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PALGHAT MANI IYER

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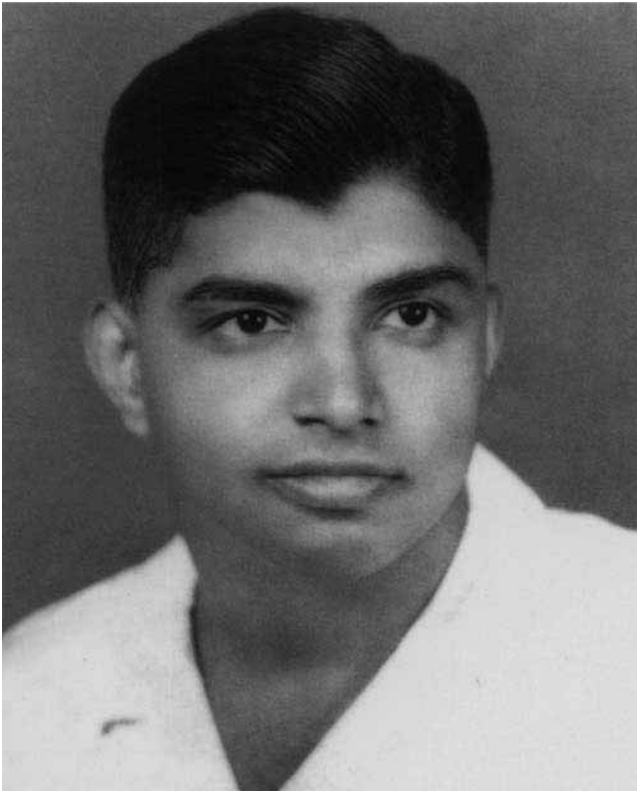


PALGHAT T.S. MANI IYER
(1912 - 1981)

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(1912-1981)

Sriram.V



Young Mani

Born for the Mridanga

Mani's parents— Anandambal and Sesham Bhagavatar



Sometime in the 17th century, a Raja of Palghat is said to have invited many Brahmin families belonging to the Tanjavur region to his principality. They were to inculcate learning and culture in the area. These families settled in 96 villages of Palghat district and greatly enriched the place. Many of their descendants rose to high positions in administration, business and other walks of life. Several shone as musicians. But the man who was to prefix the name of the district to his own name and make it synonymous with percussion was Mani Iyer, the mridanga maestro.

Palghat T.S. Mani Iyer was born on 12th June 1912 at Pazhayanur, Tiruvilvamala Taluk, in Palghat District to Sesham Bhagavatar and Anandambal as their second son. The couple had many children of whom some died early with only two sons (Mani Iyer and a younger brother) and two daughters surviving into adulthood. Sesham Bhagavatar was a vocalist in the Harikatha troupe of Mukkai Sivaramakrishna Bhagavatar, a famous exponent of the art form. Mani was christened Ramaswami at birth— after his grandfather who was a school teacher besides being a good singer.

Destined as it seemed Mani Iyer was to acquire fame in the field of percussion, the forces that control fates could not have selected a better place for his birth. Tiruvilvamala, a village on the southern side of the Bharatapuzha river, was well known for its Panchavadyam performers. 'Maddalam' Venkicchian and Konthai were famed practitioners of the percussive arts. Venkicchian was, in particular, greatly celebrated, receiving awards from the Maharajas of Travancore and Cochin and the Zamorin of Calicut. Speaking of Mani's talents in later years, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar said that having absorbed the patterns of the maddalam and chendai in his infancy, he incorporated them in his own mridanga playing. Mani Iyer himself later said in an interview that from the age of two, the beats of the percussion instruments used in the neighbouring temple filled his being and entered his heart.

Accompanying Sivaramakrishna Bhagavatar meant frequent visits to Palghat for Sesham Bhagavatar and so



the family moved to Kalpathi when Mani was around three or four. Mother Anandambal noticed that it was percussion that attracted Mani as he invariably began jumping when his father sang and the intervals between the jumps were remarkably precise. He also had the habit of producing rhythmic patterns on any available surface. Father Sesham Bhagavatar began scouting around for a good teacher.

The first formal lessons were imparted by Chathapuram Subba Iyer, a well known mridanga vidwan of the area (see box, *The Guru-s of Mani Iyer*), when Mani was six. He was also sent to a conventional Malayalam school around this time. Within a few months, Mani made rapid progress on the mridanga and his talents were noticed by L.S. Viswanatha Iyer of Alappuzha, an amateur mridangist. Viswanatha Iyer, was known to be an authority on the finer aspects of laya and lent percussion support on the mridanga or khanjira whenever vidwans from the Madras Presidency came to perform at Palghat. He began guiding young Mani on performing in various kalapramana-s and for pallavi-s.

Mani's first performance opportunity came about when he was eight. Mukkai Sivaramakrishna Bhagavatar performed Harikatha at the Ganapati temple in Palghat with Sesham Bhagavatar and Viswanatha Iyer providing vocal and mridanga accompaniment respectively. The performance had hardly begun when Viswanatha Iyer beckoned Mani and, handing over the mridanga to him, stepped off the stage. This caused consternation among the assembled

The Guru-s of Mani Iyer

Chathapuram Subba Iyer was Mani Iyer's first guru. Born on December 28th 1894, Subba Iyer came from a strong musical tradition. His father Annaswamy Bhagavatar was a violinist and grandfather Appaswamy Bhagavatar was a vainika. Noticing his interest in percussion the father gave him the basic lessons and from an early age he began accompanying bhajan sessions where his father played the violin. In 1909 he apprenticed himself under Kalpathi Krishna Iyer, a mridanga vidwan of repute. Later he trained under Chokkanathapuram Aacha Bhagavatar who, apart from being a mridangist, also ran a drama troupe.

By 1914, Subba Iyer began accompanying Mukkai Sivaramakrishna Bhagavatar for his Harikatha-s. Gradually he became the accompanist of choice for all the visiting stars such as Ariyakudi and Maharajapuram, apart from Chembai whom he accompanied often. Ill health prevented Subba Iyer from seeking concert opportunities elsewhere and soon he also began training many disciples, among whom was Mani Iyer. Others included T.S. Vilvadi Iyer who shone as a ghata vidwan. Subba Iyer passed away on 17th June 1961. A road in Palghat is named after him.

Not much is known about **L.S. Viswanatha Iyer**, one of Mani Iyer' guru-s, except that he was of affluent means, and that music was central to his existence. He is said to have accompanied many prominent artists who visited the area.

Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer was the third and perhaps most important influence on Mani Iyer as far as the mridanga was concerned. Sruti has devoted a full issue to him (*Sruti* 126). He was also influential in getting Mani Iyer to savour the culture and lifestyle of Tanjavur of which the latter was to become a lifelong admirer.

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audience which felt that a mere stripling could not handle the task. But Viswanatha Iyer remained firm and signalled to Mani to continue. The performance continued and within a few minutes the audience realised that it was witnessing a genius at play. At the end of the performance young Mani was greatly applauded and he was soon much in demand as an accompanist of Harikatha artists. Among the artists was a woman performer— Kochammal, very popular in the area (see *The Cart of Kochammal*). Soon his performance opportunities increased to such an extent that conventional schooling had to be given up. He also played the mridanga for music concerts, with Palghat Rama Bhagavatar among the first musicians he accompanied.

When Mani was nine, he was asked to accompany Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar. As is often the case, the window of opportunity opened when the scheduled accompanist did not come and Mani was asked to stand in. Chembai, who had had his eye on Mani for quite some time, decided to make him his regular accompanist from then on. The singer, as was the case for most of his life, was in the midst of a busy concert schedule and Mani began travelling with him to various parts of South India. By age twelve he had also accompanied Chembai on a concert tour to Calcutta. During these years Mani was clearly Chembai's protégé and while he did not lack talent, he in many ways owed his initial success to Chembai, then a very popular star. Yet another popular artist who began using Mani as his accompanist was the flautist Palladam Sanjeeva Rao. Through Sanjeeva Rao and Chembai, Mani made the acquaintance of eminent violinists Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer and Karur Chinnaswami Iyer. He began frequently accompanying these musicians and travelling with them to various concert locations. The association was fruitful not only musically but also in learning the ways of the world (see *Bringing up Mani*).

It was Sesham Bhagavatar's dearest wish that Mani be trained by a mridangist of the Tanjavur tradition. Once when he and Mani were both accompanying Mukkai Sivaramakrishna Bhagavatar on a Harikatha tour of Tiruchirapalli, Sesham Bhagavatar decided to approach Mylatoor Swami Iyer, a reputed mridanga vidwan then residing in Tanjavur. Hiring a bullock cart, father and son set off for Tanjavur and arriving there, began asking for the residence of Swami Iyer. The Anjaneyaswami Utsavam outside the Prasanna Venkateswara Swami shrine in Tanjavur (see 256 for further details on this festival) was in progress and Swami Iyer was playing the mridanga for a performance there. Entering into conversation with a neighbour, Sesham Bhagavatar enquired about

The cart of Kochammal

Contrary to popular belief, D.K. Pattammal was not the first woman artist that Mani Iyer accompanied. Early in his career he had accompanied Kochammal, a popular Harikatha artist of the Palghat region. He also accompanied Chembai's disciple Manku Tambiratti of the Cochin Royal family.

The first invitation to accompany Kochammal was almost like something out of Dumas. One evening, shortly after his debut at Sivaramakrishna Bhagavatar's Harikatha, Mani was out playing by the riverside when a



bullock cart drew up outside his house. The driver asked for the young lad who had recently begun playing the mridanga and said that he was urgently needed at Noorani, a neighbouring village, for a Harikatha performance. Mani's father went and fetched him and sent him off with the mridanga (Those were innocent times.

Would any parent send off his or her child that way today?). Mani returned late at night clutching three rupees which was his fee for accompanying Kochammal.

The next evening Mani was playing once again when the bullock cart arrived. The story repeated itself and he returned once again with three rupees. On the third day, Mani was not allowed to go and play by the riverside, so sure was everyone that the cart would appear again and sure enough it did. This was to continue for seven more days. Recalling the incident later in life, Mani Iyer was to remark that not once did the organisers ever tell him that he would be required the next day but simply took his availability for granted.

Kochammal was evidently a popular recording artist. The shortlived Broadcast label of the Surajmal Lallubhai Mehta family released some of her discs. ■

Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy, Palghat Mani and Erode Viswanatha Iyer (violin) in a photo published in an advertisement for Broadcast records in *Swadesamitran* (1936)



Bringing up Mani

Given that he was travelling with elder vidwans most of the time, Mani appears to have had his lessons in department, worldly matters and finance from them rather than his own parents.

One of his early concert assignments was to accompany Palladam Sanjeeva Rao at a wedding concert in Kallidaikurichi. Karur Chinnaswami Iyer was the violinist. The concert began at 10 pm and continued till 3 am. Boarding the train at 6 am Mani fell into a deep sleep leaving the two seniors to their talk. When the train reached Madurai at around 10.30 am, Mani woke up to find that his wallet containing the 75 rupees he had been paid was missing. He began a frantic search for it. The two vidwans gave him some time to wallow in his own misery before returning the wallet to him with the admonition that he ought never to be so careless as to keep it in the open while sleeping.

Mani could also take liberties with them. Once, he and Chinnaswami Iyer were staying as guests of a Mudaliar in Triplicane, Madras. Chinnaswami Iyer gave an informal performance in the evening during which he played several raga-s asking Mani to identify them. When it came to Reetigaula, Mani could not recollect the name though he could cite several songs in the raga. Chinnaswami Iyer made fun of his ignorance and the assembled coterie laughed. Stung to the quick Mani asked Chinnaswami Iyer if he could answer questions on tala and laya vyavahara. Iyer however passed lightly over the matter and the incident ended with that. Mani was to always have a special place in his heart and he even taught the youngster several songs.

Ariyakudi was not one to advise or admonish, but Mani learnt several aspects from him simply by observation. 'Gauravam' or dignity as a musician was paramount to Ariyakudi, and Mani was also to follow the dictum till the end of his life. From Chembai he possibly learnt the art of encouraging deserving youngsters, for despite being a senior vidwan he never hesitated to accompany juniors and also to advise them when necessary.

the residential address of Mylatoor Swami Iyer. The respondent, his curiosity aroused by the presence of the mridanga amidst the baggage, asked them who they were and why they were enquiring about Swami Iyer. Once Sesham Bhagavatar explained, the gentleman asked father and son to spend the night at his home, assuring them that he would escort them to Swami Iyer the next morning.

Only on reaching their host's residence did they realise that he was none other than Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer, the most famous exponent after Narayanaswami Appa, of the Tanjavur style. Dinner concluded, Vaidyanatha Iyer asked Mani to play on the mridanga and made some corrections to his fingering technique. Early next morning, when he asked Mani to perform again, Vaidyanatha Iyer was amazed to see that the boy had managed to absorb all that he had been taught the previous evening. He brought an expensive brocade shawl from his cupboard and wrapped it around Mani's shoulders. The maestro was overcome by a great desire to make the lad his own student. All ideas of approaching Swami Iyer were given up and Mani began his tutelage under Vaidyanatha Iyer (see photo).

Gurukulavasam under Vaidyanatha

Iyer was not of the conventional household chores-ridden variety. Iyer and his wife Meenakshi were childless and so looked upon the many disciples at home as their own sons and lavished affection on them. Classes were conducted regularly and what was more important, the students were encouraged to pursue their careers as percussionists even as they learnt. This was particularly useful for Mani who was already a well known accompanist. The guru had a fertile mind, forever working out new rhythmic phrases, and in Mani he found the ideal medium for performing them. By

dedicated training he managed to get him to absorb all that he knew. It was the beginning of a great relationship that lasted till Vaidyanatha Iyer's death in 1947.

During these years, Mani continued to accompany Sanjeeva Rao and Chembai on most of their concert performances. Travelling for the first time to Madras in 1925, Mani accompanied Chembai and stayed at Karur Chinnaswami Iyer's residence on Big Street, Triplicane. The most important concert in that tour was at the Jagannatha Bhakta Sabha (JBS), Egmore, managed by the redoubtable Muthanna or Tiruvenkatachiar, son of the eminent lawyer Rao Bahadur



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T. Rangachariar. The JBS was a tough environment in which very few shone and in order to assuage the fears of the organisers that the young lad might prove a failure, Chembai had brought a standby mridangist as well. Mani however was at his best. In the audience was Jalatarangam Ramaniah Chetty, the chit fund businessman of George Town, protector and patron to many musicians ranging from Veena Dhanammal to Palani Subramania Pillai. At the end of the performance, Chetty stood up and rather unusually for him, made a speech praising “Palghat Mani” and presented him with a gold medal.

Performing for Chembai also brought Mani into contact with the trio of Pillais— Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy, Kumbakonam Azhagianambi and Malaikottai Govindaswamy— all of whom had once been instrumental in bringing Chembai to the fore, largely as an alternative to Naina Pillai, whom they looked upon as an upstart from Kancheepuram. Later they made their peace with Naina and became his accompanists as well. It was through them that Mani became an accompanist to Naina Pillai, at the age of 14. The first opportunity came about at the famed 100 pillared hall at the Rock Fort in Tiruchi. Naina decided to test the lad and embarked on a fairly complicated pallavi, all the while hiding the tala under his angavastram. Mani, then as later a very determined person, simply stopped playing and refused to resume till the tala was revealed. F.G. Natesa Iyer, the arts personality who was in the audience, gently chided Naina for his behaviour and asked him to reveal the tala. Naina Pillai did and Mani joined in, making the concert a great success. Naina Pillai was impressed.

A bigger challenge lay ahead with Iluppoor Panjami

(Panchapakesa) Pillai the tavil and khanjira vidwan, when he accompanied Chembai at a concert in Salem. Panjami Pillai took his seat at the place usually marked for the mridanga artist and refused to get up. Mani too would not give in and preferred to remain standing. The crowd, rather partial to Panjami Pillai, began heckling Mani and someone even snatched his mridanga away. Mani was in tears but did not give in. Chembai then decided to intervene, and comforting Mani, asked him to sit by his side for the performance. The mridanga was brought back and the concert began. Later Iluppoor Panjami confessed to Kuttalam Sivavadivelu Pillai that Mani was no ordinary performer and was any day eligible to the rightful seat of the mridangist. In fact from the very next concert Panjami Pillai moved to the spot earmarked for the kanjira player. The incident however left a lasting impression on Mani, who till the end of his life, would insist on a proper pecking order when artists filed in on stage. With a fussiness akin to Victorians going in to dinner in a stately British home, he would insist on the main performer going in first, followed by the violinist. He would then enter with the other percussionists and the tambura artist behind them.

