

## SPECIAL FEATURE

identifying and issuing identity cards to numerous folk musicians in Tamil Nadu.

### Miscellany

Kunnakudi had a number of dance compositions to his credit. In the mid-sixties he composed *Ezhai Uzhavan* (The Poor Ploughman) for the dancer Kuchalakumari. He later composed lyrics and music for many of Krishnakumari Narendran's thematic dance productions.

Kunnakudi acted in two films – in *Kandar Alangaram* as a violinist, and in *Taat Poot Tanjavur* as the principal of a music college.

One of the movies produced by Kunnakudi was *Todi Ragam*, which starred Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan. It bombed at the box office.

### Awards and titles

Over the years, Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan won several awards and titles for his virtuosity in playing the violin, for his creative interpretations of thematic and devotional subjects, for the music composed/ directed by him for films, etc. A select list:

*Yezhisai Entthal*, awarded by the Sree Krishna Chaitanya Math near Nagercoil. This was the very first title awarded to Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan.

## Tribute to a Guru

Reams have been written on this extraordinary violinist, a crowd puller who had the enviable capacity to please both the connoisseur and the layman alike. Kunnakudi Saar, as we used to call him, died of cardiac failure, after being admitted to hospital for brief periods during the last three months. Though it came as a shock to the music fraternity, he had lived his seventy plus years to the fullest and had distinguished himself in various arenas, bringing fame to the Murugan kshetra called Kunnakudi, in Sivaganga District, Tamil Nadu.

It was my good fortune that he accepted me as a disciple in vocal music when I approached him with the request more than five years ago. The experience gave me an insight into his remarkable mind which functioned at once as a performer and a composer. I benefited greatly by observing him while composing – he would take

*Bharata Violin Vadya Bhaskara*, (from Kunnakudi's spiritual guru, Pudukotai Sadguru Sree Santananda Swamigal of Bhuvaneswari Peetham)

*Isai Perarignar*, Tamil Isai Sangam, Chennai

*Kalaimamani*, Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram

*Nada Brahmam*, Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai

*Pannisai Arasu*, Tamizh Isai Sangam, Tiruvaiyaru

*Sangeeta Ratna*, the Mysore Chowdiah memorial award, Bangalore

*Tirai Isai Mannar*, awarded by the Saurashtra Isai Rasikar Sangam Madurai

*Violin Samrat*, awarded by the Delhi Karnataka Sangeeta Sabha

*State Artist* (1984-87) of the Tamil Nadu State government

*Asthana Vidwan*, Kanchi Kamakoti Math, Sringeri Math and Tiruvavaduturai Adheenam

*Violin Isai Chakravarti*, awarded by the Federation of Sabha-s in 1992. Vaidyanathan was presented with a gold violin, made of 25 sovereigns of gold, to mark his silver jubilee year as a solo violinist

*Sangeet Natak Akademi award*, New Delhi

*Padma Shri*, Government of India



Geetha Raja with her guru at a recording studio in Vadapalani

one look at a line of sahitya and dictate the swara-s to the singer, never singing in the beginning. The vocalist would then sing the piece from notation and he would



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now sing and embellish it further. Many times, there would be swarakshara beauties, because he would not let go an opportunity to have the same sounding swara for a sahitya, as in the famous ragamalika song *Vendriduven* in the film *Agathiar*. There is a song bit in Saramati where the sahitya is “parihaasama, saahasama” and he uses the swara-s “*pa ri ga sa ma, sa ga sa ma*”. *Marudamalai mamaniye Murugaiya* composed in the raga Darbari Kanada and sung by an emotionally charged Madurai Somu in the film, *Deivam*, was an instant hit. So were innumerable devotional songs set to music by him for the Soolamangalam Sisters.

A hallmark of many of his songs was that they were composed in the upper octave – he felt it would be more impressive and make an impact on the listener’s mind. He would ask me to observe laya intricacies and instill in me the importance of maintaining kalapramanam or tempo. With his training, I became more proficient in Tamil and also developed the ability to identify swarasthanam-s quickly and notate new songs. He was a very inspiring guru who lavished a father’s affection on me, and very soon I became a part of his family.

