

Lalitha Kala Tarangini

Premier Quarterly Music Magazine from
Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira

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Palakkad Mani Iyer (1912-81) - Part 2



A rare picture of Palakkad Mani Iyer participating in the Unchavritti Seva along with Papa Venkataramiah and ML Veerabadrach (carrying the Thyagaraja photo). During this procession, Thyagaraja's idol/Photo is taken around by musicians from the small Panchayat town, Thiruvaiyaru to the venue of Thyagaraja Music Festival

October 2021

Soon it will be two years since the pandemic struck us and it has not spared anybody. While many lives have been lost, sustaining life under constant lockdown has been a real challenge. Among many professions, our performing arts and especially Karnatic music is severely impacted. Many events that provide opportunities for the artistes are either cancelled or moved forward depriving them of their livelihood.

We at SRLKM quickly adopted to digital events and continuously worked towards the well-being of artistes by providing them the opportunity to perform. We have been premiering two concerts every month and we have premiered well over 35 concerts on YouTube and Facebook pages so far. SRLKM is also supporting a few other organisations towards this and further extended our support to the artistes. The Center Spread in this edition provides a snapshot of our online concerts.

This edition is our second part dedicated to Palakkad Mani Iyer. We have included the second part of the original autobiography authored by Palakkad Mani Iyer in this edition. Our earlier edition on Palakkad Mani Iyer was appreciated by one and all, musicians and rasikas. I am sure this

will be as interesting and absorbing as the previous edition to our readers.

This edition includes Vidushi Sugandha Raman, a very senior Vocal and Veena player of Karnataka. She achieved great things during a very challenging period, especially for women artistes. The narration by Sakuntala Narasimhan makes it a very interesting read.

I wish our readers a very happy Deepavali. May God shower you all the best of health, wealth & happiness.

regards,
Anand S

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Published Articles: Palakkad Mani Iyer, TC Satyanath, Subbudu, Sakuntala Narasimhan, PG Krishnamoorthy, KP Ramakrishnan

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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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Special Edition on Palakkad Mani Iyer, Part II



Palakkad Mani Iyer with Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Papa Venkataramiah

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Renowned mridanga Vidwan AV Anand was conferred 'State Sangeetha Vidwan' award, given by the State Government, during the inauguration of Dasara cultural events at the Mysore Palace premises on 7th October 2021.

Lalitha Kala Tarangini

Inbox

Dear and respected Sri Krishna Prasad Sir, Anand Sir and the editorial Board of LKT,

What an issue of the wizard - one n only - Palghat Sri Mani Iyer special. Full of information and substance filled. It is a colossal work bringing out every minutest details about the genius. Felt like reading each article again and again. Such is the power of Sr Mani Iyer's 'Vasippu'. It is our fortune for having born and lived during his time and I owe a lot to all of you, Sirs.

I was afraid of showing the issue to any of my music friends since I will not get back the issue after lending. Such is the power of 'Lalitha Kala Tarangini'.

I pray Lord Ganesha, to give all of you the necessary good health n shower His choicest Blessings to you for this dedicated service to the cause of our Carnatic Classical Music. What a dedicated set of persons involved in giving the rasikas of Canatic music the best nectar, issues after issues!

I am failing in my duty if I do not offer my humble pranams to Sri Rajamani Sir and all the other great contributors. The rest of the articles regarding revered Dr. GV Ranganayakamma, Bangalore KS Manjunath n Sri Giridhar Udupa are also spellbinding.

This issue is another gem. Photographs are magnificent!

Very great efforts are put in by a very dedicated team of members who wanted to give more and more to the readers, issues after issues.

Really hats off to each and everyone of you.

Again my humble pranams to each one.

With deep and reverential regards,

K. Sankar,
ITO (Retired)

Dear Editor,

A belated msg but want to thank you profusely for sending the hard copy of the magazine too by post, which I thoroughly enjoyed reading! I may be labelled as old school but the pleasure of reading a maga-

zine & the feel of the pages is an indescribable pleasure which I feel can't be got in pdf, which is of course the new normal! Every article is such a treasure and the magazine, truly a labour of love! My heartiest congratulations for keeping it going successfully amidst the hurdles posed by the pandemic!



Dr. Radha Bhaskar, Chennai

Dear Sri. Krishna Prasad/ Sri. Anand,

At the outset, I congratulate Lalitha Kala Tarangini for the June 2021 issue extensively dedicating it to the doyen Mridanga Sarva Bhouma, Abhinava Nandikeshwara, Sangita Kalanidhi Palghat Mani Iyer.

Mani Iyer virtually spoke and sang through the mridangam in concerts. I was privileged to attend hundreds of concerts featuring his Mridangam in Bangalore, Mysore, Mumbai and Madras. He gratefully teamed up with lesser known players on other percussive instruments like Khanjira, Ghatam, Morsing and encouraged them.

When he was the secretary of Sri Thyaga Brahma Mahotseva Sabha at Thiruvaiyaru, a concert by a musician who was not auditioned by All India Radio was scheduled in the evening direct relay timings. AIR officials sought a change for direct relay by an auditioned musician. Mani Iyer curtly told AIR, it is the prerogative of the Sabah to schedule and AIR could pack-up and leave the place once in for all as it is a homage to the Saint rather than publicity! Taken aback by this reply by Mani Iyer, the concert was relayed directly by AIR.

Mani Iyer was responsible for getting due recognition and honour for accompanying players by All India Radio. He refused to accept AIR's many invitations to perform in regular relay timings, Akashvani Sangeet Sammelan and National Programme of Music without assigning any reasons!

Finally, the then Union minister for information and broadcasting sought Mani Iyer's reason for refusing AIR's invitation. It was then the doyen demanded that AIR should confer equal status and gradation to accompanying musicians also on par with main

performers which was readily accepted and orders were issued.

CP Chikkanna, Bangalore

Thank you for sharing the issue. The translations from Thamizh by @Rajani (Rajani Arjun Sankar) and @CRama (C Ramakrishnan) were very good. Expecting the next part by Rajani. Liked the comment by Chembai Swami on Palakkad Mani Iyer and Smt. MS.

All the photos were very good. Read the booklet in one-sitting. though as a zero in knowledge of Layam terminology, those parts were beyond my comprehension.

PMI's view on 'Thani' duration and the role of Mrudhangam accompanist in concerts are worth noting. Particularly liked the part where PMI as a boy sang 'DinamaNi vamsa' in two minutes to a rude railway clerk to get his ticket. The articles bring the 1930 to 1950 before our eyes vividly.

From rasikas.org (RSR)

Acknowledgements

SRLKM would like to thank the family of Palakkad Sri. Mani Iyer especially Vidwan Palakkad Sri. TR Rajamani and Palakkad Sri. TR Rajaram for supporting this special edition on Sangita Kalandhi Palakkad Sri. Mani Iyer which happens to be a jumbo edition, the most voluminous of the Lalitha Kala Tarangini we have published so far. Over the last one month I have received lot of information from Palakkad Sri. TR Rajamani that has enriched the magazine. We are thankful for the wonderful pictures of the doyen shared by Sri. TR Rajamani that are extensively used in this special edition. Some of the old Tamil articles have been translated to English and presented in this edition.

We are indebted to Vidwan RK Padmanabha and Karnataka Ganakala Parishath for sharing vintage photos of LS Sheshagiri Rao.

As always we are extremely thankful to all the contributors for their efforts and photographs making this edition very engrossing one.

- Editor



Our Upcoming Programmes

24 Oct '21 04.30 pm Sunday	Kum, Charulatha Chandrashekar (Veena), Arjun Ganesh (Mridangam), Trichy Murali (Ghatam)
07 Nov '21 04.30 pm Sunday	Shailesh Ramamurthy (Flute), Charulatha Ramanujam (Violin), Akshay Anand (Mridangam)
28th Nov. '21 04.30 pm Sunday	Sindhu Suchethan and H.M. Smitha (Vocal duet), Mathur R. Srinidhi (Violin), HS Sudhindra (Mridangam), SN Narayanamurthy (Ghatam)
5th Dec '21 04.30 pm Sunday	Akshay Padmanabhan (Vocal), Cherthala Sivakumar (Violin), Akshay Anand (Mridangam), KV Gopalakrishnan (Kanjira)
11 and 12 Dec '21 Full Day Program	Full day programme at Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira in association with Suswaralaya College of Music
26 Dec '21 04.30 pm Sunday	Spurthi Rao (Vocal), Vidwan Vaibhav Ramani (Violin), Vidwan BS Prashanth (Mridangam), Omkar Rao (Ghatam)
01 Jan '22 4.30 pm Saturday	Archana and Arathi (Vocal) and Party
23 Jan '22 4.30 pm Sunday	R Ashwath Narayan (Vocal), L Ramakrishnan (Violin), Sumesh Narayanan (Mridangam)

Palghat Mani Iyer - An Autobiography

*Originally written in Tamil by Palghat Mani Iyer
Translated to English by Rajani Arjun Shankar, Chennai*

Palakkad Mani Iyer started writing his autobiography, but for some reason it was not completed. Here are some excerpts from it:

Note : The translation is done with the intent of retaining the informal and conversational tone of the Tamil original as much as possible

(This is a continuation from the July Edition)

I don't know what to say about Sri Rajamanickam Pillai. We played together in many concerts. He was a great Jnanastha. There are no words to describe his playing of Madhyama Kala Swaras. The way he would fit Poruthams, and never repeat phrases while playing, were remarkable. I can never forget him.

At this juncture, I remember the violin Vidwan from Mysore, Sri Chowdiah. This is because I used to play both of them regularly. If I had a couple of concerts with Sri Rajamanickam Pillai, the next two would almost always be with Sri Chowdiah. Sri Chowdiah would never let a concert sag. He would play everything the vocalist sings, and more, and enrich the concert. Despite so many Vidwans being in Tamil Nadu, he came from Mysore and earned a special place for himself here.

After saying all this, when I think of Sri Papa Iyer's violin, it stands apart. One could call his playing singing itself. His special playing was well-suited to play solos. When I first accompanied "Na Jeevadharma" in Bilahari, I was wonderstruck. Whenever he played solo concerts, I would ask him to play this song and play the Mridangam for it with verve.

In the hundred-pillared hall of Trichy, I was called to play Mridangam for Sri Sanjeevi Rao's

flute with Sri Govindasamy Pillai on the violin. Sabha secretary Sri Rangaswamy Iyer led me to the Sabha's Office room in Retai Mall Street and asked me to have tiffin and coffee. As I was eating, the sound of Ragas being sung loud and clear was heard from the upper storey of a house on the opposite side. Sri Rangaswamy Iyer asked me "Do you realise who is singing?" I said I didn't. "It is Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar singing", he said and immediately asked "Are you coming? Let's go there." I agreed and went with him to the upper floor of the house opposite, where Sri Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar was singing.

It was the house of a prominent Rasika, Sri Ratnachalam Iyer. He was on good terms with all musicians. Music was his passion. He considered Sri Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar his God. If Iyengar's music was available, he needed nothing more. About 4-5 eminent people were seated around listening to Sri Iyengar. He was singing Ragas meant for mornings. I went there and stood transfixed for some time. That evening at 5 pm Sri Sanjeevi Rao's concert began. Sri Iyengar too came to listen. After the concert, Sri Sanjeevi Rao called me and said "Tomorrow in my Coimbatore residence, my son's Grihapraveasham is taking place. Sri Iyengar will sing then. You must accompany him." I said I would come. I went to Coimbatore with all of them : Sri Rao, Sri Iyengar, Sri Ratnachalam Iyer and a prominent Rasika from one of the Vathima villages, Sri Ramayyar. We reached our place of stay. Since I had only brought the instrument meant for the flute, they arranged for a Mridangam from a Vidwan who lived there, Sri Rajappa Iyer. That day's concert was at a pitch of 2 1/2 or 3, I am unsure which. The concert was slated for 5 pm.



Palakkad Mani Iyer accompanying GN Balasubramaniam with Mysore Chowdiah on Violin (Photo courtesy - Vidwan Dr.V Krishna)

But, even around 4 pm, so many people gathered that it seemed like holding the concert would be difficult.

Nowadays, some Rasikas ask if the kind of crowds attending concerts these days, used to be there in earlier days. It was really no less even then, perhaps even more. There was no radio in those days and therefore people would come even from nearby villages. There were no mic-s, and so they would come well before time, to corner a good seat. Vidwans would gauge the crowd and accordingly set their pitch, and sing full-throatedly. Now that we have mic-s, the natural sound has disappeared, and the wealth of voice, capable of open-throated singing, without a break, has diminished. It is a similar case with instruments too.

In Coimbatore since the crowd became unmanageable at 4 p.m. itself, Sri Rao announced that there would be no concert. Some people started leaving on hearing this. Many sat quietly, thinking this could not be true. The concert started at 6:30 pm. From that day onwards, for about 45 years, I played for Sri Iyengar's music. It is hard to describe my joy at this. I cannot praise his music enough; there are no words for it. But I don't have the heart to say nothing at all. According to me, there is no greater happiness on Earth (than his music). It is Bhuloka Samadhi. Beyond this, it is impossible to express all the feelings in my heart. If I could make a

comparison, the joy that I would get from his music is equal to Anjaneya's happiness listening to the Ramayana.

When I started playing for Sri Iyengar, I must have been only 15 or 16 years old. At that time most of the concerts I played in were by Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, Sri Sanjeevi Rao, Sri Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Sri Maharajapuram Vishwanatha Iyer. Marungapuri Sri Gopalakrishna Iyer and Karur Sri Chinna swamy Iyer would be on the violin. When I was 19 or 20, I started accompanying Sri Musiri Subramania Iyer.

At this point, I had some regret that I was not a singer. Whenever I heard excellent vocal music, I wouldn't even feel like playing the Mridangam. I was not very fond of playing Tani Avartanam. I would play Tani Avartanam as a duty and a custom, but my joy lay in playing for vocal and violin music.

I have played a lot for Sri Musiri Subramania Iyer when he was giving many wonderful concerts. Sri Musiri Subramania Iyer was an immense Gnanastha. The Neraval part of his concerts would be superb. He would avoid anything unnecessary, or of lesser quality. He knew the limitations of his voice and would sing accordingly and delight the listeners. Seeing the quality of some of the songs he sang, I have even learnt



Palakkad Mani Iyer accompanying Musiri Subramania Iyer with Mysore T Chowdiah on Violin

a couple of songs from him. It was chaste and true Carnatic music.

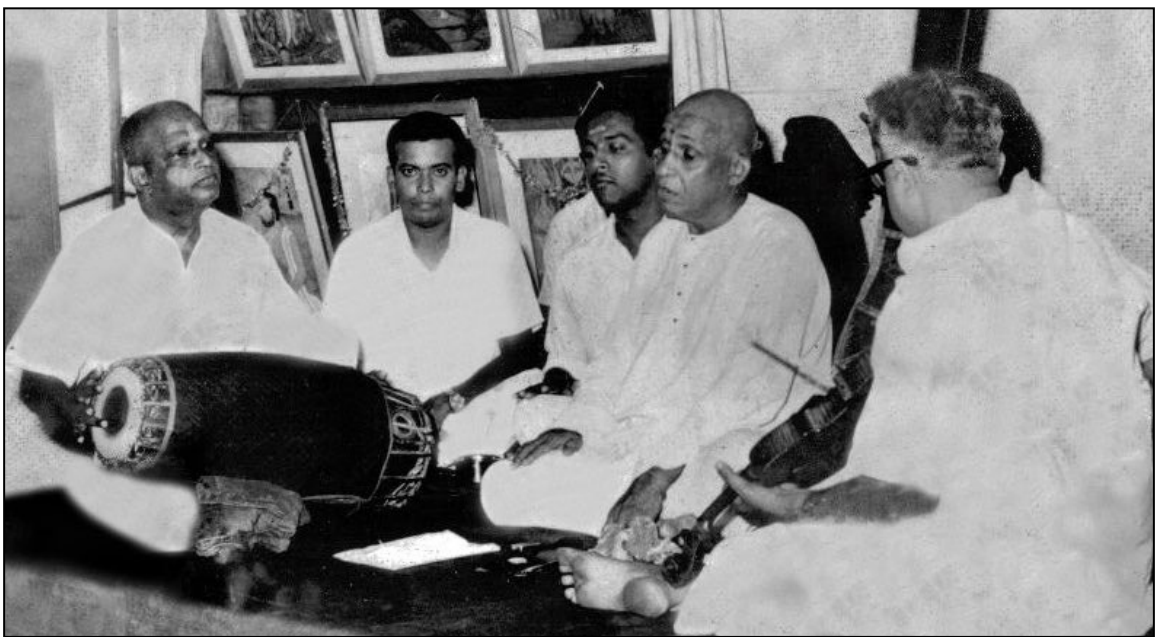
Around this time, Sri Ramana Jayanti Utsavam was held in Kumbakonam under the supervision of Sri Rajamanickam Pillai. Sri Pillai told me that I must attend. I was 19 or 20 then. In those days, Mridangam Vidwan Sri Kodandarama Iyer and Sri Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer lived in Kamakshi Josier Street. It was arranged for me to stay in the same house. That was when I came to know Sri Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. From the beginning, he was very easy-going and affectionate to me. Since I had to go to Sundarapandiapuram for Sri Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer's concert, I had to stay in Kumbakonam for 4 days. Sri Pillai and the other organisers told me that they thought I could play for Sri Musiri Subramania Iyer in the Sri Ramana Jayanti Utsavam, but since I had become acquainted with Sri Semmangudi over those two days, and we had informal sessions of his singing and my playing along at home, he told me "Let us perform together."

