *kaala* on them. Of course, segments of *krti*-s or *pallavi*-s contain *tiśra kaarvai*-s, and these could have formed an intuitive genesis for *Tiśra-chaturāśram*.

Direct disciples of maestro Sri Pazhani have reminiscenced how the maestro once played an entire *tani* (solo percussive section) in *rupaka tala* from start to finish, in *tiśra-chaturāśra*. Each *Avarta* in *Rupaka tala* (when envisioned practically as a three beat cycle like *tiśra ekam*, rather than its *sooladi* forms) comprises of four clusters of *tiśra kaarvai*-s. Using this framework, the maestro used the four clusters akin to a four



beat cycle and played various interesting and intricate patterns that one would normally associate with *Adi tala*. The syncopated patterns, intricate but coated with Sri Pillai's trademark sheen and *sunadam*, have been acclaimed as a delight for both the cognoscenti and the masses! What possibly had its genesis in a basic and intuitive grouping of inner-units into threes within *chaturaśra naḍai*, now appeared like a new *naḍai* (gati or gait) variation induced because of the aesthetic sophistication introduced during elaboration in that paradigm.

The next generation of maestros like Sri Lalgudi (and Sri Palakkadu Raghu) developed *Chaturaśra-tiśram* further, to elevate it to the status of a formal speed variation especially while rendering *pallavi*-s that began at fractional *eḍuppu*-s, which do not lend themselves easily to a conventional lower-speed *tiśra naḍai* from *eḍuppu* (e.g. *pallavi*-s with 1/4 or 3/4 *iḍam* in 2 kaLai *Adi* or other *talas*). Rendering the *pallavi*-line twice in *chaturaśra tiśram* would be conducive for rendering the *pallavi* from *iḍam* to *iḍam*. (Note: *iḍam* denotes the take-off point in the *taala*.) This gave an intricate effect similar to (but not the same as) rendering the *pallavi* in conventional *tiśra naḍai*.

#### **Delectable Delight - "Double-khaṇḍam":**

Vidwan Sri Pazhani revelled in innovative multi-layered structures in his rhythmic compositions. He would induce a *khaṇḍa naḍai* on each beat (5 pulses to a beat), group the *khaṇḍa-naḍai* pulses into four, and then induce a split of five within the time spanned by each group of four. This has been fondly called a 'double *khaṇḍam*' by some practitioners from the Pazhani school – to refer to its nature of being a second-level of *khaṇḍam*. Vidwan Pazhani would build a magnificent compositional structure over this edifice, such that it seemed elegant and simple, concealing the intricacy of this multi-layered *naḍai*. Given the lack of recordings of this, it is pertinent to note that early disciples like Udu-malaipettai Sri Mayilsamy have verbally recounted this framework to Sri KS Kalidas who has reconstructed and enriched this paradigm with his own contributions, as can be heard in the hands of his disciples (An example can be found

at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHYe863o2zM&feature=youtu.be&t=6914> - from 1hr 55m 14s).

#### **Charming Structures - 'thathakaaram-s':**

Sri Pazhani is one of the early vidwans in whose concerts (and recordings) we come across beautiful *thathakaarams*, stately rhythmically structured passages which are perceptually distinct from *korvai*-s. His renditions inspired vidwans of other schools to render similar passages as well, after adaptation, or in their original form. The charm of these passages was such that such vidwans also were also inspired to render them in multiple speeds and gaits.

#### **Thundering *tiśra naḍai korvai*:**

Among the many creations of Sri Pazhani are his *tiśra naḍai* based final *korvai*-s. The listener is drawn to their majestic and thundering nature. Also noteworthy are the elegant progressions within each round of the *korvai*. There is a challenging interplay between the rhythmic syllables and the *tala*-beats. By virtue of how *tiśra naḍai* works on his setup, the first two rounds conclude at points such as one-third and two-third of beat-positions, while the final round concludes on the beat, making for an arresting effect.. Sri Pazhani has used this setup for *Miśra jhampai* as well as *Adi*, the *korvai* spanning 80 beats. He also composed *tiśra naḍai mora*-s (*mohra*) with his trademark style, which dovetail beautifully to lead into these *korvai*-s.

The *tiśra naḍai mora* followed by *tiśra naḍai korvai* can be heard from <https://youtu.be/AIXlc-TUoR8s?t=6544> (from 1 hr 49 min 05 seconds onward)

#### **Exciting Mo(h)ra-s:**

Speaking of *mora*-s, here is one associated with the maestro, which takes off one inner-unit after the beat and continues in that vein until the end of the *mora* which joins the *samam*-beat.

<https://youtu.be/zOZaHi4m9iY?t=332>. Please listen from 5m 30s; the *mora* starts at 5m 34s. In a duet Sri Pazhani plays with his illustrious disciple, esteemed Sangita Kalanidhi Trichy Sri Sankaran, we see the same *Adi taala mora* now used in the context of a different *taala*, i.e.,



miśra chaapu. The said *mora* plus the three rounds of *korvai* that follow make this integrated passage land into the desired take-off point. The audio is available at [https://youtu.be/OU\\_WpUFGQPg?t=482](https://youtu.be/OU_WpUFGQPg?t=482); the *mora* starts at 8m 04s.

#### **Value of silence and space:**

The topic of his accompaniment to melody and music perhaps requires a separate article in itself. It is well known that Sri Pazhani used myriads of beautiful patterns in *sarvalaghu*, each one - the most appropriate, to go with the music and the composition. Cross-rhythmic patterns, played at points where they would never collide or intrude with the melody musician's flights of imagination, richly augmented the *sarvalaghu*. All these served to resonantly fill-up the sound-scape and create the richest *naadamaya*. In this article, we touch upon just one related aspect perhaps less focused upon. In his accompaniment to musicians who predominantly used the slow-tempo or *vilamba kaala* (like Vid Sri Musiri Subrahmanya Iyer), Sri Pazhani's sense of space that he has beautifully imparted, in keeping with the character of the melody he was following, is amazing and soothing. This is exemplified in his accompaniment to Sri Musiri's concert, wherein the suggested samples include *Samukhaana in Kokilavaraali* (<https://youtu.be/dxt80SKdD2M?t=4119> from the 1h 08m 40s), *Entanine in Mukhari* (<https://youtu.be/dxt80SKdD2M?t=1919> from 32<sup>nd</sup> minute) and *Ksheerasaagara śayana in Devagandhaari* (<https://youtu.be/dx-t80SKdD2M?t=4867> from 1h 21m).