The introduction to Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai too was not harmonious (see *Standing up to Pillai*). Pillai, after the first performance, for reasons unknown, refused every concert opportunity with Mani, for over two years. Chembai had to make peace here as well. Later Pillai and Mani were to become exceedingly close, with Pillai playing the khanjira for many performances in which Mani wielded the drum. According to veteran woman mridangist Tirugokarnam Ranganayaki, Pillai even went

Standing up to Pillai

The first meeting with Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai was fiery to say the least. Pillai, always an awe inspiring personality, could make himself scary on occasion and decided to do just that to intimidate Mani. The concert was by Chembai with Mani wielding the mridanga and Pillai the khanjira.

When the turn came for the tani, at the end of the RTP suite, Mani played his initial phrases and gave way to Pillai who put up an awe inspiring performance. Then, unexpectedly he also went on to play the teermanam and coming to the point of take off simply said “Pallavi” in a loud voice thereby telling Chembai to sing it. As far as Pillai was concerned the tani was over.

Mani was not to give in. Barely had Chembai sung the line when he launched into a detailed tani on the mridanga and like Pillai, played the teermanam and announced “Pallavi”! Chembai much amused, sang the line once again.

Pillai, not to be outdone, now launched into yet another display of virtuosity ending with a roar indicating that the pallavi ought to be sung. Chembai sang it, only to have Mani begin on the mridanga.

This went on for two or three rounds with the laya fascinated audience lapping it all up. Chembai brought it to a close by laughingly telling both the artists that he was enjoying himself and as far as he was concerned they could go on forever and he would sing the pallavi line as many times as they wanted him to.

It was a head on collision, but over the years, the relationship ripened into genuine affection and respect.

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Mani participating in unchavritti

to the extent of telling Palani Muthiah Pillai, that his son (Palani Subramania Pillai) and Mani were the only two mridangists who were not cowed by his khanjira playing. Mani too greatly respected Pillai's virtuosity and benefited from his association, gaining great insights into the intricacies of laya.

Given the rapidity with which he was being accepted in the higher echelons of the performing circle, Mani soon became an exceedingly busy concert artist. In fact, so tight was his schedule that it would not be wrong to say that his gurukulavasam was practically over within two years of his joining Vaidyanatha Iyer. The guru and he met only rarely, and for short intervals at that, something that both regretted. The relationship however remained as close as ever, with Vaidyanatha Iyer literally waiting for the occasions when Mani would come to Tanjavur. On such days if the train was late, he would think nothing of going to the station in his anxiety. Mani would regale him with accounts of all that happened during his concert tour. More important, they would discuss the rhythms and patterns that had been performed, debate over the immense possibilities that lay ahead and plan new techniques.

Chembai was slated to sing at the All India Music Conference held

in Madras in December 1927. He insisted that Mani be enlisted as his accompanist, something that the organisers were most reluctant to do. They relented only when Chembai threatened a boycott. The published list of participants in the conference that saw the birth of the Music Academy includes "Mani, Palghat".

In the few days Mani had between concerts, he divided his time between Tanjavur and his native Palghat. At home he was happiest among friends and performing on the mridanga continuously. The practice sessions would go on for seven to eight hours

at a stretch and soon the neighbours objected to the noise, thereby forcing Mani to shift to the riverbank. Mani also acquired his earliest disciples at this time, one of them being Kalpathi Ramanathan, who was a regular accompanist for M.S. Subbulakshmi for many years. Interestingly some of his disciples were elder to him.

Mani invariably played the mridanga at the bhajan sessions at the famous Bhajanai Mandapam at Kalpathi. If it was the month of Margazhi (December/January) he would think nothing of strapping the mridanga to himself

With his favourite 'companion'



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and walking along with the bhajan group. In his view, expressed in later years, such bhajan sessions provided the best learning and practice opportunities for any aspiring percussionist.

By the mid 1920s, Mani was also regularly accompanying Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. The numero uno and Mani had met in 1924 at the Double Mall Road residence of Ratnachalam Iyer, a great patron of Tiruchirapalli. They had been introduced to each other by Palladam Sanjeeva Rao. Mani who heard Ariyakudi hum a snatch of Todi that very morning in an adjoining room, had been itching to be introduced. It was veneration at first sight for him, reciprocated by affection on the part of Ariyakudi. A grihapravesam concert soon followed. The concert was a success, but Mani found Ariyakudi's kalapramana extremely tricky. It took him two or three more concerts before he mastered Ariyakudi's technique. It was the beginning of a great relationship and from then on, it was Mani all the way, when it came to Ariyakudi's choice of percussionist. Not everyone was happy. Dakshinamurthi Pillai initially complained about it and so too did Azhagianambi Pillai. Some attributed the caste factor to the choice. Others felt it was a very smart career move made by Mani to hitch himself to the topmost performer. Some who did not care much for the Ariyakudi style puzzled over what Mani could see in his music. But the detractors could do nothing about it.

Ariyakudi (vocal), T.N. Krishnan (violin), Mani (mridanga) and Madurai N. Krishnan (tambura)



Papa Venkataramiah, Ariyakudi, Mani with son Rajaram

The Ariyakudi-Mani duo, becoming a trio whenever Papa (K.S. Venkataramiah) was the violinist, was an enduring and successful one. Mani's love for Ariyakudi's music bordered on the obsessive and whenever he came to Madras he would visit Saraswathi Stores on Mount Road and listen to all the discs of the maestro. He would return home and then practice on the mridanga as though he was playing for those songs. Soon he knew all the

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sangati-s and their sequences by heart, so much so that in later years if Ariyakudi forgot one, he simply had to look at Mani to remember it.

Mani started accompanying other musicians by the time he was 15. The list included Musiri Subramania Iyer, Budalur Krishnamurthy Sastrigal and Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer. By the mid 1930s it became clear to one and all, including the main artist, that to be accompanied by Mani was a privilege, that he in more ways than one contributed to the success of the concert. The time had come to refer to him respectfully as Palghat Mani Iyer. He had reached such a stature that up-and-coming musicians called on him and requested him to be their accompanist in concerts. Thus it was that in the mid 1930s GNB came to Palghat and after a performance met him and mooted the idea of his playing the mridanga at some of his (GNB's) concerts. The relationship that began then was to blossom into an extremely close friendship in later years. Mani Iyer also began accompanying Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer around this time.

He had started accompanying Madurai Mani Iyer a few years earlier. It happened when the latter came to Chembai village to perform at the Utsavam that Vaidyanatha Bhagavata organised at the Parthasarathy Temple. Guru L.S. Viswanatha Iyer had told his disciple to accompany a talented young namesake from Madurai at his concert. Rushing back in a car after a kutcheri in Erode, Mani



Mani, T.K. Jayarama Iyer and Musiri in the old Music Academy building in 1955

Mani with Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer



Mani with GNB, Prof. R. Srinivasan (seated near the tambura) and others in Tiruvananthapuram



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Madurai Mani Iyer, Papa Venkataramiah and Mani

Iyer found that Madurai Mani Iyer's performance had already begun with L.S. Viswanatha Iyer accompanying him. Spotting the sishya in the audience, the guru made way for him, and Palghat Mani accompanied Madurai Mani from then on. In later years, Mani was to recall that Madurai Mani Iyer sang for five and a half hours that evening and that the concert was a great success. He also always took pride in stating the fact that both he and Madurai Mani Iyer were born in the same year.

Yet another sensation he started accompanying in the 1930s was Mali who was fast making a name as a flautist. Even Mani Iyer's guru was accompanying him. For Mani Iyer and Flute Mali this was the beginning of a mutual admiration society, with some reservations on both sides, which lasted till Mani Iyer's demise.

The Alathur Brothers were a duo that Mani Iyer met through mutual friend and acquaintance Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai around this time. However, with Alathur Venkatesa Iyer, the father of Sivasubramania Iyer and guru to both, watching over their concert career, it was Palani Subramania Pillai who was their accompanist at all times. The vyavahara-laden singing style of the Brothers must have been tempting to Mani Iyer, but he did not accompany them then. However his turn would come.

So many concerts meant a hectic travelling schedule. Incredible as it may seem today, Mani Iyer was quite comfortable travelling all by himself by the age of 15 to places as far away as Madras, though there were occasions when he had problems (see *Travelling Alone*). It also brought about strain and at least one serious illness

Travelling alone

If a film were ever to be made on Mani Iyer's childhood, 'Travelling Alone' would be a good title rather like the 'Home Alone' series where a young boy is left to fend for himself. Mani, as has been mentioned in the main story, had become quite a veteran when it came to travelling by train very early in his career and yet his extreme youth brought problems.

Once, he had come to Madras to accompany Chembai and had to return by himself to Palghat. Coming to the Central Station he tried to purchase a ticket only to find the clerk becoming suspicious that this young boy had run away from home. Mani in his defence said that he had come to Madras for a concert and showed his mridanga as proof. The clerk was sceptical and asked Mani as to whom he had accompanied. When informed that it was Chembai the clerk burst out laughing for he could not believe that a boy of 14 could accompany the great Chembai. He then asked as to how much Mani was paid and when told 25 rupees he shook his head in disbelief, for none but the senior accompanists got that kind of money. He was debating on whether to call in the police when the train solved Mani's problems by thundering into the station. Mani, apprehensive about missing it promptly burst into tears and the clerk, softened by this, gave him the ticket and he managed to board the train.

On yet another occasion, this time in Palghat, Mani was at the station to catch a train to Devakottai where he was scheduled to accompany Ariyakudi at a concert. The village drunk rolled up and demanded to know where young Mani was going. On coming to know that he was to accompany the maestro, the drunk, for reasons best known to himself (or perhaps not known) snatched away Mani's mridanga and refused to return it unless he sang *Dinamani vamsa* in the way Ariyakudi did. Mani had no choice. With the train already on the platform, he sang the song in two minutes flat, grabbed his mridanga and got into the train just as it began moving.

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(see *The Brush with Typhoid*). A flourishing career also meant extensive correspondence in Tamil, given that most sabha-s and a large part of the musicloving public were in Tamil speaking country. Mani Iyer, unfortunately, could write only in Malayalam and he depended on some of his close friends studying at the Victoria College, Palghat, for help in replying to the letters. One of them was P.G. Krishnamurthy who attended to most of Mani Iyer's correspondence and also advised him extensively on money matters. He was a staunch Gandhian who persuaded Mani Iyer to wear khadi. Gradually he also got Mani Iyer to learn Tamil and become independent in his correspondence.

By the mid 1930s, Mani Iyer was charging 100 rupees per performance and was paying income tax. With the son earning well and making a name for himself in his career, Mani Iyer's parents decided to get him married. The marriage to Thangam, a girl from Palghat in 1935, was not successful. His unhappiness was clear to guru Vaidyanatha Iyer, who found a suitable match for him in Balambal, daughter of H. Venkatarama Iyer, a railway official belonging to Tanjavur in 1936. This was a successful marriage and Mani Iyer was to have three sons and two daughters, Rajamani, Tyagarajan, Lakshmi, Lalitha and Rajaram, through her. A spirited personality, Balam stood the stresses and strains of being married to a performing artist whose only love in life was the mridanga. Contrary to all expectations, Mani Iyer did not abandon Thangam and ensured that she lacked nothing through life. Later she was, and continues to be, taken good care of by his children through Balam.

The 1930s saw many disciples apprenticing themselves under Mani Iyer. One of them was a 11-year old singer, later to become well known as K.V. Narayanaswamy

With wife Balambal



The brush with typhoid

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

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

(KVN). Mani Iyer's main brief was to strengthen him in laya, which he did with the dedication that he brought to any activity in life. KVN was to greatly benefit from this tutelage and acknowledge later that Mani Iyer was more like a loving parent than a guru. When Mani Iyer felt that KVN had acquired sufficient maturity in music, he approached Ariyakudi to take on the task of leading him forward. In 1942 Ariyakudi made KVN his disciple.

With son Rajamani





Alathur Brothers (vocal), T.N. Krishnan (violin) and Mani Iyer (mridanga)

Rather uniquely, tutelage under Mani Iyer never ceased, for whenever Ariyakudi had Mani Iyer accompanying him on the mridanga and KVN providing vocal support, which was almost always the case, the mridanga maestro would keep signalling to KVN to notice some nuance or the other in Ariyakudi's music. More important, being one of KVN's guru-s did not prevent Mani Iyer from accepting concert engagements accompanying his disciple. KVN was to greatly benefit from all this.

By 1940 Mani Iyer's concert schedule was so tightly packed that Chembai made up his mind to fashion another top ranking mridangist. The pushy Kolar Rajammal had been repeatedly championing the cause of her spouse Palani Subramania Pillai. Not that Chembai was unaware of his talents, for Palani had accompanied and impressed him as far back as 1926. Chembai sent for Palani and after getting him to give up some of his extremely laya laden practices, signed him on for several concert engagements at a stretch. It was manna in the wilderness for Palani, a lefthander, whose proclivity to heavy calculations had resulted in his being discriminated against. Chembai repeated what he had done for Mani Iyer with Palani, and by 1942 Subramania Pillai was a star on the percussion front. Around the same time however, the Alathur Brothers

fell out with Palani owing to a personal disagreement between Sivasubramania Iyer and the percussionist. The duo approached Mani Iyer who accepted the offer with alacrity. However this was not to Venkatesa Iyer's liking and he threatened a hunger strike if peace was not restored with Palani. Amends were made, but Palani had to share the honours of accompanying the Brothers with Mani Iyer thereafter.

In 1942, Mani Iyer was made Asthana Vidwan of the Travancore Court. He received the honour the same year as did many seniors such as Umayalpuram Viswanatha Iyer, Musiri Subramania Iyer and Papa K.S. Venkataramiah. It was perhaps the earliest major honour that he received and was the forerunner of many more, for Mani Iyer, uniquely in Carnatic music, became one of the most decorated and honoured percussionists. The same year he decided to move his establishment from Palghat to Madras city. Quietly confident as he always was about his talent, he must have had no doubts in his mind of a long and successful career ahead.

[Photos courtesy Palghat Mani Iyer's family]

(to be concluded)

Palghat T.S. Mani Iyer - II

(1912-1981)

Sriram.V

The 1940s were when the Mani Iyer style of playing for the song really crystallised. As he was a man of few words he never explained what made him perfect and evolve his own style of percussion. But this he did and created a unique Mani Iyer bani out of it. To him the success of a concert was paramount, and with that end in mind, he devoted hours of study to every aspect of the mridanga (see article titled *R&D on a mammoth scale*) and also the playing styles. He realised that the days of elaborate kanakku-s and rhythmic patterns were fast fading away and that the audience, largely influenced by the Ariyakudi format, had come to see melody as supreme. He fashioned his style of percussion accordingly, aiding and abetting the main performer without losing his individual identity.

Perhaps he inadvertently created a larger than life identity for himself. For, soon it became apparent to all the leading musicians that the presence of Mani Iyer could make all the difference to their concerts. The master of the pause, he knew when to be silent, when to embellish with a few strokes and when to let loose a shower of rhythm. To him, alignment to pitch was paramount (*meettu chaapu suddham*) and this greatly enhanced performances. Sensitivity to the presentation of songs was yet another feature and with his knowledge of vocal music as well, he was able to support the main artist sangati by sangati, swara for swara, creating the illusion of the mridanga singing. Ariyakudi once remarked that Mani Iyer was not playing for him but singing along with him. Numerous anecdotes abound as to how he lifted the performances of several vocalists from the ordinary to the superlative through his support. Complete concentration on stage with no recognition of ambient activity was yet another Mani Iyer feature. He once claimed, in a rare conversational mood, that when

he sat on the stage, it was as though a cinema screen opened in his mind and there he could see what sangati, niraval phrase or swara the main performer was going to attempt next. He was always able to anticipate and provide the necessary support. No wonder a co-professional compared him to Vali, the legendary ruler of Kishkinda who had the power to usurp half the strength of his opponent in battle.