The Raga Vaibhavam programmes which he conducted under the auspices of the Raga Research Centre, initiated in 1992 by the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, J. Jayalithaa, were extremely popular and educative. Indian music is internationally recognised as raga music. In addition to the raga lakshana or grammar of music, it has been proved that there is a lakshya or an ideal in raga-s. The aim of rendering a raga is to communicate a feeling and thus the raga or mode conveys a mood. He often spoke of the power of the antara gandhara to convey happiness as in a raga like Mohanam or the power of the sadharana gandhara to give a tinge of pathos as in a raga like Subhapanthuvrali.

His favourite raga-s, among many others were Abheri, Shanmukhapriya, Bhairavi, Hindolam. Saar used to tell us that his father, Harikatha Praveena Ramaswamy Sastri played various instruments like the violin, jalatarangam and flute. He had written about the sakti of raga-s and this had inspired Saar to take up research into their therapeutic powers.

Kunnakudi Saar served in the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram for two terms and was the Secretary of Sri Tyagabrahma Mahotsava Sabha, Tiruvaiyaru, continuously for more than twenty five years. His devotion to Sri Tyagabrahmam was total and he did monumental work in collecting funds for the

annadaanam and successful conduct of the utsavam. For him, Tyagaraja was a divine presence and he would get emotional when he performed the abhishekam for the saint’s idol during the aradhana.

His father very aptly named him “Vaidyanathan”, because, as Vaidya-nathan (excellent in medicine), he played the Bhairavi raga for hours at his ailing father’s bedside and brought him out of a coma.

Like his ishta devata Muruga or Arumuga – the six-faced Lord, whom he used to call upon often, Saar was multifaceted and had at least six interesting aspects to his personality – he was an accomplished performer, caring guru, music researcher, composer of film music, devotional music composer and able administrator.

Kunnakudi Saar’s vibrant and unique style of violin playing which appealed to both ‘paamara’ and ‘pandita’ was his gift to the music world. With his ‘asura sadhakam’ and mastery over the instrument, breathtakingly fast swaraprastara even in rare raga-s was child’s play for him. Easily approachable, he was friend, philosopher and guide to many and his smiling face will be sorely missed. May the soul of this genius rest in peace and may he continue to inspire and guide us in our musical endeavours.

GEETHA RAJA

## Violinist with a fan club!

**K**unnakudi R. Vaidyanathan left an indelible mark on Carnatic music. Many of us knew him as a great violinist with absolute control over the instrument which could sing, speak and converse with people. Such was the strength he possessed in his fingers to play the violin.

He was the only violinist who could draw thousands of listeners – of course by playing to the gallery with a small portion of Carnatic music amidst many film songs.

He was an “ekasantaagrahi” who could capture any music in his violin on hearing it once. He toured all over the world and wherever he went, he was greeted with enthusiasm by music lovers.

He was the only Carnatic musician who had a fan club. Whenever he went on his musical tours his fans would assemble and greet him at the railway station, which is unique for a Carnatic musician.

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Kunnakudi was a traditionalist and developed research study on the effects of Carnatic music on the human body. His Raga Research Centre attracted many musicians of fame and had them participating in his research orientation seminars.

He was a true friend and a big organiser. He held the General Secretary post in the Tyagabrahma

Mahotsava Sabha which conducts the annual aradhana festival of saint Tyagaraja, testimony to his organising capacity.

He was a multifaceted personality and the music world has lost a great artist.

**R. KRISHNASWAMI**  
Secretary, Narada Gana Sabha



## KUNNAKUDI VAIDYANATHAN A TRIBUTE TO MY GURU

by Geetha Raja

Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan's foray into the world of music reads like a dramatic scene from a film and he would often quote it in his interviews probably as an inspiration to would be aspirants of music to reiterate that God's ways are inscrutable. The violinist playing regularly for his sisters Subbulakshmi and Sundaralakshmi did not turn up for a concert at his native place Kunnakudi and his angry father vowed to make Vaidyanathan a great violin vidwan. The young lad of nine learnt from his father, practised assiduously for a year and had the wonderful opportunity to accompany the celebrated musician and his father's friend, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, in a concert very soon! He started accompanying stalwarts like Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Madurai Mani Iyer, S.Balachander and M.K.Thyagaraja Bhagavathar.

Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan played a key role in transforming the violin from a supporting instrument or pakka vadyam to a solo instrument or pakkaa vadyam. Through adapting a different and revolutionary cut-bowing and fingering technique which gave importance to proper enunciation of sahitya, he was able to bring the words of the songs before the audience - this requisite was important in the film songs he played and through which he garnered mass adulation. Through his sheer mastery over the instrument and his exceptional mike sense, he was able to cater to huge audiences, especially all over the four southern States of Karnataka, Kerala, Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh. Between 1974 and 1985, he presented the unique thavil and violin combination of Kunnakudi - Valayapatti with

concerts mounting to more than three thousand in those ten years!

He was one of the musicians who took Carnatic music to the rural areas and even an illiterate villager could identify him and

empathise with him. He travelled far and wide, visiting most countries in the world, like Singapore, Malaysia, Srilanka, Europe, the Middle East, Australia and so on. Cheerful by nature, he reinforced this quality in his performances and said that one has to communicate joy and happiness through music.

Being the Secretary for the Thyagaraja Mahotsava Sabha at Thiruvaiyaru continuously for twenty five years was a rare achievement and he considered it a benediction from Thyagarajaswami himself. Serving at Thiruvaiyaru was a cause extremely dear to his heart and he has often related stories of how he collected funds for the annadhanam and the successful conduct of the Uthsavam. Kunnakudi Sir's association with All India Radio is well known, where as a music composer, he was invited to compose music for more than thirty Vadya Vrinda programmes, many of which won awards. He took up special themes like Manushyathvam, Makara Jyoti, Bharathi Dasan's Kudumba Vilakku and Kannadasan's songs about the twelve Tamil months.

In the realm of devotional music, he composed the music for hundreds of songs



and was music composer for more than fifty films, starting with A.P.Nagarajan's Vaa Raja Vaa in 1968.

It was my good fortune that he accepted me as a disciple in vocal music five years ago and introduced me to a whole new world of ragas and swaras. Because it was instrumental music, listening to him playing on the violin developed my swara gnanam and I was able to perfect my skills in notating songs. It was a delight to watch him compose and teach the vocalist - it could be a devotional song or lyrics for a dance drama - the composing was all on the spot. There would be a harmonium and a tabla giving constant melodic and percussive accompaniment throughout the session and other members of the orchestra would also listen in. While composing, Kunnakudi Sir would write the background music extremely fast, in musical shorthand and usually an assistant would dictate it to the various instrumentalists in the orchestra. Sometimes the songs and the instrumental background music would all be recorded in the studio the same day - it was a very interesting and educative experience.

Just as my swara gnanam benefitted, my exposure to ragas like Shanmukhapriya and Abheri, and audava light ragas like Shivaranjani, Rathipathipriya and Revathi increased and my musical horizons widened. I was able to appreciate Tamil lyrics much better and I had access to information on yesteryear music and musicians. It was a real pleasure to watch him teach young violin students with patience and a fantastic sense of humour. While teaching, Kunnakudi Sir would always emphasize the importance of maintaining kalapramanam or tempo, - that is, a Muthuswami Dikshithar slow paced song and a Thyagaraja fast paced Krithi should

be sung in the appropriate kalapramanams respectively - which would bring out the beauty in the compositions.

In the Raga Vaibhavam programmes conducted over the last five years under the auspices of the Raga Research Centre, he would point out the lyrical and structural subtleties in the songs sung by the participating artistes and awaken in the listener a thirst to find out more about the intrinsic excellence of these compositions. By means of the Raga Vaibhavam programmes, he explored the compositions of the Carnatic music trinity and other vaggeyakaras, which formed the basis of his research into the raga. He believed that the raga was a "devathai" and was convinced that ragas could cure rogas or ailments. In the year 1993, with a panel of doctors, vedic scholars and musicians, he discussed the therapeutic values of music and patented the findings for Anandabhairavi - a cure for hypertension and blood pressure and Shankarabharanam - a raga which soothes and restores peace and harmony in the body.

Kunnakudi Sir exemplified Thomas Carlyle's dictum, "Work is worship" and said often, "Thozhilukku mariyadai kodukkanum". He spoke to his students about his practising days when he used to do "riyaz" for hours at a stretch without thought of food or sleep and the rich dividends it paid him.

Notwithstanding his image as a top performer and a busy administrator, he was accessible to all and a very down to earth human being who had a kind word and a smile for everybody. His passing away on 8th Sep. 2008 marks the end of a glorious chapter in the annals of violin playing. May the soul of this genius rest in peace and may he shower his blessings on all seekers in their quest for excellence in music. □