#### **The creative aesthete:**

Sri JV (Trichy Sri J Venkataraman) of the Alathur school remembers the presence of mind and on-the-spot creativity of Sri Pazhani, completely rooted in musical aesthetics, as exemplified in a concert of Alathur brothers. The line beginning 'Saumitri' of *Dachukovalena* in *Todi*, *Miśra Jhampai* was chosen for creative exploration culminating in *kalpana swaras*. In the *tani* that followed from Sri Pazhani, in the final *korvai* (of 3 rounds), the first round he played accounted for 76 inner units. Sri JV points out that in the next two rounds, Sri Pazhani spontaneously came up with beautiful patterns which accounted for growing

yati like progressions spanning 80 and 84 respectively, to precisely account for the total of 80x3 across three rounds of *korvai*. Sri JV also goes into raptures mentioning how the *korvai* was apt for 'Saumitri', which commences with a 3+3 syllabic structure in terms of inner units, in the version rendered by the artistes. He goes into details of how each cluster in *poorvaangam* (of 54 inner units) as well *uttaraangam* (of 22, 26, 30 respectively in each of the three rounds) had "a domination of 3s" in terms of the constituent inner-units, to match the 3+3 take off at 'Saumitri'. Sri JV emphasises how Sri Pazhani came up with these aesthetic and apt formulations spontaneously.

We can watch Sri JV recount this anecdote here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8boNWeVWlg>

The above examples are just the tip of the iceberg of Sri Pazhani's innovative and everlasting contributions. His renditions of even the most complex content was never dry or strident, but always sheer rhythmic poetry. Some of Sri Pazhani's creations, born of his aesthetic intuition (*lakshya*) and artistic eye, have initially baffled even experts in terms of notating them, due to the most subtle and intricate arrangements. A few of such compositions of his could, at first glance, even seem like purely *lakshya* oriented creations, but when one analyses them with enough depth, they typically prove to be completely anchored in time-honoured *lakshana* (grammar). In summary, every part of his rendition leads to the subsequent part in a very logical, progressive and aesthetic manner, like a cogent and riveting tightly-knit story !

#### **Acknowledgements:**

लेखनीदण्डरूपोहम् लेखकोपि स एव हि – "Am the stylus holder - He is the writer"

The content for this article has been framed around the analysis of various recordings, reminiscences and anecdotal evidences, supplemented with an overview of relevant technical background, as per need. Conversations with esteemed vidwan Sri KS Kalidas (direct disciple of Sri Pazhani) along with his valuable insights, have been particularly helpful. Some of the remaining examples have been excerpted from content available in the public domain.



# Shri Palakkadu Raghu on Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai

*Excerpts from a radio speech in Tamil in 1981*

It is 58 years since the demise of Mahavidwan Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai but his melodious playing is still ringing in our ears. Why, his playing will continue to enthrall thousands of rasikas for many many years to come. He had evolved a style of his own and taught it to his many disciples. What can one say about his superb melody, the combination of valantalai and thoppi, the special nadam of his thoppi, and the gumkhis, the way he played for kritis with necessary countregait patterns where required and the special Hindustani 'thekas' he played for 'tukkudas' at the end of concerts? Tani avarthanams would be constructed differently for each concert and the way he played the patterns was so melodious and appeared simple

but only when we attempted to play his patterns would we understand the 'bihu', 'gam-beeryam' and 'exquisiteness' which we could never emulate.

There was an occasion when All India Radio, Delhi in its Southeast Asia broadcast aired a concert of Alathur Brothers in which they sang 'endu daginado' in Todi, Misra Chapu, and Shri Pazhani played a Tani Avarthanam which mesmerised me so much that I reminded dazed for the whole day, making me wonder if Misra Chapu can be played in so novel and insightful ways. This set my own thinking on these lines and when I played for Shri GNB a few days later with this inspiration, Shri Pazhani, who attended the concert was very happy and blessed me.

*Pazhani accompanying Alathur Brothers*





Not only me, but he encouraged so many young artists, and today so many of them are totally indebted to him.

Once Shri Pazhani himself arranged for a concert of mine for GNB with a very good concert fee in Calcutta. When I went to thank him for this kind gesture, he did not allow me to speak of my gratitude and totally avoided the topic. Similarly, when I heard a concert at Thiruvananthapuram in which he played and wanted to

express my joy he did not only allow me to speak but told me how his ancestors ('periya-vanga') would have played for the sequences in various kritis. His humility is indescribable. He cared more for the 'gowravam' and 'respect' of his co-vidwans and rasikas and never craved for any title or honours. There is no end to his sterling qualities. We can only aspire to follow the path shown by this great vidwan with humility, grace, and dignified approach to art.

## BM Sundaram on Pazhani



(Excerpts from Musicologist Shri BM Sundaram's speech during the release of the book 'Dhruva Natchathiram' written by Lalitha Ram on Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai )

I wanted to learn Taval playing during my younger days but my father was keen that I should learn mridangam. Pazhani stayed in our house during 'Ramalinga Swamy Utsavam' and he asked my father to send me to Trichy where he stayed. At that time he used to live in Trichy near the Town Station. Since then I visited him during the weekends and that is how my learning started. It was also the time when Vidwan MN Kandaswamy Pillai was learning from Pazhani Anna. Unfortunately, I could not continue for long due to various reasons.

He was a rare gem and a real maestro. Some times the truth is bitter but as far as I am

concerned, I can not conceal the truth though it may be bitter to some people. This is my humble opinion. 'Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai is the undisputed leader of the mridangam world and a clear number one Mahavidwan. The "gumukhi" and 'araichapu' from his magical hands are unparalleled to this day so was his arithmetical content or 'Kanakku'. 'Pat-tukku vasikiradu' (Playing for the kritis) was unique in his style and he set standards for other vidwans to follow. Pazhani anna always thought about enhancing the music that he supported on mridangam.

Pazhani anna's father Shri Muthaiah Pillai, a disciple of Manpoondia Pillai was a great Taval vidwan but opted for mridangam in his later days. However, he did not teach his son Pazhani anna initially as he was a left-hander. It was due to Pudukkottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai's intervention that he began to teach him. However, the turning point was Pazhani anna's association with Iluppur (Malaikkottai) Pan-chapakesa Pillai (Taval Panchami) with whom he had several exchanges of ideas which paved the way for his reaching the top-notch.

It is very unfortunate that the true merit was not properly recognised and awards and titles like Sangeetha Kalanidhi and Padma awards were not accorded to him. True merit was never recognised by those who matter in the past or even in today's world.

*Translation credit : S Anand, Bangalore*



# Palakkadu Mani Iyer's love of Pazhani's 'thoppi'

*Excerpts from the Tamil book 'Dhruva Natchathiram' written by Lalitha Ram  
and inputs from Shri Rajaram  
Translation credit : Suresh Jagennathan, Coimbatore*



Palakkadu Mani Iyer's son Rajaram reminisces about his father's ever lasting love of Pazhani's "thoppi".