I agreed and we informed the Utsavam organisers and it happened that way. Violin Sri Vadivelu Pillai used to play very well. He played in this concert too. Sri Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer had just started giving concerts. He would keep singing all the time. He practised a lot. He

wanted to achieve with his voice whatever was possible on instruments and he actually managed to do so. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that this was the reason his voice lost its ability in later years. In about two years from this time, he attained a very high position in the world of music, performed many concerts and acquired substantial fame. His music had all the nine Rasas.

I was 20 or 21 years old when in Pallathur in Chettinad, I got the opportunity to play alongside Mridangam Khanjira Vidwan Sri Dakshinamurthy Pillai, in Chembai Vaidyanatha Iyer's concert. In those days, if anyone had to play alongside Sri Pillai he would be very circumspect. In the Pallathur concert, as usual, I played everything I knew about Laya enthusiastically. Sri Pillai too played amazingly. Many rasikas wanted to hear both of us together and invited us for concerts, but I came to know that Sri Pillai refused to play with me. After a year, the office bearers of Madras Fine Arts Society told Sri Pillai "You must play with Mani" and persuaded him with the help of others too. He then agreed to play with me playing Mridangam.

They arranged for Sri Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar's vocal concert, with Sri Chowdiah's violin, my Mridangam and Sri Dakshinamurthy Pillai's Khanjira. Two days before the concert, Sri



Palakkad Mani Iyer accompanying Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer with TN Krishnan on Violin (Photo courtesy - Vidwan Dr.V Krishna)

Iyengar sent a telegram that due to unavoidable reasons he could not come for the concert. Immediately Palakkad Sri Rama Bhagavathar was contacted and confirmed as the replacement. In those days, Sabha concerts in Madras would start at 4:15 p.m.(since Rahu Kalam started at 4:30 pm). Sri Rama Bhagavathar was a very traditional Vidwan. On that day, even before 4:00 p.m., people thronged Gokhale hall and the door was closed stating no more tickets were available. I reached there before 4 p.m. Sri Pillai came a little late, I think.

When he opened it, a wonderful scent would emanate from his Khanjira box. Pudukkottai Pachai Villai was the name of the perfume he wore. The smell of sandalwood and Javadhu would spread everywhere. When I think of it now, I feel I can smell it. Sri Pillai sat majestically on the stage. The concert started. Within half an hour the concert picked up pace and the audience was immensely delighted. Apart from Rasikas, many prominent Vidwans had come. Sri Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar and Flute Vidwan Sri Swaminatha Pillai sat in the front row. A good many local Vidwans had come too.

Sri Pillai and I started playing our first Tani Avarthanam together. We played small bits initially. The audience and Vidwans kept beat and observed us carefully. Suddenly Sri Pillai played a long se-

quence for 3 minutes and shook up the audience. As he was completing the last round with the Korvai he looked at me, showed me the Tala with his hands. The audience applauded loudly. I started playing. I played as long as him and as I was finishing, I looked at him, showing the Tala with my hand. Immediately the audience erupted in appreciation.

The secret here was that everyone was excited that a young lad was playing along with such a great Vidwan and providing suitable replies to his playing. After this Tani Avarthanam and another couple of songs, the singer sang Kharaharapriya Ragam and "*Pakkala nilabadi*". As it was drawing to an end, Sri Pillai looked at me and said "Let's see you conclude with a small Mohra for this point." 'This point' meant 3 Aksharams away from the start, in Chapu Talam. My Gurunatha Sri Vaitha Anna has composed wonderful Mohras for such situations, such that keeping the Talam was effortless.

Just as he said, I concluded with a perfectly fitting Mohra that ended at the 3rd Aksharam. Sri Pillai said nothing. Usually, in such situations, he would gain the upper hand. If I had not quickly thought of something, or had made a mistake, he would have immediately played it on the Khanjira and told the singer to start singing. Even very good Mridangam Vidwans would be

made to feel small when playing with him. He had great presence of mind and liked to be at a position of advantage in a concert. There is so much one could say about him. His Khanjira sound was thunderous and the jingling Salangai along with it, would make it very pleasing. When Mridangam and Khanjira played together, one would not even notice if the former stopped.

On one occasion my Mridangam's Toppi had lowered in pitch and could not be played. "I will take care of the Toppi. You just focus on the Valanthalai", he said. After that, the Toppi was not missed at all. Such was the sweetness of the (Khanjira's) sound. His Lakshya Gnanam was very high, and therefore whatever he played, would fit the beat. Although he knew a lot of intricate calculations related to Tala, sometimes on the stage, he would forget a few things. Occasionally he would forget the starting point of a Korvai or forget the count so far and start the pattern again. Every time he repeated it, it was more beautiful. Sometimes he would just play "Kai Tittam" and even those would be excellent. Here I recall an incident.

A concert took place near Karur, in a place called Vennamalai, in Andavar Temple. Sri Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata Sri Chowdiah, Sri Pillai and I were on stage. From the Varnam itself, the concert was superb and when the Pallavi was sung, it reached its zenith. The Tani Avartanam started. The Pallavi was quite simple "Tillai Isanaikkana enna punniyam seitheno". It was in Adi thalam, 2-Kalai Chavukkam, the starting point being the little finger. The Tani Avartanam was going on as usual. Sri Pillai had a trick up his sleeve which he tried that day. It was: When the two percussionists were playing alternatively, when his turn came he would play a very long sequence with plenty of intricacies, conclude with the Mohra Korvai and tell the singer to start singing. The singer would comply, the audience would cheer loudly and with that the Tani Avartanam would be over. Playing the Mridangam after that, would be neither appropriate nor welcome. He tried this that day, and as he was finishing the Korvai he said "Pallavi, pallavi" to Sri Chembai. Seeing him do this, as he (Sri Chembai) was about to finish, I started

playing a Korvai and said "Pallavi, pallavi" to Sri Chembai. He played another Korvai and said "Pallavi, pallavi" to Sri Chembai. I did not want to give up, so I played a Korvai and said "Pallavi, pallavi". As this was happening, Sri Chembai commented thus about this turn of events "I have no problems, I'll continue singing the name of the Lord ("Tillai Isanai..."), as long as you both wish to play and as many times as you ask me to sing."

Sri Pillai and I would have played together for about five years. Three out of four concerts I played in, in those five years, were with him. Every day I think about the lovely sound of his Khanjira and his vigorous playing. He was fearless on stage. He had "Kushagra buddhi" (intellect that is sharp as the tip of a Darbha grass). Those days of my life are unforgettable. It was a time I learnt a lot about the world and the world of music.

After he passed away, the era of dramatic stage performance of Karnatic Music, and that of awe-inspiring energy in a concert, have declined. One could even say he took the instrument away with him. When I compare those times with now, so many changes have taken place. Today's Rasikas know more about music analysis than those who came in earlier days to listen. Although they know all this, the blessing of heartfelt, joyous enjoyment, which yester-year Rasikas had is not there.

Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira (R) Announcement

Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira will be commencing music and yoga classes shortly. Students who are interested to join the classes are informed to contact on phone No (M) 7760907939.

A Tryst in Tanjore

Source - *The Indian Express*, 12 October, 1980

Author - TC Satyanath, Courtesy - TR Rajamani

He sits cross legged and shirtless on the sofa in his son's living room at Kalamassery. Palghat Mani Iyer is 69 years old and he has been mridangist nonpareil for as many decades as even people older than him can remember. He is being felicitated today at the Kerala Fine Arts Hall for his immense contribution to the world of music.

I had expected to see him in a sombre mood. News had reached him a few hours earlier that Alathur Srinivasa Iyer of the famous duo, Alathur Brothers had died that morning. With him had passed another great maestro of the era. Palghat had only recently paid a tribute to

his outstanding qualities as a vocalist. If he is touched by his death, which we know he is, he does not show it by brooding, but he conveys his regrets and is politely definite when he excuses himself from being present to inaugurate the celebration of the Navarathri Festival at Ernakulam. After all, during his career spanning 60 years, he has seen almost every great contemporary of his pass away one by one. But Mani Iyer has none of the attitude of a man waiting for the inevitable. He is also not one who is prone to reminisce unless he drawn into it. He is categoric in his views and the spark of defiance of a man who has never had to bow

Palakkad Mani Iyer accompanying Alathur Srinivasa Iyer with CR Mani Iyer on Violin



his head in submission to superior talents is quite manifest. He is quite unequivocal when he conveys his opinions through his various comments that the Golden Age of Carnatic Music is a thing of the past.

There are talented people today in the world of music, but the sort of deep dedication he has known in his time is no longer in evidence. Any musician to be considered great, must hold a consistently high standard of performance for, say 50 years or at least 25 years. That is the litmus test for greatness.

I ask him how many hours of practice he has been putting in. He says he has practiced for as long as he liked and when the mood took him. But, he adds, it is not practice that makes great musicians; there are many others who have put in more practice than himself without equal success, he says to prove his point. Only those people who are born with a God-given gift for music can be great. It would be futile for those, who are not, to seek greatness. "Nishprayojam" he repeats emphatically "Nishprayojam!"

What Mani Iyer has accepted unquestionably is that there is a mystique in Carnatic music which just cannot be explained away. It is unfathomable, and no other music has it to the extent Carnatic music has.

To demonstrate the indescribable, Mani Iyer brings out a metronome and turns it on. He says, he finds it difficult to keep to its steady, precise, unrelenting superhuman rhythm !

I ask him about the structure and construction of the mridangam which, after 60 years of association, must be almost another limb of his body.

It is hollow shell with treble at one end and bass at other. Almost 90 per cent of the mridangam players do not give the impression that they have bothered to tune the bass to the correct lower octave. So, having one single chamber or compartment, would not there be a dissonance or clash inside thereby adversely affecting the tonal quality ?

"There is a connection between the two" he says, "If you keep the left end pressed gently, the right hand produces a clear tone. But it should be done judiciously because this could slightly raise the pitch of the right hand end. The left end need not necessarily be tuned to the exact lower octave, but its pitch has a definite influence on the tonal quality of the mridangam which is hard to explain away, vocally. "For me, even if the right hand is tuned correctly I pay particular attention to tone of the left hand" he says.

In the tabla, the membrane is thinner than the mridangam which used cow hide and goat skin; hence the difference in tone. But the bahan (left) of the tabla has certain extra possibilities and more fingers are used. If the chorū is fixed on the left end of the mridangam, would it help ? No; the vertical position in which tabla is played is what gives them some more scope for the left hand.

Now the mridangam player has an opportunity to show his virtuoso talents either during pallavi, or the taniavarthanam, but where else except in a limited way, in anticipatory playing during swara prastharas ?

He says there is no fixed limitation for the mridangam's role in a concert. There is much of muchness in the method of tabla accompaniment, it just keeps the rhythm. But the mridangam has to get the laya by the stem and play according to the music.

(There have, however, been some experiments in the North to expand its scope). Here in the south, one has to play a different style for Madurai Mani, Alathur brothers, GNB etc. The tabla player does not change his style, it is the same for all singers or performers regardless of their particular styles. In mridangam playing, even during a single concert, the style is in a constant state of flux. Not so in North Indian music. anyway, that is his impression, he adds. There is a tendency on the part of some tabla players to bring in some elements of the mridangam style. He mentions young Zakir Husain (son of Ustad Allah Rakha) who has played with

Mani Iyer on an L.P., and speaks highly the young virtuoso.

"You have criticised the tendency of present day vocalists to sing in lower sruthis, thus spoiling the tone and timbre of the voice. this refers to the male vocalists. and this has dissuaded you from using the mic because a lower sruthi spoils the tone of the mridangam".

"It spoils the tone not only of the mridangam but the voice itself". If he were to tune the mridangam to MD Ramanathan's pitch which is about half katta, the mridangam will sound like dull, thuds. A close friend of Mani Iyer recalls how at the Thyagaraja Uthsavam, Kalpathy, 2000 or more people would gather to listen to Chembai, Chowdiah, Mani and with no mic. About his controversial decision 7 years ago, never to use the mic, he says that a person who is used to the mic only weakens his voice because of this mechanical aid he has come to depend on and finally the voice 'goes'. He also clarifies that it is only for open concerts. He realises that it is indispensable for radio broadcasts and L.P. recordings. This decision is based on his conviction that if mics and amplifiers come in, audience participation goes out. For any concert to click, there should be the right combination of several factors, the vocalist, the violinist, the mridangist, the hall, audience and their response --- only then can the best be brought out of him. If there is a mic in use, the members of the audience tend to talk amongst themselves because no effort is needed to listen to the music which is injected into their ears. If there is no mic, they come and sit closer, transmit their response to those behind them.

To the query whether he has thought of any possible changes in the mridangam to improve its tonal quality by alterations in the wood used, the diameter or the width of the mridangam, he is quite emphatic that it would be a 'blunder' if any such thing is tried. The mridangam as it is today, is perfectly designed and any change to the design will spoil the tone. No doubt, the length of the mridangam has changed. From 20 inches, there are mridangams in use which are 22", 24" even 25" long. But it is a strain to play

the very large ones. the lower the sruthi, the longer the mridangam. He adds that the mridangam as it is known today finds mention only in recent years, probably a generation before him. Perhaps Narayanaswamy Appa?

Asked whether he would play the notes of a raga with his left hand, he says, it just is not possible. It is only an illusion in sound created in the minds of the listener. At the most, the left hand can reproduce only the sa-pa-sa notes.

What is most eventful happening in his life?

He says from the age of 2 or so, he must have listened to the melams from nearby temple in Pazhayannur when he was born. The percussion had become part of his heart beat by the time he was 8 or 9 years when he started playing the mridangam. His father and mother taught him and encouraged him. when he was 12 or 13 years, he insisted that his father takes him to Vaidyanatha Iyer of Tanjore. His father had not heard of him but knew Swamy Iyer So, after reaching Tanjore, they were going in search of Swamy Iyer's house. They happened to pass by a temple when Katha kalakshepam had just got over, and stopped to ask a man standing by, the way. He looked at the young boy with the mridangam and guessed that it must be the young prodigy the wise man of Tanjore had heard about. He took Mani and his father to his own house. There was nothing to offer by way of a meal except rice and curds. It was meal to remember, though. It was Vaidyanatha Iyer himself whom they had accosted

Mani Iyer had a tryst with him in Tanjore.

Magic of Palghat Mani Iyer

Source - Contour, 27 April, 1980

Author - Subbudu, Courtesy - TR Rajamani

(The Mridangam maestro announced his retirement at the age of 68, on 15 April 1980)

How does a man come to have Vairagya (dispassion)? A wife once said to her husband, "dear, I am very anxious about my brother. For the past one week he has been thinking of becoming an ascetic, and has been busy preparing for that life. He is trying to reduce gradually all his desires and wants." the husband replied, "Dear, be not at all anxious about your brother. He will never become a "Sanyasin". No one can become a Sanyasin in that way."

"How does one become a Sanyasin then?" asked the wife. "Thus" exclaimed the husband, so saying, he tore his flowing dress to pieces, took a piece and tied it round his loins, and told his wife that she and all of her sex were thenceforth mothers to him. He left the house, never more to return.

- Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna

This parable of Bhagvan Ramakrishna Paramahansa came to my mind after reading Palghat Mani Iyer's Tamil New Year's Day announcement that he is renouncing the concert platform. One is sure he will stick to his decision. Knowing him only too well, one can presume this.

Mani Iyer learnt from his father Palghat Subba Iyer the rudiments of the mridangam art. Rhythm is a strong point with Keralites what with their reverberating chendai used in Kathakali. Mani was attracted by it. Even now he uses chendai permutations. But, while the chendai is "beaten", the mridangam is "played". In Kerala, they say mridangam kottarathu (beaten). If Mani had continued in Palghat, he would also have only been "beating" the instrument.

Subbier decided that he should take his son to Vaidyanatha Iyer of Tanjore to initiate him into

the mysteries of mridangam. The Tanjore style is studded with recitation niceties and exhaustive grammar for solo accompaniment. It was in the evening when Subbier reached Vaidyanatha Iyer's house and there was nothing fancy that he could offer to Subbier and Mani. In an interview, Mani Iyer said with pride that he relished the pazhiathu (cold rice with butter milk) that his guru gave and he felt that with it he was almost inheriting the art form.

