

## Palghat Mridangam Mani Iyer

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**MY** good friend Yagnaraman asked me to write a few words about Late Palghat Mani Iyer as he thought I was his only close friend. I must at once correct his impression. No doubt he had only a few friends and I know personally that Yagnaraman, the dynamic Secretary of Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, apart from the musical relationship with Mani Iyer was one whom Sri Palghat Mani Iyer held in esteem and affection and who with or without mike was his constant companion till the end. I can only repeat about Mani Iyer and his life what I have already written in several other articles.

For nearly five decades I have known Sri Palghat Mridangam Vidwan Sri T. S. Mani Iyer in such close and personal friendship.

Born in 1912, Sri Mani Iyer was given the name Ramaswamy, after his grand father who was also a performing musician. His father Sri T. R. Sesha Bhaghavathar and mother Smt. Anandambal were then living at Tiruvilvamai (Near Palghat), famous for its shrine of Sri Rama. Sri Sesha Bhaghavathar was a noted musician and accompanying singer to Mukke Sivaramakrishna Bhaghavathar of Harikatha fame, and also for some time to Tiruppayanam Panchapagesa Bhaghavathar in his Harikatha performance, which was one of the chief forms of entertainment in those days.

Sri Mani Iyer's school education was only upto the fifth standard and thereafter he started learning the rudiments of tala from his father. In his ninth year he was sent to Sathapuram Subbier, a well known mridangam vidwan who was later honoured by the Music

Academy. At that tender age, as Mani Iyer was trying to learn the beginning of the art from Sri Subbier, the hand of destiny guided him towards Sri Viswanatha Iyer, a neighbour. Sri Viswanatha Iyer was gifted in the art of Mridangam and though not a professional, had attained very high proficiency in playing the Mridangam by a natural flair fostered by intelligent listening to the Vadya played by some of the great vidwans of that time. Sri Viswanatha Iyer took a great fancy for young Mani who was playing nimbly on the instrument and used to take the budding genius to his house and make him play along with him. In three or four months with Sri Viswanatha Iyer, young Mani picked up the art of playing the mridangam dexterously. At home his father used to teach him to play for Harikatha pieces like Saki and Dandi.

Sri Mani Iyer's first performance was for a Harikatha by Sri Sivaramakrishna Bhagavathar. On that day the scheduled Mridangam Vidwan did not turn up and Sri Viswanatha Iyer took his place. After playing for a little while, Sri Viswanatha Iyer called Mani (who was keenly listening in the audience), to the stage and gave him the mridangam to continue for the rest of the Katha, which of course he did to the appreciation of one and all. Thus began his introduction to the music world. Thereafter he became a regular accompanist for Sivaramakrishna Bhagavathar and he started accompanying for the vocal music performance by his father. At Lankeshwaran temple in Chittoor he was first honoured in one of his father's concerts with a medal. Thereafter he accompanied Sri Palghat Rama

Bhagavathar and Enhappadam Venkatarama Bhagavathar for some time.

At this time he attracted the attention of Sri Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, whom he first accompanied in a performance at a festival in Chembai. Sri Chembai took instant liking to Mani's mridangam and they together went to Calcutta, Banaras and other places. The tour was a grand success, but only the beginning of the great fame Mani Iyer was to achieve in the years to come. Sri Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar introduced Mani to the Madras audience in a performance at the Jagannatha Bhakta Sabha

introduced Mani first to the Music Academy which was just then started. He was about 14 years of age at that time.

When he was fifteen, he once went for a performance near Tanjore, where he chanced to meet Mridanga Vidwan Tanjore Vaidyanatha Iyer who was an institution by himself and about whose eminence in the art he had heard much. This meeting blossomed into a fruitful one as Sri Vaidyanatha Iyer took a great liking in teaching the intricacies of the art to Mani who, in his turn, showed exceptional devotion, enthusiasm and grasp of the art from this master.



in 1924. The sabha authorities had thought that Mani was too young and had, therefore, arranged Mridangam Sankara Menon also to play for Chembai. Needless to say that Mani captivated the audience that day by his sheer brilliance; the late Vidwan Jalatarangam Ramaniah Chettiar was so pleased that he presented a medal to Mani. Sri Chembai

It was in one of Sri Palladam Sanjeeva Rao's recitals, that Mani met Sri Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. Sri Sanjeeva Rao arranged for Ariyakudi's concert for his son's wedding and Mani Iyer accompanied Iyengar for the first time there. This heralded an era of one of the great combinations on the Carnatic music stage of Iyengar and Mani Iyer, for

nearly five decades during which this combination continued unbroken, was a memorable period indeed.

It was at a palace wedding at Trivandrum that Mani Iyer first came across Sri Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer and Sri Rajamanickam Pillai and the three gave an exquisite kutcheri there. Sri Dakshinamurthy Pillai, the great master in Mridangam and Kanjeera had a profound influence on Mani Iyer. They both had performed together as co-accompanists in Kanjeera and Mridangam, on numerous occasions all over south. It was indeed thrilling to recapitulate the scintillating performances of these two laya giants in those days, unrivalled for their majesty in play, uncanny anticipation, and unsurpassed harmony and speed, sound effects, combination dovetailing as it were one into the other. Mani Iyer has accompanied almost every leading artiste of the time like Sri Musiri Subramania Iyer, Sri Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Sri Naina Pillai, Sri G. N. B., Sri Alathoor Brothers and Sri Madurai Mani Iyer. He had also accompanied several eminent lady artistes like, Srimathi D. K. Pattammal, his Sammandhi, and his co-Professor Srimathi M. L. Vasantha Kumari.

In particular the following aspects may be emphasised.

Vigorousness in supporting Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, especially in swara singing.

Resonant and sustained keeping of tempo to Sri Musiri Subramania Iyer for his vilambakala keerthanas.

Uncanny anticipation of Sri Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer (who is happily with us) with Rajamanickam Pillai embellishing.

Co-operation and matching speed and sangathis with G. N. B. while playing for him, with thousands of rasikas wondering whether the music was from mridangam or vice versa. His translating into mridangam the lovely delectable swara pattern woven by Madurai Mani Iyer.

His masterly accompaniment of flute mastero Sri Mahalingam, who is happily with us, and Papa Venkatramiah.

His delectable play with the inimitable genius for Chowdiah Garu and Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu Garu's solo performances.

Later his accompanying Alathoor Brothers along with Palani Subramania Pillai for their intricate swara singing and pallavis.

His persuading and accompanying with gusto for concerts by veteran Srirangam Iyengar (Madurai Brothers) for several years.

His teaching and imparting his expertise to several disciples all over India, including T. R. Rajamani, and abroad, several of whom are now prominent. And there are many more of the younger generation Vidwans whom he had encouraged by accompanying them.

He was most deservedly given the President's Award for Carnatic Instrumental Music in 1956 and later the Presidentship of the Music Academy.

In September 1965, he was invited to attend the Commonwealth Music Festival in London and simultaneously participate in the Edinburgh Festival. Needless to say that his tour of the United Kingdom was a grand success with his magic rhythm entralling the audience all over that country. He won spontaneous appreciation from such international masters like Yehudi Menuhin, who I understand, rated Mani Iyer very high in the field of rhythm instruments.

He arranged and supervised making of his own experiments in the construction of the Mridangams and spent a great deal of his time, energy and money to see that he obtained the correct tone Mridangam to suit the tune and voice and sruti of each individual artiste he accompanied. ●