Father (Palakkadu Mani Iyer) had more love for the instrument (mridangam) than for the music coming out of the instrument! Whether there was any kutcheri or not, he would keep checking his mridangam every now and then. He was interested in knowing the technicalities of making the mridangam i.e., which skin to use, how to apply the 'moottu', how to tighten the 'vaar' (straps) etc. We believe that one of the main reasons we shifted from Palakkadu to Thanjavur was that there were skilled craftsmen to work on mridangam there. Father's mridangams were crafted by one Parlandu, the best craftsman in the trade. He divided his time to attend to the mridangams of Pazhani also.

At one point of time Parlandu was missing for quite some time. When he came back he mentioned that he had gone to work for Pazhani. Father immediately asked about Pazhani's instruments. Father mentioned that Pazhani's

## **Extract from a speech on**

**'Talamum Anubhavamum' (the tala and experiences) by Palakkadu Mani Iyer during the release of the book on Konnakol Vydialingam Pillai.**

*"I have benefitted from great vidwans like Manpoondia Pillai, Thanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer, Tavil Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai and Panchapakesa Pillai, Pazhani Subramania Pillai, Ghatam Krishna Iyer, and others. In each of my concerts, I have followed their experiences and talents. This book has been written by Konnakol Pakkiri Pillai (son of Vydialingam Pillai) with great care and labor".*

'thoppi' was so good and comfortable and why he did not create one like that for him (PMI).

Parlandu agreed and made several attempts to make the thoppi sound as close to Pazhani's. Mani Iyer was never satisfied and Parlandu told him that it was the exact way that he made the thoppi for pazhani. This went on for a few months and Mani Iyer was never satisfied. Finally in exasperation Mani Iyer asked Parlandu what made Pazhani's thoppi so very special? Parlandu told him it was not the leather that matters but Pazhani's 'kaivahu' the sound produced by his hand and no one can equal that.

Father took it sportingly and used to tell others that Parlandu has told him that he would never be able to produce the thoppi tone like Pazhani's and that was that.



# Pudukkottai Tradition and Kanjira

*Excerpts from the Tamil book 'Dhruva Natchathiram' written by Lalitha Ram  
Translation credit : C Ramakrishnan, Chennai*

The percussionists belonging to Pudukkottai laya parampara remained experts in handling more than one instrument. Pudukkottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai was adept in playing Ghatam, Mridangam and Kanjira. Pazhani Muthiah Pillai also was an expert in Taval, Mridangam and Kanjira. Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai who came in that lineage was a genius in playing Mridangam and Kanjira both.

Trichy Sankaran the renowned Mridangam exponent and disciple of Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai who is also adept in handling Kanjira reminisced "the vidwans of Pudukkottai tradition had a special affinity towards Kanjira because Kanjira was introduced by Manpoondia Pillai, founder of this glorious tradition".

Pazhani has played Kanjira mostly in the concerts where Palakkadu Mani Iyer played the Mridangam. Rasikas used to assemble in large numbers to see both the stalwarts sharing the

stage. They played together in concerts including some fund raising and marriage concerts. When a concert of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar was organised to raise funds for the temple of Manpoondia Pillai, Palakkadu Mani Iyer and Pazhani played together. Veteran Mridanga vidwan TK Murthy quipped, "after Dakshinamurthy Pillai, only Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai could produce such a mesmerising nadam out of the Kanjira".

Trichy Sankaran reminisced "Playing Kanjira is not an easy task. In the later years, due to health reasons, my Guru stopped playing Kanjira except on some unavoidable occasions. The noted film actor Balaiah was prepared to postpone the date of a marriage in his house to suit the convenience of Palakkadu Mani Iyer and Pazhani. Pazhani was practising the Kanjira daily before that marriage. He used to remember Dakshinamurthy Pillai at that time and would

*Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar (Vocal), Palakkadu Mani Iyer (Mridangam), Pazhani M Subramania Pillai (Kanjira) and TN Krishnan (Violin).*





say. 'Irrespective of the speed in which he played, each time, when the 'dhum' is struck on the Kanjira, we used to get goosebumps'.

Normally Kanjira is given the status of upapakkavadyam. Mridangam is the main percussion instrument in a concert and Kanjira is considered to be a complementary instrument even in the present concert format. But when Pazhani played the Kanjira, it commanded an equal status to the Mridangam. Even in the seating arrangement, Pazhani was given equal status with Palakkadu Mani Iyer and he used to occupy the seat normally given to the Violinists.

The violin vidwans who were not willing to offer their seats to accommodate Pazhani in the initial years, happily consented to sit behind Pazhani in the later years. In the initial years, when Palakkadu Mani Iyer and Pazhani played together, there was the confusion as to their seating arrangement. At that juncture, it was the large hearted Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai who said 'mappallai (son-in-law) neenge en edattile okaringa' - please sit in my place. I shall sit behind you". The other violinist also followed suit.

The combination of Madurai Mani/GNB with Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai, Palakkadu Mani and Pazhani was billed as 'mummanigalum manikkavum' (Three gems and the diamond). Reminisces G Kittappa, owner of the now closed Ananda lodge at Thanjavur where most vidwans stayed while giving concerts in Thanjavur.

Even-though a lot of reports are available about the concerts played by the Pazhani and Mani Iyer pair, only one concert, that of Ariyakudi is available with this combination with TN Krishnan. Mani Iyer and Pazhani played alternatively for Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charanam, neraval passages and swara prastara-s.

There were also vary rare occasions when Pazhani played on the mridanga and Palakkadu Mani Iyer played on Kanjira. Vidwan late TM Thyagarajan mentioned that this happened in a Swathi Thirunal Day concert of Alathur Brothers held in Chennai. Another concert took place in the navaratri series concert at Trivandrum. According to Pallattur Lakshmanan, a disciple of Pazhani there were also a few occasions when he played with Ramanathapuram CS Murugabhoopathy as also with some of his disciples handling the mridangam.

According to Semmangudi mama, the Pazhani-Tavil Panchami mridangam-Kanjira combination was very impressive. They were like two wild tuskers engaged in a friendly fight. Such would be their sallies that, after each of them had completed his turn, the audience would wonder how the other could possibly respond, but the question would linger for only a second or two before the response came.

Such a combination of giants who were great personal friends must have been a sight for the Gods, truly.