Mani Iyer the professional crystallized at the same time. He had certain principles from which he never budged throughout his career. Once he accepted an engagement, he would never cancel it, no matter what pressure was brought to bear on him to accompany another artist on the same day. This would hold good even if the second party offered a higher remuneration. Secondly, he always firmly believed that concert remuneration ought to be received on stage immediately after the performance, while the hands were still perspiring. He disliked speeches during concerts

and never understood it when people came up to him and insisted on holding his hands and proclaiming his wizardry. To him it was just a God-given talent which he had assiduously cultivated. In public he preferred to let his mridanga do all the speaking.

In 1943, when T. Chowdiah decided to produce the film 'Vani' with himself as the hero, he roped in Chembai to sing in a song sequence with Chowdiah on the violin and Mani Iyer on

Made for the Mridanga

the mridanga. That was Mani Iyer's sole appearance in cinema. The movie bombed, resulting in a big loss for Chowdiah. Chembai, who demanded and received Rs. 10,000 for the film, refused to touch 'cinema tainted money' and instead got Chowdiah to make a 'golaka' (gold choker) for Parthasarathy Swami, the presiding deity, in

his village. It is not known how much Mani Iyer received, but he certainly was never interested in the world of films and indeed, in later life, was to remain largely ignorant of it (see *A send off by Sivaji*).

In 1947, Mani Iyer's guru, his beloved 'Vaitha Anna' passed away. He felt the loss keenly but he was never given to emotional excesses. He gave up chewing tobacco at once, for his happiest hours had been spent discussing his various concert successes with his mentor, with both of them seated on a swing, chewing tobacco in a leisurely fashion. His guru was always in his thoughts. Whenever he came up with a new rhythmic pattern he would invariably say that, had Vaitha Anna been around, he would have been very pleased. Vaidyanatha Iyer's wife Meenakshi maintained close contact with Mani Iyer and his wife and was often an honoured house guest till the end of her life.

The 1940s saw Mani Iyer, living in Madras, take to a lavish lifestyle. It helped that he was earning enormous amounts by the standards of those days. His clothes made by Dorai of Tiruchi were sent to Tanjavur to be laundered by Singaram, an expert 'dhobi', and the kitchen stacked silver vessels. He wore garments made from the finest khadi available. Mani Iyer and lawyer Krishnaswami Reddy,

later Judge of the Madras High Court, shared the same source for the material. Mani Iyer repeatedly changed cars and a disciple was always in charge of washing them ever so often, so that not a speck of dust remained on them. Home was an ever changing address for he, like GNB, often moved house and the choice of residence was invariably a bungalow. The household, always in a state of flux, needed the redoubtable Balam, a retinue of disciples and a factotum or two to bring about order. Mani Iyer formed many lasting friendships during this period.

GNB and the Alathur Brothers (Sivasubramania Iyer in particular) were perhaps his closest friends professionally. Among music lovers, he greatly cherished his friendships with C.K. Venkatanarasimhan (Babu Sir), the eminent lawyer of Pelathope, Mylapore, and longtime Secretary of the Music Academy; Pappasami Iyengar, the well known lawyer of Aleppey (father of Aleppey Venkatesan); and above all with Kittappa, the son of Gopalaswami Iyer, the proprietor of Ananda Lodge in Tanjavur (see *Atelier at Ananda Lodge*). With these people he really opened up and shared his innermost thoughts. Babu Sir's neighbours remember the voices of musicians floating from his residence in the stillness of the night, the animated

A send off by Sivaji

❖ Mani Iyer was largely ignorant of the movie world. But he had many fans in that galaxy as well. Movie mogul S.S. Vasan was one. His daughter's wedding in 1950 was an event that the world wondered at and even now speaks of with awe. Concerts and dance performances were held everyday for a week and on the 20th May, Mani Iyer performed at the newly acquired Gemini House (formerly the Sivaganga House) on Edward Elliotts Road, accompanying Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai.

In 1956, Vasan celebrated the wedding of his son. A pandal was put up at the Music Academy premises, the whole plot being then vacant, for 'Sweet Home' had been demolished and the new auditorium had not yet come up. Mani Iyer performed again this time though it is not clear whom he accompanied.

❖ T.S. Baliah was a great fan of Palani Subramania Pillai and Mani Iyer. For a wedding in his family, Baliah called on Mani Iyer who was staying at the Woodlands Hotel in Royapettah and requested him to perform on the occasion. As Mani Iyer had a performance in Madurai the day after the wedding, he was reluctant to accept the offer. But Karukurichi Arunachalam who was present persuaded him. It was agreed that Mani Iyer would be taken in Baliah's car to Tiruchi from where he could board a train to Madurai.

The concert was by Madurai Mani Iyer. Palani Subramania Pillai played the khanjira and the performance was superb. At the end of the performance, Mani Iyer was seen off by Sivaji Ganesan. The star, on coming to know that Baliah's chauffeur's name was Lakshmanan asked him to take Mani Iyer as carefully as Valmiki's Lakshmanan had escorted Rama to the forest and elsewhere. Mani Iyer was pleased by this statement but later asked people who the young man was!

In the car, Mani Iyer opened the cover containing his remuneration and was surprised to find that it contained much more than he had asked for. Later he tried to persuade Baliah to take back the extra amount.

Meeting Madurai Mani Iyer a few days after the concert, Palani Subramania Pillai remarked that the concert was still fresh in his mind and that one of the reasons for its success had been Palghat Mani Iyer. He then made the famous comment comparing Mani Iyer to Vali.

Atelier at Ananda Lodge

To most musicians of yesteryear, Tanjavur was synonymous with Ananda Lodge and its proprietor Gopaldaswami Iyer. Beginning with the running of the station canteen in Mayavaram (present Mayiladuturai), Gopaldaswami Iyer had moved up the ladder to found and run the popular Ananda Lodge in Tanjavur. In his Mayavaram days he had become close to musicians such as Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai and Gottuvadyam Sakharama Rao. He had supported S.S. Vasam and his mother during their initial days of struggle and it was something that the movie mogul and proprietor of *Ananda Vikatan* never forgot.

Ananda Lodge, founded the same year as Vasam's *Ananda Vikatan*, was home to every musician who visited Tanjavur. It deserves a more detailed write up in *Sruti's* 'Sangeeta Sthalam' series. We will here confine our account only to Mani Iyer and his connection with the place. Kittappa, the son of Gopaldaswami Iyer formed an inseparable trio with GNB and Palghat Mani Iyer. And he wrote feelingly about this relationship in the 2003 Music Season supplement of *Dinamani Kadir*. This account is largely based on that write up.

Kittappa and Mani Iyer had so many common tastes and preferences that Dakshinamurthy Pillai referred to the former as Chinna ma-na-a. GNB and Mani Iyer would go at least once in two months to Tanjavur to have their hair cut at Velu's salon. Ananda Lodge had a regular team of masseurs to give musicians their oil massage, and both GNB and Mani Iyer would avail themselves of this service regularly. The trio also had common tastes in clothing— all three preferred a variety of khaddar known as Chicago muslin which came from Kakinada.

Of course, there were certain things that Mani Iyer did which Kittappa could not do. He did not play the mridanga. Once he accompanied GNB and Mani Iyer to Calcutta and, while they were travelling to Howrah station preparatory to their return, a debate on philosophy ensued between the three. A question arose as to who among the three could really shed all his wants and walk alone, and the test was that the person who claimed this should walk in a loin cloth along the railway platform. Mani Iyer alone accepted the challenge and did so. GNB and Kittappa could only watch in wonder.

Kittappa was an important source of jackfruit wood which Mani Iyer preferred for his mridanga-s. He would get it for Mani Iyer from Pattukottai and was to recall later with pride that at least a hundred mridanga-s of Mani Iyer's had been made with wood supplied by him. He also cut down two jackfruit trees that grew in his own backyard for use by Mani Iyer. Ananda Lodge had a large cupboard in which Mani Iyer stored his mridanga-s, each with a sticker indicating the name of the musician to whose pitch it had been set.

Mani Iyer had yet another reason for being fond of Ananda Lodge—the food there was prepared separately for each musician. He was served what he liked, perhaps just as mother made it.

discussions punctuated by laughter and music. Even then, Mani Iyer spoke little and preferred to listen. Like Akbar, he was largely unlettered and like the emperor perhaps, he too, by listening to great men, acquired wisdom.

Despite all this enjoyment, he remained at heart a responsible individual who had no vices and cared for his family (see article titled *The Householder*). He ensured that money was always available for Balam to run two households—in Palghat and in Madras. He cared for his parents, in particular his mother, who remained an invalid for a very long time. He was of course too busy to keep track of what his children were up to, but through periodic enquiries and spending what we today call quality time with them, he did ensure that they grew up to be responsible individuals. Perhaps the greater credit for that ought to go to his better half.

In the 1950s, Mani Iyer did an about turn in favour of extreme simplicity. His hairstyle changed to shorter than a

crew cut. Gone were the expensive perfumes and cars and silver vessels. Perhaps the only luxury he allowed himself was *eau de cologne*, which he applied on his head! It was as though he had decided to taste a life of luxury and, having satiated himself, swung the other way. In 1954, the family moved to Tanjavur, which was to be his place of residence for the next decade or so. Even there he managed to change houses two or three times. Tanjavur was for him, as it was for Palani Subramania Pillai, the source for mridanga-s and he perhaps made the move to be closer to the centre of production. His R&D efforts on the mridanga almost doubled here and assisting him in this were aachaari-s such as Narayanan and later Somu, and also tanners including a trio of brothers Shengol, Parland (actually Fernand) and Shetty, whose father Sevantiyan had been a first class supplier of leather for Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer.

Assisting him in all matters was Kitta Iyer, a schoolmaster in Tanjavur who became greatly attached to the Mani Iyer household. Kitta Iyer saw to the handling of domestic accounts, doled out money for purchases, saw to the



Palghat Mani Iyer receiving the President's Award (later called the Sangeet Natak Akademi award) from President of India Dr. Rajendra Prasad

Padma Bhushan by Post

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

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

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

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

children's education, handled Mani Iyer's laundry, attended to his correspondence and took care of his railway bookings. With all this, it was a wonder that he found any time to teach, but Rajaram, Mani Iyer's youngest son remembers that Kitta Iyer taught for a couple of hours everyday at a government school. Over the years, Kitta Iyer became increasingly powerful, sometimes even taking the liberty of cajoling Mani Iyer to accept an assignment with a junior musician. His hold was to last as long as Mani Iyer lived in Tanjavur. Later too, when Mani Iyer shifted to Madras, Kitta Iyer would frequently call on him. A man of discerning taste in music, Kitta Iyer was besotted with Mani Iyer's percussion.

A frequent guest was Madurai Srirangam Iyengar who regularly came over from Mannargudi. He offered to teach Mani Iyer's daughters and both began to train under him. Yet another source of music for the girls was K.V. Narayanaswamy who often visited Mani Iyer and stayed with him. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Mani Iyer did not deliberately exclude his children from music and indeed taught his eldest and youngest sons to play the mridanga. He genuinely wanted them all to be knowledgeable about and appreciate music. What he, however, did not do was force them into the field. He genuinely believed that, if they were passionate about it and if they had talent, they would come up on their own, just as he had done. He also encouraged them to acquire conventional education so that they could stand on their own feet. In many ways, he was ahead of his time in all this.

In 1952, the Government of India instituted the President's Awards (later the Sangeet Natak Akademi awards), with Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Karaikudi Sambasiva Iyer the first recipients. In 1956, Mani Iyer became the first percussion artist to receive it. A co-recipient that year was M.S. Subbulakshmi. Mani Iyer, who set very little store by awards of any sort, did not pay much attention to the announcement and it took the persuasive skills of all his children and well wishers to convince him about the award's significance and to get him to travel to Delhi to receive it. (Something similar happened in 1971 when he was given the Padma Bhushan— see *Padma Bhushan by Post*). A great party of admirers assembled at the Central Station to see him off and foremost among them was Palani Subramania Pillai, who came armed with a garland and a basket of fruits. A grand reception was also held in his honour at the Jagannatha Bhakta Sabha, Egmore, the place where he made his debut in Madras. Ariyakudi presided over the function.

Between 1955 and 1958, Mani Iyer also served as



The two Manis in concert : Madurai Mani, Lalgudi Jayaraman, Palghat Mani, Vembu Iyer (with tambura) and Tiruvengadu Jayaraman

Secretary of the Tyagabrahma Mahotsava Sabha, the Tiruvaiyaru-based body that conducts the annual function in the name of the saint composer. He had been involved closely with the aradhana even during the 'katchi' days, what with his mentor Ariyakudi being a pillar of the Chinna Katchi and Vaitha Anna a regular percussionist for both groups. After the unification he was a regular performer during the aradhana. However, in 1958, angered over several aspects, all of which he felt were not in keeping with the solemnity of a tribute to a saint, he resigned

from the committee. He took a backseat from then on (see article *Tussles and tiffs at Tiruvaiyaru*).

The 1940s to 60s were Mani Iyer's golden period professionally when, boosted by the presence of several stalwarts, he gave of his best. With most of his time spent touring the country on concert assignments, he was at home at best for four or five days in a month. He accompanied all the big names— Ariyakudi, Chembai, Maharajapuram, Musiri, Semmangudi, GNB, Madurai Mani Iyer and the Alathur Brothers. Ariyakudi of

Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, M.S. Gopalakrishnan & Palghat Mani



course led all the rest and over the years Mani Iyer's respect for him became devotion and finally an obsession. When in 1955, Iyengar decided to boycott the Music Academy in protest against M.S. Subbulakshmi being given greater prominence than himself, Mani Iyer followed suit. He also advised youngsters like Palghat Raghu and Lalgudi Jayaraman to do so. He even approached Palani Subramania Pillai over the matter. GNB, always a supporter of the Academy, however spoke to Palani and many of the juniors, persuading them to desist from confrontation with the Academy, but Mani Iyer remained firm. He returned to the Academy only in 1959 when Ariyakudi, at the request of Madurai Mani Iyer, relented and attended the Music Academy conference.

The discerning reader would notice the complete absence of women from this list, for Mani Iyer at that time had a policy of not accompanying them. Even T. Sadasivam's overtures from Kalki Gardens could not get him to change his mind (see *From Kochammai to Pattammai*).

“From Kochammai to Pattammai”

That at least was what Chembai said when Mani Iyer could not accompany him for a Music Academy performance in 1966 owing to his having been booked for Pattammal. But over the years, Mani Iyer, like many others including Palani Subramania Pillai, refused to accompany women in concerts. He, once again like other percussionists and violinists, did not refuse to accompany them in his early years, but took this stance only when his career had stabilised. In the early years he had, as we have seen (*Sruti* 270), accompanied women such as Kochammai and also Manku Tambiratti of the Cochin royal family.

In 1966 he softened his stance by playing for Pattammal and, in 1977, he voluntarily came forward to play for M.L. Vasanthakumari. Both associations were very fruitful in terms of the outstanding concerts they produced. T. Sadasivam was very keen that Mani Iyer should accompany M.S. Subbulakshmi and in the 1960s, when Mani Iyer had shifted back to Madras, many feelers were sent out to him. But Mani Iyer was wary of TS, though he had the greatest regard for MS. Once, at a public function, TS remarked to Mani Iyer that he had forgotten MS and himself, to which Mani Iyer replied that it was not true and that the couple was always in his thoughts. To which TS replied that it would be good if the public also came to know this!

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

Mani Iyer moved back to Madras in the early sixties. Again, he frequently changed residence, once renting a house in distant Chromepet. By 1962, the lights began to go out throughout the world of Carnatic Music. Palani was the first to pass away. His death was mourned by Mani Iyer as a loss to the field of percussion. Professional rivals, they had the greatest respect for each other. Whenever Palani and Rajammal called on the Mani Iyers, he, knowing their tastes, would have the finest betel leaves and tobacco ready for them. The sparring bouts on stage with Mani Iyer on the mridanga and Palani on the khanjira were often compared to the jousting of two tuskers— one from Palghat and the other from the Palani hills. Palani's presence often spurred Mani Iyer to greater heights.

