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CHEMBAI VAIDYANATHA
BHAGAVATAR

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CHEMBAI VAIDYANATHA BHAGAVATAR
(1896 - 1974)

CHEMBAI

VAIDYANATHA BHAGAVATAR

'UTTAMA GAYAKA'

CHEMBAI One of a cluster of villages near Palakkad, in Kerala, where Tamil-speaking 'paradesa brahmana' immigrants-- among them musicians-- from the Kaveri river delta settled three-to-five centuries ago.

CHEMBAI Also the 'prenom' by which the most famous concert musician belonging to the immigrant community came to be known. Cf. Ariyakudi, Musiri, Semmangudi, names of villages elsewhere in the South which have come to denote famous musicians belonging to them.

FULL NAME OF MUSICIAN Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar.

YEAR OF BIRTH 1896.

YEAR OF DEATH 1974.

LENGTH OF CAREER Seventy years, starting in 1904. Perhaps the longest of any famous musician of the South.

FAME Equally enduring and still intact, posthumously.

TITLES Gayana Gandharva, Sangeeta Samrat, Sangeeta Kalanidhi, among others--all richly deserved and highly appropriate.

OTHER HONOURS Padma Bhushan, bestowed by the President of India; and the Sangeet Natak Akademi award.

A guru imbued with passion.

A geyakara infused with bhakti.

A fine human being given to simple living and high thinking.

Rightly called Uttama Gayaka.

Successful Career Spanning Seventy Years From Superkid To Sangeeta Samrat

This profile was written by P.C. JAYARAMAN and N. PATTABHI RAMAN.

Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata did not live to be 80 or long enough to sight the full moon a 1000 times to qualify for a satabhishekam. Yet his career as a concert musician spanned 70 years. This was unique enough, but he also held sway over audiences that cherished Carnatic music for nearly half this period. He held his place as a popular and yet respected front-ranker despite competing claims advanced for the attention of the same constituency of listeners by such stalwarts as Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Kanchipuram Naina Pillai, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Musiri Subrahmanya Iyer and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and bright new stars like G.N. Balasubramaniam and Madurai Mani Iyer, not to mention the trinity of female musicians, who entered the field later.

Indeed it was a remarkable record. But then Vaidyanatha Bhagavata was a remarkable musician, someone who gave himself unstintingly to music just like he, in personal life, early on surrendered to God without waiting for the onset of the winter of life to do so. He was a simple man who did not know what guile was. He was outspoken and his speech had no varnish to make it smooth and polished, even as his music was plain and vigorous. His straightforward, perhaps somewhat rustic personality appealed to those who came into contact with him even as his straightforward music, conveyed in a ringing voice always true to pitch, appealed to the listeners. Also, remarkably for a member of the musical fraternity, his personal life was totally blemishless. Altogether, violinist Mysore T. Chowdiah's description of him as an Uttama Gayaka-- comparable to the Uttama Nayika in dance-- was most apt.

Not surprisingly, the prenom Chembai has come to be a synonym for value-based life and music. Those who subscribe to Mendelian genetics as well as

those who give greater credence to environmental impact will likely cite the case of Vaidyanatha Bhagavata as proof for their theories. Mendelians attribute all traits of a human being to the cumulative effect of genetics and call them the *flowering of eons of evolution*. It may not be true that all human talents, and artistic abilities in particular, are entirely dependent on chromosomes; but at the same time it is necessary to recognise that certain talents do run in families. Certainly there is evidence to support this in the case of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata. However, the family and social environment in which Bhagavata was raised as a child also seem to have shaped his personality and talent. What his story suggests really is that both genes and circumstances

contributed to what he became.

It is said that for more than five centuries the Chembai family had been involved in music. Vaidyanatha Bhagavata's great-grandfather, 'Gana-chakradana' Subbiah, was a highly respected musician. Subbiah's son Ananta Bhagavata was a talented vocalist and violinist. He was a deeply religious man and led a very respectable life marked by self-discipline and dignity.

Ananta Bhagavata's wife Parvati Ammal gave birth to Vaidyanatha Bhagavata in September 1896, and younger brother Subrahmaniam was born a couple of years later.

Chembai was a 'bhagavata' even at birth, for the tag of bhagavata was a traditional family title. But Chembai lived to more than justify the title as a devotee of Guruvayurappan.

Ananta Bhagavata initiated Chembai into music when the latter was but three years old. He put the boy through rigorous practice in the swara-s, a strong foundation for Chembai's future unerring swara and sruti purity. Also included was intensive 'aakara' practice.

When Chembai was five years old, his father thought of his academic education also. But the little village had no proper school facilities and could boast only of a 'tinnai' school, an informal teaching facility run in one of the houses, on the 'tinnai' or pyol in front. It was there that Vaitha started his school education.

Music lessons for Subrahmaniam also were started at this time and the two brothers began receiving combined lessons from their father. Contrary to what usually happens, the boys showed greater inclination for their music lessons than for playing games. So keen was their interest and so rigorous their training that, by the time Chembai was six years old, the boys' voices already had the clear marks of training and displayed 'life'. The boys were also unique in their lack of inhibition





Chembai in the 1930's. Drawing inspired by Mali

whenever asked to sing.

Ananta Bhagavata was himself a musician of some repute. Naturally, several musical celebrities used to call at his residence. Then there were artists visiting the area for concerts in and around Chembai who made Ananta Bhagavata's house their lodging for the duration of the visit. The house was

thus full of music and of talk of music and musicians. The boys were not, however, overawed by the presence of musical heavyweights and went about their practice as usual. Soon enough they attracted the attention of the visiting vidwans who first listened to them casually, then with serious attention and finally in admiration. Sometimes the

visiting musicians would themselves join the children in singing or as accompanists, with the result that the practice sessions became mini-concerts as it were. This helped Chembai and his brother to develop self-confidence.

The singing ability of the boys slowly became known over a wider radius and Ananta Bhagavata was pestered with requests to send the boys to perform in public. The requests could not be put off except for a short period. The boys had their arangetram or debut, a concert of two hours' duration, in 1904 when Chembai was only eight years old.

Following the debut, there was a flood of requests for the brothers to sing at various functions. Ananta Bhagavata cheerfully obliged, prizing the experience that this gave to the boys. Of remuneration, of course, there was little at this stage. Accompanists were sometimes good, sometimes indifferent and some other times just not provided at all. But the boys sang wholeheartedly wherever they went. At first their kutcheri-s contained only kriti-s. Gradually the duo ventured into raga alapana and kalpana swara-s.

The Chembai brothers had their first concert for which they were paid in 1905 at a temple festival in a town called Ottapalam. A little later, there was another noteworthy concert at Kandalurkoil, again at a temple festival. Ananta Bhagavata himself provided the violin accompaniment, while mridanga support was given by well-known stage actor Chokkanathapuram Iyah Bhagavata.

The brothers had become fairly well-known by now as good vocalists. But

A Chembai - Semmangudi jugalbandi! It never took place but the photo-evidence was created as a gag



neither they nor their father wanted to rest on the laurels already won. Ananta Bhagavatar took the boys with him to his own concert engagements and to attend concerts by some other musicians, providing valuable listening opportunities to the youngsters. He would even send the boys alone to concerts of some musicians to which he had himself not been invited, so that they would not miss the opportunity. This continual exposure to good music by various artists helped the young musicians improve their knowledge and their understanding of what concert music involved.

One of the landmarks in the early career of the brothers was their concert at the temple festival in Vaikom, renowned for the annual musical feast it provided. At this concert in 1907, the father again provided violin support. This concert turned out to be a remarkable one, bringing to light new qualities in the music of the brothers. As it happened, Chembai thereafter made it a practice to sing at the Vaikom festival every year. Soon after the Vaikom concert, Ananta Bhagavatar took the boys to Guruvayur, another important temple town where again they had a successful concert. Guruvayur too became a regular part of the Chembai's concert programme every year.

Thus Vaidyanathan and Subrahmaniam imbibed from an early age not only the knowledge of music that their father had but also the tradition of a religious life which had marked the family for generations.

The brothers had a keen desire to advance their musical competence and their career as well. They did not want their experience to be confined to Chembai and nearby places alone and wanted to spread their wings over wider territories. An opportunity for realising this wish came when Kaliakudi Natesa Sastrigal, a Harikatha expert who was visiting Chembai, took the boys with him on a year-long tour. They had chances to display their talents at various places. Their concert in Tiruvarur (in Tanjavur district) at a guru pooja festival at which Natesa Sastrigal gave a discourse was specially notable, because it was at this concert that the boys were heard for the first time by Pudukkotai Dakshinamurthy Pillai. Natesa Sastrigal told Pillai about how

he had met the boys and about their abilities and requested Pillai to do what he could to help them. Pillai had no hesitation in agreeing to this.

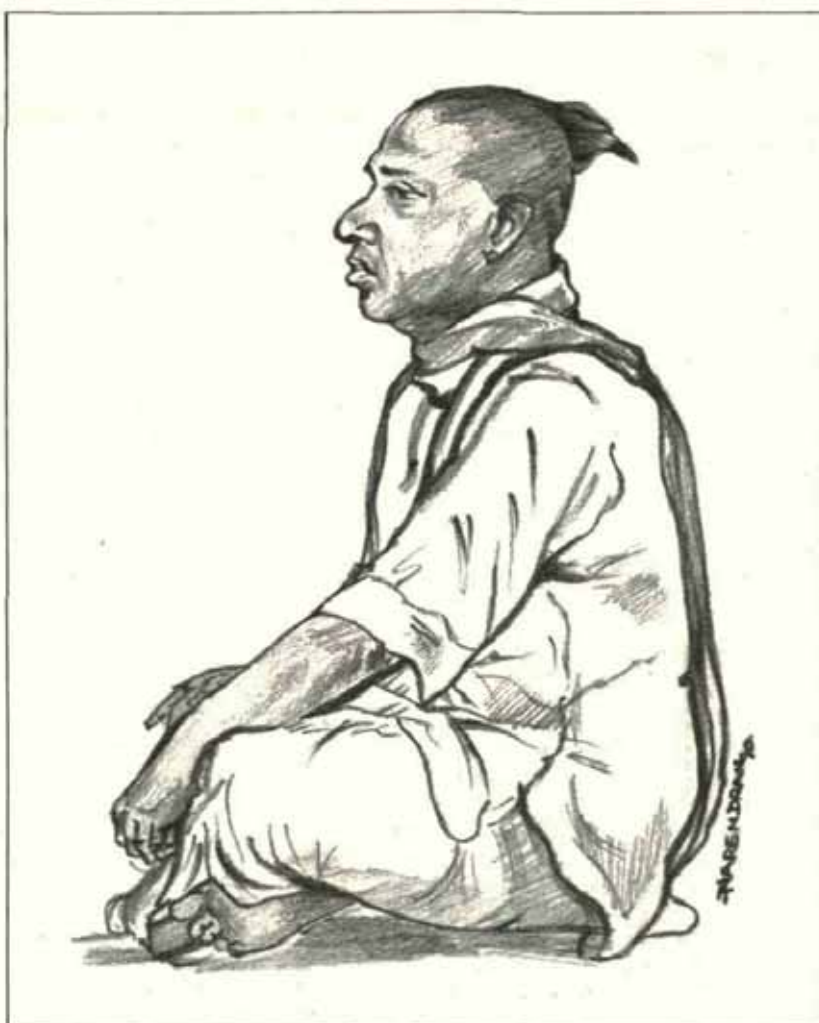
After about a year's absence, the brothers returned to Chembai, to a warm welcome from their parents. During their sojourn with Natesa Sastrigal, they had not only been singing at various places, they had also taken every possible opportunity of listening to famous musicians whenever they performed. And there were musical giants reigning in those times, like Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar, Kallidaikurichi Vedanta Bhagavatar, Ramanathapuram Srinivasa Iyengar, Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer, Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar, Madurai Pushpavanam, Tirukodikaval Krishna Iyer, Malaikkotai Govindaswamy Pillai and Pudukkotai Dakshinamurthy Pillai. This learning by listening was a valuable facet of the brothers' training. Indeed, when they returned to Chembai, their musical knowledge and ability had significantly

improved, much to their father's delight.

The quality of the musicianship of the youngsters was testified to by none other than the famous musician Palghat Anantharama Bhagavatar who was present at a concert in Sekharipuram in 1911. Particularly complimenting Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar's voice, he predicted a bright future for him.

When he was only 16, Chembai took on the role of teacher, in order to help out his father. He wanted all his students to learn all that they could from him. And he was an able teacher, whose teaching sessions were pleasant and enjoyable. No wonder that his disciples ultimately numbered a legion.

But life is not an unbroken chain of happy events for anyone. Chembai had a turn of misfortune at this time. His adolescent voice 'broke' and he could not sing at all. Chembai in fact thought he could never sing again. But instead of succumbing to a feeling of despair,



Chembai in the 1940's. Drawing inspired by Mali

he turned to learning to play the violin, something with which he was already familiar, his father being also a violinist. Within a short period he attained considerable proficiency. For about a year he in fact accompanied flute artist Ananta Bhagavata, who was his sister Narayani's husband who was a flutist. He was also bitten by the flute bug now and learnt to play it well enough to perform a few concerts on this instrument!

But fortunately for music, Chembai regained his voice, so that he could resume his singing career.

An artist gets a sense of fulfilment when his artistic merit is recognised and there is a demand for what he has

to offer. To obtain this recognition, effort is needed on his part and approbation does not usually come on its own. He has to work and work hard to improve his competence and also present what he has to offer at different places.

Chembai understood this reality even at a young age and acted accordingly. The various landmark incidents in his musical career stand testimony to this. He did get opportunities to perform at important festivals and other occasions but these came after considerable effort on his part and thanks to his determination.

A good illustration of this is available in what happened in 1913 in the town of Karur, near Tiruchi. A rich

man and a patron of the arts and artists named Pethachi Chettiar lived in this town. He used to conduct a festival featuring music concerts by the leading musical lights of the day. The arrangements of this music-fest were the responsibility of none other than the celebrated musician and vaggeyakara Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavata. Chembai wanted to attend this festival and partake of the feast of music and so he and his brother proceeded to Karur. Once he reached the town, he had another wish, that he should sing for this choice audience, consisting of not only ordinary rasika-s but also a cross-section of leading musicians themselves. He met Muthiah Bhagavata and made his desire known. But the reply was

A Night To Remember

In the early thirties, electricity had just arrived in the more important towns of India, but the radio was yet unheard of, concert platforms were mikeless and music performances were not amplified and loud-spoken. No one missed any of these signs of progress then as they did not exist! But the vocalist had to sing aloud and at a high pitch to make himself or herself heard over the length and breadth of a large auditorium, usually referred to as 'hall'. This was quite the fashion of a sangeeta natakam or musical drama in which usually the 'raja' (hero), invariably a well-known vocalist, appeared on the scene singing a popular hit, whether it was quite relevant to the story being enacted or not. The pedal harmonium accompaniment and the mridanga had to be played aloud to be heard at the rear-most row, which meant the singer had to sing even louder. This tonal requirement applied to dialogues too, and it is not surprising if the over-worked actor helped himself to some nourishment, 'spiritual' or otherwise, at every fall of the curtain. This, indeed, added colour to his performance but the organisers hoped and prayed that there would not be too much colour.

In those days, a music concert had its own interesting features. Firstly, the singer and the accompanying musicians had to arrive most probably from different locations, when road and rail transport were still not highly developed and communication mainly had to be by post. The late arrival of any one musician of the pre-arranged group would cause no end of concern especially when tickets

were sold out and a restive audience in the jam-packed hall was counting the minutes for the performance to start.

It is one of those performances in Tiruvananthapuram, which has gone into memory's archives and which is now being recalled here: a performance by Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata. He was a popular singer and he had a terrific team of sidemen that day. The violin was in the hands of T. Chowdiah, while Dakshinamurthy Pillai, originally slated to play the mridanga, had opted to play the kanjira. The name of the mridanga artist cannot be recalled now, but he was also someone of top rank.

The kutcheri was to start around 8.30 pm, but the stage curtain was still down when the appointed hour came and there was hardly any sign that a music performance was going to take place. In a few minutes, this ominous situation was compounded by a minor panic which gripped the restless audience, for someone seemed to have floated a rumour that one or two of the artists had not reached the town yet and that the concert was likely to be postponed or cancelled. The thatched hall was full; even the verandahs were full with people crowding the windows. But, it was the surprise that brought relief. The audience broke into cheers as the curtain went up after the long wait. Every artist was in his place and smiling and all was right with world! During the next minute or two, the general noise level rose up but, suddenly, Chembai, with a twinkle in his eye, shot off a musical sound into the air which was the tara shadja beginning note of *Chalamela Swati* Tirunal's *Ata tala* varnam in Sankarabharanam. Chembai held on to

this note for a few seconds and then came gliding down the octave as was required in the pallavi. And he brought the house down. Obviously he had known how to handle an impatient audience. It is difficult for me to recall now, after some 60 years, what else he sang except that, when I was getting out of the hall on the arm of my father, the musician was on *Evarimata* in Kambhoji raga. It was now near midnight and Chembai's voice, metal-smooth and clear, cut through the still night.

The patience exercised by the audience in spite of the uncomfortable conditions and the onset of a shower during which one could hardly hear anything was, indeed, commendable by present day standards. Nor were the artists fastidious. The pitter-patter of rain on a thatched roof seemed to offer them just another trial of virtuosity against the prevailing noise.

Some other aspects of this performance seem worth recalling also. The singer and sidemen seemed to be friends and totally relaxed and outgoing, this friendship sending its warm glow into the audience. Memory has retained the amiable gimmicks of Dakshinamurthy Pillai while playing the kanjira, either by way of throwing challenges to the mridanga vidwan or seeming to ask him or the audience: "How do you like that?" Appropriate facial gestures, a frown here, and a quizzical look there, a smile here and a grunt there!

It was a night to remember.