Those were days of Gurukula and Vaidyanatha Iyer spared no pains to initiate Mani Iyer into the intricacies of the art. Before he was nine, Mani Iyer had mastered the art, revealing his genius. His fame spread and he started accompanying great masters with aplomb. Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar took him under his care and trained him on the concert pattern.

At Kanchipuram, there was Naina Pillai, the devil of a singer. Surrounded by a plethora of percussionists, he used to revel in rhythmic intricacies consigning aesthetics and musicality to the limbo. In those days, concerts consisted of barely a few songs and the emphasis was on swara-prastharam. The pallavi as the centre piece was a prolonged affair testing the wits of maestros like Govindasamy Pillai (violin), Dakshinamoorthy Pillai (mridangam) and Maanpoondiya Pillai (Kanjira). The virus of casteism had already permeated the concert platform.

Having heard about the child prodigy, Mani Iyer, the Kanchipuram gang wanted to put him on the mat. Chembai, sure of his ward's capacity, agreed unhesitatingly. The pallavi, on that evening, was an intricate one and the other accompanists had already rehearsed it and teamed up. For them, it was a stage managed



Palakkad Mani Iyer setting up mridangam with mridangam maker Farland

affair. after a few songs it was time for the piece de resistance. Mani Iyer sat stoically, unruffled. The first line was sung but Iyer kept mum. The others stared at him. "Why don't you play boy?" asked Naina Pillai, rather contemptuously. "Don't count the beats beneath your angavasthrum (embroidered upper cloth), come into the open," retorted Mani. A startled and baffled Naina could not but yield. The audience marvelled at Mani's guts. Once he was in grip with the time cycle, it was child's play for him. Both during the accompaniment and ensuing percussion ensemble, he wove patterns of breezy rhythmic variations that swept the other artistes and the audience off their feet.

Since then, Mani Iyer has never looked back. It was a succession of successes. the mridangam player then was merely an accompanist. Imagine, it was incumbent on him to pay a courtesy call on the vocalist to get an insight into the technical know-how of the pallavi piece of the evening. It was Iyer who put an end to this obnoxious practice. "Let them display the time cycle precisely. Nothing is beyond the realm of arithmetic."

If today he is the Lord of percussion, this is by merit and merit alone.

The number of disciples Mani Iyer has trained is legion. Today in the south, the mridangists rule the roost. As to the secret of his success, he is never tired of saying, "One should know what not to play. The mridangam is a complimentary instrument and should never overshadow the main performer. the artist should be a musician himself if he intends to do justice to his profession. Basic rhythmic patterns can be mastered by anyone in a Garaba vasam (nine months). It is in the alignments and realignments one's mastery is revealed."

The attention he lavishes on the maintenance of mridangam is Iyer's greatest quality. The choru (the black paste on the right wing) he would change after every concert. Never to be caught napping, he would keep in readiness three more as "stepneys". Being a percussion instrument, he would ensure that both the wings concomitantly reciprocate. In fact, others accuse him of overdoing this maintenance exercise. His technician, Farland, an "untouchable" would sit by him on the concert platform and attend to minor repairs and adjustments on the mridangam. The dais almost approximated a miniature workshop. So much so, that when he and Chembai fell out in later years, he cited this as



Palakkad Mani Iyer in a concert with ML Vasanthakumari, S Seshagiri Rao (Violin), Sudha Raghunathan (Vocal Support) during Musicians conference of Karnataka Ganakala Parishat in Bangalore. Also seen are Tumkur V Bhadrachar and R Sathyakumar.

an excuse for avoiding him. He could not reconcile with a barber's shop on the concert platform, referring to the knife and leather with Farland.

Why they fell out is an interesting story. Chembai was being honoured by the Music Academy at Madras. Mani Iyer was approached for accompaniment. without meaning any offence, he said, "Why not engage someone else? He has been singing the same set of songs for more than two decades." a thoroughly honest remark, but couched in the typical Palghat discourteous tone. Chembai when he came to know of this took a vow never to have him as his accompanist. This vow, he maintained till his death.

Iyer is a stickler for punctuality. Long ago, while accompanying the late Tiger Varadachari, who set no time limit to his concerts (his voice invariably warmed only after two arduous hours, arduous both for him and his listeners), Mani Iyer looked at his watch after exactly three hours, packed up his drums and left the hall paying little respect either to the age or seniority of the singer. Uncouth? Yes. But that is Mani Iyer.

In a normal Carnatic concert, the taniavarthanam is the signal for toilet. Mani Iyer's taniavarthanam is the only exception. In fact, it is invariably the main attraction at concerts.

For over 40 years, he maintained a vow not to accompany female artistes, however eminent. He would rather accompany a male with a bad voice than a sonorous woman singer. But when his daughter married DK Pattammal's son, Iyer broke his vow and started accompanying Pattammal. Suddenly, he seemed to have discovered greatness in female vocalists. He now accompanies ML Vasanthakumari also since he is now staying at the Rishi Valley School. Better late than never.

"Mani Iyer's musical genius and mastery of percussion as a fine art is best summed up in the Sanskrit saying 'Na Bhooto, na bhavishyati'. Never before was one like him, nor ever hereafter shall there be one like him."

Some years ago, he started prescribing mic-less concerts if he was to accompany, not a wise decision as the mic is now indispensable, perhaps a necessary evil, these days. One can understand an insistence on a sophisticated public address system to ensure tonal purity, but with tuneless musicians extant and large audiences, such concerts place him at an advantage over the main performer. During his American tour, however, he did not object to the mic at some concerts. Inconsistency apparently is a virtue with him. then how could he reconcile broad-

casting studios where Mic is the main conveyor? May be idiosyncrasies are part of genius.

When Iyer was offered the Sangeet Natak Akademi award, he refused it as that "mindless and graceless institution" had ignored giants like Palghat Rama Bhagavathar and Kallidaikurichi Ramalinga Bhagavathar. It needed a spate of telegrams from well wishers and pressure of admirers to make him accept the national honour.

"Many may not know that he is a first-rate vocalist and if he had chosen that profession instead of mridangam then, too, he would have had no peers. His demonstration of a pallavi in Todi in the Academy many years ago was outstanding." It would be interesting to evaluate the status of mridangam vis-a-vis other percussion instruments. The pakhwaj is nearest to it in construction though its handling leaves much to be desired. The tabla is hardly a patch on the mridangam the legion of Ustads notwithstanding. I am not being parochial but factual. How can the tabla be a "percussion" instrument with its two wings separated? Its only advantage is its amenability to high pitch on the right (daina) and a lot of manoeuvrability on the left (bahan) to produce astounding vibrations. But rhythm and its manifestations, as perfected in the Carnatic idiom, have been evolved to such a high degree of sophistication that the tabla is miles behind the mridangam. Even in jugalbandis, the mridangam player is brainwashed to play on a low key vis-a-vis the tabla, by not indulging in intricacies of rhythmic fractions. Palghat Raghu admitted to me that when he accompanied Ravi Shankar with Alla Rakha in Bombay, he had perforce to suppress his virtuosity for safeguarding Alla Rakha's prestige which he, of course, did for a sizeable ransom. I know he will not admit this in public.

There is an interesting canard about the evolution of the tabla. It was originally all pakhwaj, the next cousin of mridangam. While a pakhwaj Ustad was playing in a royal household, the king, a follower of the tenets of Koran, was so enraged that he cut the pakhwaj into two. The humiliated artiste thought of the ingenious de-

vice of playing separately on both the pieces. The two responded and the courtiers admired. They exclaimed, it appears, Tab bhi bola (even then it spoke) which, in course of time, became tabla.

And, yet Shanta Prasad, the Banaraswalla, had the temerity to state in Madras, at one of his concerts, that the tabla was more ancient than the mridangam as it came direct from Lord Shiva's Udukkai. My brethren, those spineless wonders in Madras, listened to this pontifical pronouncement with awe and wonder. So much for the tabla.

In conclusion, I reverentially bow to the Lord of Percussion, Palghat Mani Iyer, for the yeomen service he has done to the cause of rhythm.

'State Sangeetha Vidwan' Honour for Senior Mridangist Vidwan AV Anand



Vidwan AV Anand has been selected by the Karnataka State Govt. for the prestigious 'Sangeetha Vidwan' honours. This recognition is dedicated to the artistes who have served the cause of Music in the state.

The recognition carries a cheque of Rs. 5,00,000 (Five Lakhs) and an insignia of Goddess Saraswathi and was presented to Vidwan AV Anand on 07th October in Mysore during the Dasara inauguration function.

Palakkad Mani Iyer - An all time great

Source : *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, June 28, 1981
Sakuntala Narasimhan, Bangalore

I try to think back to the first time I came face to face with Palghat Mani Iyer - and recall instantly my initial reaction of terror.

I had just finished school that year and moved from Delhi to Madras to join the Central College of Karnataka Music. When the December "season" came round, I had sent in my name for the PALLAVI competition at the Madras Music Academy.

The other students at the college tried to warn me by recounting their experiences in earlier years. If Mani Iyer is one of the judges, you're done for, they told me. He'll ask you to sing while simultaneously marking two different talas with your right and left hands. He'll give you complicated, off beat pallavis to reproduce on the spot. He'll ask you to do complex 'anuloma' and 'pratiloma' calculations that even professional musicians will find tough... He'll tear you to shreds, Mani Iyer will. He'll have you crying in two minutes flat. You'd better not go.

I sat in a secluded corner of the sprawling hostel, on the water's edge at Adyar, and tried to sing a pallavi while marking two different talas simultaneously, one on each hand - and discovered it was an impossible task.

Like the dried leaves that the eddies in the stream at my feet floated away, my hopes of winning the gold medal also seemed to recede and disappear slowly, thanks to this man who appeared to revel in asking people to do the impossible. would he really make such demands - or was it all a part of the legend that was already built round him (he was only in his forties then) as a person for whom the extraordinary was the norm ?

Mani Iyer the Man-Eater he became in my nervous estimation by the time I arrived at the hall for the competition - and sure enough he was the first person I saw at the gate. I seriously considered withdrawing from the competition; however, it was not Mani Iyer but another pallavi "giant", Chittoor Subramanya Pillai, who was the judge. Nevertheless, something of that awesome, awing impression lingered on through the years.

Played for Himself

I saw Mani Iyer thereafter several times and sat through many memorable concerts. The image he projected was always that of a serious and solemn person, a man of few words, severe habits and an aristocratic disdain for artistic compromises of any kind. He played neither for the gallery nor for the highly initiated - he played for himself.

For one who became a legend, as the cliché runs, "in his own lifetime", he looked extraordinarily ordinary in his plain white cotton shirt and dhoti. No silk kurtas, no suggestion of a swagger, no craving for attention, no nothing. (Not even a flamboyant "arty" hair style - his crew-cut was always a trifle too short.) Just the man who sat on the stage like a sphinx (that seems such an appropriate description), with his hands draped loosely over the instrument during the raga alapana when he was not required to perform, back slightly hunched, face held impassive. The barest of nods and a minimum of gestures marked his style, the only give-away of moments of excitement, appreciation or high anticipation being a quick dilation of the pupils and a widening of the eyes. In all my memories of his concerts, I can recall just one occasion



Palakkad Mani Iyer accompanying Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer with MS Gopalakrishnan on Violin

during which he broke into a smile for a brief moment, before resuming his tightlipped, solemn mien.

25 - Year Memory

One particular concert I can still recall, 25 years after. This was a radio concert in Delhi before an invited audience. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer was the vocalist. When he took up the Bhairavi swarajati "Kamakshi" by Shyama Shastri, Mani Iyer came up with a series of deft, scintillating, rhythmic permutations that even to a juvenile listener (and a reluctant one to boot - I had a lot of home-work that evening, I remember, and understandably fidgety) added a whole new dimension of beauty to the song.

Every time the opening line of four cycles was taken up (16 times on the whole, for the 8 charanas), Mani Iyer paused for a few beats, let the silence fill in - and suddenly broke in with an electrifying pattern to arrive at a synchronisation on the word Amba. each approach was more breathtaking than the one before; now tantalising, now grand; now subtle, now cunningly simple. From the fourth charanam onwards, I had ears only for the mridangam, excited with anticipation; what will it be this time- a thisra nadai, "mohra" or one in khandam? Every time I

sing or hear that song now, those lilting "approach phrases" of his ring in my ears.

He did the same for 'Viriboni' varnam on another occasion (indeed, he did that to every composition, he seemed to them all as thoroughly as the vocalist and, incredibly, even anticipate every improvisations-however it was done, as though he was a mind-reader?). It sounds improbable, but he reproduced on the mridangam that evening the whole varnam, matching musical note to musical note sangati to sangati. Had the vocalist not sung, 'Viriboni' would have still been heard - from Mani Iyer's dexterous fingers. From an instrument tuned to just one note, he produced all the seven of the octave in clear, resonant, bell-like tones. If the song flowed slow and smooth, his nadai matched the mood.

I was perhaps 14 then, and there still exists somewhere in our Bangalore house, a red file with a panegyric I wrote, crammed with superlatives, on the mind-boggling creativity of his genius. I have since cleared that file several times and thrown away a lot of juvenile jottings, but this one I had to keep as a memento of one of those rare, moving experience of those years.

Another concert I remember is from the early 60s. Mani Iyer was playing Alathur Srinivasa Iyer



Palakkad Mani Iyer in accompanying Alathur Brothers at Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha, Bombay with Mysore T Chowdiah on Violin

in Bombay and the microphone was misbehaving. Right in the middle of one of its particularly piercing squeaks, he stopped playing and began to address a very surprised audience on what was to become a pet theme of his - the demerits of the amplifier system and how it "killed" the nadam and squashed the artiste's enthusiasm. He would play a stroke, pause and point an accusing finger at the speakers; see how the sound goes! Just listen to that!

From a man known to prefer to make do with two words where ten would be normal, and a silent nod where others would use two words, this was most unusual outburst, but it was a measure of his feelings on the subject. which remained unyielding for the rest of his professional career.

It was "mic-less concert" every time thereafter, whenever he took the stage. there was less than a handful of musicians whom he accompanied and not all of them - had voices that did not miss the microphone's ministrations. No matter, if Mani Iyer was on the mridangam, mic-less the concert had to be. Only someone of his stature could have stuck to that stand and got away with it.

Living legend

How many kinds of legends one heard from different sections of the musical community! there is the story about his sharing the platform

with the great Dakshinamoorthy Pillai who played the kanjira - and insisting on being given pride of place in the seating hierarchy, although he was a youngster and far junior to the veteran, because the mridangam deserved that pre-eminent honour as against the kanjira, which was only a secondary accompaniment.

Another legend had him refusing to accompany women artistes - till he made an exception in the case of D.K.Pattammal. No one chose Mani Iyer as an accompanist; he chose the artistes whose concerts it pleased him to embellish with his accompaniment.

They called him Nandi after the celestial drummer and referred to him as an avatar, a wizard, a colossus, the "uncrowned king of mridangam", a one-of-a-kind genius. Yehudi Menuhin is said to have called him "an electronic computer that made no fault". That was one way of describing the man and his pan optic art.

His curriculum vitae records that he came from a musical family and had his initial training from Chathapuram Subba Iyer and Kalpathy LS Viswanatha Iyer, that he showed promise even in his teens and shot to fame after accompanying Chembai Vaidyanatha Bagavathar for one of his concerts. Later he came under the tutelage of Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer and his career, spanning nearly 60 years, brought him, among other things, the prestigious Sangeetha Kalanid-

hi award (1967), the President's Award (1956), the Padma Bhushan (1971) and an invitation to perform at the Edinburgh Festival (1965).

Last April he announced his voluntary retirement from professional performances, but was persuaded to stage a comeback 6 months later - by popular demand.

End of an Institution

They say that just a few days before his death on May 30 - a day before his 70th birthday - he had got all his instruments repaired and in trim. How does one adequately explain the loss to Indian music? that he was someone like Thirakwa was for the world of tabla and the "last of a generation of the greatest laya architects" ?

That he was the greatest mridangam player ever to enthrall an audience? That he had the rare distinction of attracting listeners to the taniavarthanam (the solo session on the percussion instrument) he played whereas the normal reaction of average audiences was - and is - to go

for "coffee and snacks" the moment the tani started?

Yes - the "void in the musical world created by his passing is impossible to fill"; yes-he was institution by himself, woven with legend for wrap and halos for woof. Yes- "he embellished the performance of several top-ranking musicians with his feathery touch and glittery strokes..." and "pioneered the technique of making the mridangam produce, not the solkattus, but the sahitya and sangathi".

Words, just words. How can they ever substitute for, and convey, even remotely, the sounds, the feelings, the ambiance that Mani Iyer's mridangam spelt ?