1962 was also the year when close friend Papa K.S. Venkataramaiah announced his retirement and, unlike many after him, refused to return to stage performances except under extraordinary circumstances. Worse was to follow in 1965 when GNB passed on, closely followed by Alathur Sivasubramania Iyer. Both of them had been very close to Mani Iyer and though their physical decline was perceptible and their demise expected, Mani Iyer could not reconcile himself to the loss. He however rallied round to convince Alathur Srinivasa Iyer, the other half of the Alathur Brothers duo, who had resolved to give up a concert career, to return to the stage. Mani Iyer often accompanied him in later years but while the music was chaste, the original magic of the duo was missing.

By 1965, Ariyakudi's health too began to fail and he had difficulty in sitting down for performances and also needed to take breaks during the concerts. His concert engagements became fewer and Mani Iyer began to wonder if anyone of calibre would be left for him to accompany. There remained Chembai and Semmangudi, but both had several percussionists, not just Mani Iyer, as regular accompanists. Mali was another option and Mani Iyer, despite the several challenges that Mali's erratic behaviour posed, often claimed that no one gave work for his hands as Mali did. There was, of course, Madurai Mani, a good friend.

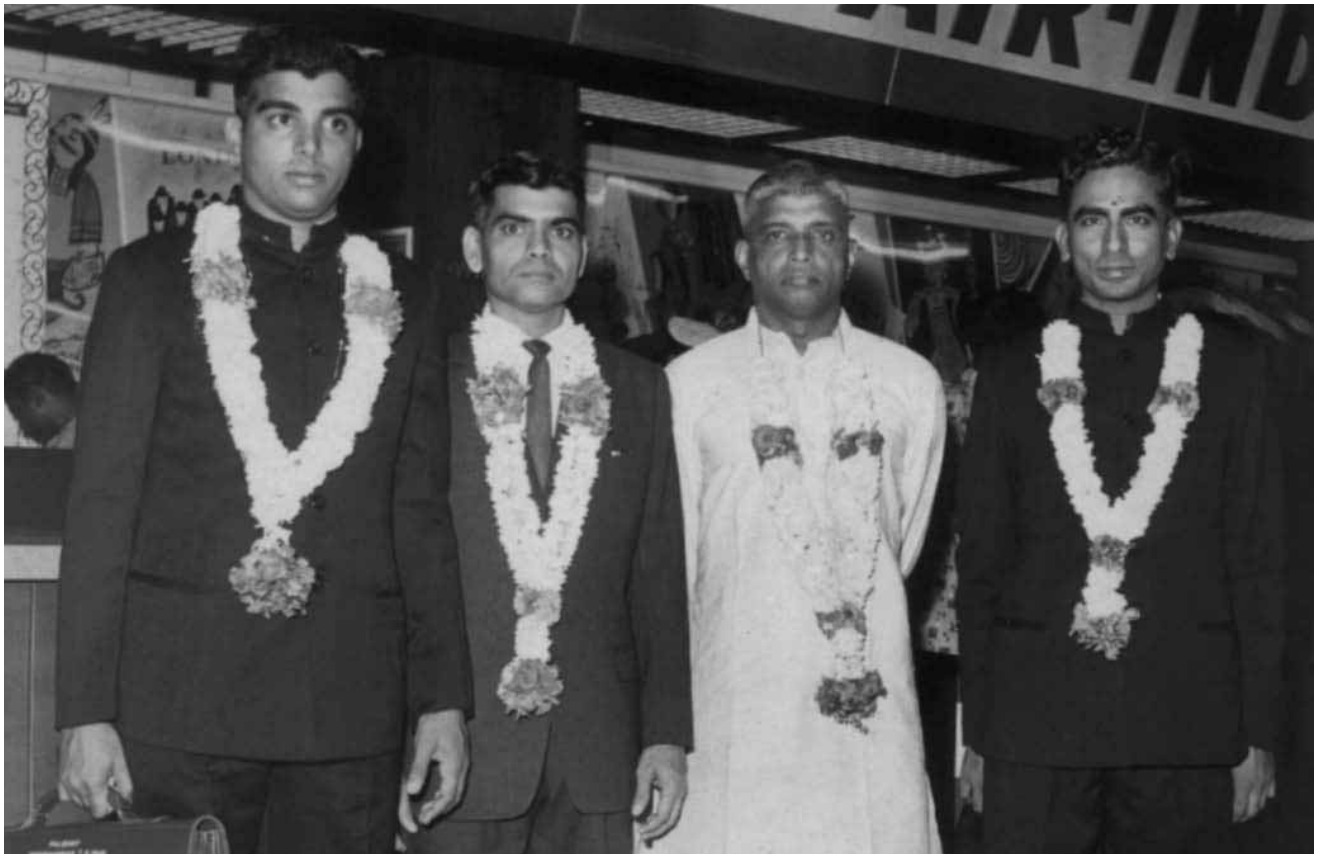
Happily, Mani Iyer had the satisfaction of seeing his protégé K.V. Narayanaswamy make it big on the concert platform. In 1965, Mani Iyer and his son Rajamani joined KVN and Lalgudi Jayaraman to perform at the Edinburgh music festival. It was Mani Iyer's first performance abroad and though he took a great liking to London and loved walking about Oxford Street, he was to remain uncomfortable with foreign travel. The presence of his son was a great comfort to him during the maiden voyage.

MAIN FEATURE



Flute Mali, T.N. Krishnan, Palghat Mani at Sri Krishna Gana Sabha in Chennai (1969)

En route to Edinburgh - at the Bombay airport : T.R. Rajamani, K.V. Narayanaswamy, Palghat Mani and Lalgudi Jayaraman



MAIN FEATURE

Around this time, he began to seriously reconsider his stance of not accompanying women. In a sense, he had made a beginning in 1962, when, he accompanied the Lalgudi Jayaraman - Srimathi Brahmanandam duo, possibly emulating Palani. This was a popular arrangement for a few years, with Mani Iyer and his elder son Rajamani providing double mridanga accompaniment. In 1965 however, following some serious introspection, he decided to accompany D.K. Pattammal. After all, had not Ariyakudi once referred to her as an ocean of music? Besides, she had a deep voice for a woman and was respected for her pallavi singing. Viewed traditionally, her music was as close to that of the male stalwarts as possible. He began to accompany her in 1966.

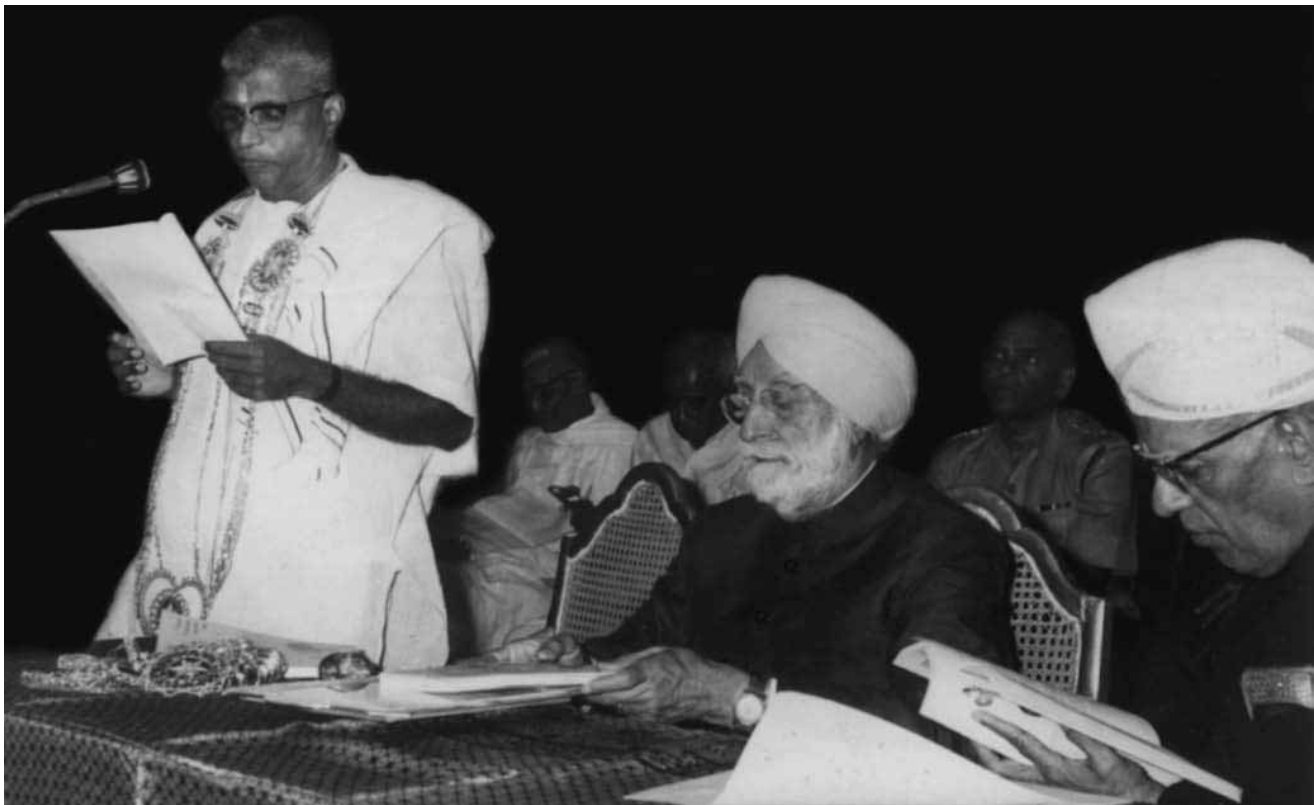
Not everyone was happy. When, in the same year, Mani Iyer's daughter Lalitha's betrothal to Pattammal's son Sivakumar was announced, many ascribed Mani Iyer's volte face to the singer becoming his sambandhi.

The decision to accompany Pattammal brought about a piquant situation in the December season of 1966. Mani Iyer was booked as Pattammal's percussionist, there was a clash of dates and he was unable to accompany Chembai. In his characteristic style, Chembai remarked,

“What began with Kochammai has come full circle with Pattammai” and went on to book Mani Iyer's son Rajamani instead. Mani's relationship with Chembai was affected by this misunderstanding, to be healed only in 1973 at the Shanmukhananda Sabha in Bombay. Many felt Chembai had overreacted.

1966 was also the year the Music Academy awarded Mani Iyer the title of Sangeeta Kalanidhi, the first time a percussionist was so recognised. The conference that year was inaugurated by Sardar Ujjal Singh, the Governor of the State and the Sadas was presided over by R. Venkataswami Naidu, a Coimbatore-based industrialist. In his speech at the inauguration, Mani Iyer was characteristically frank. He openly stated that he had stayed away from the Academy for a few years as he was not happy with the way it functioned. He had now changed his mind as he felt it was far better to work for a change from within its portals than without. He, like Alathur Sivasubramania Iyer a few years earlier, criticised the Academy's habit of consulting a few musicians while deciding the awarding of scholarships and jobs to youngsters. He also made a statement that the Academy, like Hanuman, did not know its own strength and had to be repeatedly reminded about it.

Palghat Mani presiding over the Music Conference in the presence of Governor Ujjal Singh and T.L. Venkatarama Iyer



Mani Iyer's 60th birthday

Mani Iyer was at his reclusive best when his 60th birthday came around in 1972. He made it clear to the members of his family that it was to be an exclusively private function with no outsiders being involved. He however desired the blessings of the Paramacharya of Kanchi; here again, he feared that if he mentioned the day and date, some of the other devotees in the Math would come to know of it and make it a public event. So he went with his family to where the sage was then camping and, while prostrating before him, simply stated that he had lived a life of 60 years without performing any rituals or worship and asked the sage to advise him on what he should do in future. The Paramacharya merely said that for Mani Iyer, playing the mridanga was his mode of worship and all he had to do was to continue it. Mani Iyer left the presence an eminently satisfied man. To his family however, he remarked humorously that the seer of Kanchi had known that he was good enough only to 'snatch' money from Sabha secretaries and had said as much in a diplomatic fashion!

The 60th birthday celebrations took place in Tanjavur. A few minutes prior to the tying of the mangalasootra around Balam's neck, Mani Iyer was thrilled to see a few functionaries from the Kanchi Math walking in. The seer had made enquiries about Mani Iyer's birth star and had arranged for prasadam and a shawl to be delivered at the right moment with his blessings. This was a gesture that Mani Iyer cherished for the rest of his life.



MS and Radha invoking the blessings of the Lord as Mani and wife Balam look on

Though he thought he had got away with it by celebrating the event in a hush hush manner, news did get about. C.V. Narasimhan's cousin and avid music lover Roji (Jayalakshmi) got to know of it and planned a felicitation at her residence in Bishops Garden, Chennai. Mani Iyer was most reluctant but those who knew Roji Mami will attest that she always had her way. The event must have been an aesthete's delight. M.S. Subbulakshmi sang the prayer song and several musicians spoke in Mani Iyer's praise. He was asked to perform solo for an hour or so but he refused. Finally he consented to accompany anyone who was willing to sing. K.V. Narayanaswamy came forward and Mani Iyer performed with him.

CVN and Roji gave Mani Iyer a navaratna chain and a ring. They also offered him a plot of land in Besant Nagar where he could build a house and also a thatched shed (his idea of a dream venue) where he could practise his mridanga. But Mani Iyer would have none of it. ■

The death row of the 1960s continued relentlessly. In 1967, on 1st January, the jolly Chowdiah, who had once hoisted Ariyakudi on his shoulders and danced a jig at the end of a concert, died suddenly. Mani Iyer sorely missed the dominating presence, with his even more dominating violin and his Kannada tinged Tamil.

The biggest blow fell on 23rd January that year, when Ariyakudi chose to pass on, leaving his Sabari bereft. Mani Iyer was inconsolable. He had, in the last days of his idol, spent as much time as possible with him and helped him sort out several private matters, thereby enabling him to pass away in relative peace. However, with his death, it appeared to Mani Iyer that all of Carnatic music had passed away. It took him a long while to recover and perhaps he never did. The death in 1968 of his gentle namesake from Madurai appeared to him to set the coping stone on his sorrows. In an uncharacteristic flight of imagery, he compared himself

to a child widow and also said that he was now standing like a beggar on a musical highway. With a rather unwilling heart, he began to accompany youngsters.

He identified the talent of D.K. Jayaraman and began to take steps to pull him out of his sister's shadow and make him stand on his own. Jayaraman had, for various reasons, moved to Kanchipuram and Mani Iyer was instrumental in bringing him back. He advised him on the music scene, accompanied him regularly and soon established him in his highly successful but tragically brief career.

Mani Iyer turned 60 in 1972. With his friends all gone and given his almost Garboesque desire for privacy, he wanted his shashtiabdapoorti celebrations to be a purely domestic affair. The only person he informed about it was the Paramacharya of Kanchi. The event took place in Tanjavur but word did get around and a felicitation was held in Madras later (see *Mani Iyer's 60th birthday*). In 1974, Mani

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Iyer's parents passed away within six months of each other. He cared deeply for them and, knowing that his father was always worried that his elder son (Mani Iyer) might not be by his side when he breathed his last, he ensured that a statement of his concert schedules with locations, contact addresses and phone numbers was always available with his younger brother in Palghat so that he could be called at short notice. When his father became noticeably weak, Mani Iyer cancelled all concert engagements for two months to stay with him till his end. Though he had very little belief in rituals, he performed all the rites for his parents as they had firm belief in them. He instructed his own children that when his time came, they should not perform these rituals for him (see *Crossing the Styx*)

Mani Iyer saw great talent in the young and up-and-coming violin trio of L. Shankar, L. Subramaniam and L. Vaidyanathan and began accompanying them. He did much for the trio and even overcame his reluctance to travel abroad by accompanying them on a coast to coast tour of the US in 1975. But this time Rajamani did not accompany him. Mani Iyer was nervous and afraid of

Crossing the Styx

The Styx is the mythical river that separates Hades or Hell from the earth according to Greek mythology. The Indian equivalent is the Vaitarani. It is believed that human beings need to cross this by holding on to the tail of a cow and this is why 'go daanam' or the offering of a cow is necessary when a person is alive and if not done during one's lifetime, it is done during the obsequies after the person's death. Mani Iyer performed these rituals for his parents but forbade his sons from doing the same for him.