R.B. NAYAR



Chembai presenting a memento to Madurai Somasundaram at the Shanmukhananda Sabha, Bombay



At a Bharatiya Music & Arts Society function. Speaker is N. Madhav, Mayor of Bombay. Musician is Tiruvizha Jayasankar

Seerkazhi Govindarajan garlanding Chembai. To Chembai's right is Morsing Pakkirisamy



disappointing. Muthiah Bhagavatar told him that only leading artists could expect to perform there and a youngster like him might get a chance at some future date if he made good. To Chembai's continued importuning, Muthiah Bhagavatar's response was that, at the most, the lad might be given a chance the following year, as all the arrangements for the current festival had already been completed. Chembai was keenly disappointed. But now destiny took a hand. The violin accompanist for a jalatarangam concert failed to arrive. Chembai persuaded the soloist to avail of his own services and she agreed. The concert turned out well and, as was customary, Chembai was handed over his payment for the part he had played. He, however, expressed a wish not to be paid in cash, saying that he had actually wanted only to sing. He explained he was building up a career as a vocalist, though he also knew how to play the violin, and that he would prize a different kind of payment, that of a chance to sing before such a distinguished audience. Muthiah Bhagavatar and Pethachi Chettiar were persuaded by this reasoning and promised Chembai the stage for the following day. Needless to say, the performance by Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar was a thumping success.

Chembai secured a similar opportunity of significance in 1915. A leading citizen of Ernakulam, named T.A. Duraiswami Iyer was conducting an annual Tyagaraja festival which attracted all the important performers of the day and a throng of listeners. It was considered a privilege to sing at the festival. Chembai went to Ernakulam and requested Duraiswami Iyer a chance for him also to sing. Duraiswami Iyer agreed. As customary at such festivals, Chembai sang for the limited time allotted to him and was about to get up, when there was a chorus of requests for one more number and he had to oblige!

Very soon Chembai had an opportunity to spread his wings wider, when he received an invitation to sing at a wedding in the family of one Jnanaprakasa Mudaliar in Pondicherry. Until then the brothers had given full-fledged concerts mostly in and around Chembai. True, they

had been to several places with Natesa Sastrigal and sung at his discourses, but these mini-concerts were more in the nature of interludes, of subsidiary performances. The performance in Pondicherry made Chembai known over a wider area leading later to more concert opportunities.

A testimony to Chembai's determination is the manner he got to have an audience with Sreelasree Ambalavana Desikar, head of the Tiruvavaduturai math and a revered spiritual leader. Chembai had heard about the leader's interest in music and his discriminating knowledge of music. He wanted to have a chance to sing before him and proceeded to Tiruvavaduturai with his brother. But having reached the town, the lads were disheartened to learn about the high level of security and about the formalities that made access to the Adheenam difficult. Chembai expressed his desire to an official of the math. The brothers were courteously received and provided with boarding and lodging as guests of the math and a promise of action. But time passed, five days in fact, without any news of the requested appointment with the Adheenam. The brothers were deeply disappointed and were preparing to return home. While Subrahmaniam was attending to the packing, Chembai was restlessly walking about, rueing the failure of their mission. Suddenly he noticed that he had reached the entrance to the math. He also saw that the guard who was usually stationed there was not then to be seen. He was excited. He was afraid as well but took courage in his hands and got past the gate unobserved. After walking here and there, he succeeded in locating the quarters of the head of the math, which was guarded by two armed sentries. While he was wondering what to do, Chembai discovered, from the activities that were going on, that the Adheenam was about to proceed to the temple for worship. When the latter walked out, Chembai too emerged from where he was hiding and went and stood in front of Sreelasree Ambalavana Desikar. The latter was taken aback but, fortunately for Chembai, he was in a placid mood and gently asked the young man who he was and what he wanted. Chembai told him courageously, but not without trepidation, about his keen desire for the privilege of singing before the Adheenam and obtaining his blessings. Desikar observed that Chembai

might have learnt music all right but apparently had not learnt manners as he would otherwise not have made this kind of brazen approach. Chembai made bold to explain that it was far from his intention to thrust himself forward unceremoniously but that he had been patiently waiting for days for some response to his request for an audience. Desikar was somewhat mollified and told Chembai to wait at the premises till he returned from the temple. After an hour, he came back and spoke to Chembai and this time gathered details about his family and about his musical background and qualifications. Then, at his suggestion, Chembai rendered in viruttam form the verse 'Kanduka madakkariyai vasamai nadattalam.' Desikar went on prompting Chembai about the raga-s he should sing and the youngster responded enthusiastically. Greatly impressed by the performance, Desikar ordered that a concert by Chembai be held the next day. Chembai's ardent wish was thus fulfilled. A highlight of the concert was that the mridanga accompaniment was provided by the great Azhagunambi Pillai.

Another significant event in Chembai's career was his concert at the Ramanavami festival in Palakkad in 1916. Among those who attended the concert was Pudukkotali Dakshinamurthy Pillai. Pillai had listened to Chembai on an earlier occasion and been impressed. Hearing him again, he was fully convinced of his exceptional talent. After the festival, Pillai returned to Tiruchi to meet the famous violin maestro Govindaswamy Pillai and told him of the calibre of Chembai's music. Dakshinamurthy Pillai was not a man given to easy praise. That he himself should speak so highly of Chembai greatly impressed Govindaswamy Pillai who promptly made arrangements for a kutcheri by Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar in Tiruchi. Govindaswamy Pillai himself provided the violin accompaniment while Dakshinamurthy Pillai played the mridanga. The concert met Govindaswamy Pillai's expectations fully and, thanks to his efforts and Dakshinamurthy Pillai's, Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar had the opportunity to sing at various places, with the two Pillai-s themselves playing the accompaniment in most of the concerts.

Chembai's first concert in Madras was in 1918, at the Triplicane Sangeeta

Sabha. Rasika-s who had heard about the young vidwan were keenly looking forward to the event and the sale of tickets was very brisk. As the concert was about to begin, the hall was filled to capacity, with a large number listeners who could not gain entrance milling around outside. There was a demand that the doors of the hall should be opened. This rose to a clamour as the concert started and the organisers had finally to keep the entrance doors open to mollify the restless crowd of listeners. The concert, featuring as sidemen Govindaswamy Pillai on the violin, Azhagunambi Pillai on the mridanga and Dakshinamurthy Pillai on the kanjeera, was as usual an impressive effort.

Chembai's concert career took a further upswing after this concert. He gave performances all over the South. This was the era of giants, with vocalists like Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Kanchipuram Naina Pillai and Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer considered the front-rankers. By the time he reached 30 years of age, Chembai began to be considered one of them.

In 1932 Chembai cut his first gramophone record, for the Columbia Gramophone Company and more followed soon. Once while he was relaxing with some friends, Dakshinamurthy Pillai heard one of Chembai's discs being played in a nearby building. He listened to it with rapt attention and, when it was over, remarked to his friends about the versatility of Chembai's gifts. He observed that it was usually the case that a learned musician lacked an attractive voice, and one with a good voice, did not know how to sing well and pleasingly. Some singers could sing well in concerts but their records were not impressive. But in the case of Chembai, he added, there was an exceptional combination of qualities--inborn gnana, a fine voice, good diction, attractive style, a friendly disposition, the keenness to teach as well as the ability, and so on. High praise indeed from a person of the discrimination of Dakshinamurthy Pillai.

Between 1932 and 1946, Chembai's music was captured on several phonograph discs. Many of them turned out to be hits and served to extend Chembai's popularity, leading to more concert opportunities. And Chembai was one

artist for whom almost all kutcheri-s were successful. The secret was that he put in the same devotion and effort into every performance.

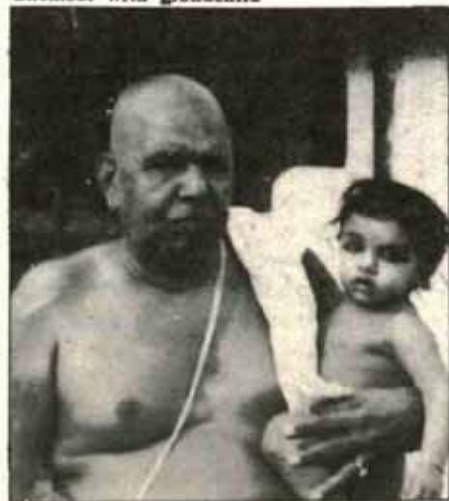
Those were the days before the advent of the loudspeaker and a singer was entirely dependent on the timbre and reach of his voice for a successful concert. Chembai was uniquely blessed in this respect, for his voice which had great depth, was a special attraction. When he was 30, he was considered to have a voice that had no parallel then. There was one occasion when he had to sing at a wedding 'competing' with the nagaswara ensemble. He did it successfully, and held the attention of the audience till the end of the performance.

Chembai was married when he was 15 years young. The bride was Meenakshi, daughter of Vasudeva Sastrigal, also a resident of his native village.

In 1927, they became parents of a girl who turned out to be their only child. They named her Parvati. Ten years later, they had her married to Chembai's nephew Narayanan. Although he had gone to college and graduated, Narayanan had studied music as well. Chembai had taken him under his wings, persuaded him to take up a career in music. When Narayanan became his son-in-law, it was arranged that thereafter Narayanan would replace brother Subrahmaniam as Chembai's 'second voice.'

Subrahmaniam had been Vaidyanatha Bhagavata's shadow right from his childhood days. Although he was about two years younger, he was verily like a

Chembai with grandchild



twin and it was not surprising that, in their boyhood days, the two of them singing together had elicited comparison with Lava and Kusa of the Ramayana. But with Chembai emerging as the hero, Subrahmaniam had become a Lakshmana to Vaitha's Rama. Ever faithful and devoted to his older brother, he had no difficulty with the new arrangement, especially since he felt he needed more time to devote to the management of family affairs and property, as well as to the free music school which his brother had established in 1923.

There were other events in 1937. Chembai's father Ananta Bhagavata died. Later, Chembai visited Mysore at the invitation of Krishnarajendra Wodeyar, its then Maharaja, and gave a command performance there. But he declined another invitation that followed, to serve as an asthana vidwan of the Mysore Court, since he felt he would not be able to stay in Mysore as frequently and as long as required to discharge the duties of a court musician. But the royal invitation was an instance of formal recognition from influential quarters.

Of course, the listening public had



Chembai with daughter and son-in-law

long recognised Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata for the dedicated and outstanding musician that he was. His sustained popularity was testimony to that. This popular recognition found further expression in 1940 when his old friend T.D. Narayana Iyer, about to retire as a senior postal official, arranged a function to raise funds for the War effort and for activities promoting the welfare of the employees of the postal department. He decided to invite Chembai to give a performance on the occasion and to honour the Bhagavata. Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavata presided over the function, of which the highlight was the awarding of the title of Gayana Gandharva to Chembai.

The recognition most coveted by Carnatic musicians, is the invitation to preside over the annual conference of the Music Academy of Madras. The title of Sangeeta Kalanidhi goes to the person presiding over the conference. Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata received the invitation and the title in 1951.

Chembai accepted it graciously though others who belonged to his era, like Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Musiri

On Encouraging Young Musicians

Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar included the following advice in his presidential address at the annual conference of the Music Academy of Madras in 1951:

All musicians who have achieved a measure of fame should, whenever convenient, attend the performances of youngsters in their profession. They should sit up-front and give encouragement, avoiding gestures which might upset or create apprehension in the minds of the young performers. Music flourished in the past only because the older musicians had given encouragement to youthful performers in this manner.

Subrahmanya Iyer, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer had been given the title before him. That he was not fully happy with the way the establishmentarians of the Academy ran its affairs was, however, known. When Musiri had been selected for the honour, Chembai had been asked to second the nomination formally. While fulfilling this responsibility, Chembai let it be known that he resented what he considered to be the favouritism shown to Musiri by the Academy. He said, the sarcasm in his speech evident, that it was but right that the Academy should honour Musiri-- and that it should honour him not once but again and again. Vidwan K.S. Krishnamurti recalled this incident recently.

On his 61st birthday



Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar subsequently received the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1958 in recognition of the distinguished service rendered by him to Carnatic music. The honorific of Padma Bhushan awarded by the President of India came his way in 1973.

Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar's busy schedule, and the fact many of his concert engagements were in Madras and other places reached easier from the city, persuaded him to shift his headquarters from Chembai to Madras in 1945. Also influencing him in this matter was his desire to compose the music for songs written by his long-time friend and supporter T.G. Krishna Iyer. In the event Chembai set to tune some 120 songs written by Krishna Iyer, known generally as Lalitadasar songs. He also recorded some of them and included several in his concert repertoire.

Bhagavatar's role as music teacher, which had started in Chembai, continued in Madras with added vigour. He accepted students without hesitation or thinking about money and he always gave of his best. When a friend once asked him whether all his students were becoming successful musicians, Chembai replied that depended on their good fortune; as far as he was concerned, it was his duty to teach, without worrying about the result.

Chembai's disciples ran into hundreds. Naturally, not all of them made a name for themselves as musicians.

Chembai died on 16 October 1974, very soon after a concert at the temple



which had been the venue of one of his earliest concerts. At 78 years of age, he was ready to exit the world and it seems he had a premonition of his end.

Chembai's memory lives in the hearts of countless rasika-s who have heard him.

Chembai's music and personality may both be considered by many as old-fashioned. They were, but for this very reason they should serve as sources of guidance to those aspiring to success as performers today. His music was rooted in tradition and yet he succeeded in creating a large following and remaining at the top for many, many years. And he did this, moreover, without lowering his personal dignity and the dignity of his profession.

He once observed:

"Music is a great art, a divine art. Our forefathers looked upon it as a dedication to the divine spirit. Therefore it pulsated with a life-force. Nowadays the art has been commercialised and music of those who get paid the highest is considered the best."

Chembai himself demanded high fees because he believed art should not be sold cheap. But he led a frugal life despite his high income, because, as noted before, he was given to simple living and high thinking. He did not hoard his wealth; he supported causes which he considered worthy and, in line with his belief that art should be dedicated to god, he devoted a considerable fortune to underwriting pooja-s at the Guruvayur temple and to restoring and maintaining the two temples in his native village.

Valuable Village Connections

The following article was written by P.A. RAMAN, a lifelong friend of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata and founder of the Bharatiya Music and Arts Society of Bombay.

Chembai is a quiet village about 25km from Palakkad town and railway station. It is actually closer to Parli railway station which is on the Palakkad-Shoranur track some five km after the Bharata river crossing. It is one of a cluster of four villages-- Ayyappankavu, Ayilam, Chembai and Meghanamkulam-- which has produced eminent citizens. If Vaidyanatha Bhagavata belonged to Chembai, A.V. Krishna Iyer, a leading lawyer, belonged to Ayyappankavu, Ayilam is the native place of the late A.S. Panchapakesa Ayyar, ICS, who also adorned the bench of the High Court in Madras.

I have heard it said that the forbears of Vaidyanatha Bhagavata originally belonged to Bhavani, near Erode, that they were among the Tamilians who had migrated long time ago to Malabar at the invitation of the Zamorin of Calicut. The Zamorin had promoted the immigration because he had fallen out with the Kerala brahmins. Banning them from his court, he had invited brahmin scholars from Tamil Nadu to take their place. And at his instance, the Raja of Palakkad had offered them land and helped to settle them in the surrounding villages.

The first to respond to the Zamorin's invitation was Uddhanda Dikshitar of Tanjavur, a great Sanskrit scholar and exponent of all the Vedas, Upanishads and puranas. His example prompted numerous others-- scholars, administrators, vaggeyakaras and musicians-- to follow him. The musicians included Vaidyanatha Bhagavata's ancestors.

I have mentioned A.V. Krishna Iyer because he played an important role in the development of Vaidyanatha Bhagavata's career. When the latter was making a mark as a musician in the local area-- he was very young then-- Krishna Iyer was a busy lawyer based in Trisoor. He had studied music under Chembai's father and later had the opportunity to deepen his sense of music appreciation by listening to fine perfor-

mances by top musicians in Malabar and in Madras City. Also he knew Kathakali songs set to Carnatic music and as well the songs used in Ottamthullal and Krishnanattam. Thus he had both the motive and the competence to play the role of a mentor to young Vaitha. (It was Krishna Iyer who later "discovered" Palakkad Mani who was being groomed as a vocalist by his father and who helped to launch the youngster on a career as a mridanga vidwan).

Krishna Iyer visited the village of Chembai from time to time, combining them with his visits to his native village. He offered suggestions on what the lad and his younger brother Subrahmaniam might do to improve the attractiveness of their singing. But he offered more than mere advice. He took the initiative to recommend Chembai for concerts outside the Palakkad area in Malabar, and as well in Travancore and Cochin, which were then independently-ruled States. He had the collaboration of Pudukkottai Chathappuram C.S. Ramachandra Iyer, a leading silk cloth merchant of Palakkad, in this endeavour. Together, they secured numerous concert engagements for Vaitha (who was accompanied by his brother) at temple festivals, palace functions and weddings of rich brahmin and Malayali families.

Krishna Iyer's reach extended to Madras also. He was married to a niece of P.R. Sundara Iyer, a leading lawyer who later served as a judge of the Madras High Court before his demise in 1913. Sundara Iyer's family recommended Chembai for concerts at private and public functions. They also arranged for Chembai to perform at weddings in the family.

(My father P.K. Ananthanarayana Iyer was a cousin of Justice Sundara Iyer who lived at Sree Bagh on Luz Church Road, the present premises of Amrutanjan Limited. My father was one of three juniors of Sundara Iyer, the other two were Alladi Krishnaswamy Iyer and C.V. Ananthakrishna Iyer. I have heard that it was A.V. Krishna Iyer who brought Parur Sundaram Iyer-- father of M.S. Gopalakrishnan-- to Madras.)

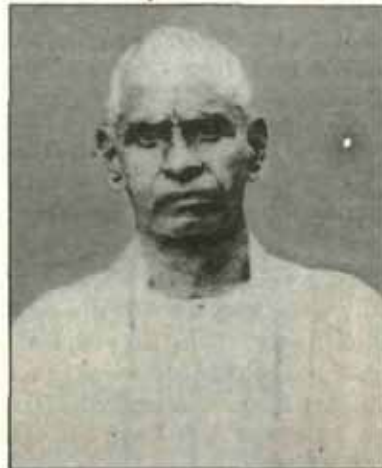
A.V. Krishna Iyer used to teach Chembai Sanskrit and persuaded him to sing *Agrey pasyami*, the sloka from *Narayaneeyam*. It was he who put Chembai on to *Karuna cheyvanendu*, the song on Guruvayurappan in Malayalam. When Chembai received offers in 1929-30 from recording companies, Iyer made the selections of songs for him. Some of the compositions rendered on 78rpm were: *Orumaiyodu* (sloka), *Chesina della* (Todi), *Raghuvara* (Pantuvavali), *Sree Rama mantram* (sloka), *Bala Gopala* (Bhairavi), *Amba naadu* (Todi), *Chetulara* (Bhairavi), and *Rama neeyada* (Kharaharapriya).