SRLKM tribute concert to MS Amma



Statue of Bharat Ratna MS Subbulakshmi at Sri Rama Lalitha Kala Mandira

September 16 was the birth anniversary of the ever green, ever remembered, ever loved MS Subbulakshmi Amma. It has become a tradition for SRLKM to arrange a concert every year on that date. Mandira had arranged the concert of the versatile Vid.Aishwarya Vidya Raghunath as a mark of tribute to the legend. Rasikas can log into SRLKM's you tube channel and enjoy her concert. It was a befitting concert in the memory of the legend and SRLKM is proud to say that she is one of the top artiste from Karnataka and already making a mark in the musical field.

LS Sheshagiri Rao, yesteryear musician of Karnataka

Rajashree Yoganand, Bangalore

It is our sincere endeavour in SRLKM to write about the musicians of earlier generation who have left a mark due to their brilliance and talent, but are hidden gems in Indian classical music. We would like the present generation to know about these musicians and it is our way of paying tribute to them, lest we forget.....

LS Sheshagiri Rao

LS Sheshagiri Rao was born in the year 1911. His elder brother LS Narayanaswamy Bhagavatar was a musician as well as a scholar. He had his initial training in violin under Vid. Krishnappa and vocal training under his brother. He also

trained under Seetharama Pandit in mridangam. Later, he was able to seek able guidance from Chintalapalli Venkata Rao, Palakkad Ishwar Bhagavatar, Tiger Varadachar Ganapathi, T Chowdiah and TM Puttaswamayya. Such was his thirst to learn, that he sought expert guidance to learn mridangam and kanjira under Pudukkottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai and Pazhani Subramanya Pillai. He was also proficient in playing the violin.

His first kutcheri was in 1923, wherein he accompanied Mysore Vasudevacharya on mridangam. It can be said that he was so proficient in playing the instruments, that he was equally at

LS Sheshagiri Rao along with Ex. Governor of Karnataka Uma Shankar Dikshit during his presidential address for Karnataka Ganakala Parishath in 1977 (Photo courtesy - Vidwan RK Padmanabha for KGP)



ease playing on the violin, mridangam or khandjira and enhance the kutcheri's impact along with the main artiste.

Sheshagiri Rao was an advocate by profession, but that did not deter him from pursuing his passion for music. Recalls SN Anand Rao an old student of Vijaya College of music "Those were the days when Vijaya college of music started a batch late in the evening after the regular classes were over. A few others and I had joined that batch and we would be taught Devaranamas mainly. But we were fortunate that we could interact with the likes of Narayanaswamy Bhagavathar, LS Sheshagiri Rao and T Chowdaiah. I have seen the camaraderie that existed between them and there were no traces of rivalry there at all. We have enjoyed listening to their discussions and debates on music and also to their playing. I have seen Sheshagiri Rao play on the khandjira and mridangam very well. He could also play on the dhol as well as nadaswaram. He had deep insight and knowledge about music and everyone admired him for it. I can say that I acquired good knowledge listening to such great music than by learning".

Sheshagiri Rao studied law in Madras (now Chennai). It so happened that there was a procession passing by with people playing the nadaswaram and dhol. He was so inspired listening to them that he approached them and took the dhol from the player and started playing on it.

He is one of the founding members of Mysore Sangeetha Sabha, Ayyanar College of music, and Vijaya college of Music. He was the first president of Karnataka Ganakala Parishath and has given many Lec-Dems to his credit. He was the recipient of the award "Gaana Kala Bhushana" in 1977 by Karnataka Ganakala Parishath. In his acceptance speech, he emphasises the importance of making music part of the school curriculum. He also talks of how manodharma sangeetha is crucial to our music and musicians must make it a point to inculcate it and nourish it to enhance the beauty of music.

It can be said that by keeping close proximity to the likes of sri LS Sheshagiri Rao will influence us and inspire us to achieve higher goals.

Padma Bhushan by Post

In 1971, Palakkad Mani Iyer was informed by an AIR functionary about the announcement of the Padma Bhushan being conferred on him. The informant was breathless with excitement, but Mani Iyer merely said that he had enough awards and did not need any more. A friend who was with him however convinced him that he ought to accept it.

The formal letter arrived soon but Mani Iyer took no notice of it. A few days later came a letter asking for the date of his arrival in Delhi. It said that he could bring a companion with him and also gave details of the awards ceremony and the venue, indicating that he was expected to be present for the previous day's dress rehearsal as well. Mani Iyer took no notice of this also. Then came telegrams to which he did not reply. The final communiqué stated

that, in the event of his not coming, the award would be conferred on him in absentia. It did not matter to him.

The award finally came by post. He had changed his address by then and it reached him after a fairly long sojourn at the post office and it was probably his fame that ensured that the authorities finally traced him down. On receiving it, he was delighted. The paper, he said, was of the right texture to line his cupboard with. The newspapers he used he added, paled in comparison.

Incidentally, the official list of Padma awardees describes Mani Iyer as 'P Tiruvillumalai Seshan M Iyer'.

Source - Courtesy Sruti, March 2007 Edition

Research on mridangam by Palghat Sri. Mani Iyer

*Originally written in Tamil by Palakkad TR Rajamani
Translated to English by Janakiraman R, Bangalore*

Revolutionary Discoveries

Mridangam maestro, Sri Palghat Mani Iyer devoted his life's work to the extensive research on the practical aspects of enhancing the 'nadham' (tonality) and also the comfort of the mridangam player by fashioning innovating changes to the construct and build of the mridangam. The maestro Sri Palghat Mani Iyer, displayed an epitome of commitment to his research, so much so that, basic human necessities like sleep and hunger would miserably fail to stand a chance against his passionate quest for any and all the information or facts that could aid his research on mridangam.

The various aspects of his exploration included:

- height of the instrument
- diameter of the left and right head
- wall thickness of the wooden pipe / trunk

Considering it would be exhaustive and laborious to condense the multifarious aspects of the maestro's research work, this note aims to focus only the predominant findings that could be of great interest and would be highly beneficial to the reader.

Diameter of the right head

The Carnatic music stalwarts of yesteryear like Semmangadi Srinivasa Iyer and Madurai Mani Iyer kept the rapt attention and the elation of the audience in every concert with their musical prowess. Gradually, the stalwarts started reducing their 'shruti' for their concerts. In order to match the 'shruti' of the singer, the mridangists were unable to reduce the 'shruti' of their instrument to match that of the singer

during the concert. Hence there was a need to have mridangam of lesser "shruti".

Interestingly, in order to have mridangam with lesser 'shruti', Sri Palghat Mani Iyer tried increasing the diameter of the right head. To achieve this, he dug out the inner wall of the mridangam. However, he abandoned this initiative as he was not satisfied with the outcome of this change had on the 'nadham'

Height of the mridangam

In olden days the size of the mridangam was relatively small. My father Sri Palghat Mani Iyer was the pioneer to experiment with the height of the Mridangam. Fascinatingly, the maestro

Palakkad Mani Iyer with the extra long mridangam



also succeeded in this pursuit and the same was endorsed by many vidwans in the field of instrumental Carnatic music. Sri Palghat Mani Iyer evaluated different height measurements of the Mridangam and discovered that twenty-four (24) inches gave the optimal performance. One such exploration led him to try with the height of thirty (30) inches to check the 'nadham' of the instrument, which he realised was too long and difficult to play with. Also, there was no improvement to the 'nadham' therefore, he aborted this attempt.

After all these intense studies, he finally came to a conclusion that there was not much scope to improvise the mridangam further. He applauded the design efforts of the inventor of the mridangam by saying that whatever best that could be done has already been done and there is no further scope for improvement.

Sandalwood mridangam as stated in the 'sastras'

Sri Palghat Mani Iyer being aware that mridangams were made from sandalwood as stated in the 'sastras', started searching for a wooden log of diameter 14 inches. He thought that his best bet would be to get it from Mysore and irrespective of how much it would cost him, he made all the efforts to obtain it. In this regard, he approached the revolutionary creator of violin, Sri Chowdiah, who also happened to be a native of Mysore. He later realised that the trees were chopped once the diameter reached 6 to 8 inches and it would be impossible to get a wooden log of 14 diameters

Left head of the Instrument from Monitor Lizard's skin

It is a well-known fact that Sri Palghat Mani Iyer was always fascinated by the 'nadham' of the Ganjira played by Pudukkottai Sri Dakshinamurthy Pillai. The fact that the duo played together for numerous concerts is a testimony to that. Sri Palghat Mani Iyer tried to emulate 'nadham' of Sri Dakshinamoorthy's Ganjira on the left head (toppi) of his mridangam. He made special efforts to match the 'nadham' by using the skin of the monitor lizard as in Ganjira, fitted on the left head of his mridangam. He

dropped the experimentation as it did not bring the desired effect. He also explored using deer skin for the left head, but it did not however meet his expectation.

Mridangam made using clay

In Sanskrit, the word mridangam can be split into mrid + anga. 'Mrid' means clay. Hence it could be inferred that, the body of the mridangam was made of clay. Sri Palghat Mani Iyer ventured to get a mridangam created out of clay with the help of a potter. He got the body of the mridangam made of clay which was baked and got the left and right heads fitted using a wooden frame onto the clay instrument. In order to adjust the 'shruti', the mridangist could not avoid using sharp objects and stone to hammer the head of the mridangam and the clay instrument would break while doing that. Hence the instrument made of clay was not tenable. The above translation and interpretation of the sanskrit could not be reconciled. Therefore, he declared that the translation of mridangam was to be understood as 'mrid' which is soft music or the sound created from the instrument.

Mud mridangam - actual mridangam made for research



Jack fruit tree's wood from Panruti

Sri Palghat Mani Iyer had a strong opinion that mridangam made from the wood of a jack fruit tree had the best 'nadham' as compared to the ones made from any other wood. Only an experienced cricketer could tell from the feel of the ground whether it is a spinner's pitch or

fast bowler's, even before the start of the game. Not everybody possesses the talent to recognise this and it is extremely difficult for an inexperienced person to recognise this. Likewise, Sri Palghat Mani Iyer could specifically bring out that the 'nadham' from mridangam made of jackfruit tree wood sourced from Panruti was very distinct and superior compared to those made from the wood of Kerala grown jackfruit trees. Only the well versed and experts could distinguish the difference in the 'nadham' between these two woods. Incidentally, Sri Palghat Mani Iyer could recognise the advantage of the instrument made from Panruti as compared to Kerala jack fruit wood.

It has also been stated in the 'sastra' that the saplings of the jack fruit which was grown hearing the sound of temple bells had the best fiber

density and the mridangam made from this wood had a unique and distinguished 'nadham'.

Sri Palghat Mani Iyer always focused on enhancing the ecstasy of the music lovers and the effort that he undertook to explore the ways and means of improving the audience experience is unmatched.

Considering Sri Palghat Mani Iyer's valuable opinion that whoever discovered the mridangam has done an amazing job, it is safe to conclude that the construct of the mridangam needs no further change and is magnificent the way it is.

“From Kochammal to Pattammal”

That at least was what Chembai said when Mani Iyer could not accompany him for a Music Academy performance in 1966 owing to his having been booked for Pattammal. But over the years, Mani Iyer, like many others including Palani Subramania Pillai, refused to accompany women in concerts. He, once again like other percussionists and violinists, did not refuse to accompany them in his early years, but took this stance only when his career had stabilised. In the early years he had accompanied women such as Kochammal and also Manku Tambiratti of the Cochin royal family.

In 1966 he softened his stance by playing for Pattammal and, in 1977, he voluntarily came forward to play for ML Vasanthakumari. Both associations were very fruitful in terms of the outstanding concerts they produced. T Sadasivam was very keen that Mani Iyer should accompany MS Subbalakshmi and in the 1960s, when Mani Iyer had shifted back to Madras, many feelers were sent out to him. But Mani Iyer was wary of TS, though he had the greatest regard for MS. Once, at a public function, TS remarked to Mani Iyer that he had forgotten

MS and himself, to which Mani Iyer replied that it was not true and that the couple was always in his thoughts. To which TS replied that it would be good if the public also came to know this!

However, many years later, MS once told Mani Iyer's youngest son Rajaram that he had once accompanied her at a chamber concert in Mumbai and that the 'sukham' his mridanga had produced was unimaginable. Mani Iyer himself never spoke of the incident.

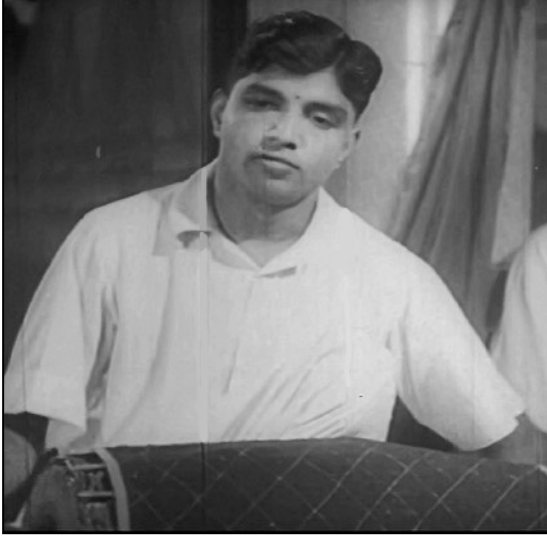
Source - Courtesy Sruti, March 2007 Edition



In the service of music for 66 years and supporting artistes during the pandemic

Reminiscence of a Legend

Chandan Kumar, Mysore



Young Palakkad Mani Iyer from the Kannada movie "Vani" directed by K Hirannaiah and MN Gopal and Produced by T Chowdaiah

My revered great-grandfather, Violin Virtuoso Sri T Chowdaiah's association with Sri Palghat Mani Iyer was indeed a very long one. They both shared a great bond of friendship "on-stage and off-stage". During their concerts in Mysore, both Sri Mani Iyer and Sri Chembai Vaidyanathan Bhagavatar used to stay in our house. That too Sri Chembai had an exclusive premises which he only used during his visits for his musical and spiritual sadhana. I vividly recall incredible moments shared by my revered father and grand mother about all these legends during their stay at our home and witnessing them performing live from a very close quarters.

"Chembai-Chowdaiah-Mani" - was a super hit power pack and the most sought after combo. It was on insistence of Sri Chowdaiah that this trio was filmed in the movie "VAANI" during

the year 1942, which was co-produced by Sri Chowdaiah. This is yet another amazing story which I can cover in a different context. During their stay at our house, they used to be very anxious as if that is going to be their very first concert and perhaps the last one too. They would check their instruments meticulously back and forth; they wouldn't necessarily sit and physically play, but check the tone, shruti etc., and mutually discuss the subtleties of the instrument. There would always be a review of the concert within themselves past dinner at home. Many a time, they have sat together and have played until they were satisfied, which was not up to the mark that evening in the kutcheri !.

Sri Mani Iyer was very meticulous with regard to his instruments. He would work on every small detail and would often get upset if it was not going his way. He cared for the Mridangam like an infant child. Those days travel to Palghat from Mysore would be via Chamarajanagar. During his travel from Mysore to Palghat, there used to be transit at Chamarajanagar. Sri Mani Iyer would hold his mridangam until he boarded the bus to Palghat. No matter how long the waiting time would be, he would never keep the Mridangam down. And always have kept it very high on stage with his divine persona! May be the asura Ravana kept the Atma Linga down which he had acquired with his penance. But this "ASURA-SADHAKA" - never let it down and his penance continued until his last breath!

It was indeed Sri Mani Iyer who was instrumental in bringing up the present pay scale of casual artists in All India Radio irrespective of whether they were main artists. Pakka vadyam or upa pakkavadyam would have the same payment scale on their gradation basis. It was a status

given to Mridangam by Sri Mani Iyer. Fraternity, with special regard to Mridangam artists owes a lot to Sri Mani Iyer.

Within our house compound there used to be a huge jack fruit tree. It had to be cut for various reasons. Sri Chowdaiah had gathered a few chunks of huge tree logs and had sent them to Mani Iyer presuming that it would be of any use

for making Mridangams. Eventually, Sri Chowdaiah had received a letter from Sri Mani Iyer expressing his gratitude for having sent those jack fruit tree logs. And among them he could make a good Mridangam ! My grand mother had treasured that letter and would often recall those vivid memories

The Brush with Typhoid

Palakkad Mani Iyer's early concert career also took its toll on his health. After his first opportunity to accompany Ariyakudi, he came back home with a fairly high temperature. The fever remained at 102 and 103 degrees for a couple of days and appeared to subside on the third day when he was to accompany Chembai in a concert in Coimbatore. Mani travelled to Coimbatore and with the fever appearing to have gone, indulged in the rich food that the host placed before him. Coming back to Palghat he fell ill once more and this time there was no respite. The fever rose and was soon diagnosed as typhoid which had relapsed. His life was in despair and Chembai mounted a vigil by the bedstead. Even Vaidyanatha Iyer arrived from Tanjavur.