As for crossing the Vaitarani, he simply said that he had been all over the world and so crossing a simple river would pose no difficulty. And if a cow was at all needed, he was quite sure that one of his fans would be crossing over on the same date and would invariably come up to tell him how much he (the fan) had enjoyed his (Mani Iyer's) accompaniment for *Enduku peddalavale* or some other song. Hitching a ride by holding on to the tail of the other's cow would be no problem!

Sitting (1st row) : Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Sundararajan, Palghat Mani and E.R. Doraiswamy.
(2nd row) Devakottai Narayana Iyengar, Vellore Ramabhadran and M.L. Vasanthakumari (standing)



getting lost in the US. After all, had he and GNB not managed to lose their way in Bombay when, after a visit to the hairdressers, they could not find their way back to their hosts? GNB had calmly predicted that a fan would soon turn up and so he did! But GNB was long gone and fans were few and far between in the US. So Mani Iyer did the next best thing. He took \$ 1000 from the trio and always kept it in his pocket as a form of security. He also carried a slip of paper in which he had someone write in English that he knew no other language than his own and in case he was found lost he was to be helped to reach L. Shankar in New York.

Despite the presence of talented youngsters like DKJ, KVN, Lalgudi and the trio, Mani Iyer could not help lamenting the falling standards in music. Nowhere else did he see a greater degradation than in the construction of auditoria and in sound amplification. He identified the mike as the root cause of all evil and began to wage a relentless battle against it (see *The mike and Mani Iyer*). He refused concert engagements if a mike would be used. If he could not avoid one with mikes, he managed to get them switched off just for the tani avartanam. It was a one-sided battle and the mike ultimately won— everyone rooted for it, and Mani Iyer was a one-man army.

Chembai passed away in 1974, yet another loss for Mani Iyer, who bemoaned his misfortune at having to witness so many deaths. Mani Iyer blossomed early, and with many of his contemporaries in Carnatic music very much his seniors, this was perhaps inevitable. However he interpreted it differently and remained discontented with the music scene in general. There was a bright side however, for he realised the talents of M.L. Vasanthakumari and started accompanying her from 1977. Their first concert was held at Sastry Hall in Luz, Mylapore, and a large crowd gathered to listen to the two geniuses in action.

It was at this time that J. Krishnamurti, the philosopher, invited Mani Iyer to join Rishi Valley School. C.V. Narasimhan, ICS created an endowment at the school which enabled the institution to pay Mani Iyer his salary. Feeling the need for a musically kindred soul at the place, Mani Iyer suggested that MLV be similarly invited for she was then going through a period of stress personally and financially and this came as a godsend. Mani Iyer came to be very appreciative of MLV's music and once, according to eye witnesses in Rishi Valley, even patted her on her back in avuncular fashion, quipping that she had allowed her brains to grow to the same size as her form! He was adored by J. Krishnamurti who often expressed his admiration publicly. In Rishi Valley, Mani Iyer found peace

The mike and Mani Iyer

To Mani Iyer, the mike was the root of all evil. Because it amplified the voice, it allowed male musicians to lower their sruti-s comfortably. This naturally robbed the mridanga of its tone and playing on it sounded like dull thuds. He also felt that singers were using amplification as a crutch and were therefore neglecting their voices.

It was of no use explaining to him that modern amplification rectified such imbalances. Perhaps he was right, given the sound levels and acoustics in today's sabha-s. He also had another grievance which he did not publicly express. He alone among mridangists was then spending a fortune on researching and developing the instrument and it was only when it was played in natural surroundings that the audience could appreciate every nuance and understand what made a Mani Iyer mridanga special. With a mike, his instrument sounded like anyone else's.

Mani Iyer was also of the view that natural amplification would discipline the audience. They would perforce have to be silent if they needed to listen to every bit of the music. In his demand for audience discipline he was one with another great artist— Veena Dhanammal. In later times, S. Balachandar was equally sensitive.

Mani Iyer tolerated the mike as long as there was only one— in front of the main artist. Then came a separate mike for the accompanying violin and he still kept his peace. When mridangists also began demanding a separate mike, he burst out in protest and decided that he would not accept any concert engagement where mikes were used. He had this policy printed on his letterheads so that nobody was left in any doubt (see below). It did not matter to him that he lost out on many concert opportunities. But such was his standing that most artists accepted the condition just to have the pleasure of his mridanga accompaniment. To many juniors, it was a matter of prestige too.

Mani Iyer did relent on a few occasions. Once, when he was accompanying D.K. Pattammal at the Music Academy, he had the amplification turned off for the tani alone. At the end of it, the pin drop silent audience got the message. Not one nuance had been missed, even in that acoustically far from perfect auditorium. ■

MRIDANGAM
PALGHAT T. S. MANI IYER

41 Nachiyappa Chetty Street
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Acceptance of concerts only without mike

and relaxation. He even took the news of the passing of Alathur Srinivasa Iyer in 1980 calmly without expressing any emotion.

But this inner peace was not to last. He discerned a decline in his own prowess on the mridanga. For the first time, family members noticed that he sought their opinions about his performances. On 26th April 1981 he brought out the mridanga to teach a girl student of the school and found that his hand was no longer obeying what his mind commanded it to do. The split second accuracy for which Yehudi Menuhin had once called him a human metronome was gone. He cancelled the class and put away the mridanga— forever. He became very quiet and reduced his food intake. MLV, who noticed this, alerted his sons.

Mani Iyer and MLV arrived shortly thereafter for a concert at Tirupati. His children were also there and he insisted on his eldest son taking his place in the concert. He said that God, who had given him a talent, had taken it away and that was that. He went to Ernakulam to be with his eldest son and on arrival there handed over his tool kit to him, stating that he had no use for it anymore. He also drew a mythological parallel. Like the Gandipam slipping from Arjuna's hands, his talents had left him. He was soon admitted to a nursing home for his arthritis. His condition rapidly declined and he soon lapsed into a coma. Recovering after three days, he suddenly began to speak non-stop. His eldest son played a recording of a violin performance and asked him to identify the artist. Pat came the answer: It was Papa playing Surati raga. He added that the song to follow would be *Mariyada*

The Householder

Mani Iyer may have spent most of the month travelling and left the running of the household to his wife, but it cannot be said that he was ignorant of what was happening in it. He managed to spend whatever free time he had with his children though he invariably never knew in which class each one of them was. If a visitor asked him he would cleverly deflect the question to the child concerned to respond to the query. He ensured they all acquired conventional education. He also imparted sound value systems to them. One was that, once they had made a choice between music and any other career, they should remain with their choice and devote 100% of their time and attention to it. He disapproved if his son Rajamani took permission from office for an early concert engagement remarking that he should have never accepted a concert which began during office hours. He also warned his children never

teleyakane, and so it proved. When asked about a forthcoming concert with Mali, he recalled the date and even his remuneration correctly.

Within four hours, however, it was clear that he was sinking. Till the last, the first citizen of Carnatic Music, Ramanuja Iyengar, dominated his thoughts. Among his last words was a request to his son to get the mridanga ready as Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai was waiting for him for a performance with Ariyakudi. Asked how he would manage when he could not even walk, he told his son to help him sit and then they (Iyengar, Pillai and himself) would “somehow manage”. It was time for him to go.

Mani Iyer passed away on 30th May 1981. It is said that when Mysore Sadasiva Rao died, all the tambura-s of the house vibrated in unison. Mani Iyer, being a pragmatic man, would have expected no such miracle and indeed none really happened. But the world must have missed a beat and fallen out of rhythm for a split second. ■

❖ As source material, the writer has drawn on articles written on Palghat Mani Iyer (in Sruti's archives) by the late P.A. Raman and 'PTI' K.V. Ramakrishnan, as well as souvenirs on Mani Iyer. He has also consulted Mani Iyer's sons T.R. Rajamani and T.R. Rajaram.

❖ An article by K.S. Kalidas on Palani Subramania Pillai and Palghat Mani Iyer; as well as the reminiscences of many musicians on Mani Iyer, will be published as the concluding part of the story on the mridanga maestro.

to use his name to seek favours and, above all, never to expect favours from anyone in the music fraternity.

His wife Balam was sensitive to the fact that Mani Iyer did not get the requisite amount of sleep during his travels and would ensure that the household was quiet on the rare occasions when he wished to take a nap in the afternoon. Mani Iyer was an extremely light sleeper and the smallest noise would wake him. But even she did not have control over the sounds that came from the upper floor where Parland and his cohorts would always be testing mridanga-s (see following article). An 'arai chap' from Parland would wake up Mani Iyer and he would immediately go to his mridanga lab and become immersed in his research.

When his youngest son Rajaram demanded money for new trousers to wear to college, he replied that education did not depend on the clothes one wore and that he, Rajaram,

could do worse than wear a dhoti to college. He also told him that if he wore a dhoti and also scored first rate marks, others would come to believe that the secret to success was the dhoti and begin copying him!

His middle son, though named Tyagarajan, did not take to music. But he was the one whose conversation Mani Iyer enjoyed the most. Father and son would argue and, in many ways, Mani Iyer needed Tyagarajan's challenges. One of the most discussed topics was Mani Iyer's reluctance to accompany women.

Eldest son Rajamani became one of the finest exponents of the Mani Iyer style and once even had a bet on the structure of a pattern with Mani Iyer. The father was proud to be the loser and, as per the conditions of the wager, grew a tuft. This hairstyle was so liked by Alathoor Sivasubramania Iyer that he followed suit. Mani Iyer would spend hours with Rajamani on the days the latter had a concert engagement coaching him on various aspects. And yet, one day, he suggested that his son had better give up his mridanga career and concentrate on his profession.

Mani Iyer did help people in a simple and unpublicised fashion. If someone he knew was suffering for want of money he would help. Once, so impressed was he by a beggar woman singing a song in Surati that he gifted her a brocade shawl. The more practical Kitta Iyer suggested that she would be better off with some money and so Mani Iyer gave her some cash as well.

R&D on a mammoth scale

An account of the research that Mani Iyer did on the construction of the mridanga would leave anyone speechless. However, it was this, combined with his innate talent, that made Mani Iyer's performances unique.

For Mani Iyer, the process began with selection of the wood for the mridanga. He arrived, after various experiments, at the conclusion that the wood from the jackfruit tree was ideally suited for the instrument. The wood had to be red in colour; if it was white or black it was rejected immediately. Wood from a tree with at least seven annular rings was preferred. It would be smeared with cow dung at both ends to ensure seasoning, and would also be kept in silos filled with grain to check whether insects could bore holes in the wood. If it remained sound it would be used for making the mridanga. Mani Iyer was also particular that the tree ought to be axed and not cut with a chain saw. He believed that with each blow

Though his wants were simple, he was particular about certain things and one of these was the care of his hands and teeth. His hands were extraordinarily soft. While his taking care of his hands can be understood as an obvious precaution, the teeth, according to him, had to be in good condition for him to recite the patterns as he played the mridanga. He used Forhans toothpaste all through life and, if anyone went abroad, he would ask him to get that brand of toothpaste for him.

On the days he was at home he spent most of his time working on his mridanga-s and there is very little to record about his daily routine. But yes, he did have a sense of humour and often joked with his family. The mail was always copious at Mani Iyer's residence and if, on a particular day, he did not receive concert offers by post, he would immediately call his children and, with a twinkle in his eye, tell them that his career was over and nobody was going to bother with him from then on.

Mani Iyer was an abstemious man and enjoyed good health throughout his life. In his last days he suffered from arthritis which affected his mobility.

Balam and the children were never in any doubt that the head of the family was someone extraordinary. Yet they were not in awe of him. But, realising his greatness, they made it a habit to record several of his conversations, arguments, comments and jokes on tapes. They still listen to them at times and it is through these that Mani Iyer comes alive. ■

of the axe, the wood was enriched by the thuds that emanated. If he liked a specimen he would not hesitate to spend even Rs. 1000 on it.

The wood would be shaped by Somu Achari who made most of Mani Iyer's mridanga-s. He was introduced to Mani Iyer by Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai. Mani Iyer first got him to make a mridanga that was 24" long with a circumference of 6 ¾" on the right side and 7 ¾" on the top, having a diameter of 11" at the midsection. He also asked Somu to ensure that the hollow interior was of the same contour as the exterior of the mridanga. This was the first time that this specification was introduced for the instrument.

The interior would first be roughly scooped out and Mani Iyer would take the instrument and test it out for two to three months. He would then send it back so that the interior could be completely scooped out. The inner core had to be smooth with no kinks in it. The entire process of

making a Mani Iyer grade instrument could take anything from two to five months. Having identified jackfruit wood, Mani Iyer did not give up. He experimented with making an instrument out of mud, probably because the root for the word 'mridanga' is said to be 'mrit' or mud. The core of this experimental drum still survives with his son. He even had ambitions of making an instrument out of sandalwood. Whenever Somu's work impressed him Mani Iyer would say that he would one day ask him to make a mridanga out of sandalwood.

That was with respect to the wood. Then came experiments in size and changes in specifications right down to variations in length, width, diameter, circumference of the two ends and even the thickness of the lip at each end. He finally arrived at specific sizes of the mridanga for specific pitches, with the shorter ones meant for the high pitched female voices, progressively increasing in length till the ones meant for the likes of M.D. Ramanathan were very long indeed. Playing on the extra-long instrument needed a lot of effort mainly because the arms had to be stretched out, resulting in great pressure on the chest. That was probably one of the reasons why Mani Iyer once commented that MDR had thrown away a rich voice by adopting a "thaggu" sruti.

If having mridanga-s in various stages of preparation, often smeared in cow dung, about the home was not enough, there was the issue of leather as well. Here a separate team comprising Sevanthian and his sons Shengol, Parland (Fernand) and Shetty took over. Samples of calf and kid leather would be brought for Mani Iyer's selection, and the house often looked like a cross between a tannery and a carpenter's workplace. The upper storey of the house was made over to this team which cured the hides, fixed them on the mridanga and tested the instruments. They were all masters in various beats, though simple unlettered people. When Sevanthian first made a train journey with Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer, his relatives mourned his departure as though he was going away forever. Years later, a member of the third generation, Arul Raj, would travel with Mani Iyer overseas.

Mani Iyer, if delighted with a mridanga, would always give the credit to the team that made it and often congratulated them in public besides giving them whatever gifts he received such as shawls and fruits. Through Kitta Iyer he ensured that the team was well taken care of financially and was kept medically fit. Palani Subramania Pillai used the same technicians and Mani Iyer would repeatedly tell Parland that his mridanga-s never produced the same gumki as Palani's. Parland finally told him that there

was only so much he could do and the rest was up to the performer. Mani Iyer understood, but never gave up trying.

Considering that Mani Iyer needed to test the mridanga-s himself, it was necessary to get the team to make them on the few days he was at home. Then a better plan was worked out. And this was to test the mridanga-s on the trains while Mani Iyer travelled. The master always travelled with a retinue of disciples who would come periodically to his coach to get him his coffee, snacks, and meals and to make his bed. Kitta Iyer and the team of mridanga technicians would be waiting at junctions such as Tanjavur or Madurai. Mani Iyer would offload the mridanga-s he had with him, which the team would place on the platform. They, in turn, would load their mridanga-s, often as many as twenty, into the coach. Meanwhile, Mani Iyer would begin testing the new mridanga-s. By the time the train was ready to leave, he would have assessed them all and handed over those which needed rectification or changes, retaining the rest. If a mridanga in Mani Iyer's possession needed some minor changes, Kitta Iyer would procure a ticket till the next major station for the technician who would thus stay on the train, finish his work and get off at the next junction.

Despite so much of preparation, Mani Iyer would never rest easy. Once he had selected an instrument for a performance, he would keep going back to it throughout the day of the concert and test it out repeatedly. He would test a few spares as well. It was only a few minutes before leaving for the concert that he would instruct a disciple to drape the instrument with its ornate cover.