The discs sold fast in India, Burma, Ceylon and other countries where South Indians lived and Chembai's fame spread and royalty income swelled.

A.S.P. Ayyar of Ayilam-- former Foreign Secretary A.P. Venkateswaran is one of his sons-- became an admirer of Vaidyanatha Bhagavata's music early on. He wrote the Foreword to *Chembai Selvam*, the biography of Bhagavata written in Tamil by 'Ellarvi' [L.R. Viswanatha Sarma]. Calling Vaidyanatha Bhagavata the Dronacharya of Carnatic music-- he described Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar as the Bheeshmacharya-- Ayyar went on to give interesting details about the area to which he and Bhagavata both belonged. He wrote in the Foreword:

"Chembai is one of the 96 agraharams [enclaves] of Palghat Taluk where the Tamil Brahmins have settled down....

A.V. Krishna Iyer





Chembai speaking at a Bharatiya Music & Arts Society function in Bombay. Looking on: V.G. Venkataraman & P.A. Raman

The Rulers of Malabar gave gifts to [them] besides ensuring protection. Malabar was not in those days noted for music, though it was famous for astrology, sorcery, medicine and literature. The Rajas of Malabar, by giving this patronage, grafted music also to the soil....

"Chembai is one of the four villages which form one of the minor groups in the 96 agraharams. I come from Ayilam (Akhileswarapuram) which is only one mile [1.6km] from Chembai. But while Chembai is noted for its *musicians*, Ayilam has only *lawyers*, no music. A wealthy Ayilam brahmin had an ambition to become a musician, and took tuition from Ananta Bhagavatar, the revered father of Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar. After a year, Ananta Bhagavatar gave him up as hopeless. To the pupil's remonstrance, "Why do you say that I shall not become proficient in music?" Ananta Bhagavatar replied, "You may at the end of Kali Yuga, but certainly not before."

Ayyar then proceeded to recall an early concert of Chembai's:

"I heard Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar first at my sister's marriage in Ayilam, in 1906. Ananta Bhagavatar was the musician, and he made Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar and his brother Subramaniam, boys aged 10 and 8, sing for an hour. They took the audience by storm, and were, at the end of the performance, paid *two rupees* by my father who exclaimed, "Fish do not require to be taught to swim!" I have heard him sing at Madras at the height of his power, and I have always been transported to a higher sphere when he sings *Nitya kalyani*, *Satruchhedaika mantram* and other songs."

Chembai was born under the asterism of Bharani and I believe in his case the aphorism that one born under Bharani will rule the world (dharani) came true, insofar as the Carnatic music world is concerned. His wife was also born under the same asterism. She passed away within six months of her

husband's demise.

I myself learnt music from Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar for some time during 1942-44. I sang along with him and also played the ghata at his concert once or twice. But what S. Satyamurthy said speaking about Sir Mohammad Usman is relevant here. "When I stand before him, I am lost in the background. If I stand behind him, nobody sees me." So lofty was his voice and so crafty his singing that no disciple of his could grow in stature under his shadow, though he helped numerous boys and girls to learn music.

My late wife and later my daughter (Suseela Raman) also learnt music from him.

Back to the village, where we began. In the nineteen thirties even, the 50 or so houses in the village all had thatched roofs. Then the Parli Tile Works, near the Parli river, was on the verge of closing because of financial difficulties. Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar bought its assets and arranged to supply tiles to all the villagers at a nominal price. And he made provisions for deferred payments too. This generous move on his part helped to make the village both lovely and virtually fire-proof.

Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar also remodelled the two temples in the village and helped the local panchayat to maintain the roads. In 1942 he agreed to make a cameo appearance in a Kannada film produced by his violinist-friend Mysore T. Chowdiah and render a song in Shanmukhapriya. He received 5000 rupees in payment which he promptly used to have a golden kavacha (or covering) made for the deity at the Parthasarathy temple.

His disciples have since built a mandapam and a shrine where pooja is offered mornings and evenings to an image of the Bhagavatar. On his birth and death anniversaries, his disciples even today gather and sing bhajan-s and other songs continuously for 24 hours.

Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar was a unique musician with an inimitable style of his own. More, a rarity among musicians, he was a person of unassailable character who believed in simple living and high thinking.

Last Day Of His Life Flashbacks Before The Farewell

This article was written by lawyer-poet P.T. NARENDRA MENON of Ottapalam, with the cooperation of his musician-wife SUKUMARI NARENDRA MENON.

Andal, Swami Haridas, Meera, and Ramalingaswami in the last century passed away with their swan-songs on their lips. So also the Trinity of Carnatic music; not for them the tortured struggle for breath, the pathetic rattle of *chakra swasa*; they entered the world beyond with the resonance of *dhaivata*, *nishada*, and *shadja* in their throats. The end of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar's life conformed to this tradition.

Tyagaraja informed his disciples on a pushya bahula panchami that an extraordinary event would take place that day. Later, he told them he would sing his last kriti. He sang *Paramatmudu* in *Vagadeeswari*, a raga of infinite tranquility and sweet pathos, which culminated in his mahasamadhi:

Oh! Paramatma, you shine gloriously in everything.

You shine in Hari, Hara, deva-s, human beings and in the innumerable worlds.

You shine in the five elements of the sky, fire, air, water and earth, and in animals, birds, hills and trees.

You shine in the good as well as the bad.

And lo! you shine in the heart of humble Tyagaraja.

Muthuswami Dikshitar entered into final samadhi with *Meenakshi meymudam dehi*, the Gamakakriya kriti ringing in his ears. But his soul left the body before the end of the composition. He was on wing to the unknown the moment he heard the words, "thou, who liberates from the coils". His disciples, however, completed the kriti.

Equally famous is Syama Sastry's Madhyamavati song of farewell, *Palinchu Kamakshi pavani*.

Ramalingaswamy, the composer of *Tiruvartupa*, entered a cellar with an instant song on his lips and, following his instructions, the disciples sealed it with stone and cement. A concourse of people witnessed the event. The District Collector, an Englishman, who rushed to the spot the next day on getting reports that a person had been entombed alive got the cellar opened, and found nothing inside, except the fragrance of the champaka flower, which the swamy's body always carried. This happened at the close of the last century, and many who witnessed it have recorded it.

One could banish these reports as arising from the fanciful imaginations of their followers. One could argue, in the light of reason, that it is not possible to compose and sing during the last struggle. But why did such myths acquire significance in our musical lore? And why, in recounting the last moments of Chembai, our thoughts are drawn to this tradition of musical samadhi? For an answer, we have to look into his mental state, demeanour, and conversation on the day of his death which he spent in Ottapalam, our small town.

A translucent morning in the month of Aswina--16 October, 1974. The winds were still bringing in a dwindling monsoon, but in between, the dawn was beginning to get dew-laden. When Sukumari sat down for *sadhakam*, she could see, through the window, the palm trees at the end of the field silhouetted in mist. When she was studying at what was then known as the Central College of Carnatic music in Madras, Chembai had once explained the meaning of a passage from *Kaddanuviriki*, the Tyagaraja kriti in Todi, and pointed out the method for practice mentioned therein: "Wake up from sleep. Take up the beautiful tambura. With pure mind, sing *suswara* in *sampradaya* style."

Ottapalam is just an overgrown vil-



lage on the banks of the Nila river. The *sadhakam* was just over when Soolapani, a disciple of Chembai and a music-teacher in our town, called on the telephone. Bhagavatar was in town, he said, and resting at the house of O.M. Vasudevan Namboodiripad (O.M.V.), one of his early disciples. He would come to our residence at 12 noon. Meanwhile, he wanted a car to go to Vengassery, a nearby village.

Chembai was a constant visitor to Ottapalam during the last 35 years of his life, because O.M.V. had settled down there. During every visit, he would stay at least a couple of days in Vasudevan's house. Right from his childhood, he had had a close association with the latter's family. The only income of Ananta Bhagavatar, Chembai's father, was from teaching music and the meagre fee obtained was seldom enough to make both ends meet. Chembai, and his younger brother Suppamani, had known stark poverty in their childhood, but they had become accomplished singers in spite of it, due to the father's training. When they were children, a marriage proposal had to be finalised for their father's sister. Ananta Bhagavatar had no where-withal. Vasudevan's family, of the Olappamanna Mana, was almost a

zamindari then, and he approached the head of the family for a loan of 2000 rupees. The latter would not oblige, as he knew that it would never be repaid. But he helped in another manner. He wrote to some 30 chieftains and landlord families, stating that Bhagavata's two boys, who were good singers and would be top-notchers in future, were in straitened circumstances, and requested them to make some payment after listening to them. Ananta Bhagavata made a tour of Malabar and Cochin with these letters, and ere long obtained the 2000 rupees he needed. He returned to Olappamanna Mana five letters which he had no need to utilize. From that day onwards, Chembai considered himself as a dependent of the Mana, and at every opportunity would walk the 15 miles to the Mana from his village. Of course the good food served there also was a big draw.

This time he had come to Ottapalam to participate in the arangetram of the disciples of his disciple Soolapani, and to give a recital at a small temple belonging to O.M.V., on the banks of the river. We sent the car to him and waited for his arrival. He had gone to the village, worshipped at the Devi temple there, and inquired about the welfare of an indigent girl to whom he had provided dowry a year earlier. After this, he was at our residence by noon.

Bhagavata used to help many girls to get married, during the last years of his life, by providing dowry, in part, and once or twice in full. A month earlier, when we were in Madras, he had said:

"Do you know how much I earned from singing this month? Twenty thousand rupees! Perhaps you think I put it in my bank. No. I spent 500 rupees here in my madhom. Four or five thousand, I gave away to get a couple of poor girls married. The entire balance was given to Guruvayurappan, [the deity of the temple in Guruvayur]. I was very greedy for money once. Now the Lord has taken away that greed from my heart."

For many years, till he died, Chembai used to go to Guruvayur, every time he had earned enough, to conduct the Udayastamana (dawn to dusk) pooja. (Now the pooja costs 15,000 rupees). He had thus conducted more than 40 of such poojas, a record for an individual.

Guruvayur had become an obsession with him, and devotees there had long begun to look upon him as a representative of the Lord. At every visit, people used to vie with each other to get his blessings, and that included many who had no knowledge about his musical prowess. He had developed an uncanny gift of speaking words which brought solace to people.

Chembai was not only a king of nada, but also a king of wit. His humour had an effervescent quality which sent everybody he met into peals of laughter. His puckish wit would well up the moment he came across a few people.

Years ago, he came late for the concert at our wedding and everybody was anxiously waiting. Suddenly we could hear somebody shouting at the gate, in Malayalam: "Aana varunu, aana varunu, vazhi vittolu" -- the elephant is coming, make way. It was none other than Chembai shouting!

We could see that he was in good form when he alighted from the car on that October day at the gate of our compound. When we hastened to receive him, he said:

"That nephew and niece you brought to me at Madras, those with funny names. Well, I taught them two songs, *Pavana guru* and *Jaya jaya sree giri*. Come on, tell me which are these kritiks. Kumari, you don't know? Let me see whether he [Narendra Menon] can tell me!"

I knew *Pavana guru* as a Hamsanandi composition of Lalitadasar [T.G. Krishna Iyer], but had not heard the other one. [It turns out it is also a kriti of Lalitadasar in Sindhuhairavi.] I said that he would try to identify it on hearing the pallavi. Chembai wagged his finger and laughingly said:

"Yes, yes, I know you want to make me sing standing under this mango tree at your doorstep, so that you can go about bragging about it. Sari, sari [okay, okay], you can have your way."

And forthwith he sang the pallavi with gusto standing in the noonday sun.

"Both the kids sit on my lap while learning. The younger one is for ever patting my potbelly," he added, revert-

ing my nephew and niece.

While being never despondent or morose, on that day he seemed to be particularly jolly. We felt that some special joy was pulsating in him. He was very active too. From 12 noon to 5.30 in the evening, he was at our residence, now sitting and chatting in the drawing room, now walking about the house. Sukumari had prepared several items of food, not knowing what he would relish. But he had only milk and biscuits. He was walking around the dining table, and loudly counting the items.

"You are not eating anything, then why count them?" Sukumari remonstrated.

"Your nathoon [sister-in-law] in Madras will ask whether you treated me to vada-payasam. I want to tell her you had prepared so many items," he replied.

The correspondent of *Malayala Manorama* dropped in on hearing about the arrival of Chembai. He was entranced by the wit of the aged doyen. He said he was planning to write a long article on Chembai. The latter replied:

"Don't bother. I do not feel like reading the papers nowadays. You report only wars, murders, robberies and sex. You report nothing but the abuse people hurl at each other. I have other things to think about. If you want, you can report that Chembai said so."

The correspondent earned a promotion for his report captioned, "Malayala Manorama given the last interview", which appeared on the front page the very next day.

A Cascade Of Reminiscences

We talked during the afternoon and kept asking him about the many incidents in his interesting life. And he responded readily.

He skipped from one incident to another in quick succession, all recounted in his rustic, colloquial Malayalam, carrying a sort of telling effect. He recalled his childhood days, steeped in arduous sadhakam, though beset by penury; the jalasadhakam he tried in the Nila river as a youth; the few months of schooling, abruptly terminated by the father when once he came home

covered with slush, after falling off from the back of a buffalo, while playing with children of other castes; the days he used to walk 10 to 20 miles just to participate in a varam feast where the poor could get fine food. He also remembered a concert at the Madras Music Academy which exceeded the allotted time, and continued long into the night as a spell-bound audience listened. He talked about the poignant days when he lost his voice, and the agony he underwent; the occasions he used to stand before the Lord of Guruvayur with tears in his eyes, asking, "Oh Lord! have you forsaken me to this extent, so that you cannot even bear to hear my voice recite a verse in your praise"; his back-breaking violin practice during those days; the restoration of his voice by the grace of Guruvayurappan (he totally believed it was so); the treatment by Vaidyamadhom Namboodiri and his stay at the Poomulli Mana. He remembered, too, the days when he made a golaka [golden plate] for the Parthasarathy idol at his village temple with the 5000 rupees he demanded and obtained when Mysore T. Chowdiah persuaded him to sing for the Kannada film *Vani*; and the gradual surrender to Guruvayurappan as the only refuge.

We asked him about the truth of the story that he once produced rain by singing the Devamritavarshini raga. He smiled enigmatically and replied:

"Once when I sang the raga, it rained heavily even though it was not the rainy season. I do not know how it rained in the height of summer. Music has great power. Did it not rain when Dikshitar sang Amritavarshini? In my case it might have been a mere coincidence, comparable to the falling of the palm-fruit the moment the crow perched on it." He was repeating the Malayalam proverb, 'Kakka irunnathum panampazham veenathum oppam'. "Yes it was possibly a mere fluke, as I am a far cry from Dikshitar. But remember, there is nothing which cannot be wrought with the saptaswara."

We asked Chembai about the report that he had refused to don the dress presented by the Maharaja of Mysore while singing at the durbar.



Chembai with two Bombay friends

Chembai with Ravi Shankar



It was compulsory for the artists to wear the achkan presented by the Maharaja, but Chembai had refused to do so, and insisted that he would be bare-chested, except for a shawl draped around the shoulders, as was his practice. In the end, he was given special permission to give the recital in his usual attire. Chembai replied: "Yes, I did not like a bhagavatar to be dressed up in raja part. I was prepared to sing only in my palassar and angavastram. The courtiers said that I would not be allowed to sing. Okay, I said, I will be glad to go back without singing the concert. The matter reached the ears of His Highness. He allowed me to sing in my usual attire."

He confirmed that he had refused the invitation to be an asthana vidwan of the Mysore court, because he could not bear to be absent from the Navaratri celebrations at the Parthasarathy temple in his village.

We had heard that Chembai had taught music to his disciples on the railway platform on occasion. When queried about it, he said:

"Yes, I have done it a few times. If a train would be late for two or three hours, why sit idle? So I used to teach the accompanying sishya-s then and there. What was the harm if a few people saw and heard us?"

We were reminded of the incident when Chembai sang in a bank premises in Palakkad. He was there to encash a cheque, when a clerk sitting at the counter told him that he was looking forward to hearing Chembai directly, though he had heard him over the radio many times. "Then you can hear me now itself," said Chembai. He sat down on the floor and started to sing, *Vatapi Ganapatim*. The manager, the clerks, and the customers all came running and clustered around him, bringing the business of the bank to a halt for the next half an hour.

Chembai belonged to the Chozhiya brahmin community, whose members were traditionally engaged in officiating for srardha (anniversary) ceremonies, and were consequently considered to be inferior to them by other brahmins in olden times. As was the custom in the community, Chembai had a 'munkudumi', or tuft in the front part of his head. Some orthodox brahmins

used to look down on Chembai during his younger days because he was a Chozhiyan. As regards that he quipped:

"In those days, some could not stand the sight of a Chozhiya Pattar [Bhattar] singing. They would get up and leave, the moment I started my concert. Once I got really peeved about it, and shouted to them: 'I also have a kudumi. The only difference is that it is a front-tuft, instead of a back-tuft (pinkudumi)'. Those were my full-blooded days. Now I have no rancour against anybody."

Regard For Kerala And Its Culture

Chembai belonged to the community called 'Paradesa brahmana' in Kerala, whose mother-tongue is even now Tamil. They speak Tamil at home. Almost all the vidwans of Carnatic music in Kerala till recently belonged to this community. It was considered by virtually all of them not quite the done thing to sing Malayalam kriti-s in a concert. Even though Muthiah Bhagavatar sought to popularise some Malayalam kriti-s of Swati Tirunal very few sang them in practice. But Chembai used to sing Malayalam kriti-s right from his youth. He included even Kathakali pada-s in his repertoire. Even though Ulloor Parameswara Iyer, the Mahakavi, had loved and devoted his entire life to Malayalam, it was unusual for a person like Chembai, who had practically no formal education, to have loved this language so much. He also loved Sopana Sangeetam, the ancient musical style of Kerala.