## TK Murthy speaks

TK Murthy in an interview to 'The Hindu' he had this to say, "I have high regard for Pazhani, a genius who was unfortunately denied the recognition he should have got. Do you know that Dakshinamurthy Pillai was a very austere musician? He ate just once a day and slept on the floor. But when he put his hands on the mridangam it was magic! Look at us - we have several meals a day and live a good life, yet we feel we lack nourishment and energy when we play. I believe it is a matter of will and passion,

and not entirely on energy....," He further says "Pudukkottai school of mridangam has more or less disappeared, barring a few practitioners. "Almost everyone who plays now, plays the Thanjavur style. While I am happy that this school of music lives on immortalising the likes of my guru, I am sad that a highly evolved style like the Pudukkottai school has few takers"

(Courtesy 'The Hindu')



# Pazhani and his contemporaries

*(Excerpts from the Sruti, June/July 1987 and interaction with KS Kalidas)*



*File photo of Pazhani with Alathur Brothers and Doreswamy Iyengar*

## **Alathur Brothers**

Alathur Venkatesa Iyer, father of Alathur Sivasubramania Iyer who constituted the burly half of the singing pair known as Alathur Brothers, was a great friend of laya vidwans of his day and particularly Pudukkottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai. He trained the brothers - the other brother 'Srinivasa Iyer' was only a partner of Sivasubramania Iyer, not really a sibling - to become specialists in laya aspects and taught them complex pallavi-s. The brothers rendered one such specially prepared pallavi as a surprise item - such surprises were common to concerts in those days - on the occasion of Dakshinamurthy Pillai's shashtiabdapoorti (61st birthday) celebration. Pazhani on the mridangam and his father on the Kanjira accompanied the pair; Muthaiah Pillai took no time at all to decipher the structure of the pallavi called technically as 'asu'. Pazhani took off from where his father had left and introduced a few variations in the middle, keeping the eduppu (beginning) and the 'arudhi' (midpoint of the tala cycle) intact. In the

next round Muthaiah Pillai added a few more frills and Pazhani applied his own imagination to produce a few variations of his own. The exchange went on like this from father to son and back to father, and, as Venkatesa Iyer later told MN Kandaswamy, it appeared that it was Pazhani and his father who were the main performers and the brothers were merely accompanying them. It was then that Venkatesa Iyer realised that Pazhani - about the same age as the brothers - was the only mridangam artist around who could raise their concert to the highest level

Forthwith he packed off the brothers to Madras where Pazhani was living then. Thus began one of the greatest friendships and collaborations in Karnatic music history - between Alathur Brothers and Pazhani Subramania Pillai.

In the years that followed, The brothers and Pazhani worked closely to produce and render exciting pallavi-s, rhythm-oriented korvai-s, etc. The combination became very popular. If the brothers gained reputation as worthy successor of Kanchipuram Naina Pillai in terms of laya specialisation, a substantial share of the credit for it belonged to Pazhani Subramania Pillai. Since there is a competent mridangam artist behind every successful vyavahara-oriented vidwan.

There was, unfortunately, a break in their friendship for a few years - much to the sorrow of Venkatesa Iyer, who was a Pazhani fan(atic) till his very end - when Pazhani did not accompany the brothers. At last Venkatesa Iyer succeeded in bringing them together again by actually resorting to hunger strike till Pazhani relented. Then onwards, they go along well together





*Sitting L to R - Pazhani M Subramania Pillai, Alathur Srinivasa Iyer, Alathur Sivasubramania Iyer, KPS Narayanan, Radhakrishna Iyer (Secretary RR Sabha, Trichy). Standing - MR Govindaraja Bhagavathar, (MKT's cousin)*

again but the old camaraderie seemed to have cooled down somewhat.

When Pazhani died, the brothers were the most heartbroken among the musicians and it is said that they rushed from Trichy to Madras within few hours of the event to participate in the funeral.

### **TR Mahalingam**

Pazhani had accompanied Mali in many concerts and they admired each other's talent, but, like everybody else, the mridangam maestro had to put up with the eccentric behaviour of the flute genius.

On one occasion, in a Madurai programme, Mali did not allow Pazhani to play tani avarthanam till the end of the concert was reached and then he asked Pazhani to play it for a Tirup-pugazh song. All though he was furious, Pazhani played all the same, but just the Mohra and Korvai in about two minutes. When he reached the hotel, a visibly seething Pazhani wondered aloud what sort of vidwan this disrespectful youngster was and what he knew of music. N Ramakrishnan a very devoted disciple, dared to disagree with him and retorted that, whatever one might say of Mali's behaviour, no one, not even Pazhani, could speak ill of Mali's musician-

ship. Pazhani was taken aback at this retort but smiled after a few seconds and said : "Yes, you are right".

The incident did not end there. In a couple of days, a sheepish looking Mali went over to the office of the Chief Commercial Superintendent of Southern Railways where Ramakrishna worked and, apologising profusely, asked him to convey his regards to Pazhani.

In a letter to the editor of The Hindu, published on 16 June 1962, Mali wrote, voicing his regret over Pazhani's death : "He (Pazhani) was one who would not hesitate to track and follow all the laya manipulations a main artist could take up"

### **GN Balasubramaniam**

GNB was the prince charming among Carnatic musicians, Pazhani himself was a man of epicurean tastes who lived very well. Both were unorthodox, liberal and intellectual and a great friendship developed between them. GNB would affectionately address him as 'Pazhani ayya'. For almost three decades, it was either Pazhani or Palakkadu Mani Iyer who used to accompany GNB and only when neither of them were available would someone else be fixed up.





*Pazhani accompanying Madurai Mani Iyer with Mysore T Chowdiah on violin at Sri Rama Seva Mandali, Chamarajapet, Bangalore*

Some of the best concerts of GNB were with Pazhani as an accompanist. According to GNB's son Doraiswami (Appu), GNB would tell him that, with Pazhani accompanying him in a concert, it was like riding a 'Chevrolet'. Chevrolet cars were the craze then.

#### **Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer**

It was no surprise that Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer, a great expert in laya, had great respect and appreciation for Pazhani and that he preferred to have Pazhani as his mridangam accompanist. Although he was not an artist who enjoyed popularity, Mudikondan was noted for his vyavahara-laden recitals and erudite lecture-demonstrations ; in both Pazhani could be an asset to him.

Venkatarama Iyer took up the Simhanandana tala for a pallavi demonstration at the music academy. This tala has 128 akshara-s per avartha - and it takes nearly two minutes to complete one avarta or round. It presents many pitfalls to the performers even after rehearsals. But the Mudikondan-Pazhani combo rendered the pallavi smoothly and without a single lapse; the demonstration was talked about for many years as a great feat.

#### **Kalyanakrishna Bhagavathar**

When he had a misunderstanding with Alathur Brothers and did not play often with them,

Pazhani felt the need for an artist with a commanding voice and laya mastery in whose company he could perform. He persuaded MA Kalyanakrishna Bhagavatar, a veena vidwan, to become a full-fledged vocalist as well.

There were a number of programmes in which he accompanied the Manjapara vidwan, with Lalgudi Jayaraman playing the violin. A grateful Kalyanakrishna Bhagavatar would not talk of music for more than a minute without bringing in Pazhani and his greatness.

#### **Madurai Mani Iyer**

It is said that initially Pazhani was not quite keen on accompanying Madurai Mani Iyer as, according to him, the latter's music did not contain any vyavaharam or complexities. However, his well-wishers persuaded him to play for Mani Iyer. He came to appreciate the 'sowkhyabhavam', the sweet serenity, of Mani Iyer's music as also his impeccable adherence to sruti and control over tempo. Pazhani's playing itself acquired a new sheen and Madurai Mani Iyer's control over Kalapramana was such that Pazhani could play freely and not necessarily sarvalaghu alone. Mani Iyer's gain was that the large number of gaps during his niraval and swara-singing were beautifully filled up by Pazhani. They complemented each other so well that Pazhani became the first choice to accompany Madurai Mani



Iyer. Pazhani can be considered as the 'alter-ego' of Madurai Mani Iyer.

### TK Rangachari

TK Rangachari, like Sattur AG Subrahmaniam and Tanjavur Lakshminarayanan of his age group, had the misfortune to enter the kutcheri arena when maestros like Ariyakudi, Semmangudi, Madurai Mani Iyer, GNB and Alathur Brothers had a virtual monopoly of the rasikas attention. He never made it to the summit. But his erudite

and engaging music appealed to Pazhani who provided enthusiastic mridangam accompaniment to him in many concerts. Rangachari for his part enjoyed the graceful and varied gait and counter-gait that marked Pazhani's playing. After the latter's death, Rangachari would point out to Pazhani's disciples who played accompaniment to him, how well their master had played one passage or another.

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## TK Murthy on Pazhani

It was around 1936 that I first met Pazhani Subbudu. I was 13 then. My fellow student, 12 year old Thambuswamy (brother of Sangeetha Kalanidhi TM Thyagarajan) and I were both accompanying Musiri Subramania Iyer and Semmangudi Narayanaswamy Iyer (Violin) at the Jagannatha Bhaktha Sabha in Egmore, Madras. After Musiri sang a 4-kalai chaukkam pallavi, 'nilathaa marulu kontini', I played the tani. At the end of the concert, a gentleman approached me, hugged me affectionately and complimented me on my playing. My guru, who as always present at the concert, came up to us and made the introductions. Pazhani Subbudu exclaimed : 'Your student, eh? It certainly shows'. I will never forget that day. I was thrilled to receive the blessings of this great vidwan. In addition, my guru, who discouraged his students from hearing any words of praise lest they develop swollen head - 'leave the hall as soon as the concert is over', he would say, and even today I obey the dictum - was obviously happy at the reaction of Pazhani. Vaitha anna (Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer), then and on many later occasions advised me to listen to Pazhani's playing whenever possible and learn from it whatever I could. A year later Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar gave me similar advice.

At that time Pazhani was residing in Purasavakkam, in a house of a Vakil's (Lawyer's) clerk. But, some years later, when he moved to Gengu Reddy street (where also lived Alathur

Brothers, Thirupamburam Swaminatha Pillai, Sundari Thampi and fiddle Govindaswamy Naicker), I used to go by his house often, halt and listen to him playing as I was also residing nearby. Furthermore, when he moved to Trichy, joining the World War II evacuees, from Madras who were afraid that the Japanese might attack the city. In Trichy he had a number of concert opportunities as well as play on the radio. I listened to him quite a lot and was charmed by his playing. In particular, I developed an immense liking for his Korvai-s and embellish my own performance. In fact, Palakkadu Mani Iyer used to remark quite frequently; 'you played that diligently like Pazhani'.

TK Murthy reminisces, 'There was a tavil vidwan called Malaikottai Panchapakesa Pillai (aka Panchami). I remember a festival in Thanjavur at 'Ramalinga Swami Matham' (mutt). This Tavil vidwan delivered a fantastic vocal concert with BK Viswanatha Sarma on the violin and Sri Pazhani on the mridangam. Incidentally, it is the same tavil vidwan who composed the chitta swaram for 'niravadhi sukhada' (Ravi Chandrika). The next day, the said festival had Sri Naina Pillai's son with Sri Viswanatha Sarma on the violin and Sri Pazhani on mridangam. The next day had the swami oorvalam or divine procession, with Nagaswaram music by Tiruvizhimalai brothers with Sri Needamangalam Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, Sri Kamakshisundaram Pillai and Sri Panchapakesa Pillai, all on Tavil.





*Pazhani, Madurai Mani Iyer, Alathur Brothers at Trichy Nandrudayan Vinayaka Temple which was the focal point of Music during '50s and '60s. Who is who of music and stalwarts have performed here for over 70 years.*

To hear their wonderful rendition, vidwans Sri Palakkadu Mani Iyer, Sri TM Thyagarajan, his brother Sri Thambuswamy and me, were in rapt attention. Such music cannot be witnessed in the current times.

Pazhani did not get to the pre-eminent position which he richly deserved. It is very unfortunate indeed. I am convinced that he belongs to the same galaxy - a Jupiter to Palakkadu Mani Iyer's Saturn.

It can be said that it was Chembai who eventually brought Pazhani into prominence. The world of Karnatic music owes deep debt of gratitude to Chembai - bless his soul. He encouraged, promoted and nurtured many artistes who might otherwise have been like 'buried deep in the dark unfathomed caves of ocean'. Pazhani ranks among the greatest of vidwans. He was a true artist. His accompanying during the rendering of the kritis was high class and delectable.

Once at a Golden Rock concert in Trichy, accompanying MA Kalyanakrishna Bhagavata, I played Pazhani's 'thadinginathom' (korvai). Pazhani, who was present, asked me to play it again, which I did. Again he repeated the request and I obliged, but I was beginning to suspect perhaps I had made a serious mistake. After the concert when we were having our dinner, he asked me about that korvai. I told him that it was his own and I hoped that I did not slip up.

Pazhani simply asked me to repeat the 'solkattu' and asked me whether I could identify any difference. I expressed my eagerness to learn his 'solkattu'. The same night, we brought two mridangams to our hotel room and he taught me then and there the correct format of the korvai. I learnt his korvai in tistra nadai, which I have played often and am still playing. My Guru was happy to know that I could pick up such gems from others. He would say 'pick up all the good things from others.'