For him, the mridanga was almost human. It is a common belief among horticulturists that plants need plenty of tender loving care. Mani Iyer lavished it on his instruments. If, in spite of all this, a mridanga played up, he would simply shrug his shoulders and say that, like human beings mridanga-s too were subject to mood swings. Not many of the instruments dared to do it with him anyway. When his son Rajamani performed along with Mani Iyer, he would at times find his mridanga misbehaving. Mani Iyer would immediately exchange his instrument with Rajamani. And lo! in his hands the instrument would be docility personified and generate the richest of tones.

Mani Iyer was very finicky about sruti suddham or fidelity to pitch. He usually had different instruments for each pitch and yet, once in Calcutta, he was placed in a piquant situation when he had to use a low pitched mridanga for a high pitched artist. He instructed his disciple to ensure that

the mridanga was adjusted to the right pitch by evening and went off for lunch and then a siesta. The poor disciple tried his best and yet the mridanga was nowhere near the desired pitch even as the concert hour approached. When Mani Iyer awoke, he realised the problem and, in a trice, pushed in a couple of small wooden sticks into the leather straps that went around the mridanga and sure enough the pitch had risen to the desired level.

On his last visit to Tirupati in 1981 (see main story) Mani

Iyer found that son Rajamani's mridanga needed its pitch to be brought down to suit M.L. Vasanthakumari. As his son tried in vain to change the pitch, Mani Iyer, who was sitting, asked to be helped across to the instrument (he was afflicted with arthritis by then). He then pressed hard on one side of the instrument and when he released his hand the pitch had changed to the desired level. Perhaps it would be no exaggeration to say that the mridanga-s understood his requirements as much as he did theirs. ■

Tussles and tiffs at Tiruvaiyaru

Mani Iyer interested himself in the Tyagaraja Aradhana from very early on and photographs taken during the first Aradhana after unification (1940) show him very prominently. Probably it was the Ariyakudi influence that led to his involvement. However, to him the 'Aradhana' was a very devout and solemn occasion where, as he put it, musicians gathered to offer their homage to Tyagaraja every year after spending the rest of the days earning money by using his songs. It was to him an occasion for thanksgiving to the bard.

Towards this, he spent many months preparing his mridanga-s. The first was the mridanga to be used for the unchavritti (ceremonial alms seeking procession) and this would be shared by all the mridangists who took turns to accompany the singers. Unlike his friend Papa K.S. Venkataramaiah who had no option but to hold his violin aloft, walk along and play simultaneously, Mani Iyer asked his wife Balam to devise a method whereby, like the tavil players, he too could strap the mridanga to himself and play on it. More importantly, this arrangement had to be passed on from one percussionist to another without

any disturbance. Balam came up with the idea of an angavastram to be worn around the shoulder from which the mridanga could be suspended. Mani Iyer practised walking with it around the central courtyard of his house but rejected it saying that the mridanga moved from side to side. Balam then came up with the idea of a belt around the waist in addition to the shoulder straps, which would hold the mridanga laterally. It must be noted here that neither the angavastram nor the belt could be hung from the mridanga straps for that would mean a dislocation of sruti.

Mani Iyer did not like the idea of a belt. Balam then thought of a belt-like arrangement made of dhoti material which could be stitched to the angavastram around the shoulder. This contraption could be taken off like a kavacham (body armour). Wearing this, and having walked around his courtyard and practised to his satisfaction, Mani Iyer declared himself happy. This was the arrangement which all the mridangists used, and all of them used Mani Iyer's mridanga.

Paying musical homage at the bard's residence with the Alathur Brothers, Papa Venkataramaiah and others



For the aradhana concerts, Mani Iyer would prepare mridanga-s of all sruti-s and a troupe of disciples would take them to Tiruvaiyaru. A screen would be set up behind the concert platform where a regular mridanga workshop would come up with Mani Iyer's team of mridanga-makers giving last minute touches to the instruments. Before each concert, Mani Iyer would ascertain the sruti of the main singer and presto, a mridanga with that sruti would be handed out from the screen to the accompanist of the concert. All the mridangists, except Palani Subramania Pillai, used Mani Iyer's instruments. This was Mani Iyer's way of offering his respects to Tyagaraja.

In 1955, Mani Iyer became Secretary of the Tyagabrahma Mahotsava Sabha. Given his liking for simplicity and austerity, it was inevitable that he would clash with many others in the committee. He questioned the necessity for having a bigwig to inaugurate the celebrations and expressed the view that the beginning of the unchavritti was the best possible inauguration. In 1958, he managed to do away with the inauguration completely.

Mani Iyer questioned the need for broadcasting the concerts. He felt that, right through the year, artists were having their performances broadcast and so it was only befitting that, at least during the aradhana, they sang without any thought of an audience except perhaps Tyagaraja. In his view, the broadcast led to plenty of ego clashes and lobbying, with everyone wanting to perform only when the AIR relays were going on. The relay, he said, gave unnecessary publicity to the aradhana with many mediocre singers crowding into the event thereby reducing its quality. He also opined that a broadcast of an aradhana meant that people were listening to an act of worship even as they went about their routine activities with no devotion. Mani Iyer had seen a man going to answer a call of nature with a transistor in his hand, and the gadget was even then broadcasting the Pancharatnam-s!

Mani Iyer had strong views on ritual purity of women and, given that this was a delicate issue, he felt that the temptation of a radio broadcast meant that women would overlook such matters and turn up for the aradhana. He felt that only famous women artists, who did not stand to gain in any way by performing during the aradhana should be allowed to participate.

Mani Iyer's objections to the broadcast fell on deaf ears. Chances are that, given his devotion to Tyagaraja, he would nevertheless have continued to participate in the aradhana had it not been for a clash with AIR in 1958. Even as the concerts were in progress, Aleppey Papasami Iyengar

brought a young boy to Mani Iyer and requested that he be allowed to perform and thereby receive Tyagaraja's blessings. Mani Iyer readily acquiesced and arranged for the boy to accompany the next performance. The concert was just about to begin when the Station Director of AIR-Tiruchi, who was in attendance, objected that the boy was not a graded artist and should be asked to step down for, otherwise, the rules of the AIR would be violated. Therefore, the broadcast could not continue.

Mani Iyer retorted sharply that, in the first place, it ought to be made clear that what was in progress was not a radio concert but an 'aradhana' and therefore anyone wishing to pay homage to Tyagaraja would be given a chance. If AIR had any objections it need not relay the aradhana concerts. If, on the other hand, AIR felt that this was indeed a concert and not an aradhana in progress, then they ought to ensure that the fee to which each artiste was entitled was paid to the Tyagabrahma Mahotsava Sabha. Then, the Aradhana committee would also ensure that only graded artists were selected to perform. The Station Director had nothing to say in response and the performance went on and was relayed as well.

During the subsequent closed door meeting of the Aradhana committee, Mani Iyer spoke frankly about his disgust at the way in which the aradhana was being conducted. This was construed by the others, who perhaps wanted him out of the way, as his resignation and it was recorded as such in the minutes. Mani Iyer stayed away from the celebrations thereafter.

SRIRAM.V

[Photos courtesy Palghat Mani Iyer's family]

Palghat Mani Iyer - I (Sruti 270)

Some corrections

- 1. Readers Ravi and Sridhar of Tiruvannamalai point out that it was the Maharaja of Cochin who brought in families from the Tanjavur region and not a Raja of Palghat. Indeed there was no Raja of Palghat.**
- 2. Mani Iyer's son T.R. Rajaram points out: ❖ It was Budalur Krishnamurthy Sastrigal who challenged young Mani to identify the raga-s he played and not Karur Chinnaswami Iyer (see box – *Bringing up Mani*, p. 18). ❖ Chembai's concert where Dakshinamurthy Pillai and Mani Iyer fought their musical duel was not the first time they paired together (see *Standing up to Pillai*, p. 19). The first occasion was when the duo played for Palghat Rama Bhagavata. Pillai selected a particularly difficult spot to request that a tani be allowed. Mani Iyer knew that his future hung over a musical precipice. Almost walking on eggshells, he ensured he did not falter and thus saved his reputation.**

Palghat Mani Iyer and Palani Subramania Pillai Two pillars of Carnatic music during its Golden Age



Mani



Palani

SAMUDRI ARCHIVES

Differing in age by just four years— Palani Subramania Pillai (Palani) b. 1908 and Palghat Mani Iyer (Mani) b. 1912, the legendary twosome provided an unforgettable feast of laya to music lovers from the early decades of the twentieth century upto its sixties. Palani was gone in 1962 and Mani in 1981, but one cannot think or talk of one without in some way bringing the other into the picture.

After about five years of training in mridanga at Calcutta, I had the good fortune of learning from Palani for a couple of years. On a few occasions while teaching me and my fellow students, he would sink into a reverie and relive the past. For him, 'periyavanga' (literally elders) meant Pudukottai Dakshinamoorthy Pillai whom he never mentioned by name. He would play a sollukattu, the way 'periyavanga' would have handled it. On a couple of occasions, he also mentioned that Kumbakonam Alaganambia Pillai's method of playing was extremely simple without any 'vyavaharam' (laya intricacies) but it was as sonorous that listeners would compare him favourably with Dakshinamoorthy Pillai. Those days, in the fifties, a disciple posing questions to the 'guru' was unthinkable and one had to be content with what the guru chose to tell. Thus, it was not possible to form our opinion on those great artists analytically; not that even a more vivid description would have enabled me,

in my teens then, to get much insight. I have heard from my father and his friends, all keen listeners, about the two Pillais and their prowess but this again was not good enough for me as technical details were not available. The few 78 rpm gramophone records of Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar in which Dakshinamoorthy Pillai played on the khanjira (his mridanga playing records are not available at all— perhaps they were never made), which I heard a few years ago, thanks to a collector of vintage music as well as radio broadcasts, do not give a full account of the vidwan's prowess. What can a mere three-minute or six-minute record in which the alapana, kriti, niraval and swara-s and a half-minute tani with two percussionists— the mridanga and khanjira artists— are packed in reveal? Of course an alert listener did discover flashes of the tonal quality and uniqueness of a few sollukattu-s but that was all.

Except for the fact that the mridanga or its forerunner has remained in the Tamil country from the Sangam age if not earlier, the modern mridanga and technique of playing it have come down to us thanks to the settling down in Tanjavur and adjoining areas of Marathi bhajan and Harikatha troupes after Sivaji established the Maratha Empire and its influence spread to the northern, central and southern parts of the country. Tanjavur itself was the melting pot of cultures— the original Tamil, Telugu (Naik)

and Maratha. Mridanga was an essential accompaniment to bhajan-s, katha-s (Harikatha) and dance (Sadir as it was then known). The names now familiar to us among the descendants of Marathi-speaking mridanga players are Tukaramappa and Narayanaswamy Appa. The terms used in mridanga play 'thekka', 'chapu', 'mohara' clearly indicate their Maratha origin and the term 'faran' suggests a North Indian as distinct from the Maratha-connection. A close relation of mridanga, the dholak also seems to have been a popular instrument, being played in bhajan-s and in folk arts like Tamasha and Lavani.

However, the art of playing the modern mridanga in Tanjavur was essentially based on the tradition of the Maratha percussionists. In this type of playing, the predominant function of mridanga was in the establishment and maintenance of kalapramanam and the addition of a rhythmic lilt to the composition being sung by appropriate jati-s and rounding off a passage by an appropriate teermanam or mohara. In their handling of the instrument, basic rhythmic support and sonorous strokes— thekka-s and chapu-s— were paramount and vyavaharam was minimal.

In the 18th and 19th centuries as also the first few decades of the 20th, music and other forms of fine arts used to be patronised by the rulers of principalities such as Tanjavur, Pudukottai, Ettayapuram and Ramanathapuram, not to forget larger states like Travancore and Mysore. Events like weekly bhajan-s, Harikatha, and Radha Kalyanam did take place, but organised concerts took off only during the closing decades of the 19th century. Sabha-s were to come up only after the dawn of the 20th century.

However, tavil playing was a living tradition for many centuries in the Tamil country as an accompaniment to nagaswara music in temples and secular functions like marriage, upanayanam, etc. Over the centuries, tavil playing acquired great laya intricacies all its own and spread its wings beyond Tamil land into the neighbouring regions. The Cauvery delta, Pudukottai, Madurai, Tirunelveli and Palani, besides other important towns of religious / commercial importance became centres of percussion art and myriad shades of tavil art evolved at these centres. To this day, laya intricacies (vyavaharam) indulged in by tavil vidwans has not been excelled by any mridanga vidwan.

Pudukottai, long famous for its temples and the Royal court, had its own tavil and nagaswara artists, some employed in temples, others in the royal manors and still others freelance artists. One Marimuthu Pillai, a renowned tavil vidwan was in the service of the royal court and besides his state duties, was also participating in secular and religious

functions. A disciple of his, Manpoondia Pillai (1857-1922) by name, played on the khanjira what he learnt from his guru the tavil vidwan. Khanjira till then was a folk instrument, sometimes played for bhajan-s. It was improved tonally and Manpoondia Pillai could play on the single-sided instrument whatever his guru played on the two-sided tavil. The khanjira, as an instrument is tonally severely restricted with only two sounds, 'tha' and 'dhom' emanating from it. But Pillai developed a playing technique that produced fast 'faran' patterns and the equivalent of the gumki of the mridanga. Soon the khanjira was elevated to the status of a concert instrument, a prestigious one at that. Very often, if the khanjira artist was the senior of the two, he was seated nearer the audience.

Manpoondia Pillai's disciples included, among others, Pudukottai Dakshinamoorthy Pillai and Palani Muthiah Pillai, both highly versatile artists with great proficiency in handling various percussion instruments such as tavil, khanjira, ghata and mridanga. As far as percussion history is concerned, this was its golden period.

It will not be out of place to mention here that, in the Tamil country, as in various other parts of India, historically the music and dance performers constituted a distinct caste, almost always attached to temples. The higher classes involved with music and dance were, more often than not, scholars, chroniclers, codifiers and composers who laid down rules governing the performance of fine arts and often patronised the performing class. There were also linkages between the two classes— both platonic and physical liaison as many women of the performing classes were, by tradition, 'married' to the deity of the local temple, a system declining from the middle of the 20th century. The performing caste was perhaps socially looked down upon but their cultural attainments were lauded. Great vidwans from the performing— the 'isai vellalar'— community were held in great respect by everyone, irrespective of caste or status. The interaction between the 'performing' and 'patronising' classes was extremely beneficial to the art-form as in any case of cross relationship in any field.

That the musicologist became the performer happened first in vocal music when Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer and Patnam Subramania Iyer, two generations removed from the Trinity of Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Syama Sastry started giving concerts; not in the present format, perhaps, but concerts they certainly were. Then followed an explosion of talent among the hitherto 'non-performing' classes— brahmins and non-brahmins (excluding isai vellalar-s) although the proportion of the second-named was minuscule and remains so to this day.

All this lengthy preamble is necessary to understand the development of the two schools of laya and the stars these schools produced— namely Palani and Mani.

The two schools developed independently and although the distance between Tanjavur and Pudukottai was only 35 miles, their interaction was minimal for about a few decades, due to constraint in transport and communication and the number of public concerts being few and far between. However, by the time Alaganambia Pillai of the Tanjavur school and Dakshinamoorthy Pillai of Pudukottai were holding the fort, much better contacts had been established and, while the Pudukottai school absorbed some of the aesthetic elements of the Tanjavur school, the latter did likewise on the vyavahara aspects that were the hallmark of the Pudukottai school.

Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer was among the few brahmin mridanga artists who first made inroads into the Isai Vellalar fort. However, it was left to Palghat Mani to open up the laya field to other than traditional performers just as Rukmini Devi did in dance. We should remember that Mani himself had received his initial training from Chathapuram Subba Iyer and only later did he come under the tutelage of Vaidyanatha Iyer. According to the late Kallidaikurichi Mahadeva Bhagavata, Vaidyanatha Iyer himself had been initiated into some laya vyavaharam by none other than Dakshinamoorthy Pillai and thus, although Mani can be technically classified as belonging to the Tanjavur school, he had derived inspiration from different sources including the folk traditions of Kerala like the chenda. With these under his belt, he also observed and imbibed certain aspects of laya from tavil vidwans of the area and it has been said that he modelled his 'kriti playing' technique after the great Needamangalam Meenakshisundaram Pillai who was described by people who had heard him and whom this writer had the privilege to speak to, as playing tavil in a way one would actually play the mridanga; the tonal quality would equal that of the mridanga! Mani also played with Dakshinamoorthy Pillai whom he held in the highest respect and who had a role in influencing his play.

Palani Subramania Pillai, on the other hand, descended from a lineage of percussion artists who had been playing the tavil for many generations. His father and guru, Muthiah Pillai, earlier a tavil vidwan of great repute, later took up mridanga and the khanjira and was considered as good as, if not better than, Dakshinamoorthy Pillai himself in certain respects. Palani, besides being the son and disciple of a great master, considered Dakshinamoorthy Pillai as his 'manaseeka guru', such was his great respect

and regard for him. It is a fact not widely known but he played the mridanga in concerts where either his father or Dakshinamoorthy Pillai played the khanjira. That was the time when khanjira was considered to be even superior to the mridanga, thanks to the stature given to it by Manpoondia Pillai. (Palani was later to play the khanjira with Mani on the mridanga in many concerts). Palani also struck a close friendship with Iluppur (aka Malaikottai) Panchapakesa Pillai (Panchami), one of the greatest tavil vidwans ever, who was a fine vocalist and khanjira vidwan too. Although Panchami was much senior to Palani, they are said to have spent a few years together sharing ideas. Unfortunately, like many geniuses, he died very young when he was only twenty nine years old.

Palani's other influence was the tabla and according to the late T. Sankaran, whenever Palani came over to the radio station at Tiruchi for a performance (where T. Sankaran was Asst. Station Director), he would invariably play on the studio's tabla for a while. The 'baya' of the tabla corresponds to the 'toppi' of the mridanga and any observer would have noticed that the gumki performs a major role in tabla playing. Palani's gumki, including the positioning of his palm and its movement across the toppi was entirely influenced by tabla artistry. He also picked up the tabla's thekka-s in his inimitable and unexcelled use of soft sollu patterns while playing for tukkada-s in the later part of concerts.

Thus then we see that while Mani and Palani are usually represented as scions of the Tanjavur and Pudukottai schools respectively, in reality they went far beyond the boundaries of their schools, thanks partially to their innate quest for broader rhythmic experiences and partially due to better communications between the two schools themselves. T. Sankaran, who was well acquainted with both the vidwans told me that both Palani and Mani would attend concerts where Tanjavur Ramdas Rao played, intently watching and internalising the way he played his strokes, especially the chapu-s.

They thus adopted styles of playing all their own. Mani's accompanying techniques for songs would be to follow the sangati-s faithfully and Palani's was nadai based with emphasis on the 'take-off' or other important points in the kriti. Of course, one cannot stretch this fact beyond a point; it is not that Palani and Mani played at all times like this.

Mani's playing was always rousing from the start of the concert to its finish and he was an ace communicator with the audience. The audience just loved him and no wonder that he was the most popular mridanga vidwan in

the 1940s and 50s. The vocalist (or the instrument soloist), with the exception of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar who was his mentor, was often overawed or even overwhelmed by him. Very often it would appear that the concert was centred around him and not the main performer. People have at times accused him of being a show-stealer and putting himself ahead of the team but the enormous success of the concerts in which he participated proved that it was not so. However, he was an artist whom the main performer could ignore only at his or her peril. He was an embodiment of supreme confidence. His stroke play was bold and would sing out loud and clear with flourishes in the higher tempo.

Palani's mridanga play was a study in contrast. There were no exuberant flourishes nor showmanship. His performance would always merge with that of the team; he was always a team man. He was the master of understatement. His motto in playing for kriti-s was 'poshaakku'— adding nourishment to the kriti itself. He was always considered as the main performer's close friend and partner. The mix of intellectual and aesthetic aspects in his playing was optimum. He was quintessentially the musician's musician. His sarvalaghu patterns were most famous but they were also played on the spur of the moment and never tiresomely repetitive. The sarvalaghu would often be interspersed with cross-patterns or 'edir-nadai-s'. Madurai Mani Iyer used to call him a "tyagi", one who made sacrifices for the success of the concert.

If Mani was the Cecil B. Demille of Mridanga ('The Ten Commandments', the glorious spectacle), Palani was David O. Selznick (of the unforgettable classic, 'Gone with the Wind'). T.K. Murthy, a close associate of Palani and Mani says Palani was Jupiter to Mani's Saturn (*Sruti* 33/34). Another writer, Sriram.V has gone lyrical in comparing them to the sun's rays (Mani) and the moon's (Palani).

Their personalities too were very different: Mani, a man of few words and taciturn; Palani, genial to a fault. Of course both had special friends with whom they opened up without restraint. Lalgudi Jayaraman said in the course of an interview that where Palani was, there was also 'gauravam' (dignity).

Palani's handling of the toppi, especially the gumki, has remained unmatched. It is said that none in the earlier generations, and certainly none during his time or later could come anywhere near its extraordinary beauty. His speciality was also the fine balance between the 'valantalai' and 'toppi' strokes and the 'vallinam' (forceful) and 'mellinam' (soft) patterns. He also insisted on the simultaneous use of valantalai and toppi wherever possible

although it was much more difficult and one could have got away with a single-handed stroke. "Ottha kai vaasippu vaasikkade ayya" (do not play single-handed strokes) was his constant refrain to us, his students. On the aesthetic front (he had given up much of his vyavaharam-based playing as suggested by Chembai, his mentor), he had no equals.

The two vidwans complemented each other in the music field. There was also variety available in Ramanathapuram Murugabhoopathy, another stalwart. The major vocalists of the golden era of music were fortunate in having these three titans to choose from.

While Mani had the advantage of the immensely popular Chembai to back him even as a teenager, Palani had no such luck. His being a left hander was held against him and many senior violinists would not accommodate him in their place. Although all came round when Palani became famous, Papa Venkataramaiah did not relent except during AIR concerts where the seating arrangement was informal. Till Chembai came round to having him as his accompanist, Palani had to rely on 'laya-heavy' vidwans like Naina Pillai, Chittoor Subramania Pillai, P.S. Vedachalam Chettiar, Mudicondan Venkatarama Iyer and Alathur Brothers with an occasional concert of a Musiri, Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavatar or Maharajapuram thrown in. From around 1942 till 1962, both Palani and Mani performed in an equal number of concerts in any music series in any part of India. Chembai told me during a train journey how, in a span of a couple of years, he ensured that Palani got the same fee as Mani for his concerts.

As Ariyakudi and Mani were 'made for each other', so were Madurai Mani Iyer and Palani. This is not to say that Palani did not accompany Ariyakudi or Mani, Mani Iyer; in fact, they did on many occasions. If on the specific date one was not available, the other usually substituted. There were other similarities too. GNB teamed together with Mani in the earlier years and Palani in the later years; the Alathur Brothers and Palani were inseparables in the earlier years and Mani replaced Palani in the later years.

Both of them had good personal relationship and held each other in high esteem. However both had differences about the way the mridanga should be played and I have heard from many sources that they had letters exchanged too in *The Hindu*. Research in this direction would help students. I was a witness to a lecture demonstration by Palani in the Music Academy when he suggested that mridanga playing for kriti-s should not follow sangati to sangati and Mani Iyer, in a speech on laya, criticised certain

vyavaharam aspects of Palani. The recording of this speech is available widely. Both were careful not to mention the other by name but the reference was clear. Fortunately, this difference in perception did not come in the way of their personal relationship.

Sruti 33/34 incidentally brought out a comparison between the two in a tongue-in-cheek manner.

Both encouraged younger vidwans to come up the musical ladder. Those who received encouragement from Mani were K.V. Narayanaswamy and Ramnad Krishnan and many years later, Dr. S. Ramanathan, Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, M.L. Vasanthakumari, D.K. Jayaraman, T.V. Gopalakrishnan, T.N. Seshagopalan, A. Sundaresan and Tirupointuruthi Venkatesan. Palani, who had no god-father till Chembai came along, made it a point to see as many younger artists as were deserving got his help. Lalgudi Jayaraman's smooth entry into the music field was in a large measure due to Palani's efforts. He often cajoled or even compelled established vidwans and sabha secretaries to fix Lalgudi for the concerts in which he participated. He was also instrumental (pun intended) in Lalgudi and his sister Srimathi performing as a duo

Lalgudi Remembers Mani

Lalgudi Jayaraman was 'lit up' with joy and nostalgia, while talking about his interactions with the superstar from Palghat. He recalled his early fascination for the artistry of Palghat Mani Iyer, and his trips to nearby Tiruchirappalli to listen to the mridanga maestro in the concerts arranged by the Rasika Ranjana Sabha there and Trichy Fine Arts. He even recounted paying eight 'annas' (half a rupee, some amount those days) for admission. Years later, Jayaraman mentioned this to Mani Iyer while travelling together by train, expressing his wonder at the 'once unthinkable' good fortune of sharing the platform with the percussion genius, attributing it to God's grace. The legend from Palghat was moved.

The first opportunity to share the platform with Mani Iyer came by chance, during the Tyagaraja utsavam at Devakottai, in February 1950. There were two concerts on one evening. Jayaraman was billed to accompany Palladam Sanjeeva Rao in the first concert. The second one in the schedule was by Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar with Papa Venkataramiah and Mani Iyer. Papa could not make it; Iyengar opted for the youngster from Lalgudi, barely twenty then, to provide violin accompaniment. From then on such opportunities became frequent, often with the Alathur Brothers and Mani Iyer combination. Such

and the first and several subsequent concerts had him playing the mridanga. Other young artists of the day who received immense support from Palani included M. Balamuralikrishna, K.V. Narayanaswamy, Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, Ramnad Krishnan, Manakkal Rangarajan, T.M. Thiagarajan, Tiruvarur Namasivayam and Ayyalur Krishnan. The vainika, M.A. Kalyanakrishna Bhagavata started giving vocal concerts only on the suggestion, and with the support of Palani.

That Palani did not receive any major titles or decorations during his illustrious career is an eternal shame. At a function organised to felicitate R. Yagnaraman on Sri Krishna Gana Sabha completing 25 years, Palghat Mani lamented the fact that great artists like Dakshinamoorthy Pillai and Palani Subramania Pillai did not receive due recognition. No one knows the reason for this but there are many conjectures, not all of them complimentary to those concerned. But then, Palani had excellent company in T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai, T.R. Mahalingam, S. Balachander, M.D. Ramanathan and why, even Murugabhoopathy (part of the famous trio), who lived well into advanced age.

K.S. KALIDAS

interactions strengthened 'mutual admiration', on and off the stage. Both Mani Iyer and Jayaraman shared many values including their disciplined approach to music and life, and both were men of few words.

In this context, Jayaraman also referred to the sense of fairness and propriety of Mani Iyer. Alathur Subbier composed a special 'sankeerna jati' pallavi for presentation at the Music Academy concert when he got the Sangeeta Kalanidhi title in 1964. He shared the 'intricacies' only with Mani Iyer who was to accompany on the mridanga and not with Jayaraman who was to play on the violin. Mani Iyer felt this was not proper and insisted on fair play, though without success. After the concert an overjoyed Subbier embraced Jayaraman and praised him, calling him "Singa Kutti" (a lion cub).

Years later, for an archival recording at AIR-Tiruchi, Alathur Srinivasa Iyer devised, in consultation with Mani Iyer, a complicated pallavi to be negotiated in trikalam. Though Jayaraman could join them for only one sitting, he quickly grasped and reproduced the intricacies. Mani Iyer conveyed his wholehearted appreciation—"Brahmalayam" was the term used by Mani Iyer to praise Jayaraman.

From the early sixties, Jayaraman started giving violin



Mani and Lalgudi

COURTESY : LALGUDI G. JAYARAMAN

solo/duet concerts with sister Srimathi. Mani Iyer's accompaniment happened for the first time in May 1960, at a concert presented by the Mylapore Fine Arts Club. The concert originally slated was that of Alathur Brothers but it was cancelled due to their indisposition. Mani Iyer's son, Rajamani, also participated as the "second percussion".

The Edinburgh Festival of 1965 proved a breakthrough event. Lalgudi had been invited to accompany Palghat K.V. Narayanaswamy. Mani Iyer was a special invitee; he was particular about Jayaraman making the trip and took the trouble of personally requesting Jayaraman's father, Gopala Iyer, to give his consent. Initially hesitant, Gopala Iyer relented only for the sake of Mani Iyer. That was Jayaraman's first plane journey. By all accounts, the tour was a grand success. (Dr. V.K. Narayana Menon has written about the festival's 'high points'.) The genius of the Palghat maestro became known to a wider world; Jayaraman's art got appreciation from Yehudi Menuhin along with the gift of a violin. Jayaraman also recalls that in the informal 'practice' sessions at their place of stay with K.V. Narayanaswamy as the vocalist, Mani Iyer would play on the khanjira.

Jayaraman also made it a practice to call on Mani Iyer before his violin concerts— solo/duet, in which the latter was to provide percussion support and would discuss the 'pallavi' with him. He stuck to this practice even when there was very little time. On one occasion, both returned to Madras after a train journey of two days, arriving late in the afternoon and were scheduled to play together that very evening. Still, Jayaraman rushed back from home to call on Mani Iyer before the concert; the latter was surprised and touched as well.

Asked about any special selection in the repertoire for the solo/duet concerts with Mani Iyer, Jayaraman mentioned Tyagaraja kriti-s like *Heccharika* (Yadukulakambhoji), *Ninnuvina sukhamugana* (Todi), *Pakkala nilabadi* (Kharaharapriya), choosing an intermediate tempo ("rendungettaan kalapramanam") for special effect. Mani Iyer was very fond of Lalgudi's tillana-s, particularly the one in Behag (Adi - tisra gati).

During the 'mikeless' phase of his career, Mani Iyer, along with Rajamani, accompanied nearly thirty violin duets of Lalgudi with sister Srimathi Brahmanandam. Mani Iyer also accompanied Jayaraman in solo concerts, and, in later years, a few of Jayaraman's duets with his son G.J.R. Krishnan.

On one occasion, Mani Iyer was engaged to accompany Jayaraman in a single violin open-air concert at Vizianagaram. Jayaraman had his apprehensions, but Mani Iyer sought to reassure him about the success of the concert saying "*Naan paartukkaren, nee vaasi*" (I'll take care, you play). It was so successful that four such concerts followed soon after.

This illustrates, as Lalgudi points out, that Mani Iyer would contribute his best towards the total quality of the concert and not play just for his individual glory and would adjust the kalapramanam. In general, Mani Iyer would play in a 'non-intimidating' manner when accompanying 'junior' artists and when there was an upa-pakkavadyam.

Jayaraman describes his admiration for the art of Mani Iyer with terms like "usatthi", "kacchidam", "poornatvam", and "siddhi".

Some other factors he refers to about Mani Iyer's playing are:

- ❖ playing for the song, not for the 'sollukattu';
- ❖ never monotonous or sagging;
- ❖ playing in different styles for the main vocalist and for the accompanying violinist during their turns;
- ❖ capacity to take any slip in his stride, a rarity, during the run of the play itself;

- ❖ judgement when to play and when not, and joining after pauses in a ‘dramatic’ manner with full understanding of the creative nuances of the main artist, allowing them to communicate and be appreciated better;
- ❖ ‘camphor like’ brain (*karpooora buddhi*), eloquent execution, captivating both the cognoscenti and the lay alike;
- ❖ majestic stage by stage build up of the korvai patterns;

- ❖ brilliance in the tonal quality, clarity and crispness of the syllables, large variety in the patterns of the Adi tala itself;
- ❖ substantial, (‘vivaram’), and with remarkable sense of proportion— “*Ethai eppo, evvalavu, eppadi kodukka vendumo, appadi koduppar*”;
- ❖ a special liking for Tyagaraja kriti-s, Ata tala varnam, and trikalam negotiation.