When we mentioned Sopana Sangeetam, he said:

"It is just like our Bharatapuzha [the Nila river]. Not much, but what is there is really great." He went on:

"Have you not heard the Kathakali padam, *Mariman kanni* in *Nalacharitham*. Bhava in its entirety is found there. Kumari!" (Chembai always used to call Sukumari thus). "You will have to do some work on Sopana Sangeetam one day."

It is the experience of many that whatever Chembai spoke about, especially towards the end of his life, used to happen. We know at least three couples who believe that they had a son or daughter due to his words of blessing.

We were wondering why Chembai spoke those words regarding work on Sopana Sangeetam until 1989 when its purport was made clear. That year Sukumari got a senior fellowship from the Department of Culture of the Government of India to do some work on Sopana Sangeetam.

Love for all, compassion, a brimming zest for life, intermittent spells of detachment-- these were the qualities we noticed in Chembai that day.

He pointed to the little daughter of our maid-servant, and said:

"Ah! the girl has got a face with good lakshana. Kumari! teach her to play the tambura. If the voice is good teach her to sing also. Let her make a living out of it."

He looked at the garden and said:

"Some raga-s are like the jasmine. Fragrant and white. Some are like the hibiscus. Red and spectacular. Some are like the full-blown lotus. Lovely and soft. But remember! They will all flower only when the heart is full of love."

It was as if he was thinking aloud. Presently he said:

"Two of my disciples, Raman and Kunchu. I have not been able so far to get them settled. Look at Kunchu, he has five or six children, and is always in difficulties. As for Raman, who knows where he will be the next moment?"

Raman is Rama Poduval, the now well-known expert of Sopana Sangeetam, a brilliant, but erratic and absent-minded singer. It was after Chembai's death that his talents were recognised, and he got the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi award. Kunchu is Soolapani, to help whom Chembai had come to Ottapalam that day. He followed his master into the Great Beyond.

Chembai lapsed into deep silence two or three times. During one such spell, he said with eyes focussed at some far distance:

"I want to have anayasa maranam [easy death]. That is my only remaining desire. I am sure, Guruvayurappan will grant me that boon also."

At half past five in the evening, Chembai left for the residence of O.M.V.

Saying we would come to the venue by the time the concert began at 6.30 pm, we started accompanying him upto the car. He indicated the floor of the verandah and said, "Kumari! Sit down here." When she sat down, he placed both his hands on her head, prayed with eyes closed for a minute and blessed her saying:

"Oh Lord! Give her all soubhagya." Then addressing her: "Never forget to sing during ekadasi at Guruvayur temple. The Lord there will always be with you."

Chembai had never before given his blessings in such a ceremonious fashion. Not for a moment did we suspect that it was the last blessing.

Poozhikunnam temple is situated on the banks of the Nila river, with a song of nature created by the serene flow of the river, the green fields waiting for the pre-winter harvest, and the distant blue hills providing the backdrop. A small shrine of Krishna is like a gamaka in between. The rain of the previous night had made the narrow pathway slippery, and though it was short, O.M.V. had arranged a manchal, a country-palanquin, to carry Chembai. At first he refused to get into it.

"I have not travelled in one so far," said he and asked: "Do you want me to cut a sorry figure at the end of my life."

But then he relented. When he reached the temple, there was a slight delay in helping him to get up from the manchal.

Chembai quipped to P.K.G. Nambiar, the Koodiyattam artist, and Chithali Rama Marar, the percussion exponent, who were on hand to welcome him:

"Are you planning to make me lie here for ever? Well, it does not matter even if that is so. It is time for that sort of thing."

He had darshan of the deity at the temple, and proceeded to the stage where two girls, disciples of Soolapani, were singing. Sitting on the side, he encouraged them, exclaiming 'Besh'. When they finished the kriti and prostrated, he raised them up and made them sit on his lap.

Last Concert

Many had come early to hear the concert, including Poomulli Neelakantan Namboodiripad, an expert in the mar-

tial art of Kalaripayattu and in hypnotism and elephant therapy, in addition to being a Sanskrit scholar. Chembai, in a buoyant mood, cracked jokes with all of them.

When we reached the venue, the concert was about to begin, with T.K. Ramachandran on the violin, Trisoor R. Mohan on the mridanga and Alangudi Ramachandran on the ghata. There was one more violinist on the stage, we do not remember his name. There were also about 10 to 15 disciples on the stage, including O.M.V., Rama Poduval and O.M.V.'s son and young sishya, Babu from Madras. The audience was small, but most of the listeners were rasika-s.

As the concert proceeded, an admirer who had a dairy brought Chembai a glass of milk. He sipped a little, and asked:

"Is this milk with water added, or water with milk added?"

The audience laughed.

The favourite kriti-s of Bhagavata started flowing out. He was in form, and it was a first-class concert. He sang *Viriboni* in Bhairavi, *Vatapi Ganapatim* in Hamsadhwani, *Pavana guru* in Hamsanandi and *Rakshamam saranagatam* in Nata with his usual verve and gusto. Then he took up *Sree Subrahmanyaya* in Kambhoji, and elaborated the raga, to be followed later by a sizzling niraval and swaraprastara. Power mingled with visranti in his alapana. The bell-metal voice was practically intact. The sruti suddham and accuracy of tala were there unravaged by old age. The enunciation of sahitya was as usual clear, though he never used artificial dentures. The speciality of Chembai, kattiri swara-- combination of scissored swara-s-- also was there. And above all there was soulful bhava.

We heard this last concert with bated breath, never suspecting the imminent end for a moment. Bhagavata took up many items not usually sung by him: *Broohi Mukundeti* of Sadasiva Brahmdra was among them. Then, of course, he sang *Karuna cheyvanendu tamasam* by Irayimman Tampi, his favourite and a virtually indispensable song in all his concerts. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he sang it, and he raised his hands high above the head and joined his palms in prayer. Then he

rendered a sloka: *Vandemataram Ambikam*, the supplication of the child going to the mother's lap.

When the concert ended, O.M.V. asked me to speak a few words. Being a poet, I could speak only lyrically about the recital. When that ended, Chembai announced over the mike, "Oh, the speech of this chap is also a type of music!"

When he was helped to get up, he said: "Please take me to the sanctum sanctorum."

Chithali Rama Marar and P.K.G. Nambiar held his hands and led him to the door of the sanctum. He sat down on the floor, shut his eyes, and prayed for a few minutes. Then he called out to the deity in a supplicating tone:

"Krishna! Guruvayurappa! I am 80. You have fulfilled all my desires. Why do you still make me go about with this body? Why don't you call me [to you]?"

The Final Adieu

When he got up, after receiving the prasada, and giving dakshina to the priest, Rama Marar said:

"Bhagavata will live for the full span of 125 years."

Chembai laughed aloud and retorted:

"You don't poke your head in it. All is settled between me and Guruvayurappan."

He returned in the manchal itself to O.M.V.'s residence. He washed his feet and face, and sat down for prayers in the verandah. After a few minutes, it was noticed that his head was sliding to one side. Somebody supported him, and slowly eased him down to lie on the floor. He was perspiring profusely. Neelakantan Namboodiripad, who knows 'marana lakshana' [signs of death] went near to examine him. He looked only for a few seconds, and called out:

"Everything is over for Bhagavata."

Centuries ago, Hazrat Amir Khusrro said: "The music of Hindostan is divine."

As the funeral pyre burnt and died down on the banks of the river the next day, this passage came back to mind and I thought Chembai's music had once again conveyed the message to all those who love the saptaswara-s.

Vidwan With Values And A Sense Of Humour Too

A Man Of Character

The following have been transcribed by P. ORR from anecdotes recorded in Chembai Selvam, the biography of Bhagavatar written by ELLARVI [L.R. Viswanatha Sarma].

Summons [1907]

When Chembai was 11, he and his brother first sang at the Sree Krishna temple in Guruvayur on Ekadasi day (on the 11th day of the lunar cycle). When, shortly afterwards, the father and the sons were coming out of the temple, a couple of policemen met them and said they were wanted by the Inspector. Chembai asked what wrong they had committed and why they should accompany the policemen. The latter replied they did not know why. At that point, Ananta Bhagavatar said there should be no harm in going with the policemen and finding out what it was all about. In the event, the Inspector welcomed them with respect and speaking with affection, told the father: "On Sunday, your boy must sing here!" The concert took place and Chembai received 115 rupees for it-- the highest yet. At his father's suggestion, he earmarked the money received for conducting worship at the temple every year.

A Bittersweet Experience [1923]

Chembai Vaitha and his brother Subrahmaniam, still in their twenties, were glad to have the opportunity of listening to this musician of maturity. Captivated by a particular kriti they heard him sing, Chembai memorised the pallavi and anupallavi even as he listened but the lyric of the charanam did not register well. This was frustrating but he had no chance to ask the performer.

Some days later, when the vidwan was due to perform again in that area, Chembai called on him before the concert and, after a while, asked him for the text of the charanam. The vidwan pretended not to know which song the

youngster was talking about. Chembai thought this was a genuine case of puzzlement. So he sang the pallavi and anupallavi of the song but now, while congratulating him, the vidwan said he could not remember the charanam. He then excused himself.

A surprise was in store for Chembai when, later during the performance, the vidwan started singing the song he had said he could not remember fully. Innocent yet, Chembai was worried that the vidwan was going to stumble when he reached the charanam. But Chembai need not have worried. The vidwan sang the charanam all right and this time Chembai quickly grasped the words. But, he realised too that vidwan had not levelled with him earlier. Then and there he took a vow he would never refuse to teach anyone what he knew.

Conflict In Chettinad [1936]

The place: Kottaiyur in Chettinad. The occasion: a wedding. Chembai was giving a performance with Mysore T. Chowdiah (violin), Palakkad Mani Iyer (mridanga) and Pudukkottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai (kanjeera) as his sidemen. When there was a pause in the proceedings, a prominent person stood up and said the guests assembled desired to hear Chowdiah play solo. The violinist could not find any reaction on Chembai's face. He continued to sing and the sidemen performed with him.

There was another interruption soon. Now there was a chorus demanding a solo performance from the Mysorean. Chembai and his cohorts continued to ignore the clamour. In the event, there was confusion and many of the guests began leaving, while some came near the platform and shouted.

Chembai now stopped singing and, with an air of insouciance, asked: "What is it you want, please?" The common response was: "We want Chowdiah to

play the English Note!" Whereupon, Chembai said: "That's all! Okay, I will conclude my concert in a few minutes and after that you can ask him to play for you what you want".

The chorus sang: "No! we want him to play now!"

Chembai spoke again now, quietly but firmly. He explained the tradition followed in music concerts and said that it was not the done thing for an accompanist to play a piece which the main musician had not taken up.

The angry audience was not mollified; if anything, the lecture seemed to have irritated them further. Some said other musicians had heeded similar requests made by them.

Chembai said that he could not oblige simply because others had done so. "I will now conclude the concert by singing the mangalam. You can then do what you want."

An angry man shouted Chembai would not ever again be invited to perform in the town.

The news spread Chembai had antagonised the people of Chettinad.

But, when tempers cooled, good sense prevailed. Members of the community soon decided to invite Chembai to sing at another function in the town. Bhagavatar again performed with the same set. It had ended well, and all was well.

A Matter Of Priorities [1937]

It was the tradition of the Mysore court to honour prominent artists by inviting them to give performances in the royal presence and to accept the title of asthana vidwan. In 1937 Maharaja Krishnarajendra Wodeyar extended an invitation to Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar to perform. Chembai accepted the invitation and gave a performance which was hailed as excellent by

the king as well as by his courtiers. Next day Wodeyar presented the vidwan with a ponnadai (shawl) and other tokens of appreciation. Leading court musician Muthiah Bhagavathar also honoured Chembai and a photograph showing the two bhagavathars together is still on display at the Mysore palace.

The maharaja then expressed his wish to have Chembai enlisted as an asthana vidwan. Chembai was pleased to learn this but responded by saying that he would not be able to discharge the obligations of a court musician which would require his attendance at the court frequently and especially during Dussera. The vidwan was already committed, since many years before, to perform Navaratri pooja privately at home and therefore he was not available for any public engagements during that holiday period. His sense of priorities was such that he did not wish to break this commitment. Accordingly he explained his inability to accept the royal invitation to serve as the asthana vidwan of the Mysore court.

Far from being upset, the maharaja appreciated Chembai's sense of priorities. The courtiers too were struck by the character of Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar.

In subsequent years, Chembai gave performances at the court several times at the invitation of the maharaja.

Power of Faith [1939]

Chembai was about to start a performance at the palace in Kallikotai. Suddenly he discovered that his voice was 'frozen'. He was puzzled since he had no problem of any kind earlier that day. The sound of the tambura sruti seemed to gain in volume as Chembai pondered the reason. Suddenly, a question arose in his mind. He asked someone seated nearby whether it was 'sukla paksham', after the new moon. This was the month of Kartika and it was Chembai's practice to offer musical prayers at the Sree Krishna temple in Guruvayur on the Ekadasi day of the 'sukla paksham' in the month of Kartika every year. When a reference to an almanac confirmed that it was 'sukla paksham' Ekadasi, Chembai explained the matter to the host and requested permission and help to go to Guruvayur and fulfil his commitment. The host obliged. Chembai speeded to Guruvayur in a car, offered his apologies and prayers to Sree Krishna.

He had no problem singing; he had recovered his voice fully. He sang many songs and long until he was satisfied that the Lord had forgiven his lapse.

He sang at Kallikotai the next evening, without any problem.

A Blow For Equality [1941]

Chembai was due to give a performance at the Singaravelan temple in Nagapattinam, as part of the Kanda Shashthi festivities. It was past the time when the concert was to start and still none had come from the office of the temple's trustees to fetch him. Unwilling to wait any longer, he proceeded to the temple, accompanied by his sidemen. As he reached the temple, he realised there was some galatta or noisy disturbance going on. When he inquired about it, he was told that common people had occupied seats reserved for VIPs in the mandapa where the concert was to take place; that a representative of the trustees had more than once asked them to clear out of the space but in vain; that the representative had said the trustees would rather shift the venue of the concert to some place else than allow their stipulations to be transgressed; and that this had precipitated the galatta.

Chembai arrived at the mandapam, pacified the crowd and said that, as far as he was concerned, all were equal before god and music. He also explained he attached more importance to performing in the temple's precincts than to pleasing the organisers by singing elsewhere. "I was invited to perform at the sannidhi [presence] of the deity and that is what I propose to do," he added.

Then he proceeded to give the performance without waiting for the trustees and other VIPs.

A Tribute In Diamond [1942]

Chembai was returning by train to Madras from Karaikudi where he had given a concert. During the journey, he got acquainted with a fellow passenger, a wealthy, middle-aged businessman named Valliappa Chettiar. Noticing that Chettiar was undergoing some kind of stress, he openly asked the latter what was bothering him. Chettiar was taken aback by the directness of the query but responded nonetheless by disclosing the source of his worry. Chembai then told

him that the deity of the Parthasarathy temple in Chembai would help solve the problem if Chettiar would pray to him and, if the problem were solved, Chettiar could show his gratitude to the Lord in some way.

Chettiar agreed to abide by the suggestion and then saw a smile playing on the lips of Bhagavathar. "What are you smiling about?", he asked and Chembai said that the act of gratitude should not be like fulfilment of a trade transaction and that he should in advance decide what offering he would make, in line with his capacity. In the conversation that followed, he explained he had already provided the temple with a gold kavacham [ornamental covering] for the deity and it would be nice if Chettiar could take a vow to present a namam [Vaishnavite mark] made of diamonds. Chettiar agreed to do so.

Subsequently, Chettiar came to the village of Chembai, his problem solved, and made his offering to Lord Parthasarathy. None could have been more pleased than Chembai.

On The Razor's Edge [1952]

One morning when Chembai was standing in the verandah of his house in Santhome, Madras, lost in thought, a barber carrying his equipment made his appearance and saluted him. Chembai had never seen him before nor had he the need for a shave. Yet, using sign language, he invited him to sit down and himself sat down to have a shave.

The barber, an elderly fellow, spoke volubly as he passed the razor back and forth on Chembai's face. He let it be known that he was not fond of barbering and that his real vocation was healing the sick, like it had been the vocation of his forefathers.

Bhagavathar did not respond in any manner to any of this talk. The barber thereupon sought to provoke him by asking questions.

Chembai finally blurted out that he was unable to speak. It was obvious he had a very bad throat, the way he croaked out the words.

The barber said he was very sorry to notice the difficulty Chembai was experiencing, especially since he had heard his golden voice many a time while passing his house. And he asked how

long the vidwan had been suffering this.

Chembai stuck out a single finger to indicate 'one month'.

The barber asked: "Haven't you been receiving any treatment?"

Chembai conveyed by signs that the treatment had been in vain.

The barber finished his job and received payment. Then he said he would bring a herbal medicine if Chembai would

trust him to treat his ailment.

Speaking with difficulty, Chembai said he had been offered a concert engagement a week hence and asked if he could rely on the barber's treatment and accept it.

"Praise the Lord and accept it," replied the man with the razor. And then he left.

Next evening, the barber brought the medicine and gave instructions to

Bhagavata on how he should take it. Chembai paid him two rupees and promised to pay a total of 20 if the treatment proved to be successful.

The treatment worked, Chembai regained his voice and the concert he had accepted was a grand success.

What had cured him? The medicine? Faith? A combination of both? Whatever, Chembai never saw the barber-physician again.

Memorable Incidents

The following tales true were recounted by long-time friend P.A. RAMAN.

The Sage & The Singer

Once Chembai sang in Kanchipuram after the Paramacharya, then the pontiff of the Math, had performed the long Chandramouleeswara pooja. The sage asked him whether he was not tired. Chembai replied: "No, not at all. How can anyone be fatigued watching your Holiness performing the pooja?" The pontiff presented him with a bracelet, a rudraksha necklace, a ponnadai [shawl] and prasada.

Like A Bhagavata

We were speeding towards Kollam [Quilon] when our car got held up at a railway crossing. A young boy who was tending cattle nearby came up to the car and asked Chembai who he was. Always playful, Chembai asked him:

Chembai & P.A. Raman

"What do I look like?" The boy replied smartly: "Like a bhagavata." When Chembai conceded he was one, the boy asked: "Are you going to sing at Vadayattu Kottai? The concert will be a roaring one, eh?" Chembai had a hearty laugh and said that possibly Guruvayurappan himself had come to bless him.