The doctor, whose name rather aptly (or, perhaps, not so aptly) was Dharmarajan, decided to administer a new injection on the patient, having tried everything else. It worked and Mani turned the corner. A visibly moved Chembai immediately ordered a pair of diamond Kadukkan-s for Mani, costing an enormous sum even in those days. The day of recovery was marked by another happy development. A telegram arrived asking Mani to accompany Ariyakudi the following week. There was no looking back after that.

Source - Courtesy Sruti, March 2007 Edition



Sugandha Raman - An Extraordinarily versatile artist

Sakuntala Narasimhan, Bangalore

With assistance and inputs from from Radhika Raj Narayan, Bangalore

She was not yet a teenager when she sang for the maharani of Travancore (as it was known then, during the 1930s) and received a beautiful, embossed silver box (which is now a family heirloom). In the next 75 years, this woman went on to become a musical pioneer with extraordinary achievements in multiple dimensions.

The only woman inducted into the national Vadya Vrinda orchestra, under Pandit Ravi Shankar, soon after independence.

The first south Indian musician to broadcast Hindustani classical music (1946). The first

woman to play north Indian music on the south Indian Tanjavur veena.

The first musician to broadcast both Carnatic and Hindustani music (from AIR Delhi, from 1947 onwards).

One of the first women artistes to learn to play the tabla after enrolling at the famous Gandharva Maha Vidyalaya of Delhi (and perhaps the only south Indian woman to take to the tabla)

Had she lived, Sugandha Raman would have completed 102 years this September. She passed away at age 93, after training many advanced students in Bengaluru, at the Veenapani

Sugandha Raman with her innovative Narada veena



Centre for Arts that she set up soon after settling in the city around 1959.

Sugandha hailed from a musical family - her mother Lakshmi Ammal was a pioneering lady, one of the first from the orthodox Brahmin community to learn classical music and acquire concert level proficiency during the early years of the twentieth century (it is said that connoisseurs would flock to hear her, but she would sit in an adjoining room, out of sight, clad in a traditional nine yards sari, while the listeners sat in the front room (because it was not considered proper for a family woman to mark tala on her thighs, in front of unknown men). Her repertoire of rare Thyagaraja kirits was considerable and priceless, and these she passed on to her three daughters. But only Sugandhavalli, her middle daughter, kept her music alive even after marriage and moving to the north where her engineer husband was posted. Lakshmi ammal was lucky enough to have a mother-in-law who was fond of music, and encouraged her (even buying a special bullock cart, to take her daughter-in-law for her music lessons under a Wala-japet disciple of Thyagaraja, at Kancheepuram).

Sugandha went on to learn under stalwarts at Chennai, like the disciple of Poochi Srinivansa Iyenger and Dr Cheema (nephew of Tillaisthanam Ramaiyengar – thus she acquired a repertoire of Tillaisthanam kirtis, known for their “chauka kala” renditions). Sugandha was a little girl at that time, and her advocate father used to put her on his shoulder and bring her back home by tram after each lesson, as the child was tired and sleepy.

Her first concert was at age 10 at Chennai and she started broadcasting from 1944. That year the maharani of Travancore awarded her a gold medal for her music. She got a gold medal at the Madras Music Academy in 1934, when she was a teenager. Among her teachers was the famous composer Papanasam Sivan, who used to come home to teach her. Similarly, pioneering musicologist P Sambamoorthy was also one of her teachers and mentors.

Having lived in the north (Calcutta as it was known then, Jamshedpur, then Delhi) and sub-

sequently in Vishakhapatnam (where her husband was sent on deputation to the Vizag Shipyard) she spoke several languages (Hindi, Telugu and fluent English though she never went to college) besides her own mother tongue Tamil (to which she added Kannada when she married a Kannadiga from Gorur). With a husband who was passionately fond of music, she was able to devote all her time to the pursuit of classical music. She was a regular broadcaster from Delhi station of AIR, and participated in several special programmes (including one on Swati Tirunal's rare compositions) devised by the then director general, Dr Narayana Menon. She performed in public regularly (including one at Delhi during the early 1950s where her husband played the flute, she played the veena and her ten year old daughter provided vocal support).

When AIR introduced its grading system for artistes, the late SN Ratanjankar (who was on the jury) was so intrigued by her playing Hindustani music on the south Indian veena that he broke the rules to request that the curtain behind which the artistes performed be removed so that he could see the musician who was playing, to check that she was indeed playing north Indian music on the south Indian Tanjavur veena. There was not much scope for Carnatic broadcasts at Delhi AIR in those days (1940s) except in the External Services Division, so she engaged Ustad Ahmed Raza Khan who played the Vichitra veena (similar to the south Indian Gottuvadyam) to come home and teach her Hindustani style - and she started broadcasting.

Born in Kancheepuram (Tamil Nadu) on 5 September 1919, Sugandha had music literally running in her blood -- once when she put her hand on the copper boiler in the bathroom to test if the water was hot enough, her palm got singed badly. The whole skin of the palm got scorched and stuck to the boiler. She coped with the pain by composing a kriti in Sriranjani raga, “*Vedanai neekkuvaye Varada*” - please remove my distress. She went on to compose many pieces (with attention to all details like yati-prasam and poetic rules); these included some tillanas in Hindustani ragas like Miyan-ki-



Sugandha Raman with her mother Lakshmi Ammal and sister

Malhar (many decades before south Indians like Lalgudi Jayaraman began to use Hindustani ragas).

She enrolled at Gandharva Maha Vidyalaya at Delhi, to learn to play the tabla. In the meantime she also designed a special veena, which she named Narada veena, with a peacock head (instead of the traditional yali) and frets (like the south Indian veena) but with 13 resonating strings below the main strings (like the north Indian veena). Instead of the scooped wooden sound box that south Indian veenas have, this one has two gourds. It is thus a combination of the northern vichitra veena and the southern Tanjavur veena.

On January 30, 1948, she was preparing to go on the air for a broadcast in the evening when news came of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. Instead of her veena recital, mournful sarangi music came on the air, interspersed with announcements of the Mahatma's death, and she hurried home, nervous about riots breaking out. That was an unforgettable memory for the family.

Her versatility ran to not just music but also other areas of artistic endeavour – she did a course at the college for arts in Chennai, and learned painting and leather work; later she also enrolled at the Singer sewing classes in Delhi, to

learn machine embroidery (samples of her exquisite work – embossed leather purses and embroidered pictures, are still preserved by the family, seventy years later).

During her stay at Visakhapatnam (1956 to 1960) she travelled every two months to broadcast from Vijayawada AIR - which was the nearest radio station). For the overnight train journey, she would take a Perry Mason thriller to read (and thus built up a fine collection of detective novels). The late Voleti Venkateswarlu and Dr Balamurali Krishna, who both worked at AIR Vijayawada, used her frequently for special programmes (one on Rabindranath Tagore's compositions in Telugu, for instance, to mark the poet's anniversary). She was one of three leading vocalists of Andhra at that time and was very active at local sabhas. Sangeeta Kalanidhi Dr Sripada Pinakapani was employed at the Vizag King George hospital at that time, and the two interacted frequently for music sessions, especially on Kshetragna padams.

Once she moved to Bengaluru and set up her Veenapani Centre for Arts at Jayanagar, after her husband's retirement, students began to stream in, and she soon enjoyed the enviable reputation of training students to stand first in the state music (senior and vidwat) exams - invariably it was her students who walked away with the first or second rank, year after year (total 22).



Sugandha Raman at a musical evening at the Veenapani centre for Arts in Bengaluru introducing vocalist S Rajam of Chennai

They came to enrol for veena as well a vocal. She also devised and produced a number of theme-based programmes - on Krishna (for Krishna jayanti) for instance. These were received with great appreciation. The passing away of her second son, at the age of 23, in a tragic road accident, in 1967, put paid to her broadcasting career, but she continued to teach students. In the middle of all this she also coached herself for an examination in Hindi from Punjab university, and travelled to Delhi, alone by long distance train, changing trains en route, to write and clear the exam, for which she had to study the novels of leading Hindi writers. She was truly indefatigable. Even after she had knee replacement surgery that made it impossible to squat cross-legged on the floor to hold her veena, she continued to teach and play, by sitting on a divan. She has left behind notebooks with over 900 kritis, including some very rare ones, written in notation. She also presented papers at scholarly conferences, on music. After her presentation of one of these research papers at Visakhapatnam, the chief guest remarked that she could easily qualify for a doctorate, for the admirable insights she presented in her paper.

She trained her daughter and son both of whom went on to receive the Akashvani national competition prize. Perhaps hers was one

of the rare families which could boast of three broadcasters (and one more, when her daughter-in-law joined the family). In 1946 she learned to drive a car - one of the few women in the capital who drove - and also rode a bicycle. Her rangoli designs at the entrance to her house, especially on festival day, used to be works of art - sometimes over ten feet in diameter. What a woman really !

The Gayana Samaja of Bengaluru and Karnataka Gana Kala Parishad, both honoured her for her contributions to music during the 1990s. She was Artiste of the Year in 1998. But other honours never came her way - the Sangeet Natak Akademi award, the Padma Shri. etc. Leading scholars, critics and performers like Dr. V Doreswamy Iyengar and BVK Sastry thought very highly of her musical knowledge. Ariyakku-di Ramanuja Iyengar's disciple Palghat KV Narayanaswami once told me that Sugandha madam had a very valuable repertoire of rare kritis and to learn them all. G.N.B. also, likewise, had great regard for her musical knowledge. As a versatile musician and teacher, she was admired and respected. But she never lobbied for any titles or honours.

She was my awe-inspiring mother.

Honnappa Bhagavathar, the ever green Hero

CP Chikkanna, Bangalore



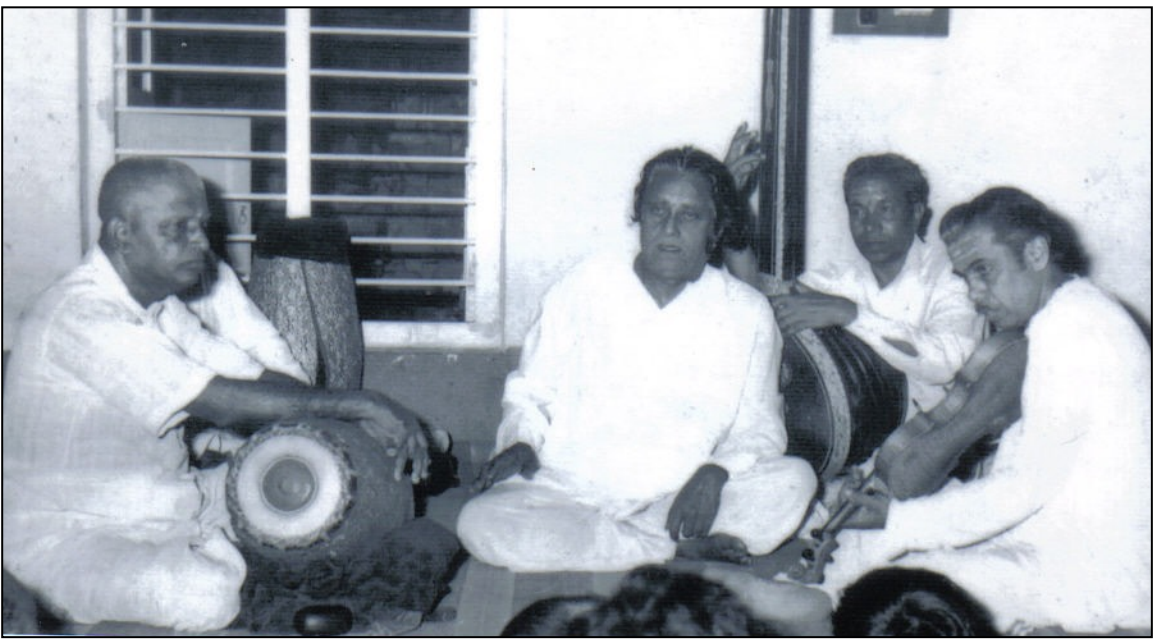
In the history of Karnataka and Carnatic music, only one musician has carved a niche for himself as an outstanding performer, Harikatha exponent, a composer of merit with 300 compositions in Kannada and Telugu with notation, out of which 101 songs have been published under the name "Omkaara Nadha Sudha" to his credit, a film producer, playback singer, film music director besides story and scriptwriter. This is none other than legendary Honnappa Bhagavathar.

His birth name is Honnappa after his family Goddess and Bhagavathar was attached to it later. Honnappa was born on 14-1-1915 at the Makra Sankranthi festival at Chowdasandra Village, Nelamangala Taluk, Bangalore district as the

second son of Chikkalingappa and Kallamma couple belonging to weaver's community. His mother used to take him to weekly Bhajans in the village Temple where a number of Namavalis and other devotional songs had a lingering effect on the little boy. His mother also taught him few songs. At the age of 5, he lost his father. Due to poverty, the brothers migrated to Bangalore and employed as domestic helps in a rich man's house. The landlady was highly generous and large-hearted that she after noticing the sweet voice of Honnappa during his morning prayers, arranged for their education and music lessons.

The boy made rapid progress that he could give mini-concerts. During one such concert, noted Harikatha exponent Sambhanda Murthy (who could deliver harikathas in Kannada, Tamil and Telugu with felicity) spotted the immense potential and hidden talent of the boy and took him to train under him. He took his disciple to his programmes for vocal support and for stage experience. Honnappa was also trained by noted Harmonium player Arunachalappa of famed Aruna Musicals, Bangalore. Thus, the musical journey of Honnappa started on a strong footing. He was a singer/actor in several dramas also. In the olden days, music, harikathas and dramas were the main recreations to people. The radio was never invented then. Two or three language films were released every month in theatres. Kannada films were rare.

Honnappa was gifted with a majestic look, fair complexion, good height, catchy eyes and everlasting smile, precise diction of lyrics, besides sweet and captivating voice the main essentiality for a successful career as a matinee idol. Soon Honnappa earned a good name and started



Honnappa Bhagavathar performing with HV Krishnamurthy on Violin and Palghat Mani Iyer on Mridangam for Karnataka Ganakala Parishat, Bangalore

giving music concerts in public and private functions. During his concert visit to Salem in Tamil Nadu, he was invited to act by Shankar films, Madras for their production 'Ambikapathi'. In the olden days, the main hero was supposed to be a good musician also to render his own songs in films! The film was a super hit and a new hero in Tamil films emerged. Earlier to Honnappa, it was MK Thyagaraja Bhagavathar who donned the role of Hero and singer in films. In early 1940, he was involved in a court case and withdrew from film acting. His brother MK Govindaraja Bhagavathar was also a classical musician and was in high demand. His role and luck landed on Honnappa, the substitute for Thyagaraja Bhagavathar! He was senior to noted film actors MG Ramachandran with whom he has acted in one or two films besides Shivaji Ganesan. Thereafter, the name Bhagavathar was attached to Honnappa!

Empire Studio Gurappa was a great patron of music. He was host to several leading visiting musicians to Bangalore that included Mysore T Chowdiah. In his company's anniversary function, Honnappa Bhagavathar performed. Legendary dramatist Gubbi Veeranna was so impressed that he invited Honnappa to join his drama company and gave him many leading roles which were great hits. While he was in Gubbi Company, he was invited to act as a hero

in a Tamil film "Krishna Kumara". Noted music director G Ramanathan was the music chief in famed Modern Studios at Salem who offered the leading role to Honnappa Bhagavathar in films Sathi Sukhanya, Sri Raja Rajeshwari, Burma Rani and Arundathi. Around 1938, Gubbi Veeranna produced the Kannada film 'Subhadra' in Pune with Honnappa Bhagavathar as a hero. In order to act in this film, he has to forego many invitations from Tamil films. That was his love and respect for Kannada and Gubbi Veeranna.

He, in partnership with BD Irani of Mumbai, produced the mythological Kannada film 'Bhaktha Kumbara'. He took his own orchestral team 'Bharatha Seva Mandali' to Madras and recorded all the songs for the film. With great difficulty, he completed the film successfully. Although the film earned a good name, it suffered a heavy loss in box office collection. He was selected by veteran director HLN Simha as hero in AVM Production's Kannada movie 'Bedara Kannappa'. Since he was commanding a high premium, proprietor Meyappa Chettiar suggested to lookout for a new face and that's how matinee idol Dr Rajkumar's epoch career in Kannada Film Industry started.

Later, he restricted himself to acting and playback singing. Noted producer Vishvanatha Shetty produced the film 'Jagajyothi Basaveshwara'

with Honnappa Bhagavathar in the lead role as Basavanna and Rajkumar as King Bijjala. Veterans Kalinga Rao and GK Venkatesh scored music. The film was a hit and received National Award. In his next film 'Mahakavi Kalidasa', famed actress B Saroja Devi made her debut as heroine. In those days, the harmonium was the base instrument in film music and even to this day.