MANNA SRINIVASAN

T.K. Murthy on Palghat Mani

“I need just six months to train this youngster.” That was my guru Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer assuring Sesham Bhagavatar, father of Palghat Mani Iyer. Six months later, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar performed at the Naalu Kaal Mandapam in Tanjavur. Chowdiah was on the violin and Dakshinamoorthy Pillai on the khanjira. My guru approached Chembai and said, “You may sing anything— a song or a pallavi— this boy can handle it.” This anecdote about the great Palghat Mani Iyer was related to me by my guru.

Mani Iyer was my co-student though elder to me by seven or eight years. My teacher would often describe his brilliance as “Electric Brain”. Mani Iyer and I shared a close relationship. As youngsters, many were the days when we ate and slept together. It was he who shortened my name from Krishnamurthy to Murthy. The incident that led to the rechristening happened in 1937, after a concert at R.R. Sabha. Musiri Iyerval was the main performer with Mani Iyer on the khanjira and me on the mridanga. While noting down the names of the artists, prior to announcing the credits, the secretary made a casual observation that my name was too long and Mani Iyer promptly said, “Note down his name as Murthy.” The shortened form came to stay.

It would not be an empty assertion to say that it is Mani Iyer who has given the mridanga an elevated status and for this contribution, the entire music world should always remember him with gratitude. When the general tendency was for people to leave the hall during the tani avartanam, Mani Iyer’s playing compelled listeners to stay in their seats. He was a rare genius. There was not a “sol” that he could not negotiate and a stalwart no less than Flute Mali marvelled, “Mani Iyer is infallible as far as the beats of the mridanga go. There is

no korvai of his that does not land at the right spot in the tala. I don’t know how he manages it so perfectly and so consistently.”

On the occasion of the wedding of T.S. Baliah’s daughter, Madurai Mani Iyer’s concert was arranged. Accompanying him were Lalgudi Jayaraman on the violin, Palani Subramania Pillai on the khanjira and Mani Iyer on the mridanga. The seating arrangement was such that the two percussionists faced each other. The concert was brilliant. The following day, I happened to meet Palani Subramania Pillai and complimented him on the sterling performance. He replied, “Ennanga, avar Vali maadiri balatthai izhutidaraaru.” (Like the opponents of the mythical Vali who lost their strength to him, Mani Iyer’s playing had a mesmerising charm that incapacitated fellow-performers).

If Mani Iyer made up his mind to boost the impact of any particular song in a concert, he could and would do it. In straight contrast to the grandeur of his mridanga performance, was his simplicity in several mundane matters. I do not ever recall seeing him clad in a zari dhoti. It was always a simple four-yard dhoti. No ornaments either. While dwelling on this characteristic of his, I recall a rather funny incident. The occasion was the ‘Presidential Award’ ceremony. Mani Iyer was slated to receive the award along with a few others like Bismillah Khan. On that particular occasion, I was accompanying M.S. Subbulakshmi for a concert. The citation was printed on a scroll and packed in a cylindrical container made of sandal wood. After the day’s function, Mani Iyer walked over to me and said, “This container seems to be made of sandal wood. What should I do with it? Do you think it could be ground and used?” And, despite my protestations, that was exactly what he did.

When he was ailing, and in the last stages of his life,

I went to see him. A crowd had gathered around his bedside. Spotting me, he called me over. He hugged me and asked emotionally, “Do you think I’ll ever play again?”

History is not going to witness another mridanga vidwan like Mani Iyer. Comparable to his artistic expertise were

Karaikudi Mani on Palghat Mani

Palghat Mani Iyer was my inspiration from my childhood. As a teenager I used to ape his mannerisms; I had cut my hair very short like him. He had the habit of leaving pauses during his playing, which created a good effect. I started doing that, only I did it a little too often and Subbudu once criticised me for it!

Tyagaraja aradhana used to be celebrated in Devakottai annually those days. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar lived in the house opposite to ours in Karaikudi. When I was studying SSLC, he asked me to come to the aradhana and play the mridanga there in the presence of stalwarts like Palghat Mani. I was asked to play for the last Pancharatna kriti *Endaro mahanubhavulu*. Ariyakudi introduced me to Palghat Mani and asked him to take me as his disciple. He however advised me to complete my education and then come to him. But the following year when my father took me to meet him, he said educated boys would not like to stay in the gurukulam. My father was quite upset and we left.

I used to practise the *sollu-s* that Palghat Mani played. I came to Chennai in 1961. I saw that while the audience appreciated what he played, when I played the same *sollu-s* there was no reaction! It took me almost thirty years to realise that mine had only been a faithful copy, and there had been no life in it.

When accompanying in a concert, Palghat Mani would leave the *sangati-s* alone in the first two cycles while the vocalist sang. Later he would repeat what the artist had sung, and it would seem as if the mridanga was singing. He was the first one to do so. He could make or mar a concert. When his popularity was at its peak, he came to know that a particular vocalist had raised doubts about his greatness. The next time he accompanied that musician, Mani Iyer played without getting involved in the music. Some of the popular songs of the musician which usually won him applause did not evoke any response that day. But suddenly when he started singing a simple song, *Entani ne* in Mukhari, Palghat Mani played in such a way that the audience spontaneously burst into applause.

Whenever he had some problem with a *korvai*, he would

fill the resultant gap with related *sollu-s* in an indiscernible way. There was such clarity in the way he played that there was weight in each *sollu*. “Avar kaiyil aparimitamaana naadam”. Musicians considered it an honour if he accompanied them in their concerts.

When he came to Chennai he would stay with Prof. Venkatanarasimhan (Dr. C.V. Krishnaswamy’s father) in Palathope, Mylapore. They were close friends. Venkatanarasimhan told me that Palghat Mani never talked much; and when he did he hardly ever said anything for or against anyone.

Those days there were only about four or five major *sabhas* like the Music Academy, Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha, Indian Fine Arts and the Tamil Isai Sangam. Most of them organised a series of concerts in connection with Tyagaraja Utsavam. Four out of eight concerts would have Palghat Mani Iyer. His date was fixed first and the major musicians would adjust their dates according to his convenience, because they felt that his mridanga accompaniment would enhance the quality of their concerts.

When he started accompanying D.K. Pattammal, he was already insisting on mikeless concerts. For DKP’s concerts with the mike, I used to play the mridanga. On one such occasion Mani Iyer had come to listen to my playing.

When Palghat Mani and MLV were at Rishi Valley School, Venkatanarasimhan and caterer Mani Iyer used to visit him. Once Venkatanarasimhan asked him whether he had heard me play the mridanga. Mani Iyer responded saying that his ‘namesake’ had quite a good following, and had evolved a different *bani*. “He will come up very well,” he said. Venkatanarasimhan mentioned this to me only after Palghat Mani’s death. These words are my greatest reward. No other award or title matters to me.

When he was ill and was staying with his son Rajamani at Kalamasseri in Kerala, I visited him along with Sivakumar (Sangeetha Sivakumar’s father and T.M. Krishna’s father-in-law). I was able to get some good mangoes for him although it was not the season, as I was told that he had expressed his wish for the tasty fruit. He was very happy

As told to

LAKSHMI DEVNATH

to receive them. I spent over an hour with him; he clarified many of my doubts about technique, *kanakku*, *nada*, etc. I was quite selective about accepting concerts and he questioned me about it and also asked my age. I was about 30 then and he said: "I am 60!"

Mani Iyer's professional integrity was remarkable. If any organisation approached him for a concert, he would accept it if he was free on that date, but would not suggest alternative dates. Once he had a concert on a Sunday in Bombay, when a *sabha* in Poona asked him for the same date. He told the organisers that he was not free, and did not mention a word about the Bombay concert. The critic K.S. Mahadevan, who was with him then, asked him why he had not suggested that he could play on the day before, as Poona was very near Bombay. But all that Palghat Mani said was, "They have to suggest the date". He conducted his profession in a dignified manner.

New year with a bang

“Let us celebrate this new year with a bang”, said our friend when we visited him at his home. The usual thing, we thought. But when our friend explained, we understood that he had deliberately spoken to us in English in order to pun on the word ‘bang’. Yes, he had booked tickets for the concert of Flute Ramani. Accompanying him would be T.N. Krishnan on the violin and Palghat T.S. Mani Iyer on the mridanga. That explained the word ‘bang’. The concert at Sastri Hall on January 1st 1979 was to be mikeless.

We counted the days impatiently and with a bit of suspense as the last week of 1978 saw rains battering Chennai relentlessly, thus effectively spoiling the last half of the music season. What if the January 1st concert got cancelled because of heavy rains? But the new year was kind. After breakfast at home we rushed to Sastri Hall and took our seats at 8 am, securing for ourselves vantage positions in order to be able to ‘see’ Mani Iyer and observe his playing. Came the maestro at around 8.40 accompanied by his disciples. Though one had seen him at close quarters many times, his personality never failed to inspire awe and respect.

The concert started at 9 am with a *varnam*. As there were no mikes the full house audience had to sit in pin drop silence, and so they did. The concert progressed with Mani Iyer playing softly without the bang or the thunder many associate him with. Soft, and silken smooth were his touches while playing for Ramani. But it was while playing for Krishnan's *niraval* and *swara* delineations that Mani Iyer showed why he was unanimously termed a genius. A mikeless violin even in a small auditorium like Sastri Hall becomes inaudible beyond the third row if the mridanga is accompanying it. Krishnan or

Mridanga was his life. When he was not playing it, he would be working on the instrument with the help of technicians, rearranging some parts, trying to improve the quality. He had a few men to do it— Paraland, Rajamanickam, Setty. He would never use the stone to increase the *sruti*, only for decreasing it; his mridanga was so finely tuned. On the stage the mridanga could do what he wanted: "Avar *ninaithadai athu seyyum*".

I feel that any mridanga vidwan today, before he begins to play in a concert should pay obeisance first to his guru and then to Palghat Mani Iyer. His contribution was phenomenal. It was a 'sahaptam'. When he passed away I wrote to Rajamani, "That he has passed away is news, but it is as though the mridangam itself is dead".

As told to
V. KARPAGALAKSHMI

any other violinist wouldn't have any problem while playing raga replies. But with mridanga sounding along? Well, believe it or not, the softest touches of Krishnan could be heard even in the last row. Reason? Mani Iyer's sensitive and sublime playing. How Mani Iyer managed to play in a softer volume than the violin is beyond explanation. But he did exactly that. If it was an aural feast to *rasika-s*, it was an object lesson not only to other percussionists but other musicians as well on the utter necessity to be sensitive, to be without any trace of ego, to get rid of temptation to gain the upper hand in a concert. A music concert is a team effort and should be conducted as such. And the *rasika-s* need to be sensitive and disciplined themselves. The answer: mikeless concerts.

The sensitivity and the sublimity did not end there. Mani Iyer's *tani* which lasted just five minutes was sweetness itself and the ultimate in mridanga melody. It was truly a new year celebrated with a bang, but with a sublime bang. It will remain in memory forever.

RAVI & SRIDHAR

Palghat Mani's disciples

The list of disciples is a long one: Kalpathi Ramanathan, Palghat Raghu, Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman, Palghat Kunjumani, M.L. Veerabhadriah, V. Kamalakar Rao, V. Nagarajan, Tanjavur Ramdoss, Atluri Venkat Rao, Yella Somanna, Pudukode Krishnan, L.V. Krishnan, V.S. Krishna Iyer, Chadalavada Krishnamoorthy, P. Srinivasan, K.M. Krishnamoorthy, Kollengode Ramakrishnan, T.R. Rajamani (son), Mavelikkara Velukutty Nair, Shencottah Rajamani, Palakkad Suresh, Trivandrum V. Surendran, S. Anand, P.C. Ramakrishna.

The names of those who studied only for a short period have not been included. ■

Palghat Mani and MLV

“*Beshaa paadaraal, pakshe ippo vendaame*” (she sings very well, but well, not for the present). This was the answer the maestro gave to several concert organisers in his Malayalam accented Palakkad Tamil. For about five or six years Palghat Mani Iyer was reluctant to play for M.L. Vasanthakumari, though he was regularly accompanying his *sambandhi* (his daughter’s mother-in-law) D.K. Pattammal. Mani Iyer had never played for lady musicians for more than forty years.

Suddenly one day in 1977, Mani Iyer agreed to play for Vasanthakumari. This no mean feat was achieved by an all-women run sabha called Raga Tarangini. Came that day and all roads led to Sastri Hall. The cognoscenti of Madras and the avid rasika-s of Mylapore turned up in large numbers licking their chops. Among the audience were several leading musicians of the day. S. Ramanathan sat in front of the dais on the ground, a perfect picture of humility. It was to be, yes, a mikeless concert. These scribes do not remember much of that concert except that the two great musicians made an excellent combination. Thereafter Mani Iyer started playing for MLV almost regularly.

We particularly remember a concert at Sastri Hall in 1978. It was attended by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, MS and Sadasivam. After the Kalyani varnam, MLV sang the Tyagaraja song in Sreeranjani, *Sogasuga mridanga talamu*, probably as a tribute to the mridanga maestro. Mani Iyer acknowledged the tribute by playing exactly as mentioned in the song. Soft and full of sophisticated shades, he caressed the mridanga like a child. It was verily ‘*draaksha rasa navarasa*’. The audience was more moved than thrilled.

The RTP was in Bhairavi. MLV started on the pallavi after an excellent alapana and tanam. Mani Iyer roared and inspired MLV to give of her best. Roared we said and yet there was not the slightest hint of noise. The audience this time was more thrilled than moved. The tani as was the master’s wont, was brief. It lasted five minutes. The sweetness of the tani cannot be described in words. The audience left convinced that they had been transported to another world that evening.

Mani Iyer who used to design his own mridanga-s seems to have taken special care while making an instrument to suit and match MLV’s voice. There is an HMV record of MLV singing to Mani Iyer’s accompaniment which stands testimony to the kind of care and attention Mani Iyer paid to tone and its suitability to individual musicians. It is well

known that Mani Iyer incorporated elements of the Kerala chenda, edakka and tayambaka in his playing and made them part of his artistry. In this particular recording Mani Iyer’s mridanga sounds like the edakka, soft and caressing, yet possessing a masculine timbre. This eminently suited MLV’s music which was of course feminine, yet with a masculine ‘gambheeram’. The master’s sensitivity, his inimitable artistry, his penchant for ‘poruttam’ can all be discerned in this recording. Particularly stunning is his playing for the Madhyamavati pallavi, the kalpana swara-s in it and his tani. The two great artists were certainly made for each other. One wished they had begun performing together much earlier, at least in the 1960s.

The relationship between the two blossomed into a fine one, so much so that Mani Iyer insisted upon MLV joining the Rishi Valley school so that she could come out of her then depressed mental state caused by family problems. MLV found the much needed peace and quiet in the sylvan surroundings and in the deeply inspiring teachings of the patron-saint of that school J. Krishnamurti. She never tired of expressing her gratitude to the mridanga genius for the personal help he had rendered her. After Mani Iyer’s death, MLV made it a point to mention publicly that, apart from DKP and herself, Mani Iyer had also played for M.S. Subbulakshmi at a house concert and that MS herself had told her so.

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

Palghat Mani Iyer taught mridanga to the students of the Rishi Valley school near Madanapalli in Andhra Pradesh for a couple of years. Sometime towards the end of 1978, Mani Iyer gave a solo recital at the school auditorium. J. Krishnamurti sat in front on the floor and silently listened to Mani Iyer’s elevating touches on the mridanga. At the end of it, he stood up, took Mani Iyer’s hand in his and said to him, “Mr. Mani Iyer, even if you are born as Palghat Mani Iyer in your next birth you will not be able to play the mridanga like this.” Sunanda Patwardhan who was in charge of the world headquarters of the Krishnamurti Foundation in Madras, translated it into Tamil for Mani Iyer’s benefit. Mani Iyer remained silent only for a few seconds and realising the deep meaning behind the words of the seer nodded and told him, “Yes, you are right.” What Krishnaji meant was that, for Mani Iyer, his art was his meditation. Elevating himself through his art he moved and elevated rasika-s too. Therefore, he had no more of karma left to fulfill. He had fulfilled his karma-s in this birth itself through his great art.

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E - BOOK EDITION

PALGHAT T.S. MANI IYER

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