My Guru was another generous soul who appreciated quality from any source. My humble request to Pazhani's disciples is that they should play true to his style and emulate his technique, manners and attitude to perpetuate the glory of their guru. That will be their greatest tribute to his memory.

*(Sources : Sruti June/July 1987,  
Pazhani centenary celebration 2008,  
and inputs from KS Kalidas)*

### **T Rukmini passes away**

Veteran violinist from Bangalore and a favourite accompanist of flute maestro TR Mahalingam passed away on 31 May 2020. She was 84. In a career spanning seven decades, she accompanied all the top notch artistes and some of these concerts are an all time epic concerts. One such concert at Mysore accompanying DK Jayaraman with UK Sivaraman on mridangam for SPVGM (Vontikoppal 8th cross Ganapathi festival) (*dhanyudevado dasharathe, Malayamaarutham*) is permanently etched in our memory.

For more details on T Rukmini, one can visit our website and access the LKT March 17 edition (special edition on T Rukmini).

Team Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira conveys heartfelt condolences to her family members, admirers and disciples.



# Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai's disciples

*Excerpts from Tamil book 'Dhruva Natchathiram' by Lalitha Ram,  
and Sruti June/July 1987 edition  
Translation credit - Suresh Jagennathan, Coimbatore*

One of the main reasons for Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai's name becoming immortal is the fact that he trained and groomed a number of disciples. KS Kalidas, a direct disciple of the maestro says that Pazhani started training his disciples from the age of 25 itself. In the early days, his disciples mainly came from traditional musical families. Most of these disciples followed the "Gurukulam" system and stayed in pazhani's house. In the 1950's, in addition to students from traditional families, other students with interest in music also started learning from him. In addition, there were many who did not learn directly from him but took him as a maanaseeka Guru mesmerised by his playing style.

Even though many were interested in learning from him, it was not easy to become his student. KS Kalidas recollects that before he went to learn under him, he had already had 6 years of learning and practice from another guru. However, 'Pazhani anna' was very strict and told him that if he wanted to learn from him then he should start from scratch. He was very particular that each "sollu" should be played with his specific fingering technique only.

Pazhani's lessons were well defined and structured and helped the students to think clearly and logically in their own development playing for concerts. He used to start with basic lessons, followed up with Chatusram, Thisra, Misra, Kanda lessons and then continued with various thalas, eduppus, different kind of nadais, sollu-s, solkattus-s, teerman-s, mohra and then thathakaram-s and korvai-s. Playing for kritis and pallavi would follow.

This article touches upon the prominent disciples.

## T Ranganathan



He was Pazhani anna's first disciple and is the grandson of Veena Dhanammal. He initially learnt from Pazhani Muthaiah Pillai and then from Pazhani anna for a number of years. He is the cousin of the Bharatanatyam exponent

Balasaraswathy and brother of vocalist cum Flautist T Viswanathan. He shifted to the United States and trained many students in California Institute of Arts and later in Wesleyan University, Connecticut, USA. He passed away in 1987.

## Ramanathapuram MN Kandaswamy Pillai



Whenever one talks of Kandaswamy Pillai, most will start the discussion saying Kandaswamy Pillai was to Pazhani anna what Lord Anjaneya was to Lord Rama. He comes from a family of musicians and was a station vidwan in

AIR. He has trained number of disciples. He passed away in 1995.

## Trichy Sankaran



Trichy Sankaran was very fortunate in that he was considered as a special disciple. He started learning from Poovalur Venkatraman at the age of 4. When he was seven, Pazhani anna visited Trichy. On listening to his playing, Pazhani wanted to take him in as his disciple. Trichy Sankaran stayed in Pazhani anna's house and



learnt the nuances of playing the Mridangam. Pazhani anna promoted him early in his career by arranging for him to play along with himself in concert of top ranking artist like Ariyakudi and Madurai Mani Iyer when he was only a teenager. He quickly made a mark and, in the event, emerged as a vidwan given top billing. He is a retired professor of York University in Toronto.

In 2011 he was bestowed with “Sangeetha Kalanidhi”, considered as the highest award in the world of music. By selecting him for the award, the Madras Music Academy corrected a long time mistake of not having awarded the Sangeetha Kalanidhi award to any of the leading Vidwans coming in the Pudukkottai tradition.

### **Guruvayur Dorai**



He is a bit different among the disciples of Pazhani. He used to play for leading Vidwans even as he was learning from Pazhani anna. Based on Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar's recommendation, he started learning from Pazhani when he was living in Thiruppunithura. After that, whenever Pazhani anna used to visit Kerala, Guruvayur Durai learnt a lot of nuances from him. Even after shifting to Chennai and playing a number of kutcheris, he used to visit Pazhani anna and continued to learn from him.

### **Dandamudi Ramamohan Rao**



He is from Andhra and stayed in Pazhani's Gurukulam from the age of 8. He has played for leading artists like M Balamuralikrishna both in India and abroad. He worked with Vijayawada All India Radio for more than 50 years and passed away in 2011. He is responsible for developing many disciples and for enabling the Pudukkottai style to flourish in Andhra. His wife Sumathy Rammohan Rao is also an accomplished Mridangam player.

### **Poovalur Venkataraman**

He initially learnt from Mylatoor Samy Iyer and then continued his practice under Pazhani anna.



station.

### **Pallattur Ct Lakshmanan**



Pallattur Ct Lakshmanan was one of the senior disciples of Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai and a leading Vidwan. He has played along with Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai for leading Vidwans like Ariyakkudi. He has played a lot on Radio and Television. He was not only a good artist but was also proficient in teaching Mridangam to others. He worked as Mridangam teacher for more than 25 years with Thamizh Isai Sangam, Chennai.

### **Udumalai Mayilswamy Pillai**



He is one of Pazhani's senior disciples. He is related to Udumalai Marimutha Pillai who was a very famous Kanjira Vidwan. He stayed in Coimbatore even though it would have made sense to shift to Chennai for an artist. He has played for many leading Vidwans. He used to conduct Guru Poojas in Coimbatore every year for Manpoondia Pillai and Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai at his own expense.

### **Pattukkottai G Shanuganandam**



He was a resident student. Pazhani anna used to call him as 'thambi' (younger brother in Tamizh). For many of Pazhani's latter day disciples, Shanmuganandam used to take the initial lessons. He has played for a number of senior Vidwans and retired as Principal of Tirupati Venkateshwara University

### **Coimbatore S Gopal**

Born into a well-to-do family, he is well known for handling the Mridangam very well. His son and disciple Tiruppur Sridar Kumar is a very



good Mridangam, Kanjira and Konnakol Vidwan and runs a laya school.

#### **KS Kalidas**



He learnt under Pazhani for two years towards the end of 1950's. Prior to that he had already studied and practiced for 6 years in Kolkata and was performing in kutcheris.

He fell in love with Pazhani's anna's style of playing and made his principle not to deviate from that tradition. Since his interest in Mridangam interfered with his engineering studies, he was forced to give up his training. However he continued to follow and listen to Pazhani and accordingly developed and maintained his style of play. He retired from Southern Railways as Chief Engineer after serving for 30 Yrs. He was an "A" grade Vidwan with All India Radio. He continues to groom students in the Pazhani style.

#### **Madarimangalam Swaminathan**



He became well known for his "arangetram" kutcheri along with Pazhani anna for Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer after it was critically acclaimed in the Kalki magazine. After the passing away of

Pazhani anna, he continued learning under Poovalur Venkatraman and served with All India Radio for a number of years till his retirement.

#### **AV Raghuprasad**



He is one of Pazhani's latter day disciples and happens to be a painting specialist too. He had worked in Kalakshetra for a number of years and later worked in the television studios in Chennai.

#### **N Ramakrishnan**



He was very close to Pazhani anna. Since he was in Railways service (commercial department), he used to take care of the Pazhani's travel arrangements. He retired from Railways and was associated with a number of Sab-

has.

#### **TV Gurumurthy**

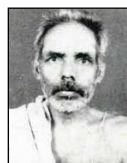


He was a disciple of Pazhani anna in his later years. He was working in the account department of the Railways. He has accompanied popular musicians. He passed away recently.

#### **Srikakulam (Bhaskarabatl) Krishnamurthy**

He was a disciple of Pazhani anna during his later years. He serviced the Cuddapah AIR as a staff artist.

#### **KNS Namboodri**



He was one of the many disciples of Pazhani from Kerala. He was with Pazhani anna till the very end and later with Trichy Sankaran. He started a mridangam school in Irinjalakuda, Thirissur district which is now being looked after by his sons. Other

Kerala disciples included Thankappan and Karunakaran Nair.

In addition to disciples who learnt directly from Pazhani, there were a number of disciples, who like Ekalavya, developed their skills just listening to Pazhani during his lifetime itself. Even after six decades of Pazhani's passing away, mesmerised by his music, innumerable number of musicians try and play like him.

#### **Shyamala G Bhawe passes away**

Shyamala G Bhawe who excelled in Hindustani and Karnatic music passed away on 22 May 2020. She was 79. She was called 'Ubhayagana Vidhushi' for her mastery over both forms of music, a title given by Sir M Visvesvaraya.

She learnt Hindustani from her parents and Karnatic from B Doreswamy and A Subbarao. She composed music in 9 languages.

Team Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira conveys its heartfelt condolences to her family members, admirers and disciples.



# Pazhani and Anaithandavapuram

Courtesy - Sruti, June/July 1987 edition



The people of Anaithandavapuram would, go out of their way in the case of Pazhani. There is a case of an unscheduled stoppage of train in the village in order to pick up Pazhani after the concert.

This happened when Pazhani played in Alathur Brothers concert in the village along with Tiruvalangadu Sunderesa Iyer on violin. The arrangement was that the musicians will take the Boat Mail to Madras from Mayavaram after the concert. But, while the concert was in progress, one rasika got to worrying. He was the station master of railroad's Anaithandavapuram station, a music addict by name of Nataraja Pillai. He was especially fond of Pazhani's mridangam artistry. He was looking forward to an elaborate Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi and the mridangam tani that would go with it, and to the masters mellifluous mridangam accompaniment for

the tukkada-s in the post pallavi segment of the concert.

Because it was the practice for the musicians to have proper meal after the concert before taking the train, and because he was apprehensive that pallavi and the tukkada-s segments might have to be cut short that evening, he approached the musicians and told them to go through the programme as planned, promising that he would make it possible for them to board the train at Anaithandavapuram itself.

The concert ended on a satisfying note for the performers as well as Nataraja Pillai. When the musicians, after a hasty but tasty meal, reached the local station, they found that the Boat Mail was waiting there.

What had happened was that the Assistant Station Master, on order from his boss, had 'lost' the token which had to be picked up by the crew of the train when it passed through. The token was not 'found' until the music makers had boarded the train. But those were the days when such lapses were not condoned. An enquiry was order and the guilt of the station master was established. The railway administration, which was not in the least amused, withheld Nataraja Pillai's annual increment for two years. Even though the increment in those times was but a single rupee, in cumulative terms Nataraja Pillai paid a pretty price for his passion for Pazhani's art.

*In 1954, Pazhani suffered a heart attack that kept him from performing for a year. When he recovered, he made 'Veena' Vasudevan, a staunch admirer, record his mridangam performance at his home and play it back to him with a tape recorder which was a novelty then. He wanted to see if his performance had in any way been affected by the long break and only then did he start accepting concerts.*



# R Vedavalli on Pazhani

*(Excerpts from a speech during Pazhani Guru Pooja on 12 June 2012)*

*Translation credit : S Anand, Bangalore*



*Pazhani was the preferred mridangam accompanist for Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer, the revered Guru of Sangita Kalanidhi R Vedavalli. Pazhani M Subramania Pillai Trust invited R Vedavalli to share her experiences with Shri Pazhani during the Guru pooja in the year 2012. She paid rich tribute to Pazhani and looked back 60 years. The excerpts from the speech follow;*

I have seen a lot of Shri Pazhani with my Guru Shri Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer many times in my childhood days, and I was fortunate to know about his association with my Guru. When one talks of Pazhani, the human aspects of Gentleman Pazhani come to the forefront.

Shri Pazhani stayed very close to our house in Mambalam and he used to greet me every day whenever he came out for his walk and he used to address me as 'papa' (child). I used to go to his house to handover fruits that we used to get from Andhra. I have developed enormous respect for him from my childhood days.

He had enormous love and affection for his disciples and this is the reason why his disciples have been conducting the Guru pooja for the last 50 years without a gap and it speaks of volumes of Pazhani's personality.

Whenever my Guru had a concert or recording with Shri Pazhani in AIR, they would send a car for picking them up and I used to accompany them. In that short duration of the commute, I

have heard them discuss intricate matters on music which was mind-blowing and I have learned a lot from just being a listener. Shri Pazhani used to sing in a soft voice and demonstrate how some of the phrases can be sung or share his ideas on a vyavaharam (kanakku). These interactions used to be highly intellectual and I have never heard them talk about anything other than music.

My Guru always used to say, 'a mridangist should be somebody who knows how to play for the kriti-s, and not talam'. This is very true in the case of Shri Pazhani with his command over vocal music. My Guru was always excited and happy when Shri Pazhani was to accompany him and he used to talk a lot about his mridangam playing with me. For him, Shri Pazhani was the ultimate mridangist and others were not at par with him. Having heard those concerts, I do agree with him as those concerts were really top-class.

If you follow Shri Pazhani's life history, it is a remarkable story of how a left-handed mridangist went against the tide to achieve a pinnacle by virtue of his sheer performance and knowledge and not by anything else. It is another matter that today, there are ever-so-many left-handed Mridangist's but in those days it was totally a different situation.

His 'araichapu', 'sruti suddham', 'playing for the kriti-s' were all out of the world and made him the unique mridangist he was. My Guru would be most happy to have him play on mridangam as Shri Pazhani considered all the artistes on the stage as a 'family' and strived his best to lift the performance several notches up. He never dominated the vocal artist and ensured that he provided maximum support.



# Lesser-known facts about Pazhani

*(Excerpts from the Tamil book 'Dhruva Natchathiram' written by Lalitha Ram,  
Inputs from Shri Rajaram, son of Palakkadu Mani Iyer, Vidwan KS Kalidas)  
Translation credit : C Ramakrishnan, Chennai*

The versatility of Pazhani in the art of playing Mridangam and Kanjira is well known. But there are many more facets of this esteemed vidwan which had escaped public attention- mainly his proficiency in vocal music.

An announcement came in the Trichy AIR. "In today's programme Pazhani Shri M Subramania Pillai will present a vocal concert". People thought that the announcer had made a mistake. But this was not so. Pazhani presented a vocal concert that day in Trichy AIR. His elaboration of Todi ragam and the scholarly neraval at the lines "raja raja" for the kriti 'Munnuravana' and the swara prastarams is still remembered by old time vidwans.

Mridangam vidwan Trichy Sankaran reminisced. "Rasikas would have listened to my tani avaratanam in Mishra Jampai played along with Pazhani Anna. It was the practice of those days that before starting laya vinyasam, a vocalist will sing a few lines from a kriti. The vocalist who came that day for recording was wondering as to what he should sing in Mishra Jampai. Pazhani anna demonstrated an engrossing neraval in 'raja raja' (Munnuravana) and those who were witness to that later repented that the heavenly music went unrecorded."

Neelakantan, son of Violin vidwan Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer reminisced. "Appa was a great fan of Pazhani's mridangam and vocal music. While returning by train after a concert, he would request for Pazhani to sing and the latter would happily oblige". GNB was also an admirer of Pazhani's vocal music. He would also request Pazhani to sing an elaborate shanmukhapriya alapana for which he (GNB) was himself famous. GNB would enjoy Pazhani's alapana as much as he did his own. Semmangudi told Trichy

Sankaran "Whenever your Guru and myself traveled in a train, we would sing swarams alternatively."

Shri Rajaram, son of Palakkadu Mani Iyer shared an anecdote.

Palakkadu Mani Iyer had been to MS Subbulakshmi's house when MS Amma was to sing in the evening concert at the Music Academy on that day. She told Mani Iyer that Pazhani anna and Sundaresa Iyer had come over to her house and Pazhani demonstrated a pallavi in Nattaikuranji there. Sundaresa Iyer asked her to sing that pallavi in her concert that evening as it was very appealing. Mani Iyer also told her 'Why don't you sing that pallavi it is very nice'. MS Amma, with some trepidation did present that pallavi with two of the laya wizards sitting in the audience at the Academy.

KS Kalidas recounts a conversation he had with DK Pattammal during a train journey when she told him that Pazhani anna had taught her many pallavi's.

Once during an informal discussion of musicians, noted laya exponent Ramachandra Iyer of Palakkadu mentioned that in the kriti 'Karpagame kann paray', 'Tirumayilai' is a very suitable edam for singing swarams. What followed was a downpour of swarams for about forty five minutes by Pazhani and Ramachandra Iyer and the vidwans who witnessed this episode were awestruck. Kittamani Iyer, one of the close friends of Palakkadu Mani Iyer, narrated this incident to Shri Rajaram.

Today, fusion music and jugalbandis are very common. But many may not know that Pazhani was a forerunner in this aspect too. Pazhani had a special liking for tabla. Whenever he visited





*File photo of 1958 taken at AIR Chennai where Pazhani collaborated with Joe Morello*

the studios of AIR, he would play on the tabla available in the studios for about 10-15 min remembered T Sankaran (grandson of Veena Dhanammal) who was the assistant station director at AIR, Trichy.

Pazhani had played jugalbandis with great tabla vidwans of the period like Kishan Maharaj, Anokhi Lal, and Samta Prasad in radio concerts and these have been recorded in AIR. Rasikas who have heard those programmes would vouch that Pazhani's strokes on the thoppi posed a challenge to the tabla vidwans.

Pazhani also participated in a musical venture with Jazz artistes. A famous Jazz band 'Dave Brubeck Quartet' visited Chennai and wanted to listen to Indian drumming. AIR, Madras invited Pazhani to the studios to play on the mridangam much to the appreciation of the Jazz band. Jazz band followed thereafter and finally both Pazhani and the Jazz band played together. The AIR recording was titled 'When the mridangam played Jazz'

Trichy Sankaran remarked "After many years, when I met Joe Morello who played drums on

that day, he mentioned 'Pazhani, will I ever forget him? Your Guru made me sit and practice for hours'.

Pazhani's personal life remained a closed book for many people. Whenever there was an interview on Pazhani, the unanimous opinion of all vidwans was that "He was such an adorable personality and there should be a book on the great personality." Even though he attained great heights in his career, he remained humble and easily approachable. Thiruvaiyaru Chellam Iyer quipped, 'Whenever we went to invite him for the Thyagaraja aradhana in Thiruvaiyaru, he would say humbly - "you will be having many preoccupations. Don't bother to come here to invite me personally. I will come and play." A great vidwan full of humility.





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## SRLKM Facebook Live concerts

- 1) Anagha Yoganand (Vocal), Krithik Koushik MP (Violin), BJ Srinivas (Mridanga)
- 2) Pushpa Kashinath (Veena), R Adamy (Mridanga), SN Narayanamurthy (Ghata)
- 3) Dr. Sheshaprasad (Vocal), Nalina Mohan (Violin), Sunil Subramanya (Mridanga), BS Raghunandan (Ghata)
- 4) Vishnu Venkatesh (Mandolin), Arjun Dinakar (Violin), Nikshit Puttur (Mridanga), Krishna Prasad (Ghata)
- 5) Manasa Nayana, Achyutha Rao (Violin), BC Manjunath (Mridanga), ASN Swamy (Khanjira)





During the release of the DVD on Pazhani 'Pole Star of the Laya Universe' on 4 July 2014