For the first time, he used Veena, flute and western instrument clarinet in the orchestra. His rendering of 'Manikya Veena' in the raga Kambodhi was a delight to the listeners. Major ragas of Carnatic music Kalyani, Navarasa Kannada, Simmhendra Madhyama, Dharbar etc. are used in the film. Those days, people who never liked films, used to come only to relish pure Carnatic music rendered by veteran singers! The next film 'Gunasagari' was also a success.

He bought a house at Venkata Narayana Street in T Nagar at Madras where the entire script and music for the film were composed. Due to heavy studio rents, many Kannada film's shooting used to be in the night after 10pm. But for the film Mahakavi Kalidasa, Bhagavathar hired the studio for the entire day without minding the heavy rent. In all, he acted in ten Kannada films and over 20 Tamil films. In the year 1959, he produced the Tamil film 'Ulilukkum Tolilukkum Vandhane Shaivom' and suffered heavy loss compelling him to sell his house at Madras and return to Bangalore. He restricted his activities to music concerts and Harikatha. After 20 years, his close friend, another actor/producer D Kemparaj Urs, who was the managing director of Karnataka Film Industry Development Corporation invited him to produce Kannada film Sadananda jointly. On the request of veteran GV Iyer, he acted in the film 'Madhwacharya' donning the role of Madhwacharya's father.

In the year 1961, he floated his own drama company 'Uma Maheshwari Sangitha Nataka Mandali' and toured the entire Karnataka staging numerous plays. Due to heavy loss, the company was wound up in 1964.

Although he was a highly gifted and versatile actor, musician, film producer, composer, luck didn't favour him. He suffered huge financial

losses in all his endeavours and efforts to survive in the magic movie and drama world. Apart from these setbacks, he was subject to ill-treatment by some cultural organisations. All the grocery merchants of Tumkur joined to celebrate Vinayaka festival under the organisation 'Siddhi Vinayaka Seva Mandali' with the late HH Shivakumara Swamiji as the chief patron. In the month-long festival, attractive scenery sets were erected besides music concerts by eminent and popular performers, light music, harikathas, dramas etc attracted huge visitors from various places.

In the year 1979, Honnappa Bhagavathar was invited. Without reason and intimating him, his concert was dropped. So also noted flautist late BN Suresh's programme. An enraged Bhagavathar aired his grievances in letter columns of all leading newspapers that was taken seriously by Kannada Activist Vatal Nagraj who threatened to launch a dharna before the Ganapathy Pandal unless the organisers reschedule the programmes with a public apology for this ill-treatment of local artists. Most of the invited musicians cancelled their programme in protest!

In his long innings, he was decorated with numerous awards and titles. He was on the advisory board of several cultural bodies and President of Musicians Forum 'Karnataka Gana Kala Parishath'. Decorated with Central Sangeet Natak Akademi fellowship, Film National awards twice, Karnataka State Sangitha Nritya Academy award, honours by Shankaracharya of Sringeri Sharada Pita HH. Abhinava Vidya Theerta Maha Swamiji, Malladihalli Raghavendra Swamiji, 'Gana Kala Bhushana' by Musicians forum 'Karnataka Ganakala Parishath' etc. He passed away in 1992. His mortal remains were accorded State Honours by Karnataka Government. In the year 2015, his birth centenary was celebrated paying him rich tributes. As a mark of it, the Information and publicity department of Karnataka produced a special documentary film on him. Third Main Road, Chamrajpet, Bangalore where he lived is named after him by BBMP, Bangalore. His family members have started a musical institution in his memory.

Sree Palakkad Mani Iyer

PG Krishnamoorthy, Bombay

Reminiscences of my association with Palakkad Mani Iyer

"Any attempt to write or speak about anything that is complete in itself and comprehensive is bound to be incomplete" [Poornathvam petra onrai kurithu pesavo ezhuthuvathu seithall athu poornam aahathu]. A great man wrote somewhat on these lines while describing some of the virtues of Sree Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar in an article in the souvenir published while celebrating the completion of 50 years after latter's stage entry. He was himself worthy of such a compliment. He was an ocean, deep and vast, unfathomable in depth, immeasurable in expanse and full of "Gems of purest ray serene", beyond the ken of the common man and therefore sometimes dubbed as unpredictable. He ruled supreme as the uncrowned king in Carnatic percussion field for over 50 years and left a style distinct and well developed for hundreds of percussionists to follow. Like the mighty ocean, he had immense capacity to influence the course of any concert in which he took part, and like the ocean, which, although it encircles the entire land, exhibits different characteristics in different places, which is perceived differently by different persons and which serves different purposes for different persons, he too was viewed and his actions evaluated variously by different people. Some worshipped him like a god, some attempted to emulate his style in handling instrument, some his personal styles - hairstyle, dress, gait, habits and mannerisms while some others covertly criticised and vilified him. Sri MS Ramiah, a senior mridangist was muttering to himself after listening to this great man in 1978 at a concert, "Uchishtam - what we are having as knowledge of percussion instrument consists of the left overs from this man's performance. can we ever learn enough

to understand and appreciate him, not to speak of coming anywhere near him in performance !". And yet, there were others who covertly despised him, accused him as unorthodox, lacking in consistency of views and possessing idiosyncrasies.

My object in this write up is only to put down some of the occurrences, anecdotes and observations during my association with this great man, which would afford some glimpses of his personality, his keen intellect, his large-heartedness, his ideals, his vision and perception which impressed me and which have been guiding me as a beacon light in my own life, both official and personal.

One thing which comes uppermost in the reminiscences, is his forthrightness and courage of conviction. I am reminded of two incidents which I had personally seen and one or two which had been narrated to me by the Master. It was during the Experts committee demonstrations during the annual Music festival at the Music Academy on a Sunday morning in December in the sixties. The pandal in the courtyard of the auditorium was packed to capacity and many were standing outside.

The session included a demonstration of 'Jathis' set to different Thaalams by a guest artiste from Andhra. The speciality was that he would be indicating the Angams of different Thaalams simultaneously using both the hands, both the feet, the shoulders and the head while uttering the Jathis. The Thaalams having different Mastras would synchronise after several rounds, at which point, the jathis would also end. starting with two different Thaalams counted on two hands, the artiste, demonstrated the feat of oral

presentation of jathis keeping seven different thaalam simultaneously. The applause from the audience was spontaneous and many admired the performance. Master, however, stood up and asked the artiste a few pertinent questions. He asked him whether he could indicate the calculations or at least generally state the principle underlying the demonstration. the reply was in negative. Then he asked the artiste whether he could state any part of the jathis in the three speeds (thrikaalam). the reply was again in the negative. The next question was whether the artiste could put any portion of the jathis into a different 'gathi' like thisram and again this drew blank. finally he asked the artiste whether in simple Aadi thaalam, he could say "thakadhimi" seven times followed by "thadhikinnathom", thus coming to 'level in the fifth round; still there was no positive response. Meanwhile the audience was hurling all sorts of insults against the Master. They said that he had no business to question an honoured guest artiste; that it was his uncurbed arrogance which made him to do this; that he was unnecessarily teasing and exposing the artiste's weakness and even they shouted "can you do such a feat ?". We were really worried as to what would happen. Master, however, stood up calmly, raised his voice and said "I am one with you in appreciating the difficult feat performed by the artiste, but please remember that this is a session of the Experts committee in the music field. Any discussion or demonstration will have to be related to the theory and practice of music. If a performance cannot be explained in terms of these, it may partake of the nature of acrobatics only and, however difficult and novel it may be, this is not the forum to exhibit it. We are entitled to know how far the performer can relate it to the general principles". I could see the persons who had shouted against the Master acknowledging the correctness of his argument - "of course that is true", they said. His perception was different and lofty.

A second occasion was in late 70s when I saw his stubbornness in sticking to principles. A function had been arranged in memory of Master's coeval and fellow student under the late

Sri Chathapuram Subba Iyer. In the evening there was programme at which the percussion support was provided by Master. As usual it had been announced that there would be no loudspeaker arrangement, but the organisers had allowed unrestricted entry of listeners, little realising the consequences. After a very good start, the artistes had got into Saint Thyagaraja's '*dinamani vamsa*' in Harikamboji. The audience had increased in number and as the hall was in a temple complex, there were also external disturbances. the audibility of the music was therefore low. there were requests from the audience for the provision of a loudspeaker. the Master told the organisers to explain to the audience the kutcheri was announced as a mic-less concert and that if they had patience, in a matter of minutes, their ears would get adjusted to the sound. there were persistent calls for a loudspeaker and it was likely that there would be trouble. any other person would have yielded and agreed to the provision of loudspeaker which could have been arranged soon. But master simply asked the veena vidwan to play '*Manigalam*' and concluded the concert notwithstanding threats of injury to his person unless the concert was continued with loudspeaker. Of course, nothing untoward happened; usually nothing untoward ever happens to one who takes a bold stand on the basis of declared principles.

A lot has been said about his aversion to loudspeakers for the performances in which he took part. A few years before he declared that it is his policy to avoid the microphone in his performances, I was with him at one of the concerts in the Egmore Museum Theatre at Madras. That was the time when at Madras Bharatanatyam and Dramas were holding the sway among the music and fine arts sabhas; light music was also gaining prominence and carnatic music programmes even by celebrated artistes did not have much of an appeal for the audiences as before. To tell the truth, including the artistes on the stage, we were only about 75 persons in the hall for the programme. After the programme, Master told the organisers "look, this is going to be the pattern for quite some

time; Carnatic music is not going to draw large audiences. why pollute the music with the microphone which will distort the sound and sometimes make it very unpleasant ? I am prepared to reduce my rates substantially if you avoid it during my programmes". In later years, he imposed a total ban on mic for his programmes. He had several reasons for this. when I had become sufficiently close to him to discuss these matters, without much inhibitions, I asked him whether in his opinion, mic was responsible for our losing the voice culture technique. The response was quick and emphatic. He said "where is the doubt? (Samasyam enna, andha kuthu villakku thaana kedukkarathu)". If one wants to strengthen and refine his voice, he should sing at '2-1/2 kattai' and it should be full-throat, full volume effort, if possible in the open preferably sitting on the terrace". He had, of course, male singers in his mind while saying this; he also believed that with fairly good acoustics in the concert hall, the listening power and involvement of the audience would substantially improve in the absence of the mic. After his decision to do away with the mic, he had given scores of performances, accompanying vocal and instrumental music including veena. Some of these were in quite large auditoriums and to fully packed audiences. Music lovers did enjoy the performances. He had the knack of ensuring that his handling of the mridangam never affected the audibility of the rendering by the other artistes and all the time it embellished these and brought the performance to the full-blossomed beauty. I am reminded of the advice given to me by Trichur Sankara Menon, one of the old veteran mridangists of the times of Kallidaikurichi Sri Vedantha Bagavathar, in the beginning stages of my interest in mridangam. He used to say that a percussionist would normally pass through four stages before he became competent to give pleasing accompaniment as a mridangist. Thus, "Adi, Idi, Kottu, Vaayana" meaning "uncontrolled sound, muffled identifiable pattern of sound, clear sollukattu but in crude and loud volume and clear and appropriate sollukattu rendered in pleasing and sweet form" were according to him the four stages; practice and nothing but hours of prac-

tice would elevate one from stage to stage. Master had practiced endlessly, researched every facet of the construction of the instrument, its preparation for use for concerts of different types and handling under all circumstances. He had proved his views on the supremacy of the mic-less concert and his ability to handle the mridangam in an exceedingly effective manner to support the main artiste, whoever it was. In his hands it was really the 'Mridu angam' (soft, sweet instrument), though occasionally he used to bring the effect of super fast jet speed or a tempestuous thunderclap to enliven or prop up a slackening tempo. why should he not have his way ?

His respect for traditional values and maintenance of standards was phenomenal. He knew that perfection was impossible; he was fully aware that one should make allowance for many imponderables and external forces, but he never slackened his efforts towards achievement of perfection. He would never compromise on quality, be it his personal attire, the maintenance and even the general appearance of his instruments or the planning and the performance of a kutcheri. He had expressed his immense happiness at the increasing spread of classical south Indian music in recent times, but he lamented the deteriorating standards of practice. It was not as though he was unaware of the problems of the present day students of the art, such as, lack of time, diversions and the need to be well up in general knowledge and awareness of the happenings so as to be able to converse and compete where necessary, with others in the society, and, more than anything else, the practical impossibility of taking to music as the sole occupation or profession at least in the beginning stages, due to the change in the economic and social scenario. He shared the feeling of other old-timers that the role of amateurs in fostering the traditional arts would become increasingly prominent in the times to come. (I recall a conversation which I had with late Sri Rajamanickam Pillai in 1966, if I remember correct, when he was bed-ridden at Kumbakonam. I had expressed the constraints in practising mridangam due to my touring job and

said that all the same, if someone could measure the sincerity and devotion to music, it would probably be found that it existed at least as much in the amateurs as in the professionals. He said "Lakshathil oru vaarthai" and added that spread of music and its development in times to come would depend solely on the interest and the efforts of general public and notably amateur artistes, as old time samasthanams and princely houses were dissolving). And yet, Master did feel that practice of south Indian Music be it vocal or instrumental had to be more strenuous and well structured. Complacency and compromises had no place in the development of art, nor did he accept the craze for quick results, abandoning quality. He had once specifically referred to the lack of care in learning or teaching the fingering and formation of sollu in the initial stages. A student must develop awareness of the potentialities of the instrument which he handles and also what type of fingering would bring out the best from the instrument. He would state "take the American learning mridangam. Once he is instructed to use his thumb hooked to support the forefinger and to keep his middle finger raised for a particular sound, he will never forget it, whereas our boys will have to be reminded frequently of the position; if not, they will allow their fingers to spread out like the legs of a spider". He used to say that if a student approached in the early stages, it would be possible to reset the fingering. But if he had reached the advanced stages, the fingering would have already set and few would have the inclination or patience to practice the 'paadakkai' to correct the fingering. The advantages of a little longer practice and attention to the first lessons could not be ignored.

Likewise, he had his own view about music competitions and schemes for selection of candidates for award of scholarships etc.,. It was his firm conviction that there should be a minimum standard of performance to be expected from the competitors and awarding of prize or selection for scholarship should not be on the basis of 'the best among those who participated'. He narrated an incident when, as judges on the panes for selecting eligible candidates for schol-

arship in a very advanced stage of learning of music, himself and the late Sri Alathur Srinivasa Iyer had boldly expressed their view that none of the participants had the minimum standard required for the award.

His criticism was never destructive. He had a genuine concern for improvement. He had done everything possible to encourage younger artistes by tendering advice, by accompanying them at concerts and guiding them and unreservedly appreciating them when they did well. In this respect, he had no complexes, no airs and never was he casual or half-hearted. In fact, he had looked into all aspects right from the seating arrangements, selection and sequencing of kritis and building their morale and mutual understanding. I distinctly remember a rather difficult situation which Master diffused very beautifully and ensured the conduct of an excellent concert. I had moved over to a city a months before the incident. Master was to give a performance at a Sabha if I remember correct, in October 1976 or so. I met him at his lodging around 11.am. The first thing he mentioned to me on seeing me was that there was a problem and it was even likely that the concert might be cancelled. the Sabha had, after some unsavoury experiences, decided that when artistes were engaged for their programmes, they would offer a remuneration which would include the cost of travel, board and lodging. The Sabha would render assistance in arranging for journey tickets, accommodation etc., if so desired by the artistes, but the bills should be paid by the artiste out of the remuneration; there was no question of these paid by the Sabha, once the remuneration offered was accepted. In this particular instance, when the Sabha specified its terms, the main artiste had not accepted and had insisted that their remuneration should be besides the train fare, transport and accommodation including boarding charges. there had been a stalemate and finally the artistes had received a telegram asking them to come for the performance and they had come. No representative of the Sabha had met them at the station and when they reached the hotel, though they found that accommodation was booked,

no member of the managing committee had contacted them till I had gone. It was a question of not only clarification and confirmation of terms, but the more important and complex problem of prestige. The artistes had decided to go back without performing, if there was no answer to these from the sabha. Master just asked me to go to the sabha office and see to it that a responsible office bearer would visit the artistes. His views were very clear. It was not just a question of money. It was the prestige and good name of the artiste and the sabha and, more than anything else, avoiding disappointment to the music lovers who would be thronging the auditorium in a few hours, from all part of the city. He was very good as a conciliator and he convinced the parties and ironed out the differences in a matter of minutes and the concert got off to a good start by 4.15 pm. as scheduled. One curious thing I found when I joined him was that the performance was going on but the performers had been seated on the floor abandoning the stage. Master explained that he had suggested this as he found the stage too high and far away from the audience. His ideas of audience rapport and involvement were excellent.

