

‘Vikku’ for Sangeeta Kalanidhi

The preparation for next year’s Wimbledon tennis tourney starts even before the completion of this year’s championships. Advance planning and consultations are always helpful. It is not too early now to think of the Music Academy’s choice of the next Sangeeta Kalanidhi. The President of the Academy should not fight shy of a public debate on the issue as his institution has achieved a unique place in the music and dance world and he has himself pioneered new ideas.

It is typical of the class-conscious and caste-ridden Hindu society to have used the concepts of upper and lower places in status in the field of music and dance also. For a long time women singers were considered an inferior species not fit to sing ragam-tanam-pallavi until D.K. Pattammal came along. Bharatanatyam or Sadir, as it was called, was not dignified enough to be taken up by upper class women until Rukmini Devi broke the taboo. Nagaswara vidwans were not allowed to wear shirts while performing until T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai dared to do it. Nattuvanar and party had to move behind the dancer standing while the devadasi performed until Kalakshetra gave them a proper place to sit in the side wings. Prejudices still prevail in the Carnatic music world. In the pecking order on the concert dais it is vocal, violin, mridanga, ghata, khanjira and konnakol in the descending sequence of importance. The last three artists are seated behind the others to show them their places in the

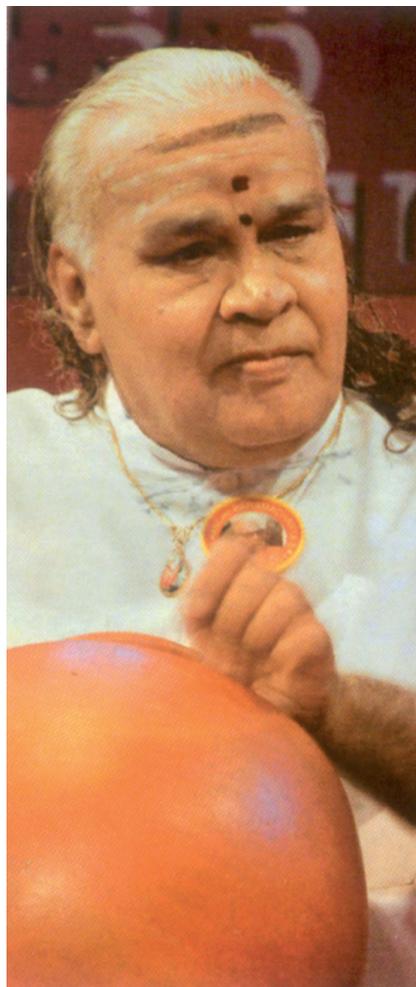
concert. There was a time when Pudukottai Manmoondia Pillai, as a khanjira player, used to sit in front of the mridanga vidwan on the dais. He attained this distinction as a consequence of his ‘victory’ in a rhythmic sawal-jawab competition he had with Patnam Subramania Iyer, the vocalist, involving a complicated pallavi. It took quite some time for the front seat to be reclaimed for the mridanga by Palghat Mani Iyer after Dakshinamoorthy Pillai, the khanjira maestro, acknowledged that the

former had outplayed him in a concert.

There are no upa-pakkavadya-s in Western music. Percussion instruments occupy such an important place that from early 20th century onwards composers have written scores specifically for them. The role of a specific percussion player may be limited to just a few occasions. But he is a full-fledged member of the orchestra. In symphonies all the members of the orchestra are equal, be they first violinists or players on cymbals. Often, usually after a long wait, a percussionist stands up and performs a single crash on a pair of cymbals but he is as important as anyone else on the stage for the audience to hear that short but brilliant splash of colour. The percussion artists are seated in the last row simply because the total strength of the orchestra is frequently more than 100 and the volumes of the sounds of their instruments are stronger than those of the rest. In Hindustani music, the tabla player is considered as essential as the ‘main’ artist.

It is time that the indignity of a fourth-class status heaped on upa-pakkavadya-s is banished once and for all from the Carnatic music world. The artificial barriers in the statuses of various performers need to be torn down. This is applicable also to the award of the title of Sangeeta Kalanidhi, not given to any upa-pakkavadya vidwan so far. I suggest that T.H. Vinayakram, the ghata maestro, be considered for the title of Sangeeta Kalanidhi

Vinayakram



POINT OF VIEW

in 2008. Right from the 1960s when, as a lad, he participated in a talavadya kutcheri at a lecture demonstration given by his father and guru Harihara Sarma at the meeting of the Experts Committee of the Academy, I have seen him grow in stature as a master of rhythm. There have been other ghata vidwans before him. But he has the unique distinction of raising the humble clay pot to the level of a major percussion instrument on the international platform.

Vinayakram already has a number of titles and honours to his name, including: Asthana Vidwan of

Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, Ghatam Nagamani given by Sri Jayendra Saraswati, Kalaimamani title from the Government of Tamil Nadu and the first central Sangeet Natak Akademi award for ghata in 1988. He was conferred the Hafiz Ali Khan Award for “unmatched contribution in the field of music” in 2000. He was the first South Indian musician to be given the Grammy for Best World Music Album for his role in Mickey Hart’s *Planet Drum*. His role in the fusion music of Shakti and JG Laya is well known. He was nominated for the 1996 Grammy Awards for Best World Music

Album for his participation along with L. Shankar and Zakir Hussain in the exposition of Abheri, set to a tala of $4\frac{3}{4}$ beats. He taught at the Centre for World Music (Berkeley, California) for some time. The Indian Government made him a Padma Shri. He has trained a number of brilliant ghata players. A Google search reveals 11,900 references to him! It should not matter that this year’s honour went to a percussion artist. Rasika-s who agree should start a massive mailing campaign in favour of the proposal by writing to the Music Academy, Chennai.

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