Sixth Sense

There was an overflowing audience for the concert at Vadayattu Kottai. Chembai was in fine form. There was an intermission during which a curious thing happened. He took a letter from his pocket, waved it at a member of the audience and asked: "You wrote this anonymous letter, didn't you?" The man shamefacedly admitted he had done so, whereupon Chembai admonished him not to write anonymous letters ever again.

Miracle Rain

I was present at the concert given by Chembai at the wedding of the daughter of Postmaster Viswanatha Iyer of Kalpathy which took place in Sekharipuram, Palakkad. This was around the time S.G. Kittappa, K.B. Sundarambal and their drama troupe was giving performances in Palakkad and the song *Evarani* rendered by Kittappa with terrific impact was on everybody's lips. Some of the listeners at the wedding concert requested Chembai to sing this song which is in the Devamritavarshini raga. Chembai replied that although it was summer and it was as dry as it could be, it would rain if he sang any song in that raga. Probably no one believed it because the listeners persisted with the request. Chembai then rendered the song and, miracle of miracles, when he concluded, dark clouds appeared in the sky and there was a downpour.

Question Of Seniority

Chembai and I were travelling by the Mangalore Mail in a posh old-time second class compartment, from Madras to Palakkad. It was very late at night when the train stopped at Erode. I heard someone knocking on the door and since there was an upper berth vacant, I opened it and there was Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. We invited him in gladly. He was also going to Palakkad, to sing at the marriage of one of my relatives. Chembai began talking to Ariyakudi and, after a while, asked: "I know you are older than me, but which of us is senior in terms of performing experience?" Iyengar admitted Chembai was, for he too remembered that even when he was giving only vocal support to his



guru Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar, Chembai was accompanying the latter on the violin. The exact words he spoke to Chembai, in broken English, which I remember vividly were: "You were fiddling then." All of us laughed.

Footrule

It was a time when the Railways used to issue "Travel As You Like" tickets costing seven and half rupees which could be used for three months throughout the entire railway network in the South.

On or about June 1940, Chembai and I were at the Shoranur railway station platform, waiting to board the Mangalore-Madras Mail. Desamangalam Namboodiripad, an advocate of Madras and a Member of the then Madras Legislative Council, hove into view with members of his family. Desamangalam is close to Shoranur.

Namboodiripad spoke to Chembai: "Bhagavatar, why are you sitting here? Only the third class compartments will be coming to where you are sitting. The first class and second class compartments will not come here. You will have to go still further up." Bhagavatar replied that he was travelling by third class only and he showed him the special season ticket. The advocate-admirer was greatly surprised and asked: "My dear Bhagavatar, you are a very popular musician with several engagements all over the country and in the sphere of music you are an uncrowned king. Is it not below your stature to travel in third class?"

Chembai replied: "My father and my grandfather used to travel by foot and give concerts but I have given up the usual family practice and travel by train. I really feel, though, that I too should go walking to the places where I give concerts."

Desamangalam Nambudiripad had a hearty laugh at the insouciant reply of the great musician.

Deference To Elder

When the Bharatiya Music and Arts Society was founded in Bombay in 1953, I requested Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar to give the inaugural concert. But Chembai replied that it would

be more appropriate to give the honour to Palakkad Rama Bhagavatar, who was senior to him. We took his advice; but were glad Chembai also gave a concert later.

Joker

A man of serious purpose in life, Chembai was yet full of fun. He liked to crack jokes and he would do so even while he was on the stage for a concert.

This happened in a concert in which his sidemen were Lalgudi Jayaraman and Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman. Chembai was singing *Rama ninney*, the Tyagaraja kriti in Husseini raga. Suddenly he substituted the word Jaya for Seeta, and again Siva for Seeta, at the end of the pallavi line and the audience burst into laughter when they heard Jayarama and Seetarama called out.

Saareeram Sareeram

Parveen Sultana's first concert in Madras was another occasion for a quip. Chembai, who was asked to preside on the occasion and "speak a few words", made just this observation: "I don't know much about Hindustani music. But this I know: I have a good saareeram and the lady here has both good saareeram and sareeram." The second was a reference to Parveen's attractive appearance.

He would tell a joke at the expense of his dear wife too, in the presence of others even. Meenakshi was her name but everyone at home called her Ammalu. One day he told me, as we were all chatting: "Rama Iyer, she is the only daughter of Vasudeva Sastrigal, a rich man of my village. My father fixed our marriage without telling me. When I came to know of it, I resisted a little but my father gave me a slap on my face and made me agree. Anyway, she is beautiful and dutiful! [Turning to his wife] Aren't you, Ammalu?"

At The Academy

* This happened during a Chembai concert at the Music Academy of Madras many years ago. The programme took place in a pandal in the compound of the P.S. High School in Mylapore.

As Bhagavatar was belting out a piece, he saw four other leading vidwans of

the day entering and taking their seats. Stopping in mid-song momentarily, he recited a Sanskrit sloka of which the substance of which was that it is rare for four musicians to come together as it is for four dogs, and then added he considered himself most fortunate that four great vidwans had come together to attend his concert.

Source: P.N. SUNDARESAN

* And this happened at another Academy concert. Chembai saw Musiri Subrahmanya Iyer and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, their heads covered possibly to hide their identities, slinking away quietly. He quipped, with that openness for which he was noted: "Oi, Sangeeta Kalanidhi's! You're welcome to go. There is no need to cover your heads!"

Source: T. SANKARAN

Mistaken Identity

Chembai was singing in the Sree Ramanavami series of the Asthika Samajam in Madras. This was towards the end of his career when he sang 'topless', that is without wearing a shirt. Sporting, as he was, a tuft, stripes of vibhooti on his forehead, chest and arms, and a rudraksha necklace, he could be easily mistaken for a kalakshepam expert or a religious discoursesman, especially at the Samajam which was known for its presentation of religious programmes. And he was.

A couple of artisans, who had been engaged in construction work nearby, came into the hall and sat down. At that time, the violinist was playing a raga alapana. When Chembai started singing the composition after the violin essay, one of the workers turned to a listener sitting next to him and asked what the 'periyavar' [the respected person] on the stage was doing. When the listener explained the obvious, the worker turned to his mate and said: "It seems he is singing." Then the first worker asked the rasika another question: "When will he start talking?" When it was explained to him that Chembai would not be talking as the programme was a music kutchery, the man turned to his mate again and exclaimed: "It is a kutchery, it seems. Let's go." Promptly they got up and left.

Source: P.C. SUBRAMANIAN

A Karmayogi

The following article was written by C.D. AYYAR.

My uncle, the late Sivaramakrishna Iyer, then an Accountant General, was fond of entertaining people. Musicians liked him very much. He would often regale us with interesting anecdotes of old masters like Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer, Tirukkodikaval Krishna Iyer and Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar.

Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata was his honoured guest more than once. He was visiting my uncle once again. His company was like an invigorating breath of fresh air.

This was some 35 years ago. The place: a mansion at 56 Ballygunge Circular Road, Calcutta. The time: 6 pm. I was in my late twenties then. I called on my uncle as I normally did. I was surprised to see him restless since he had a jolly disposition. A tactful inquiry revealed that the Bhagavata who had left home in the morning had failed to return, though only half an hour was left for his music performance. The concert hall in Tollygunge, a crowded suburb of Calcutta, was over six km away. And Chembai had to have rest and a change before the performance. Time was running out. Had Bhagavata lost his way? Had he suddenly taken ill? Our minds were in a whirl. We thought of the numerous music enthusiasts patiently waiting at the concert hall to listen to the maestro. We thought of the predicament of the organisers. Many such thoughts were assailing our minds, when Bhagavata suddenly appeared. What a relief! The maestro looked somewhat tired, but his chubby face was wreathed in smiles. After welcoming Chembai my uncle spoke and a conversation ensued along the following lines.

Uncle: I hope you had a nice day. You must be ready to blast the audience with your music!

Bhagavata: I am fine. My concert does not worry me. After singing a song or two, I will get into my stride. My voice will then become my obedient servant.... I got stuck the whole day with a disciple of mine whom a pallavi in Sankarabharanam was eluding. Her timing had gone haywire. She had prac-

tised the wrong way and could not get out of the rut. She sought my help. It is next to impossible to eliminate habitual musical errors. The morning session was followed by a sumptuous lunch, after which we resumed our battle royal with Sankarabharanam. I did not know how time flew. I was shocked when the wall-clock showed 5-30. I immediately sent word to the organisers that I would be late by half an hour and to inform everyone accordingly.

Uncle: Please have your wash and change. We will enjoy some coffee before we leave. My Oldsmobile will not take more than half an hour to reach us to the concert hall.

A little later we marched into the dining hall, the Bhagavata looking fresh and trim. He preferred to sit on the floor. A few dosas were served, and the maestro relished them greatly. Then followed coffee which he sipped slowly. He was completely unruffled though time was running out. He reminded me of a karmayogi.

The coffee over, we drove through the crowded streets and reached our destination. As our car approached the outer gate, Bhagavata asked the driver to stop. The haunting melody of the unmistakable Mohanam was delightful to the ears. The loudspeakers poured out kalpana swaras in torrents. The maestro seemed lost in the music. We did not disturb him. We, however, guessed that the singer-- it was a lady-- must be his disciple. After remaining in a trance-like state for a few minutes, Bhagavata signalled the driver to proceed. On reaching the main entrance we were received cordially by the organisers who were anxiously awaiting our arrival. As desired by Chembai, we all slipped into the hall through a back entrance. This precaution was not very helpful because the majestic figure of the maestro did not elude the eyes of many. There was a mild commotion, followed by smiles and relief: at last, the maestro was in their midst and a musical feast was a certainty. On see-



ing Chembai, the lady on the dais stopped singing. Embarrassment was writ on her face. She implored him to take her place. But he would not listen; he asked her to finish her song.

When Chembai finally took the stage, there was terrific applause. The maestro shot straight into Pantuvarali. Except for the sound of music, there was pindrop silence. The famous temple-bell voice filled the hall. For the next two hours, there was a riot of joyful music. Songs in Bhairavi, Kambhoji, Saveri and Todi flowed like a river in spate. The performance over, the audience dispersed, fully satisfied, with the music ringing in their ears. That was one of the best performances of Chembai I had heard.

The sequence of events later became clear to us. On knowing that he would be late for the performance, Chembai had not only taken pains to inform the organisers, but also had planned out a mini-performance by his disciple, pending his arrival. By this means, the audience was kept occupied. In addition, his disciple-- no mean singer-- had an opportunity to display her talent before the public. The maestro did not mind spending all day on a gruelling task, though he was committed to give a performance the same evening.

CHEMBAI
VAIDYANATHA BHAGAVATAR
UTTAMA GAYAKA'



PART II OF A TWO-PART FEATURE

Early Musical Training Features Of Special Interest

The following article was written by N. PATTABHI RAMAN.

Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar was born into a family of musicians and as a child was brought up in an ambience favourable to the development of musical instincts. He thus had a "head start", to use a term familiar to educationists.

It is also evident from the available chronicles of his childhood that he was a precocious child with an ear for music. In fact, an elderly relative adept at astrology had predicted, upon Vaidyanathan's birth, that he would bring gladness to the world through his musical prowess.

Other early signs seemed to underscore this prophesy. It appears that whenever father Ananta Bhagavatar took up the tambura and tuned it, the child would come to him and stay for the duration of the music session.

Child Vaitha was only three years of age when his father started giving him formal lessons in music. The first lesson, repeated numerous times, was aimed at training Vaitha to sing *sa-pa-sa* in strict alignment with the sruti. Then followed the swara series. Father was keen to teach and the little lad revealed he had both the aptitude and the patience to learn. The foundations that were to serve Chembai solidly throughout his career were thus laid at this time. He acquired the ability to sing in unison with sruti always and to handle the swarasthanas accurately. Talent such as he displayed at that age would, in the present day, have quickly led observers to certify Chembai as a child prodigy.

The term 'prodigy' is used loosely these days to encompass children who merely possess outstanding-- but not inexplicable-- talent. The concert was not in vogue when Chembai was a child and, though one elderly vidwan named Sivaramakrishna Bhagavatar speculated that Vaitha had some sort of divine blessing and accumulated credits for good deeds from previous births,

the observations made by others of his talent do not offer a basis for making a clear judgement on whether he was a prodigy or not. But there is no doubt he was a precocious child, a kid with super intelligence.

Vaitha was only four or five years old when his father got him and his brother Subrahmaniam-- two years younger to him-- to practise systematically every day. It is said he would practise at any or all times of the day, but methodically, going through the sarali series with a mind to the proper kalapramana or time divisions. Soon he was guided to practise the singing of akara phrases also.

By the time Vaitha was six years of age and his brother four, both had completed their first stages of their training. Vaitha's voice was beginning to acquire a sheen. More notable was the fact that the boys' interest in music was reflected even in the games they played. The ambience and the encouragement they received at home must have had something to do with it.

Soon their learning experience acquired another dimension. It was their ability, first incipient but later on increasingly, to acquire understanding of different aspects of music by listening in when musicians visiting their father discussed music or made music informally. In course of time, the little eavesdroppers began to be called upon to sing for the visitors.

The talent shown by the youngsters led to family friends and others requesting their father to let them give concerts of sorts outside their home. It is easy to resist everything but temptation, a wit observed once, but Ananta Bhagavatar managed to hold out for some time against such requests which natural pride in his sons' abilities might easily have tempted him to concede. But he could not hold out for long. Vaitha made his kutcheri debut when he was barely eight years of age.

There may be a case against pushing

a child of a single digit age to the concert platform and for exercising maximum restraint, but in Chembai Vaitha's case, the musician father was either not too concerned about the probable counter-productive effects or unable to stem the tide of requests. He apparently did not consider his boys to be meal-tickets, or instruments for making money, but he usually agreed to let the boys give programmes whenever requests were received.

In the beginning, Chembai and his brother concentrated on presenting only kriti-s, without sruti and laya lapses. Then, they began to add raga alapana to their presentations-- and then swaraprastara too. Thus it was they slowly acquired the capacity to present concerts.

Both Vaitha and Subrahmaniam thus had the opportunity to gain performance experience when they were yet very young, and to accompany their father to his concerts. And of course, disciplined practice at home was a daily feature.

Another element in this pattern of learning experience was the father's practice of asking questions about what the sons had observed when they attended his or other musicians' concerts. This was a kind of seminar, if at an elementary level. Sometimes, the lads had to demonstrate what they had observed or learnt by listening. This process helped to sharpen their 'kelvi gnanam'.

The kind of involvement in music which the brothers had developed was possible because in their case there was not as much emphasis on regular school education as there is today with respect to musical aspirants. Their keenness to succeed in the music arena was, moreover, overwhelming-- a keenness that was matched by discipline and application.

On top of all these, there was a significant additional component to the musical training of the Chembai broth-

ers. This was their year-long experience as members of the travelling troupe of a Harikatha exponent.

The door to this experience was opened when Kaliakudi Natesa Sastry of Tiruvarur, a noted exponent of the art of musical discourse, came to Chembai and Ananta Bhagavatar and his family attended all his programmes. Invited to Bhagavatar's home, Sastrigal had the opportunity to listen to the lads singing. One thing led to another and the boys ended up joining Sastrigal's troupe.

It is possible that Ananta Bhagavatar and his wife Parvati recalled the Ramayana episode of Rama and Lakshmana setting off with Viswamitra, only in this case the initiative came from the boys.

Vaitha and Subrahmaniam travelled with Natesa Sastry for a full year. In the beginning of each discourse, they would be asked to sing for a little while. Later, Sastrigal hit upon the idea of featuring them in mini-concerts as part

of his Harikatha presentation. The arrangement was mutually beneficial. For the brothers, it gave the experience of singing to vastly different audiences and wide exposure too. It was during this phase of his training and career, Ananta Bhagavatar's elder son came to be known popularly as Chembai Vaitha.

According to his biographer Ellarvi, Vaitha and his brother returned to Chembai as ripened musicians. This was in 1910, when Vaitha was all of 14 years old.

The Music Of The Maestro

Great Voice, Enduring Appeal

The following analysis was written by CALCUTTA K.S. KRISHNAMURTI and MANIRANGU.

The music of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar was as straightforward as the man himself.

His best asset was his voice which, despite playing truant a couple of times during his career, sustained him till the end.

He was only 15 in 1911-- when Palakkad Rama Bhagavatar, an eminent musician of his time, heard him sing for the first time. Rama Bhagavatar's reaction to the experience has been recorded. According to Ellarvi, Chembai's biographer, he said: "I can't praise the quality of Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar's voice enough. I have not heard a voice like this before. I have no doubt that, in the years to come, this voice is going to shake up the Carnatic music world."

The voice had several impressive characteristics: range, weight, volume, reach, clarity and flow.

The range of his voice stretched upto two octaves easily for the better part of his career. More notable was the fact that the strength of his voice was even, without dropping at either end.

His voice had weight too, and this suited him perfectly in rendering ragas like Bilahari, Kalyani, Pantuvarali, Sankarabharanam and Todi.

He could give volume to his singing.

And because his voice had the clarity of a bronze bell, it could be heard in the farthest reaches of halls and pandals even in the mikeless days of the past and over the hustle-bustle, characteristic of temple festivals.

And his voice had such an easy flow that he could simply attain and easily maintain great speed and velocity in his singing. He was the king of speed long before G.N. Balasubramaniam came on the scene.

What was perhaps lacking, to a degree, in his voice was polish. His voice was like the granite used in building the great temples, not the machine-polished variety which can be seen in the kitchens of affluent homes today. But like the stone floors and pillars of a temple whose rough surfaces gain a degree of smoothness over time, Chembai's voice gained a mellow quality towards the end of his career. A long-play recording that he has made offers evidence of this fact, even as the 78rpm discs he cut in the nineteen thirties and forties, with all the inadequacies of the technology of those times, give glimpses of his remarkably powerful voice of his heydays.

Chembai's music, as reflected in his singing, was without artifices, devoid of any sophistry. It might even be said that it lacked sophistication, polish. It was comparable not to a gourmet dinner in a metropolitan restaurant but a homely country meal that tastes wholesome and satisfies the appetite.

His voice was, of course, highly responsible for his sustained popularity. But there was more to his music.

His singing had a sense of vigour which kept his listeners fully alert, but also conveyed a sense of joy which got them involved in his music-making. Sometimes, he would even impart a degree of bonhomie to the proceedings, with musical puns and palavers, jocular remarks and humorous asides. And because he gave ample room for his sidemen to shine, and to the percussionists particularly, to ride the rhythmic waves, he got them also fully involved in his music-making and this too had an impact on the audience.

During the major part of his long career, Chembai had to sing for four to five hours, sometimes even longer, in each concert. But he did so effortlessly and, moreover, had no problem retaining his audience.

The concert format he followed was basically the one which his contemporary, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, had made popular with the lay listeners organised in sabha-s. Of course, he too started his performances with a varnam, sang kriti-s with and without raga alapana, invariably rendered a ragam-tanam-pallavi and offered tukkada-s, including Tamil songs, sloka-s and tillana-s in the post-pallavi segment. But within this framework, his approach was different in that he neither relied on brevity nor offered much variety in terms of lakshana features.

On Vyavaharam

Chembai did not favour what is called vyavaharam or the introduction of rhythmic intricacies. "I don't know anything about vyavaharam," he told a critic once. "Sruti mata, laya pita, this I know. And I believe, while singing, we should not deviate from the truth of this dictum."

He further explained: "The aim of music is to create peace of mind. Where is the necessity for vyavaharam? The inner meaning of vyavaharam is the destruction of peace. Those who have learnt music properly, who have gnana and a good voice, should sing soulfully. When a performer sings with a sense of devotion to art and god, the music would create rasa in the listener. Vyavaharam should be restricted to a gathering of experts...." The duty of musicians is to provide fare that pleases the lay listener.

Close listening to the 78 rpm discs, LPs and cassette recordings of Chembai's vocal music, and recollection of memories of live concerts heard over the years, yield the following further observations.

His rendering of *Viriboni* in Bhairavi, *Sarasijanabha* in Kambhoji and *Chalamela* in Sankarabharanam reveals that he did not sing the varna-s as a mere obligation but used them to give a good start to the performance. His voice rang out from the beginning and, in this sense, he did not need the varnam to warm up.

His alapana-s were neither too long nor too short, but they were invariably crisp. This was true of his alapana-s for ragam-tanam-pallavi as well. He was anything but mechanical. He would start even the same raga at different places in different concerts. He would employ fast phrases in the middle section of the alapana, but usually not in the lower octave. Almost always he used plain notes or flat notes which, however, had gamaka intimations. Invariably he concluded his raga presentation on the adhara shadja of either the upper or lower octaves.

Time and again, he included a special feature in his alapana, namely 'ghanam' or nasal articulation of the humpita gamaka, with the mouth closed.

The raga-s which he seemed to have particularly enjoyed elaborating, either through alapana or during the singing

of sloka-s and viruttam-s, are Arabhi, Bhairavi, Bilahari, Kalyani, Kedaragoula, Kafi, Pantuvarali, Sankarabharanam, Surati and Todi. When he rendered kriti-s, there was a limpid quality; it was like clear water flowing over small stones. The flow was natural and unforced.

The perception that Chembai's repertoire of songs was limited is likely incorrect, for he did seem to have accumulated a substantial stock of compositions as he travelled through time.

Available recordings offer a glimpse of the variety. He can be heard singing: *Amba nadu* (Todi); *Bantureeti* (Hamsanandi); *Bhajanaseya* (Kedaram); *Brovavamma* (Manji); *Chesinadella* (Todi); *Ela needaya* (Athana); *Elavatara* (Mukhari); *Enda veduko* (Saraswathi Manohari); *Endu cheivan* (Yadukulakambhoji); *Ennil kaninda* (Husseini); *Evariki* (Dhanyasi); *Inda kannanandam* (Bilahari); *Manasa etulo* (Malaya-marutam); *Nammi vachina* (Kalyani); *Nijamarmulanu* (Umatharanam); *Ninnu jeppaga* (Mandari); *Ninnu joochi* (Saurashtram); *Pavana guru* (Hamsanandi); *Raghuvara* (Pantuvarali); *Rakshamam* (Nata); *Rama neeyada* (Kharaharapriya); *Ramachandrena rakshitotham* (Husseini); *Sankaracharyam* (Sankarabharanam); *Saraguna palimpa* (Kedaragoula); *Sarasaksha* (Pantuvarali); *Sarasiruha* (Nata); *Siva Siva Siva yenarada* (Pantuvarali); *Sree Balasubrahmanyaya* (Bilahari); *Sree Mahaganapati* (Goula); *Sree Subramanyaya* (Kambhoji); *Syamasundaraya* (Dhanyasi); *Vadera deivamu* (Pantuvarali); *Vareejadala lochana* (Arabhi) and *Vatapi Ganapatim* (Hamsadhvani).

The Tamil songs he sang included: *Idudano tillaisthalam* (Behag); *Innamum oru taram* (Yadukulakambhoji); *Kanakasabhai tirunadanam* (Surati); *Nadamadi tirinda* (Kambhoji); *Natharmudimel* (Punnagavarali); *Sivalokanathanai* (Mayamalavagoula); *Un perumaiyai* (Kalyani); *Vaa vaa Muruga* (Kapi); and *Yarukku ponnambalam* (Bhairavi); hymns from Tiruppugazh and a few

viruttam-s.

Chembai was noted for his rendering of sloka-s in praise of Guruvayurappan, from *Narayaneeeyam*, (*Agre pasyami, Venimooley, Manjeeram*).

Other favourite items of ragamalika he sang in this type were: *Sree Rama mantram* and *Sayankaley*.

Chembai was at home with songs in Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam. He enunciated the lyrics clearly but the Malayalam accent was quite evident in his diction. There is the story about a Kannadiga listener who requested Chembai, during a concert, to sing a song in Kannada. Chembai is said to have replied: "I just sang two!" (Ippodu than rendennam padineney!).

He sang kalpana swara-s usually in madhyamakala (medium speed) but not seldom in dhurita kala (fast speed) also. When he sang them in high speed, a distinct pattern would sometimes emerge. For example, instead of singing the swara-s discretely as *pa dha pa ma, ga ri sa ri, sa ri ga ma pa dha ni sa*, he would use phrases like: *Ma pa dha, pa dha ni, Dha ni dha, Pa da pa, Dha ni sa, Ni sa ri Sa*. The gait would be distinct and suggest a kind of hopping. Sometimes he would employ what are called kathri swara-s--or scissored and rolled swara-s.

A notable feature of his swara-singing was his resort to gati bheda or modal shifting of tonic. He did this expertly. Chembai used to sing only single pallavi-s. Sometimes he would conclude the pallavi after a short niraval passage and then take up swaraprastara. Sometimes he would also execute trikala or three-speed variations. When he did so, he would sing the slow movement for the duration of two or three avarta-s (tala cycle) only and shift to madhyama kala quickly.

In short, madhyama kala singing dominated his presentation of ragam-tanam-pallavi as well as of kriti-s.

One feature stood out in his singing throughout his life: sruti suddham or purity of pitch. His pitch was between F to F sharp (4 to 4-1/2 kattai) for many years; in the last phase of his life, it was C (1 kattai). But whatever it was, it was perfect. He had got a lock on sruti even as a youngster, through rigorous and disciplined sadhana. It never wavered, even as he never departed from the straight path he followed in his life.

Corrections

* The caption given to the photograph on top of page 23 of *Sruti* 98 was: "Chembai with his daughter and son-in-law". It is wrong. Standing on either side of Chembai are his disciple T.S. Krishnamurthy (AIR, now retired) and Mrs. Krishnamurthy.

Records & Cassettes

Sound bytes securely locked into the grooves of records and the spools and stretches of magnetic tape make it possible for us to listen to the music of many of the performances of the past.

Unlike many musicians, who were born at the turn of the 20th century, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata has left us a large legacy.

In the early nineteen thirties, when he was a super star, recording companies chased him with contracts and managed to capture and circulate his music on circular sheets of shellac.

The first disc he cut, to use trade

parlance, contained a ragamalika rendering of an arutpa of Ramalingaswamy. The raga-s used were Kalyani, Dhanyasi, Kedaragoula, Kafi and Surati. The disc created a sensation.

Several other recordings which followed all helped to enhance the reputation of Chembai as a singing star with a superb voice.

Among these a kutcheri set-- a series of discs which, when played in sequence, constituted a mini-concert with abridged presentations of alapana, kriti-s, etc.

In 1946, Chembai recorded a sele-

ction of songs for which the lyrics had been written by his friend T.G. Krishna Iyer and he himself had composed the music.

Later he added two long-play records to the discography.

In recent times, recording companies have been releasing pre-recorded cassettes containing excerpts from live concerts. One of the cassettes is an All India Radio release of a national programme recorded in 1971. It is distributed under the HMV banner. Another HMV cassette offers songs from an LP released earlier.

Recordings Of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata

(In the collection of V.A.K. Ranga Rao)

78 rpm (10")

<i>Chalamela</i> (Sankarabharanam)	BROADCAST	JM	2372
<i>Bhajana seyavey</i> (Kedaram)	G2437	JM	2373
<i>Nijamamamulanu</i> (Umabharanam)	BROADCAST	JM	2374
<i>Elavata</i> (Mukhari)	G2438	JM	2375
<i>Todi</i> (Alapana)	BROADCAST	JM	2377/1
<i>Todi</i> (Tanam)	G2439	JM	2377/3
<i>Oraru Mukhaney</i> (Pallavi)	BROADCAST	JM	2379
<i>Pallavi continued</i>	G2440	JM	2380
<i>Venimuley</i> (Sloka)	BROADCAST	JM	2442
<i>Part II</i>	G2441	JM	2443
<i>Kommaro vaniki</i> (Khamas)	BROADCAST	JM	2381
<i>Tiruppugazh</i> , Mangalam	G2442	JM	2382
<i>Orumaiyodu</i> (Ragamalika)	COLUMBIA	WEI	2452
<i>Part II</i>	LBE 29	WEI	2453
<i>Chesinadella</i> (Todi)	COLUMBIA	WEI	2438
<i>Brovavamma</i> (Manji)	LBE 35	WEI	2448
<i>Raghuvara</i> (Pantuvrali)	COLUMBIA	WEI	2466
<i>Part II</i>	LBE 40	WEI	2467
<i>Nadamadi</i> (Kambhoji)	COLUMBIA	WEI	2439
<i>Yaarukku ponnambalam</i> (Bhairavi)	LBE 47	WEI	2450
<i>Sree Rama mantram</i> (Ragamalika)	COLUMBIA	WEI	3566
<i>Part II</i>	LBE 59	WEI	3567
<i>Va Va Muruga</i> (Hindustani Kafi)	COLUMBIA	WEI	3568
<i>Pranavanilai</i> (Mohanam)	LBE 64	WEI	2451
<i>Ninnujoochi</i> (Saurashtram)	LBE 85	WEI	2449

<i>Sree Mahaganapati</i> (Goula)	COLUMBIA	CEI	17937
<i>Sree Balasubramanya</i> (Bilahari)	LBE 101	CEI	17938
<i>Arum ponne</i> (Ragamalika)	COLUMBIA	CEI	17943
<i>Part II</i>	LBE 103	CEI	17958
<i>Nammi vachina</i> (Kalyani)	COLUMBIA	CEI	17959
<i>Part II</i>	GE 100	CEI	17960
<i>Un perumayai</i> (Kalyani)	COLUMBIA	CEI	19477
<i>Part II</i>	GE 6249	CEI	19478
<i>Varijadala</i> (Arabhi)	COLUMBIA	CEI	19474
<i>Pavana gura</i> (Hamsanandi)	GE 6280	CEI	19476
<i>Evariki telisu</i> (Dhanyasi)	COLUMBIA	CEI	19479
<i>Part II</i>	GE 6300	CEI	17480
<i>Sayankaley</i> (Ragamalika)	COLUMBIA	CEI	19500
<i>Part II</i>	GE 6337	CEI	19501
<i>Ennil kaninda</i> (Sankarabharanam)	COLUMBIA	CEI	19498
<i>Part II</i>	GE 6372	CEI	19499

78 rpm (12")

<i>Rama neeyada</i> (Kharaharapriya)	BROADCAST	JMT	178
<i>Part II</i>	RT 2410	JMT	179
<i>Amba nada</i> (Todi)	BROADCAST	HT	133
<i>Part II</i>	RT 4002	HT	134
<i>Parasakti mahamayi</i> (Saveri)	BROADCAST	HT	127
<i>Harahara Siva sambho</i> (Kapi)	GT 4058	HT	128
<i>Kanakasabhai</i> (Surati)	BROADCAST	HT	129
<i>Idudano tillaisthalam</i> (Behag)	GT 4057	HT	130
<i>Sarasiruha</i> (Nata)	BROADCAST	-	-
<i>Syamasundara</i> (Dhanyasi)	-	-	-

LONG-PLAY RECORDS

HMVS/33ESX 6027 (Stereo): Gambheera Nata, Hamsanadam, Nalinakanti, Saraswatimanohari, Malayamarutam, Kharaharapriya and Narayaneeyam Sloka.

HMVS/33ESX 6063 (Stereo): Vijayasree, Chakravakam, Hamsanandi, Devagandhari and Vijayanagari.

CASSETTES

The contents of some cassettes commercially recorded by Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata are listed below. Source of information: inlay cards of cassettes.

AVM

[MEI-SR 1089]. *Bantu recti* - Hamsanadam; *Manavinalakinch* - Nalinakanti; *Enta vedukundu* - Saraswatimanohari; *Samagana* - Hamsanandi; *Ela needayaradu* - Athana; Ragam-tanam-pallavi - Bhairavi.

HMV

[HTC-8148]. *Sree Mahaganapati* - Goula; *Sree Balasubramanyaya* - Bilahari; *Raghuvans* - Pantuvarali; *Varijadu lochani* - Arabhi; *Evariki telisunamma* - Dhanyasi;

Ennil kaninda - Sankarabharanam; *Nadamaadi tirinda* - Kambhoji; *Aarukku ponnambalam* - Bhairavi; *Pavana guru* - Hamsanandi; *Sree Rama mantram* - Ragamalika.

[HTC 03B-8183] *Sarasijanabha* - Kambhoji (varnam); *Rakshamam* - Gambheera Nata; *Sarasaksha* - Pantuvarali; *Agrey pasyami* - Kedaragoula.

INRECO

[2771-C-359]. *Raghuvamsa sudha* - Kadanakutoohalam; *Vadera daivamu* - Pantuvarali; *Saraguna palimpa* - Kedaragoula; *Sree Subrahmanyaya namastey* - Kambhoji; *Manasa etulo* - Malayamarutam; *Vandey mataram*.

Sidemen To The Star

The following article was written by RAM ASLESHA.

Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata's career as a concert musician covered a span of 70 years-- three score and ten, to use biblical language. It is virtually impossible to identify, let alone list, all the violinists and percussionists who accompanied him in his concerts. But a few at least among them deserve to be highlighted.

As a matter of form, perhaps the violinist who should be mentioned first is his father Ananta Bhagavata himself. On more occasions than one, in the early years of Chembai's career, he wielded the bow for his son.

T.A. Krishna Iyer of Ernakulam was another of the early violin accompanists.

The violinist who, by all rights, should be most prominently highlighted from among Chembai's concert colleagues is Malaikkotai Govindaswamy Pillai. This great maestro did more than enhance the quality and appeal of Chembai's concerts. Along with another giant of his era, Pudukotai Dakshinamurthy Pillai, who was a master of mridanga and kanjeera both, he promoted Vaidyanatha Bhagavata and was responsible for the meteoric rise to fame that Chembai achieved. It was Dakshinamurthy Pillai who first got an inkling of Vaidyanatha Bhagavata's

phenomenal talent. He conveyed the favourable impression he gained to Govindaswamy Pillai and the two of them promptly arranged a concert for Chembai in Tiruchi. It marked the beginning of a series of concerts in which the two Pillai's played for-- and thus promoted the fortunes of-- their 'favourite son'. According to T. Sankaran, the Pillai's played this role for Chembai because they wanted to put up a rival with comparable talents to Naina Pillai whom they disdainfully described as "that Kanchipuram upstart". It is said his association with the Pillai's yielded Chembai a great fortune, not to mention Chembai, T.N. Krishnan & Palakkad Mani

tion the fact it secured for him a high profile stature in Tamil country.

Not only the Pillai's, virtually all the other leading violinists and percussionists of the time were glad to play sidemen for Chembai.

Since Bhagavata's concert career spanned seven decades and since he sincerely sought to encourage all up-and-coming musicians, a host of others too had the privilege of providing accompaniment to him at one time or another.

Even a restrictive list of violinists





Chembai, T.K. Ramachandran & T.V. Gopalakrishnan, vocal support: Chembai Narayanan

who accompanied him must include: Tripunithura Gopalakrishna Bhagavata, Tripunithura Krishna Bhagavata, Tiruvananthapuram Gopalakrishna Bhagavata, T.A. Krishna Iyer, Mysore T. Chowdiah, Karur Chinnaswamy Iyer, Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai, Mayavaram Govindaraja Pillai, Erode Viswanatha Iyer, Palakkad C.R. Mani Iyer, T.K. Ramachandran, T.N. Krishnan, Lalgudi G. Jayaraman, M.S. Gopalakrishnan, V.V. Subramaniam and V.V. Ravi.

Possibly all of them kept in mind, while displaying their musical wares and technical skills in his presence, that Chembai himself was a proficient player of the instrument and could wield the bow with effect-- as he did, on the spur of the moment, at a flute recital of T.R. Mahalingam at the Thiagaraja Vidvat Samajam in Madras. Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer played the mridanga on the occasion.

Chowdiah's association with Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata and his brother antedated the concert in 1928 in which he first played sideman for him. He was about the same age as Chembai and was a co-star in numerous performances of the latter. He knew Chembai intimately both as a friend and as a colleague. He likely voiced the assessment of the entire music community when he described Chembai as an 'uttama gayaka'.

The mridanga vidwans prominently associated with Vaidyanatha Bhagavata in the latter's heydays were Palakkad Mani Iyer and Palani Subramania Pillai.

It was Chembai who introduced Mani Iyer, when he was still a young lad, to

the discriminating connoisseurs of Madras. He had told the Jagannatha Bhakta Sabha of Egmore that he would like to have Mani, then all of 13 years old, as his mridanga accompanist in his kutcheri for the Sabha but the response had been negative. Nonetheless he brought the youngster along and had him play too in the concert, side by side with another mridanga vidwan named Sankara Menon. The tremendous reception he received that day must have made Mani Iyer think of signing up as Chembai's slave for the rest of his life!

Mani Iyer's long association with Vaidyanatha Bhagavata convinced him that none could excel the jolly giant from Chembai in championing the case of young musicians, and that the great gayaka was a model for others in regard to how a main musician should conduct himself vis-a-vis his sidemen. Chembai's attitude and conduct in this regard was most praiseworthy, according to Mani Iyer. Explaining this observation, he said once: "Sometimes, the accompanists' performance would be middling, but Bhagavata wouldn't react to this with displeasure. Nor would he point a finger at them with a view to getting the listeners to appreciate his predicament. He would as far as possible encourage the sidemen to do their best and also to cover up their handi-caps and errors."

Mani Iyer held Chembai in high regard not only for this generous attitude towards accompanists and his broad-mindedness, but also for his laya gnana. With Chembai keeping the beat, the percussionists could never go wrong, he asserted.

In the thirties, Palakkad Mani Iyer was part of a splendid team of sidemen who played with Chembai often. Other members of the team were Mysore T. Chowdiah (violin) and Pudukotai Dakshinamurthy Pillai (kanjeera). The music they produced would typically be a riot of colour, full of joy, verve and bounce. Bhagavata's own enthusiasm could be infectious and this was there for all, including the two percussionists, to experience. At a 1936 concert in Vennaimalai, near Karur in Tiruchi district, Mani Iyer and Dakshinamurthy Pillai had exploited the 'tani' at the end of a ragam-tanam-pallavi for all its worth but when they had concluded it, Chembai repeated the pallavi line again twice, prompting the percussionists to follow suit.

Chowdiah has revealed that at one time the friendship between Dakshinamurthy Pillai and Palakkad Mani Iyer had soured but Chembai had adroitly manoeuvred to bring them together as sidemen for a concert of his and paved the way for a reconciliation.

Mani Iyer had taken a prominent position at Chembai's side when Dakshinamurthy Pillai's availability began to diminish. And Palani Subramania Pillai replaced Mani Iyer in a similar manner in similar circumstances.

Palani Subbudu's father Muthiah Pillai had been providing mridanga accompaniment to Vaidyanatha Bhagavata now and then. The son utilised the opportunity given to him to entrench himself as one of Chembai's favourite mridanga accompanists. And this he did through excellent displays of his competence--knowledge, skills and attitude-- and nothing else.

According to Subbudu, Chembai told him at the beginning of their association that he would get him any number of engagements but, if the young man agreed not to specify a fee for some time, he (Chembai) could secure for him whatever fee he wanted later. He explained that this pact to which he had agreed had worked in his favour because, as Chembai had explained to him, a musician must establish himself first and should not allow money considerations to derail achievement of the goal.

Chembai The Violinist

Chembai had learnt to play the violin. Much after his voice had come back to him, this ability was put to unexpected use a couple of times at least.

In 1938, he was in Alangudi, a village in Tanjavur district, for a concert during the annual temple festival, one of many concerts to be held on the occasion. On the day following the concert, he was chatting with friends, among them Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer and another famous musician Kaliakudi Vaidyanatha Iyer. Chembai observed that, rather than whiling away their time, they could listen to some good music. Maharajapuram readily agreed and said that it was a good opportunity to listen to the Kaliakudi maestro as they would not be staying for his performance scheduled for the latter part of the festival, but wondered who could be the accompanists. Chembai immediately said that Maharajapuram and he himself could play the roles. So they did, with Chembai playing the violin and Viswanatha Iyer the mridanga. The result was an impromptu concert which became an unforgettable experience for those who had the good fortune to be there.

Chembai and Maharajapuram similarly played sidemen to flutist T.R. Mahalingam at a performance at the Thiagaraja Vidwat Samajam in Madras.



The first Chembai kutcheri in which Palani Subbudu participated as a sideman was in 1926. Thereafter he played for Chembai numerous times, until his premature demise in 1962.

It appears Subbudu ran into a difficulty with violinist Chowdiah at one time. As a southpaw, he had to sit to the left of the vocalist, but Chowdiah objected to this-- not once but many times. Chembai, however, backed Subbudu. He told Chowdiah he would realise the correctness of this arrangement one day. His words came true some years later.

The backing Chembai gave Subbudu manifested itself in a remarkable manner during a 1941 performance in Bombay. Bhagavatar made room for as many as four tani-s, or percussion solo

interludes, during the concert.

According to Subbudu, Chembai instinctively knew the role the sidemen could play in making a concert a success. Therefore, he said once, Chembai created opportunities for the percussionists to display their talent. And Chembai did this when the concert was going well and the listeners were immersed in it. Moreover, he would keep the beats of the tala in a way that anticipated and supported the performance of the laya vidwans.

Numerous other mridanga vidwans were lucky to play sidemen to Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar. The list includes old time veterans Azhagunambi Pillai and Umayalpuram Kothandarama Iyer, as well as Vellore Ramabhadran, T.V. Gopalakrishnan, Guruvayur Dorai,

Umayalpuram Sivaraman, Trisoor Narendran and Trisoor Mohan who were youngsters when they accompanied him.

From T.S. Vilvadi Iyer and Alangudi Ramachandran to T.H. Vinayakram, several ghata vidwans too have participated in Chembai's concerts. As have many kanjeera vidwans-- Dakshinamurthy Pillai and Dakshinamurthy Asari among them-- and a few masters of the morsing like Mannargudi Natesa Pillai and N. Pakkiriswamy Pillai.

There was sure benefit to the violinists and percussionists when they joined the galaxy of which the star in the centre was Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar. The brightness of the concerts helped to add lustre to their own reputation.

Chembaï' s Last Concert



Some Pictorial Glimpses



Guru

Passion For Teaching

This article was written by NARAYANAN PILLAI.

Throughout his life, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar displayed a passion for teaching, spurred by his desire that as many as possible should learn the music he knew.

This passion manifested early. His biographer Ellarvi has suggested that, even as a six-year old, he began serving as a guide to Subrahmaniam, his brother who was two-years younger to him. Perhaps this was a bit of hyperbole, but it is recorded as a fact that when he was only 16 years of age-- eight years after his debut on the stage-- Chembai formally took on the role of a music tutor. The emergence of Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar and his brother as impressive musicians under the tutelage of their father prompted many parents to send their children to Ananta Bhagavathar for training in music. When the number of students became too large for him to handle by himself, Ananta Bhagavathar assigned son Vaitha the task of tutoring some of them. With his broad outlook and willingness freely to share his knowledge and experience with his students, the father himself served as a good model for his son.

Even if the thought never crossed Vaitha's mind that he should hoard his learning like a miser, he made a vow always to share with others whatever he had learnt, after an incident in which a well-known musician whom he had requested for the text of the charanam of a particular kriti tricked him into believing that he could not remember it.

Over the decades, he taught music or specific songs to numerous persons of diverse backgrounds and different levels of prior accomplishment, indifferent to their age, sex, caste, background or social status. If someone was sincere in wishing to learn from him, he obliged without hesitation.

And he did not teach in order to earn money. Manku Thampuran, a princess



Chembai with disciples Jaya & Vijaya

of the Cochin royal family and his first disciple to mount the kutcheri platform, has this to say about Chembai's noble attitude:

"Bhagavathar did not pursue his career as teacher to make money. His aim was to create a good number of talented disciples without expecting any return in kind or cash. Even though he received guru dakshina, he often used to repeat that it should only be a mere token since he found it distasteful to receive payment for imparting musical education. He often used to extol the virtues of vidya daanam or the gifting of knowledge."

The altruism that guided him in his role as a guru received praise from many others too.

The case of L.R. Lakshmi of Bangalore appears to have been a peculiar exception in that she believes her tenure as a disciple of Chembai was terminated by a member of his family on grounds she was being favoured by Chembai even though she was not able

to pay him any fee. (Her story appears as a separate article below).

Chembai would not only teach anyone who cared to learn, but also give lessons at all times of the day and anywhere he found it possible or convenient to do so. There is a tale of his conducting a class for his disciples travelling with him while they were waiting for a delayed train at a railway station platform.

Although a leading concert artist, he never considered it below his dignity to teach even newcomers, beginning with the rudiments of music. The experience of violin vidwan V.V. Subramaniam illustrates this observation.

He did establish and conduct a school to impart music training to boys and girls within the framework of the gurukula system. This was as early as in 1923 and in Chembai. It was, of course, a free school. He erected a building for the school and his brother Subrahmaniam helped him with the teaching. A success, the school

Chembai Narayanan (1920-1992)

Chembai Narayanan was the son of Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar's sister Narayani Ammal and brother-in-law Ananta Bhagavatar. His father taught music to children when not giving flute recitals.

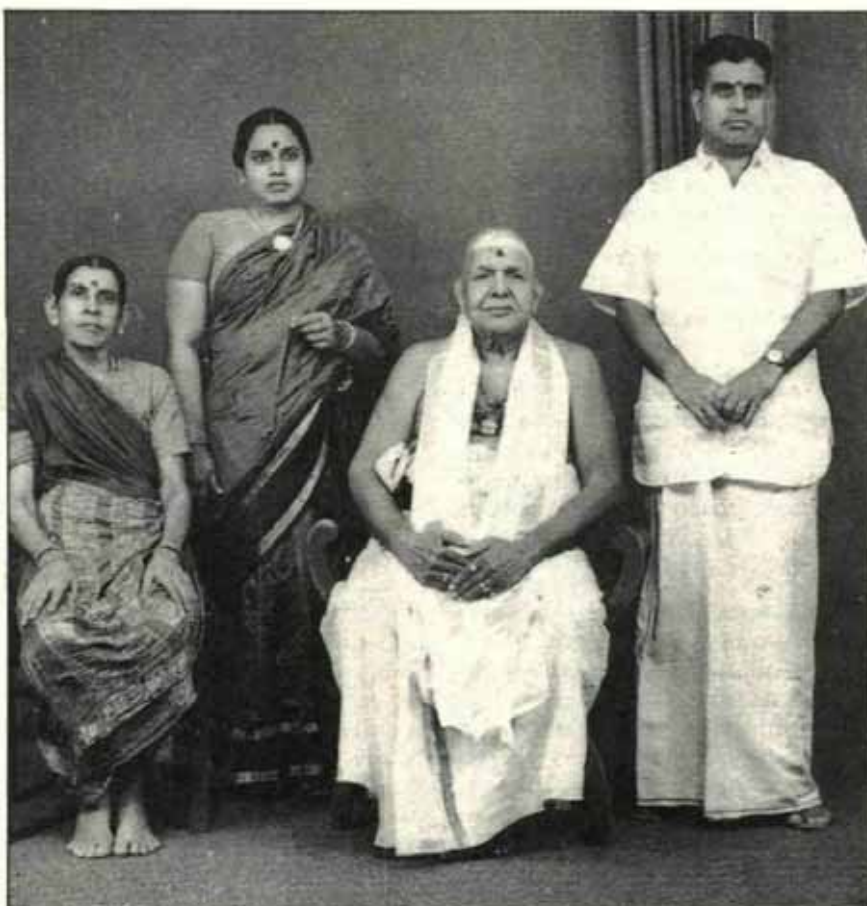
Narayanan initially studied upto Form VI, which means he completed secondary school education. He learnt music side by side. It seemed inevitable that, at one time or another, he should become a disciple of his illustrious uncle Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar. He did; but the consanguinity had no bearing on the guru-sishya relationship.

Narayanan could fulfil his desire to continue his scholastic studies when his father took up an assignment with the Raja of Kallikkotai. He enrolled himself in a Palakkad college and graduated with a B.Sc. degree.

After that, however, he seemed to have preferred a career in music, or deferred to the wishes of Uncle Vaitha in this matter. Chembai evaluated Narayanan's musical endowments and aptitude favourably and voiced the view that the latter, with additional training under him, would emerge as a successful concert musician.

In 1937, Narayanan married Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar's only child, daughter Parvati. The parents of the bride and the groom, and other senior members of the two families, had apparently decided on this marriage soon after Parvati was born in 1927.

Right from the beginning, Chembai's brother Subrahmaniam had been accompanying him in his concerts, providing vocal support. Now nephew-turned son-in-law took his place. No rancour resulted from this change because Subrahmaniam apparently wished to stay in Chembai and look after the properties



Chembai, wife Meenakshi, daughter Parvati and son-in-law Narayanan while Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar was thinking of shifting to Madras. Lucknow, Benaras, Kanpur.

Narayanan travelled with Chembai near and far to take part in the latter's concerts. The experience served him well; he could observe his uncle's performances from inside the ring, so to speak, and improve his own competence. In course of time, this helped him to handle solo concert engagements successfully. He was invited to give performances in sabha-s and festivals and at weddings and other functions; and all over India--in Kerala towns, Madras, Bangalore, Mysore, Calcutta, Delhi, Simla,

Ultimately, he decided to pursue a quiet life in Madras, along with Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar.

After his uncle's demise, Narayanan gladly took on the responsibility of conducting the annual music festival in the village of Chembai.

Narayanan passed away in 1992, at the age of 72. Narayanan did not have any children.

N.P.

survived the departure of Bhagavatar from his native village. It is functioning even today.

Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar trained numerous disciples but, according to one of them, they were all dwarfed by his own tall stature.

A list of his more prominent disciples includes: Manku Thampuram and her

sister Kunjikavu Thampuram; O.M. Vasudevan Namboodiripad; Maani Bhagavatar of Coimbatore; Vangeri Krishnan Namboodiripad; Raman Namboodiripad of Poomulli Mana; Parameswaran Namboodiri (Babu); Jaya and Vijaya, the male twins with feminine-sounding names; R. Subbaraju (guru of Mandolin U. Srinivas); Bhagavatar's own nephew and son-in-law Chembai Narayanan; Guruvayur Ponnammal and Sukumari Narendra Menon.

Kadayanallur Venkataraman, violinist V.V. Subramaniam and T.V. (Viswaroopam) Gopalakrishnan also consider him their guru. T.K. Govinda Rao and V.R. Krishnan had their initial training under Chembai. Popular playback singers P. Leela and T.V. Rathnam learnt specific songs from him, as did K.J. Yesudass who for a few years also provided vocal support to Chembai in concerts.

An Exemplar

The following article was written by MANKU THAMPURAN, a member of the erstwhile Cochin royal family. She was the first disciple of Chembai and the first Chairperson of the Kerala Sangeeta Nataka Akademy. Later she was made a Fellow of this Akademy along with Chembai. In her mid-seventies now, she lives in Tripunithura.

I had a very long association with my respected guru, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar. I was his first disciple to give concerts.

My father, Muriarass Mana Neelakantan Namboodripad was a great connoisseur of music. He desired me to learn music. I started by learning to sing Kathakali pada-s when I was about seven years of age. My first guru at that age was my own father.

Kunhikidavu Thampuran, my uncle who was also my father's intimate friend, was the person who introduced Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar to my father. In Tripunithura at that time there were a lot of festivals and functions where a good many distinguished musicians came to give musical performances. Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar also used to come to Tripunithura to participate in these functions and give music concerts.

Bhagavatar had the unique capacity

to discover real musical talent in the young. He heard me singing when I was yet young and told my father that I should be taught Carnatic music. In the event, he himself took the responsibility of teaching me, even though he was a very busy artist then, with engagements all over the South. What a fine example, if example is the right word, of a simple and sincere musician of his stature he was!

It was a time when there were con-

siderations of caste, creed and community and superiority of men over women. But he had a liberal attitude and stood bold in seeking to eliminate such differences. Among his numerous disciples, there were brahmins, kshatriyas, Nairs, Menons and harijans and other so-called depressed classes also. This fact, I presume, is known to all. I knew that his own father disagreed with him on his choice of disciples and his liberal attitude.

An illustration of this outlook was when Bhagavatar secured for me an opportunity to sing at the Music Academy of Madras in December 1939-- a joy and a stroke of real luck which I can never forget. The courage with which I sang and my adherence to the Carnatic tradition amazed many who listened to that concert. He also recommended me to All India Radio in Madras and I had opportunity to sing for AIR-Madras from 1939.

Bhagavatar did not pursue his career as teacher to make money. His aim was to create a good number of talented disciples without expecting any return in kind or cash. Even though he received guru dakshina, he often used to repeat that it should only be a mere token since he found it distasteful to receive payment for imparting musical education. He often used to extol the virtues of vidya danam or the gifting of knowledge.

In promoting his disciples, he was



Chembai & Manku Thampuran

(R to L) Chembai, Manku Thampuran, Kunhi Kavu Thampuran & Chembai's brother Subrahmaniam



impartial and unaffected by any kind of criticism. His goal was to create more and more disciples and develop Carnatic music in the country in which he was born. When the Kerala Sangeeta Nataka Academy was started and I was selected as its Chairperson, it was Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar who was the first person to congratulate me. I cherished and continue to cherish this fact with great pride, gratitude and respect.

I may mention that I had the privilege of singing along with my guru at the Guruvayur temple many a time. I had occasion to sing with him also at the Parthasarathy temple in his home village.

I should mention a very special feature about my revered guru. If he established an affectionate attachment, a connection with any person or a family of persons, he maintained that intimate relationship throughout his life. He had very close connections with many reputable families of Kerala and he moved with them as a member of each. To name only a few, I may mention the families of Poomulli Mana, Olappamanna Mana, Varikasser Mana, Kudalur Mana, Kavalappara House, Manakhampad House, Kannambra House and Kollengode Palace. He mingled freely with brahmin as well as non-brahmin families, with royalty as well as the scions of kshatriya families.

He maintained his friendship to the last.

Lastly, let me say with all the emphasis at my command that I learnt from Chembai not music alone; I also learnt how to pursue a simple and humble life. I appreciated his capacity for moving with people. He showed me how to be a perfectly practical person in such matters. He was not only my guru, he was also like a father to me, as he was indeed to all his disciples.

Chembai's attitude towards life, his way of handling men and matters must serve as an object lesson to others, especially musicians.

My Spiritual Guide

This article was written by PARAMESWARAN NAMBOODIRI, a disciple of Chembai. It was translated from the original Malayalam by N. Sundaram.

I came to be the disciple of the great maestro Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar thanks to the now well-known but happily ended mishap that befell him when he contracted a troublesome throat infection between 1955 and 1956 and seemingly lost his golden voice for ever. Through the intervention of my brother the late Poomulli Raman Namboodiripad, Bhagavatar was examined by Vaidyamadhom Narayanan Namboodiri and treated at Raman Namboodiripad's manor in Peringode. I was interested in music and this turn of events gave me the opportunity of becoming Bhagavatar's disciple while I had the task of preparing for him the medicines prescribed by Vaidyamadhom. On the ninth day of treatment, Bhagavatar regained his voice and broadcast a concert from All India Radio-Kozhikode. Truly, this was a miracle wrought by Lord Guruvayurappan.

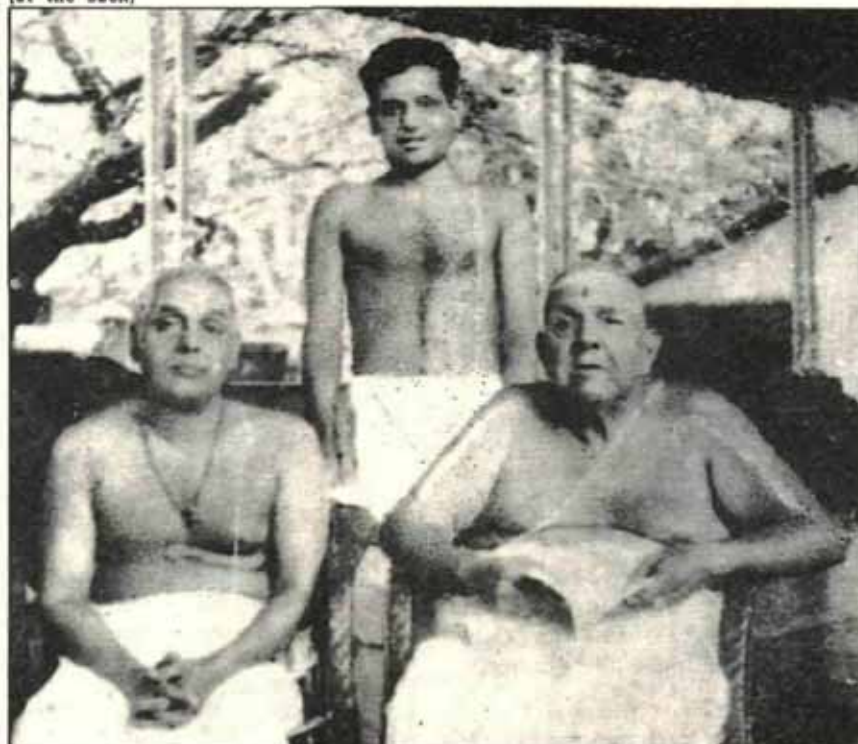
Chembai continued to remain at Poomulli Mana as tutor to his host. Poomulli was a place which Vedic scholars and experts in purana-s, ayurveda, mimamsa, astrology, yoga and Kalaripayattu as well as doyens of Carnatic music all liked to visit. Vidwans would visit the mana especially during Navaratri. Needless to say, Chembai also used to be an important visitor, delighting all with his performances.

I recall in particular, during the

Navaratri festival in 1957, the delightful episode of Bhagavatar and the great flutist T.R. Mahalingam taking the measure of each other. Mahalingam entered the house and asked if Chembai was there and Chembai, with a straight face, told him that he was there a little while earlier waiting for Mahalingam. And Mahalingam then said: "I am Mahalingam," and Chembai replied with impish delight: "In that case, I am Chembai." Everyone broke into hearty laughter.

That was not the end. Mahalingam virtually challenged Chembai to play the violin, which of course he could very well indeed. Bhagavatar asked the violinist T.K. Ramachandran to hand him his instrument and gave such an astonishing performance that the audience was moved to tears. Mahalingam reverentially touched Chembai's feet. Then he himself played on the flute and had the audience spellbound. This concert lasted some six hours.

Chembai, Vaidyamadhom Narayanan Namboodiri & Parameswaran Namboodiri (at the back)



While teaching Raman Namboodiripad vocal music, Chembai would ask me to provide mridanga accompaniment. He had even brought with him Kodunthirapally Mahadeva Iyer to teach me advanced techniques in mridanga-playing. I provided mridanga accompaniment to Bhagavatar himself during one of the succeeding Navaratri festivals. M.S. Gopalakrishnan on the violin and Alangudi Ramachandran on the ghata were the other accompanists. I can never forget that occasion.

I also vividly remember how, as President Radhakrishnan was presenting the Sangeet Natak Akademi award to Chembai in 1958, the Bhagavatar good-naturedly helped the First Citizen to slip on the golden bracelet that was somewhat tight. The day after the award presentation, I accompanied Bhagavatar when he gave a performance. Bhagavatar then proceeded to Hardwar and Rishikesh

and performed bhajan-s at the Sivananda Ashram where he was honoured.

I should also recall here the great kutcheri that Bhagavatar gave under the auspices of the Bharatiya Music and Arts Society in Bombay, of which his close friend P.A. Raman was a leading light. This was a notable performance. It was Chembai's first concert outside Kerala after his recovery from the severe throat malady. Raman Namboodiripad provided vocal support while I played the mridanga.

Around this time, Bhagavatar wanted me to stay in Madras and to accompany him on his tours. I readily agreed. For 10 years I had the rare privilege of being his private secretary also. At the Tiruvaiyaru festivals he chose me to play the mridanga for him in preference to all others. How overwhelmed I am still, to recall his love for me!

Many were the musicians that Bhagavatar encouraged, including the greatest mridanga vidwan of them all, Palghat Mani Iyer, whose talents he nurtured so lovingly. Yet Chembai was all humility, illustrated by the fact that he would carry Mani's mridanga for him.

K.J. Yesudass, Veena S. Balachander, Harikatha expert Balakrishna Sastrigal and Anjam Madhavan Namboodiri were all his devoted friends and admirers because of his endearing qualities.

His kindness did not end with me. My son Babu also became his disciple and earned his first remuneration by singing in his company.

It was through Chembai's good offices that I joined All India Radio's Trisoor station in 1973, though it was a wrench for me to leave him for this Government job.

Heaven, So Long It Lasted

The following article was written by L.R. LAKSHMI of Bangalore who learnt music from Chembai for a while.

Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar agreed to teach me at the instance of T.P. Gopalachari, father of mridanga vidwan Vellore Ramabhadran. I had learnt music during my girlhood but my marriage had put an end to my aspirations. Later, when I came to Madras in 1967, I wished to resume my studies. It was then that Gopalachari took me to Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, who was then residing in Santhome.

I offered tamboolam with 10 rupees to the Bhagavatar and prostrated at his feet.

"Ai kutti [lassie] you need not give all these since Guruvayurappan has given me plenty." Saying this he returned the 10-rupee note but accepted the tamboolam. Then he told Gopalachari, who had pleaded my case: "I'll teach her what I know, but I'll not accept any chakram [coin]." And then he asked me to sing a song.

I sang something nervously. "Good, you sing well," he said and added: "What's there to be taught? Mere knowledge from listening will be enough."

But Gopalachari insisted that he should actually teach me, and Chembai

promised to do what he could.

My lessons started next morning. On some days he would ask me to sing alapana-s and would enjoy it. Sometimes he would ask me to prepare fruit juice or write a letter for him.

My guru was very considerate towards me. Sometimes he would be suffering from severe pain in his stomach and lying down in bed, but even then he would teach me.

I used to listen to all his concerts sitting in the front row. If ever I sat away, he would make me sit in front. In the middle of the concert he would say: "It is getting late, and don't go alone by bus, I'll take you in the car."

My financial situation was poor, and I couldn't pay any fees, but he never seemed to care, though if I took fruits with me, he would accept them.

Aware of my situation, he even helped me to earn some money, by persuading a neighbour of his to engage me to tutor his children.

One day, Chembai was in one of his best moods, and asked me to sing, and himself started singing with me. As we were singing, two sabha officials arrived in a car, with a sangeeta vidwan. I stopped singing, but he admonished me: "Don't stop in the middle! Finish

the song." When I had completed it, he said to the sabha secretary: "Why, sir, she is going to sing with me in the concert. Print her name also. What do you say?"

I was thrilled. But the vidwan did not like the idea. "How is that possible?" he asked. "Will the sruti be the same?"

"Why, you heard her just now-- she was singing in 6-kattai sruti," said my guru.

I could not have asked for more from my guru. I was in heaven.

But I could gather that my guru's willingness to teach without expecting any fee was not an attitude favoured by some within his immediate family. At least this seemed true in my case, as I learnt to my great sorrow when, a few days after the visit of the sabha officials recounted earlier, I went to my guru's residence. I was not welcome any longer and the reason given was that he was not well. I was in tears but there was little I could do except to keep on crying.

I never believed that my guru had turned me away. I found out later, quite accidentally, that he hadn't. When I ran into him, he said: "You'll always have my blessings."

Tunesmith

Result Of The Ernakulam Connection

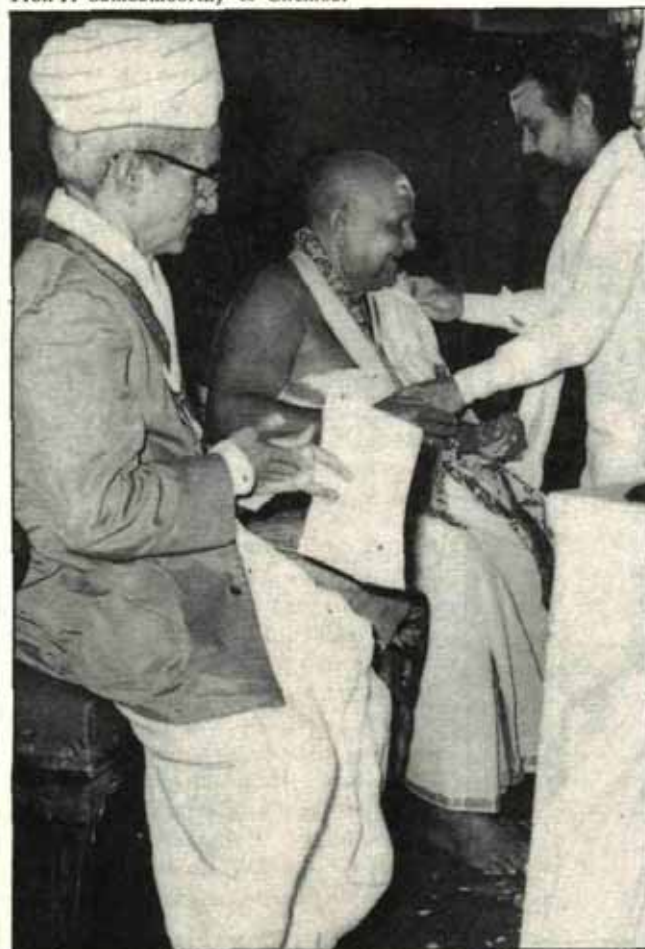
The following article was written by NARAYANAN PILLAI.

Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata played the role of geyakara or tunesmith for lyrics written by T.G. Krishna Iyer using the mudra of Lalitadasar.

Krishna Iyer was among the influential friends Chembai had made in Ernakulam. The association went back to 1915 when Chembai gave his first performance, along with his brother, at the annual Tyagaraja music festival in Ernakulam organised by T.A. Duraiswamy Iyer, a prominent lawyer.

Duraiswamy Iyer was musically knowledgeable too, having received regular training in the subject. As a connoisseur he was highly respected by leading musicians of the time.

Prof. P. Sambamoorthy & Chembai



The Tyagaraja festival in Ernakulam was the first such event at which the Chembai brothers were exposed to an array of leading Carnatic musicians and their performances. They became indebted to Duraiswamy Iyer for this opportunity, as well as for the chance to perform. The brothers had gone to the festival on their own but once there, impressed by everything connected with the festival, they wished to participate as performers as well. And Duraiswamy Iyer gave them a chance.

Duraiswamy Iyer detained the youngsters for a few days after the conclusion of the festival and had them stay with him as his guests. The personal contact established at this time ripened into a friendship based on mutual respect.

Duraiswamy Iyer's son T.D. Narayana Iyer and nephew T.G. Krishna Iyer were also deeply interested in music, although their main vocations in life were different. They too became good friends of the Chembai brothers.

An upshot of these new friendships was that T.A. Krishna Iyer, brother of Duraiswamy Iyer who was a violinist, played sideman to Chembai in numerous concerts.

Krishna Iyer's son T.K. Ramachandran also, in later years, played the violin in many of Chembai's concerts. His other son is the flutist T.K. Radhakrishnan, now retired.

T.G. Krishna Iyer's career took him to many places but eventually he settled down in

Lalitanagar, a complex of houses he built in Santhome, Madras. Chembai too settled down there in the mid-forties.

Krishna Iyer was a devotee of Devi in her manifestation as Lalita. In his retirement days he composed lyrics, in Sanskrit and Telugu, dedicated to his favourite deity.

However, he had no training in music and hence someone else was needed to set the lyrics to music properly. In the event, Chembai assumed the role of this 'someone else'. In fact, the decision to compose the music for Krishna Iyer's lyrics was among the factors that made Chembai shift his residence to Madras.

Chembai's work-- he would have described it as a pleasure-- on Krishna Iyer's lyrics resulted in a book called *Sree Lalitadasar Keertanaigal*. He himself began to include select songs from this anthology in his concert repertoire. Kriti-s with the Lalitadasar mudra popularised by Chembai include: *Akhilandeswari* - Kanada; *Ennil kaninda* - Sankarabharanam; *Evariki telusu* - Dhanyasi; *Karuna cheyyvanendu* - Yadukulakambhoji; *Nikhila pavani*; *Pavana guru* - Hamsanandi; *Pranava nilayi* - Mohanam; *Rakshamam saranagatam* - Nata; *Sama gana* - Hamsanandi; *Sree Mudukulapati* - Husseni; *Unnai marava* - Hamsanandi; *Un perumai* - Kalyani; and *Varijadal* - Arabhi.

Because of the important role played by Chembai in the composition of the songs written by Krishna Iyer, he should-- if the correct Western tradition would be followed-- be given equal credit for them. The compositions should properly be ascribed therefore to "Krishna Iyer-- Vaidyanatha Iyer" rather than to Krishna Iyer alone.

Sree Mudukulapati (Lalitadasar song) is a replica of the song *Sree Raghukulanidhi* by Poochi Iyengar. Both have chitta swara; but in the former, Chembai used to sing sahitya for the chitta swara.

Festivals In Chembai & Guruvayur Annual Salutes

There are two Carnatic music festivals associated with Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata.

One is the annual 10-day festival which has been taking place in the village of Chembai in February-March. As early as the second decade of the century, stalwarts like Ennapadam Venkatrama Bhagavata used to sing regularly at this festival. All vidwans and top violinists of the years that followed used to perform. Among them were Kanchipuram Naina Pillai, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Musiri Subrahmanya Iyer, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, C.N. Balasubramaniam, Madurai Mani Iyer, M.S. Subbulakshmi, Flute T.N. Swaminatha Pillai, Flute T.R. Mahalingam and Mysore T. Chowdiah.

Even after he shifted to Madras in the early forties, Vaidyanatha Bhagavata would come down to Chembai every year to conduct the festival.

When Vaidyanatha Bhagavata died, his Madras-based son-in-law Narayanan assumed the responsibility for conducting the festival, with funds left by Chembai at Guruvayur temple. Second from

Vaidyanatha Bhagavata in trust, his own funds and resources mobilised by him. Narayanan too died earlier this year.

Vaidyanatha Bhagavata's disciples Jaya-Vijaya have erected a shrine for their guru at the entrance to the village. The Pancharatna kriti-s of Tyagaraja are rendered by a chorus of musicians at the shrine during the festival.

Commenting on the five-day festival conducted in the last week of February 1991, P.T. Narendra Menon reported in *Sruti*: "During the event, one felt that the spirit of Chembai was hovering over the village and that he was once again sitting on his favourite swing, opposite to the (Parthasarathy) temple, with his eyes riveted on the sanctum sanctorum.

The other music festival has been taking place at the Sree Krishna temple in Guruvayur. From the age of 20, Vaidyanatha Bhagavata and his disciples gave free concerts on navami, dasami and ekadasi days in the waxing phase of the moon (sukla paksham) in the month of Kartika. The three-day affair was attended by thousands of



Chembai festival. Yesudass in the foreground music lovers and devotees of Guruvayurappan. The Dewasom gave only a very small grant to help Chembai conduct the festival.

When Chembai passed away in 1974, the Dewasom assumed the responsibility for conducting it and decided to dedicate vastly larger resources for it. The duration of the festival was increased to four days in 1979. Four years later, it was increased to 11 days. With some 200 musicians, young and old, novices and established artists, vocalists and instrumentalists participating every day, the total number taking part in the festival every year exceeds 2000! All India Radio broadcasts a selection of the late evening concerts.

Significantly, children are allowed to perform too, since Chembai made it a point during his lifetime to encourage youngsters to learn music. A couple of years ago, 52 youngsters belonging to the age group of 5-20 participated in a mridanga mela.

As at the Tyagaraja aradhana festival in Tiruvaiyaru, a highlight is the group-singing of Tyagaraja's Pancharatna kriti-s. Over a 100 musicians sing these kriti-s in chorus on the dasami day, while another group sings on the night of ekadasi. Their presentation includes Chembai's favourite songs like *Vatapi Ganapatim* (Hamsadhvani), *Rakshamam saranagatam* (Nata), *Pavana guru* (Hamsanandi), *Mamava sada janani* (Kanada) and *Karuna cheivanendu tamasam Krishna* (Yadukulakambhoji).

NARAYANAN PILLAI



E - BOOK EDITION

CHEMBAI VAIDYANATHA BHAGAVATAR
(1896 - 1974)



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