I was with him when he accompanied Sri Chitti Babu at one of the chamber music sabhas. The code of conduct for the listeners was very stringent. They were to be in their seats well before the commencement of the concert; they should not clap their hands or make any sound during the performance and they could not also leave the auditorium before the conclusion of the programme. the concert was excellent and the Thaniavarthanam was in Misra Chappu (if I remember correct, after the kriti '*Neethu charanamule*' in Simmendra madhyamam). As usual, it was crisp and colourful, but the audience had to keep silent. Chitti Babu applauded loudly and said " why are you bowing to restrictions on your freedom to appreciate a masterly effort like this " and there was thunderous applause. Master said that in our system the artiste expected open expression of encouragement and appreciation. In this he drew a comparison with the western audience, which is ' very polite,

disciplined and respectful, but which reserves its applause till the completion of the piece or sometimes, the entire concert '. He narrated his own experience in England, where he was given due respect and the standing ovation which followed his performance. He said it was all very good, but he really missed the visual and audible expression of appreciation during a raga exposition or a sangathi or good swara-prasthara or thani, which he was used to. It must be recalled that he accepted very few engagements abroad.

He used to say that a good part of any audience comprised those who 'love' music rather than those who knew the intricacies. A good artiste would therefore take note of this important aspect while choosing and sequencing the compositions, making a balanced time allocation of setting the '*kaala pramaanam*' so that there would be a number of popularly known compositions in different tempos, '*madhyama kaalam*' being given prominence. There should be some portion set apart for efforts to cater to the tastes and expectations of scholars and intricate aspects should definitely find a place so that the depth of knowledge and skills in presentation could be understood and appreciated, to some extent these would be providing guidance to the younger aspirants. He also used to emphasise the need for proper understanding the co-ordination among the performers themselves to avoid '*virasa*'. After all, as far as listeners are concerned, while they would expect each individual artiste to give his best, their main desire would be to get a full, satisfying and memorable kutcheri as a cooperative effort of the entire team. The master did really take pains to achieve this objective. Generally his own '*thani*' used to be brief, weaving colourful rhythmic patterns with adjustments of pleasing variations of sound and resonance. Complex technical aspects were also masterfully ingrained to make the performance dignified and weighty without being ponderous and procrastinating.

Reflecting on my association with him, a flood of episodes comes to my mind. It is difficult to

record them in detail, but I would like to narrate a few more.

Once, after a performance, I was taking him back to the hotel. He asked me whether I was finding enough opportunities to perform in kutchcheris. I told him that I was new to the place and therefore, apart from the A.I.R. Programmes, there were not many opportunities. I added that there was some resistance to new entrants especially to those from a different state. He patted my back and said " music field has never been free from politics. God has given you a good job and position and therefore you can afford to treat mridangam really as a hobby. do not compete with professionals who have to contend with several problems and ethics and fair play may not always be compatible with survival and success. Times and values have changed and the spontaneous respect which the old-time vidwan received from disciples and patrons may no longer be available to the professionals of the future, as a matter of course, when everything will be governed by contractual relationship rather than sentiments. continue to practice with devotion and be of assistance then no one will say that you are usurping his chance". What a rational way of looking at the somewhat unhealthy competition and performance - prejudice feelings which do rear their heads quite often in this field !

Master's outlook to commonplace things too was very logical. Once at the railway station, I stopped to pickup the mridangams and his luggage from the car boot. He stopped me and said " look, there are enough number of porters who eke out their living by doing this job. If we do not employ them, they will have to get their livelihood by other methods which may not be strictly healthy. Once they are successful in those methods, they will be harmful to the society. Why not employ them and pay them their just wages ?". He was quite liberal but not lavish in remunerating persons who worked for him and they left him satisfied and grateful. He would, however, never hesitate to pull up a person who had done slipshod or halfhearted work. Recently, I had occasion to study 'the Maxims of Chanakya' a compilation of

Chanakya's principles by Shri VK Subramaniam. the chapter on 'Causes of discontent' starts with the statement to the effect that the main cause of discontent is the denial of payment of one's legitimate dues. Great minds think alike ! I do not think that Master would have been less of an administrator if he had chosen to enter that field.

Master knew the art of management well. He was one of the old-time professional artistes, who earned well by hard and intelligent effort, spent judiciously blending considerations of utility, dignity, simplicity and consistency and invested wisely. Long before the average public knew it, he had understood the implications of tax incentives and he had availed of the schemes offered for tax planning. He had a quick and clear grasp of any subject of general interest. He would never skip his reading of a standard newspaper. I remember an occasion when he had to take the commuted value of some annuity certificates in which he had invested. I was present when he discussed the implications and procedural aspects with the officials concerned. After about five minutes with them, he had mastered all the aspects.

He was fully aware of the ways of the world and he was pragmatic to the core. Once a dynamic office bearer of an organisation, who was very well known in the music circles, lost his position due to the efforts of an opposition group. He asked me whether I was aware of it, and how it happened and I explained the circumstances to the best of my knowledge. However, within a matter of months, the organisation started languishing and the general body voted him back to position. At the next opportunity I passed on the information to Master. He had a hearty laugh. Then he said that he had expected it. He said "you know, the really aggressive go-getter, will have to bulldoze obstacles sometimes. He may not break the law, but will not have much of regard for procedures which can often cause serious delays and frustration and he is also not likely to follow the democratic principles always. But the organisation will flourish. the same thing is true of those whom we employ for our personal work. The

easiest way is to wink at the faults of such persons unless they are likely to be serious.

Master had his own unique and fascinating way of putting across his ideas. I remember one evening I had gone to meet him at the common room at Woodlands Hotel in Madras. His second son was also there. A very interesting piece of conversation took place regarding the son's job at Karaikudi (if my memory is correct). Master asked his son about the job, the date of joining etc., and then he enquired

"so how much will you be getting as salary?"

Son: "about Rs.250/-"

Master: "so you keep Rs.100/- and send me Rs.150/-. Is it not so?"

Son: "How can it be? I will not be able to live there with just Rs.100/-."

Master: "all right. then you keep Rs.150/- and send me Rs.100/- What do you say?"

For Master, these were very insignificant figures considering his affluence and the remuneration that he was receiving for his performances. It was not that Master wanted his son's monthly remittance, but that was part of his strategy of teaching his son to inculcate the habit of thrift.

There was nothing slipshod, nothing which would not reflect his characteristic dignity, about him. Even a simple and small action of his would be indicative of his planning and perfection. For some time he had to take a number of tablets in different combinations at different times of the day. He had organised it wonderfully well. He had a plastic container with a number of compartments for the tablets. He had very clearly marked the time at which each had to be taken and he also had a beautiful small pair of scissors to remove the tablets from the aluminium foils.

He had a keen time sense and he would never linger in the concert hall or place of any work after his job was over. In fact even before the conclusion of the concerts, often he would have despatched one of his disciples, from the dias, to fetch a taxi for his going from the concert

hall. Some of his fans used to notice this and they used to say "Mani Iyer has sent his disciple to get a taxi. the katcheri is about to end".

There was a unique greatness in everything about him and one great musician had, while speaking about him, punned using his name Mani, meaning 'time', 'jewel', 'money', 'beauty', (as in 'mani maniyaana ezhuthu), 'best' or 'adept' (as in 'Gaayakamani' or 'Thiruppukazhmani').

His circle of friends was not unduly wide. He would scrupulously avoid accepting favors from others. As a professional, he had to move with thousands of persons and yet, he knew exactly who should be close to him and who should be kept at a distance. There were few errors in his judgment of persons. He believed in trusting and delegating work to his chosen disciples and servants or friends and would generally leave them to do their job unless they sought his instructions. In the unfortunate event of anyone proving untrustworthy, he would not get unduly perturbed, but quietly keep him away; for him the world was large enough for people who could not see 'eye to eye', to remain apart. Not that he would be unreasonable and refuse to patch up where an earlier misunderstanding could be resolved. the manner in which he accepted and appreciated the efforts of some mutual friends who brought about a rapprochement between the late Chembai Sri Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar and himself after a few years of drifting apart, would abundantly indicate that he would correct his stand if he was convinced.

His appreciation of greatness in other artistes was unreserved and healthy, though he never believed in outward show or exhibitionism. His brief, but splendid write up on Ariyakudi Sri Ramanuja Iyengar amply brought out his admiration for that vidwan. Likewise he felt genuinely sad when several doyens like Alathoor Sri Subbier passed away. I distinctly remember the way he spoke about Kumbakonam Sri Rajamanickam Pillai on his demise, in the condolence programme broadcast by the A.I.R. He said in grief-stricken voice "Pillaiwal and myself had participated in innumerable performances over more than thirty years and, face to face with

each other on the dias, we had such excellent rapport that I shall miss him. Many of the old-time veterans have disappeared from the field and, with them, the traditional pattern of rendering is also slowly disappearing. I am left standing as a mendicant yearning for good, old-time music (Sangeetha Bhikshukanaaka nirkiren)".

Even his reprimands used to be subtle. He would not waste words and not a single word would be inappropriate. Once there was a mild communication gap between us. this was some time in 1978 or 1979. He was to take part in a kutcheri. I had received him at the station and put him in his hotel. There were some others and one of them, my namesake, was very keen that Master should visit his residence. when finally the programme was settled, Master said "Krishnamoorthy Iyer will take me there by about 4.15 p.m.." I was not used to the suffix to my name and therefore it never struck me that Master had meant that I should take him in my car; I had presumed that he had referred to the other gentleman. However, around 4.p.m, I had a feeling that probably I would also be required and I immediately rushed to the hotel. It appears that Master had been waiting for me and just left. So later I told him that he asked me "you usually keep your watch advanced by a few minutes, is it not so? Hereafter you keep it slow by a few minutes so that you may involuntarily start in advance especially when you are preoccupied with many things as you will subconsciously be worried about your watch being slow."

He scrupulously observed etiquette. In one kutcheri at the Nijaguna Kalyana Mantapam, Bangalore, Smt. Pattammal had asked her daughter -in-law (Master's daughter) to sing along with her and Master was accompanying on the mridangam. Smt. Pattammal mentioned to him before the concert that her daughter-in-law was also going to sing and Master had said "Oh yes, once I have entrusted her to your care, I know that you will mould her wonderfully well." the performance was excellent and some of the pieces, notably "eego namma swami" in Manirangu, "seetha vara sangeetha gnanamu" in Deva-

gandhari and a pallavi in khanda nadai were outstanding. Smt. Sivakumar gave very good support to her mother-in-law. after the performance, Master complimented Smt. Pattammal, to whom he was providing percussion accompaniment after quite some time, on the excellent performance. He never said anything to his daughter about her singing nor did he mention it to Smt. Pattammal. an ordinary person would have praised his daughter. Later, when I was driving him back to the hotel, I just mentioned to him that Smt. Sivakumar had risen up to the occasion and sung well. His comment was "yes, it was a pleasant surprise, especially because of the difference in the basic 'Sruti' and the very chaste method of rendering which Smt. Pattammal follows. She has taken great pains to teach Lalitha."

There are many such examples of his noble qualities.

My last association with him was in 1979. I was under orders of transfer to a place where the chances of his visit were remote. therefore, when an occasion arose for me to be with him before my departure, I spent as much time as possible in his company. After his kutcheri, I had accompanied him to the station. Unfortunately, that day, the departure platform for his train had been changed from No.1 to No.4 and we had to walk through the sub-way. At the head of the steps for climbing down, he paused and said "I can walk some distance on level ground, but climbing steps is a problem". Then he added "the body has become quite weak. Only the fingers have retained their strength. If someone puts me on the stage, I can go on playing." It was a statement which I would never have expected from him. Tears welled up in my eyes. He had an iron will and an indomitable spirit. It was not in his nature to admit of physical fatigue or weakness. His was a life full of tough challenges boldly and successfully met. (As a matter of fact, he was reported to have kept several mridangams in trim condition ready for concerts, even at the time of his demise.) Instinctively I knew that I was seeing him for the last time.

I have no claim or competence to be Master's Boswell. He started his career before I was born. My knowledge of music is quite shallow and there were too many fine aspects in his performances which baffled me. As Sri S.Y.Krishnaswamy had stated in his memoirs after Master's demise, Master started at the top and stayed there for over five decades. There are many who knew him much better than me and were closer to him. All that I had in mind when

I started recording reminiscences was the desire that glimpses of the multifaceted personality of this truly great Master should be available to my children and their contemporaries who did not have any occasion to see him as a man and as a maestro, although they can listen to his recorded performances. For myself, this serves as a faithful remembrancer of a Divinely gifted person at whose feet I shall ever remain a devotee.

TV Gopalakrishnan on Palghat Mani Iyer

As told by Sangita Kalanidhi TV Gopalakrishnan to C Ramakrishnan

I was blessed to know and move closely with the legendary percussionist Palghat Mani Iyer from my childhood. I distinctly remember the first time I heard his concert. I was just aged five. It was in a Royal Wedding in Tripunitura, Kerala that I first got the opportunity to hear him. Mani Iyer was accompanying Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar in that series where many titans in Carnatic music were lined up. Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, Semmangudi Sreenivasa Iyer, Musiri Subramania Iyer, MS Subbalakshmi, DK Pattammal, Palghat Mani Iyer, Papa Venkataramaiah, Palani Subramania Pillai, CS Murugabhoopathy, Rajamanickam Pillai.. there were many great musicians. My father took me to all the concerts. We could not go inside. I sat on a parapet wall and listened to the magic created by Ariyakudi-Papa-Mani Iyer team. I had already reached a higher level in my musical training and was capable of understanding the subtle nuances of the music that was created on the stage. Mani Iyer's playing was simply awe inspiring. From that concert, I made it a practice to attend all the concerts where Mani Iyer was playing. Palghat Mani Iyer knew my credentials

and treated me with love and affection. I used to go the place where they would be staying and witness their practice sessions and impromptu music creations. I remember one instance when Palghat Mani Iyer and Rajamanickam Pillai doing detailed neraval on 'kantiki sundara' (chakkaniraja) - one person singing while the other supporting on the instrument. It was heavenly music.

Palghat Mani Iyer was a personification of layam. The charm of mridangam, layam was demonstrated by him which was a lesson for his peers and succeeding generations of percussionists. He was a phenomenal artiste right from his childhood. As a young lad he shared the stage with giants like Pudukkottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai. Pillaival, playing the Ganjira, initially insisted that he would sit in the front seat in the dais. But after three or four concerts he got convinced of the artistry of the young boy, he offered the front seat to Palghat Mani Iyer and volunteered to sit in the rear. The way he followed the kritis, neravals, kalpana swarams, tanams, pallavis, everything had a sophistication.



Palakkad Mani Iyer in accompanying TV Gopalakrishnan with MS Gopalakrishnan on Violin. Photo Courtesy - Sri. Ram-prasad of Sree Ramaseva Mandali, Bangalore

It was not mere kanakku. It was music all the way. Palghat Mani Iyer was a well trained vocalist too. It was his love for the instrument that he chose Mridangam. He could have become a vocalist also. His knowledge as a vocalist only helped him to embellish any concert to this remarkable level. His sollus did carry weight. They were not empty strokes. And it is difficult to substitute with any other sollu. He is very intelligent- a thinking musician in that. His embellishment in a concert starts right from the varnam and it continue till Mangalam. He never considers any aspect of the concert as less important. Right from the varnam his greatness is visible. When the first speed of the varnam is sung, he would fill with sollus following the chandam giving adequate space and pauses and when the second speed starts, he employs the nadais filling with gumkis. He is very quick to anticipate the variations in kalapramanam and play along with the vocalist. While playing for the kritis, he will highlight suitable places. In fact, he was the first artiste to bring in punctuation in Mridangam. He used to bring excitement during the starting and ending of a song – it is touching divinity. His pauses are very meaningful. The pauses carry music in them. He used to

tell - Tani avartanam is not the only thing to concentrate for a Mridangam performer. The Mridangist should embellish each and every aspect in the concert.

He devotes great care and diligence in the topi-valantalai alignment. The sruti alignment of topi with shadjam will be pitch perfect serving as a guide for the vocalist without insisting the tanpura sruti. His tani will be crisp. Those days, tani will be played within one and half hours of the concert. Nothing at the end of the concert. There will not be repetition in the tani. After about four avartanams, he will place a *abhiprayam*. Then he will shift the theme and conclude with two abhiprayams- one small and one big.

After seeing me in all the concerts, Mani Iyer requested my father to send me along with him to Madras and he will teach me as well as ensure my academic education. But my father said "Gopalakrishnan is my eldest son. I will provide for his College education and see that he is settled in a Govt job." So I did not go with Mani Iyer. After my education and choosing a full time career in music, in 1969, when I went to Madras, he had sold his Madras house and settled in

Tanjavur. So that formal learning under him remained an unfulfilled dream of mine. Once I mentioned this to him. He said “You have seen me in all my concerts and imbibed my entire art more than my formal students. What more you can learn from me?”. He continued “the other day I was hearing a concert of your Vadhyar (Chembai) thinking that I am playing the Mridangam. When the tani started only, hearing some of the special sollus, I could realise that it was you on the Mridangam”. What could be a better blessing for me from the God of Mridangam. In fact we both shared the common pedigree. My Mridangam Guru was my Chithappa who is a disciple of Tanjavur Ramdas Rao - who was the Guru of Palghat Mani Iyer.

