

Tavil maestro Valayapatti AR. Subramaniam

Manna Srinivasan

Tavil maestro Valayapatti AR. Subramaniam has become a legend in his own lifetime with his introduction of new dimensions to the art of percussion, scoring several firsts as a performing artist and bringing laurels to the traditional temple drum. His accomplishments include the performance of more than 3000 concerts with violin virtuoso Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan, and a solo tavil record brought out by HMV. His awards and honours include the title of Isai Perarignar from the Tamil Isai Sangam in 1990; the Rajaratnam memorial award from Muthamizh Peravai in 1998; the central Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1989; the Puttu Rao memorial Palghat Mani Iyer award from the Academy of Music, Bangalore in 1995; and his appointment as Asthana Vidwan of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham in 2002. The latest milestone of his life has been the conferment of the award of Sangita Kalanidhi by the Music Academy in 2009.

SRUTI's roving editor Manna Srinivasan had a freewheeling conversation with Sangita Kalanidhi designate Valayapatti. The following account highlights his accomplishments, his views on matters vital to the art form and his ideas on how to promote it.

His beginnings were humble. His father, Arumugam Pillai, a nagaswara vidwan with a good understanding of sahitya, lived in a village near Pudukkottai. A stickler for discipline, he made his son learn talam for a year before initiating him into the nagaswaram. Subramaniam was fascinated by the artistry displayed by some tavil players accompanying his father or visiting the village for concert engagements. In this context, he specially mentions the names of Iluppur Nallakumar, Perichikovil Arumugam Pillai, Poorthukovil Muthiah Pillai, and Kudumiyanmalai Shanmukham Pillai, Thirumayam Ramiah.

Self taught in the beginning, he also received guidance from his elder brother and later underwent gurukulavasam with Mannargudi Rajagopala Pillai, a disciple of Needamangalam Meenakshisundaram Pillai.

This stint instilled in him respect for the importance of bhava in rhythm.

Gradually making an impression in the concert circuit, Subramaniam went to Jaffna or Yazhpanam in Sri Lanka to perform when he was 18 years old, staying in the island



Receiving Padma Shri Award from President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (2007)



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for seven to eight months. He played and interacted with great names like Yazhpanam Dakshinamurthi Pillai, Chinnaraja and Ganesa Pillai, Chinnapalani and Visar Rajagopal gained wide experience. These opportunities provided further insights and inspiration for creative thinking.

He remembers that the concerts lasted several hours, all night sometimes, with tavil solos in three different tala-s including some rare ones. On many occasions vigorous, intricate and continuous playing caused bleeding fingers.

Later in India, playing for stalwarts like Thiruvenkadu Subramania Pillai, Kuzhikarai Pichayappa, Karukurichi Arunachalam, Tirumeignanam Natarajasundaram Pillai, Kanyakumari Sudalayandi Kambar, Tirunelveli Chinna Subbiah, Sheikh Chinna Moula, Namagiripetai Krishnan and A.K.C. Natarajan (clarinet) and the illustrious helped Valayapatti to gain significant recognition and established him in the big league. Among the highly accomplished tavil artists he has played with, Valayapatti makes particular mention of Valangaiman Shanmugasundaram, Tiruchendur Nainarsami and Tirupati Muniramaiah.

With his growing confidence and stature and restless spirit, Valayapatti found he could not remain in a confined milieu. The urge to exploit the potential of the tavil in a variety of engagements took Valayapatti to wider horizons. His jugalbandi with the violin, choreographing and leading in 'Nada Laya Natyam', accompaniment to vocal music, and contributions to film music marked him out as a pioneer amidst the tribe of tavil vidwans. His special programmes for good causes have on occasion featured a hundred tavils.

How does he coax such a variety of tonal hues from an instrument that is not amenable to sruti adjustment? Valayapatti attributes his ability to his experience and mental make-up. "Virtuosity should captivate the mind as well as touch the heart," he stresses.

An ardent devotee of the Paramacharya of Kanchi, Valayapatti frequently mentions the appreciation and blessings he received from him. Even his hotel room has a picture of the sage on the wall.

Recalling the traditional origin of our arts and artists, Valayapatti pleads for the revival of the glory of nagaswaram-tavil music at temples, without neglecting



Receiving the special Rajaratnam Memorial Award from Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi as Shivaji Ganesan looks on (Muthamizh Peravai)

With Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer



its place in the concert circuit. He laments the replacement of the mangala vadyam by other, sometimes alien, instruments during marriage ceremonies in some regions.

He is firm in his belief that steps should be taken to introduce music as a subject in schools, particularly those run by state government and local bodies, and hold monthly programmes there. Approaching the age of seventy, with six decades of service in the field, Valayapatti is as active as ever, playing the tavil ever so vibrantly, and training a large number of disciples mainly in Andhra and Kerala.

The crowning glory of Sangita Kalanidhi has come at the most appropriate time to a dedicated artist and pathbreaker.