After hearing some of my concerts, Mani Iyer himself arranged for a concert of mine in Trichy Ragapriya- where Alathur Sreenivasa Iyer was the President - with himself playing the Mridangam and Sikkil Bhaskaran on the Violin. He was very happy after the concert. After this we shared the stage in nearly 40-50 concerts and each concert provided different learning experience. I would take his views while choosing the Varnam, Main kriti and Pallavi during each concert. We shared the stage for many mic-less

concerts also. He was right on his insisting of mic-less concerts. The purity of chapu is best experienced without amplification.

He used to give great respect for the stage and the audience who come to our concert. He would say “People spend their hard earned money and buy tickets for our concert. You should do enough home work and be prepared to present the music with hundred percent perfection. They are not coming to see your practice session on the stage. You should respect the audience and the art.” He upheld the dignity of the profession like nobody did. Apart from the agreed fees, he will never demand any other favours or pleasantries from the organisers. When some organisers, pay enhanced remuneration out of their happiness after the concert, he would return the extra money forthwith. I will never miss any of his Chennai concerts. The days spent with him are cherish-able for the life time.

You won't be able to play like this....

Palakkad Mani Iyer taught mridangam to the students of the Rishi Valley school near Madanapalli in Andhra Pradesh for a couple of years. Sometimes towards the end of 1978, Mani Iyer gave a solo recital at the school auditorium. J Krishnamurthy sat in front of the floor and silently listened to Mani Iyer's elevating touches on the mridangam. At the end of it, he stood up, took Mani Iyer's hand in his and said to him, 'Mr. Mani Iyer, even if you are born as Palakkad Mani Iyer in your next birth, you will not be able to play the mridangam like this'. Sunanda Patwardhan who was in charge of the world head quarters of the Krishnamurthy foundation in Madras, translated it to Tamil for Mani Iyer's benefit. Mani Iyer remained silent for

a few seconds and realising the deep meaning behind the words of the seer nodded and told him, 'Yes, you are right'

What Krishna ji meant was that, for Mani Iyer, his art was his meditation. Elevating himself through his art he moved and elevated rasika-s too. Therefore, he had no more of karma left to fulfil. He had fulfilled his karma-s in this birth itself through his great art

Ravi and Sridhar

Source - Courtesy Sruti, March 2007 Edition

Mali and Mani Iyer

*Author - KP Ramakrishnan (a close associate of Mali)
Courtesy - Sruti, August 1987 Edition and TR Rajamani*

“Mani Iyer is great,” declared Mali one morning - as if giving the devil his due and shaking his head somewhat ruefully as if he were doing it much against his wishes.

“Yes” I said, not to be outdone in trivialities; and lit a cigarette.

Mali’s face shone with the sheen of one who has had his morning coffee (yea, he drank coffee too!) and he had a satisfied look about him. Only the previous evening he had given a concert at Gokhale Hall with Mani Iyer and Papa Venkataramiah. The trio had done pretty well what they liked with the audience (which included some luminaries like Maharajapuram and the M.S.family) and offered three hours of concerted artistry with friendly punches and counter-punches occasionally thrown in. Mali had divided his attention equally between bhava and laya – turning to Papa for the former and to Mani Iyer for the latter.

“Osthi ! Romba Osthi !!” said Mali after a pause, combing his forelocks absently with his artistically tempered fingers. High class ! Very high class !!

“Sure,” I said just to keep him from flying off to some other topic. Evidently he was in a rare communicative mood and I did not want to say the wrong thing and make him calm up.

So I waited puffing on my Wills. Mali, seated on his cot with a small pillow casually flung on his lap, sat lost in thought. Something was stirring inside, some weighty remark gathering shape some expression gaining form and substance. Mali was never, to my knowledge, an impulsive speaker. He thought long on what to say, on how to say it, often on whether to say it at all. For one who could hurl a lightning briga at an

audience, he was easily the worst despairs as a sprightly conversationalist.

So, as I said, I waited. I had a hunch that I would soon be hearing something momentous about Mani Iyer, something worth waiting for. And I knew that, when it came, it would be quite out of the ordinary. How out of the ordinary I learnt in a while.

“Mani Iyer,” said Mali with a most serious look in his face, “ could have become a Stalin if had wanted to! He has what it takes!”

I ducked under the bouncer. Of all the eccentric thoughts to start a day with, I thought – picking up my Wills from the floor! – This stands without peer. Stalin and Mani Iyer! Where the hell was the connection?

Was he pulling my leg? Certainly not. He was sitting there in all innocence, looking smug and serious, with the air of one who had got it off his chest at last – little realising the jolt he had given.

The topic soon changed to something else. But two things were clear: he had paid a compliment; and it was the highest compliment he could think of!

The Tuskers Clash

One evening the two tuskers locked in combat and parted none the worse for the wear.

The venue was an open-air concert featuring the same classic trio - Mali - Papa - Mani - somewhere in Madras (I cannot recall the place; probably some who read this may). There was a small pandal for the artists and possibly for some VIP’s and the rest was a spacious ground crowded with steel chairs. The “many” had turned up in thousands - licking their chops.



Palakkad Mani Iyer in a concert with TR Mahalingam and TN Krishnan

The concert took off in an air of hushed expectancy. It was 'Viriboni' that day - that all time classic of venerable vintage which even the Trinity must have practised when lads.

The tempo was typically Malian: most leisurely, haltingly slow, and excruciatingly long drawn out. In anyone else it would have degenerated into a tedious drag but Mali gave the karvai-s a body and meat that gave them a substance, richness, a full-blooded vigour that possibly only Naidu garu could match. As it was, the leisurely strain filled every cubic millimetre of that open ground.

But things were happening on either side of Mali that the audience could not miss. To his left Papa was gamely struggling to match the tempo. He had to employ the most leisurely sweeps of the bow to sustain the karvai-s. Madhyamakala being his forte he was feeling the rigours of totally unfamiliar pace. He had to bring in all his expertise to do justice to the occasion.

To Mali's left, Mani Iyer was up and away paraphrasing the varnam in his own inimitable manner. In mridangam (as in Veena), long karvai-a cannot be sustained, especially when the membrane is stretched to pitch No.5. But Mani Iyer solved the problem by preferring the chappu to

the meettu. His chappu-s rang with metallic clarity and rich timbre while the thoppi let out deep sustained growls that resonated with the chappu. All in all a masterly show. What else does one expect from a maestro?

At long last, the first round of pallavi and anupallavi drew to a close (with the inevitable tisra gati of the chittai) and the second round began in the second degree of speed (which is double that of the first). Papa was on his home ground and played with relish and gusto. Mani Iyer, as his wont, followed like a shadow and the trio finished the round in complete unanimity (including the double speed tisra gati of chittai).

Now when the second round draws to a close, the usual practice is to return to the first-degree speed and go on to the charanam (usually at a brisker pace). No one bothers to have a tilt at the third-degree speed (which is four times the first, that is double of double).

But I do not know what drove Mali that day. Some imp must have whispered in his ears: "Now, how about the third-degree speed?" Without a hint of what he was going to do, Mali cut loose on the third round. And all hell broke loose!

Now a third degree speed is nothing to raise a fuss about. There are many who can do that. A maestro like M.S.Gopalakrishnan on the violin would think nothing of a third-degree speed even on a single string. He is practically daily in touch with his instrument. But not so Mali. To my knowledge he did not touch the flute except on the evening of the concert. As soon as the sabha car came he would ask to be driven to the beach and there would reel off a few phrases and scales and, in minutes, be ready to be driven to the recital hall. (It is said that Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan too was somewhat similar. He would frequently call out “Siva! Siva! !” On his way to the concert hall and keep his voice in fine fettle!)

So, knowing his lack of touch, I thought the man was mad. My heart leapt into my mouth when he plunged into the third-degree speed with a come-what-may air – like a reckless Saint templar coolly sauntering into the salon of the ungodly. It was suicide. Mali had committed himself and the point of no return was far behind him. It was either fly or crash. And he flew.

He let loose a fusillade of split-timed notes and the effect was electric. The audience sat up as one and the air was clipped by shining stilettos of steel-blue notes.

But it was to Mani Iyer that the thousands of eyes turned as one. Beyond an initial startled look, the maestro plunged into the fray with all his verve. That he was taken aback was obvious. But he shrugged it off and proceeded to clinically carry out what was expected of him. And what was expected of him was not merely to play the third-degree speed. That any other decent mridangam vidwan could have done. What was expected of him was to play the varnam in unison with Mali and at the same time conforming to the idioms of his own instrument. And that at such short notice, too in the third tempo. It is at such crises, true genius blazes. As Kalidasa says somewhere: “The true test of fire is not when it is blazing on the straw but when blazing in the submarine caverns of the ocean.”

Papa had long back given up the unequal contest, but the bout continued between Mali and

Mani Iyer. The burst of shower from Mali's flute fell on the audience along with the hailstorm from Mani Iyer's mridangam. Bhavam had long fled.

But it was all touch and go throughout! Both had to concentrate hard and bring to bear all they had. Mali's face looked grim and strained – very unusually – and he almost looked unsure of carrying it off. Mani Iyer looked wary but sharp and gamely carried on. The strain was obvious. Clearly Mani Iyer had no choice in the matter because, being a sideman, he had to toe the line of the main artist. That he did under the most trying circumstances was a tribute to his mettle and skill.

Now all this took only a couple of minutes – no longer. Before you could say Jiffy it was over and Mali and Mani Iyer jointly homed in on the first-speed without tripping. And the audience burst into deafening applause. Most of it I am sure was for Mani Iyer.

But that was not the end. The episode erupted into repercussions later in the concert.

Came the tani and Mani Iyer began in the most majestic way - laying proper foundations and exploring various possibilities in his characteristic way. And Mali began to keep time! Now that is something, which Mali never did – at least as far as I know. (Another musician who never bothered to keep time for tani was Naidu garu). He never even listened to the tani unless it be stalwarts like Mani Iyer or Palani Subbudu. But keep times with palms-never. I do not know what made him keep time. Maybe Mani Iyer himself had signalled to him (I was too far back in the audience to note). Or the same imp was still active grinning behind him and egging him on. Whatever the reason, Mali started keeping time.

And that was enough! The Kerala tusker had a long memory! And it was no longer Mali's choice. It was Mani Iyer's! It was Mali who had to toe the line!

Soon there was drama in the air. Mani Iyer inexorably pushed Mali to the brink of straining himself. He was carrying the battle to Mali's



*Palakkad Mani Iyer in a concert with TR Mahalingam.
Photo courtesy Vidwan Dr.V Krishna*

camp and trying to trip him up. He tried everything he was the master of. Now a split-second pause, now a false start, now a rogue flourish, now a sustained fusillade with an uncertain beginning and an uncertain end, now an unexpected change of gati, a tisram, a kandam, a misram; now a chatusram in a kandam, now this, now that.

It was Mali's turn to be wary, to cling for life to the neck of tusker running amuck. With bated breath the audience watched not knowing where all this would end.

And when it ended Mali had come unscathed! But only just!

The audience deafened the air with applause. And this time it was more for Mali than for Mani Iyer!

"Bravo!" cried Mali enthusiastically (and possibly with relief).

"Sariya pottade perisu," rejoined Mani Iyer. [That at all you kept time was in itself great!]

That Fastidious Man

Another day, one afternoon, I happened to rave about Mani Iyer's inimitable virtues - which I suppose was the wrong thing to do.

Mali absent-mindedly listened to me but began shaking his head slowly in dissent. There was, however, a smile on his face and an indulgent gleam in his eyes. Evidently he was not totally denying my critique. But he had the look of a

fond parent letting the kid rave on, reserving to himself a more mature judgement.

And soon even the conversation stopped. For something astonishing was happening. Mali was playing the half-chappu (semi-chappu if you like). Yes, just the semi-chappu. Nothing else. I swear no one could have heard anything equal to it. It rang softly like the string of a veena-not like a percussion instrument at all. Unconsciously during his chat, Mali must have discovered the right spot, the right angle and the right sweep. Again and again the lower edge of the palm descended on the face with all the leisure in the world (by now I had rushed to the window and was looking in!) and every time the palm met it slantingly, the bally leather sang, but sang. The ring remained indefinitely in the air. It was pure note - all of it. And all this mind you, on that disreputable mridangam!

In a flash my mind fled back over months and the words rang again: "Innum suddham venum!"

Here it was - purity in the absolute. No other words can describe the sensation. Purity and purity alone. Even from Mani Iyer I had not heard that sort of neatness.

Mali turned back towards the window, still teasing out that long-drawn ringing note from the mridangam. A gleam rose in his eyes and a gentle smile curved around his lips. That gleam spoke volumes. I looked sheepish.

Let me hasten to add that Mali was not a competent player on the mridangam. But he could manage a few patterns on it - just for the heck of it. And that day I understood what he could have done if he had but bent his skills to it. He would have made history!

The Dumb And The Eloquent

In every age there must have been instrumentalists trying to make their instruments sound vocal. Why instrumentalists alone? It is said of Raphael that, on completing a statue, he struck on the shoulder with his chisel and said, "Now, speak!" In the late nineties of the last century it was Tirukodikaval Krishna Iyer who is said to have set the tempo in this respect.

In the middle of this century too there rose quite a few of such uncompromising instrumentalists.

Rajarathnam Pillai was one. He “sang” through his nagaswaram. It is said that he once bragged to the great drama-actor-singer S.G.Kittappa: “Let me see one musician who can reproduce what I play on the pipe!” Unfortunately he made that remark to the wrong person. Kittappa bristled and shot back: “Come, let me see if I can’t do it!” Rajarathnam had to pacify him saying: “Didn’t mean you, brother, only the others!”

Once after one of Mali’s concerts (Mali was then, he told me, in his mid-teens) Subba Rao garu, after duly complimenting him, added: “After all what more can a dumb flute do?” It was a fortunate remark because it stung the lad to the quick. “I that day vowed,” said Mali years later, “to make the flute sing!” That prod pricked the oyster into a pearl. It is a known fact that he refused to play in the 9-30 pm. Slot during the Madras music season. He insisted on the early evening slot reserved for vocalists. I personally know how he hated the word ‘flutist’.

Papa was another example. He came closest to vocal music on the violin even though many would argue that it was (Govindaswamy) Pillai.

Another outstanding example is Veena Balachander. Even when young, I guess, he must have been irritated by the profusion of meetu-s in the older players and vowed to make the veena ‘sing’. That he succeeded superbly is an accepted fact and all credit to him for blazing a trail.

But Mali and Rajarathnam were on a different footing because, when vocalising their instruments, they did not forget their tonal qualities. Rajarathnam was despair for the other nagaswara vidwans even where tone was concerned-let alone technique. So was Mali. Both in tone and technique, he was just unbeatable.

Papa and Balachander stand apart. In their pre-occupation with vocalisation they, I should think, treated tone with scant regard. (Naidu garu was the other extreme - sacrificing vocalisation for

tone!) Papa’s violin “sang” but did not sound violin. Balachander’s veena “sings” but very little sounds like the traditional veena. In fact some extremists have even gone to the extent of saying that Balachander plays gottuvadhyam on the veena - out of his earshot of course! There are wiser things to do than to lock up with him!

So we had a quartet - Rajarathnam, Mali, Papa and Balachander - who strove to struggle out of pure instrumentalism and blossom into the vocal fields. It was unusual that they aspired to outshine vocalists. But strange, no.

And there was a fifth! Palghat Mani Iyer! And he stood like a star, apart from the above four.

Here was a man who was a percussionist and he threw the gauntlet at the vocalists and made them love it! “Mani Iyer didn’t play mridangam. He actually played the songs!” How many times ad nauseam have we not heard this cliché? But how true! And mind you, he did not let down the tone of his instrument. If anything he was peerless in tone.

Tailpiece

Mali and I once were crossing the Hamilton’s Bridge in Triplicane when we were surprised by a beefy buffalo which came galloping towards us. We swerved in time and the buffalo sped fast barely brushing us.

While I was trying to still my still palpitating heart, I turned around to find that Mali was convulsed in silent laughter.

“What is so funny about it?” I asked testily.

“Didn’t you notice?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “What?”

“That bally beast was galloping in tisra nadai!” he responded.

“And what kalapramanam” he added, and choked!

“Divine blessings for new beginnings”

Anagha and Dileep receiving ashirvadams from his Holiness Sri Sri Yadugiri Yathiraja Narayana Ramanuja Jeeyar of Yadugiri Yathiraja Mutt.

Smt.Anagha is the great grand daughter of visionary founder of SRLKM G Vedantha Iyengar and grand niece of GV Krishnaprasad, Hon. Secretary SRLKM.

Smt.Anagha recently gave a performance at the Sree Venkateshwara Temple in Richfield, Ohio , U.S.A.





A rare picture of Palakkad Mani Iyer with Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar