

T.R. Navaneetham

Visitors to the Tyagaraja aradhana at Tiruvaiyaru would have noticed a frail woman sitting quietly most of the time in the amplification enclosure near the dais. She would talk occasionally to a select few; those close by could hear snatches about the past, on 'patantharam', and the like. On the 'panchami' day, the same lady would join in the flute rendition of the Bhairavi piece *Chetulara* that precedes the Pancharatna chorus. This octogenarian, who is today the seniormost among women flute artists, is the Top graded Tiruvidaimarudur Rajamanickam Navaneetham. The most recent title she received was 'Kala Seva Ratna' conferred by the Rasika Ranjani Sabha in Chennai. She has been honoured earlier by institutions like the Ramani's Academy of Flute in Chennai, the Tamizh Isai Manram in Tiruvaiyaru, and the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram which conferred on her the title of Kalaimamani.

Navaneetham was born in 1923. Hailing from an Isai Velalar family, she was first initiated into dance. Though she progressed up to the varnam stage, she switched over to the flute out of fancy. She would observe Peruncheri Muthu Pillai playing on the instrument at her house and try to imitate the action with any piece of bamboo she could lay her hands on. Pillai was a versatile artist, in nagaswaram, vocal and flute, who sang for her mother Rajamanickam's dance performances.

He would play on the flute in his spare time. Navaneetham's mock practice attracted the notice of a visiting vidwan, M.R. Krishnamurthy (younger brother of Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer), who told her mother that the child was perhaps destined to achieve fame in flute playing. Navaneetham started learning to play on the flute from Pillai, at the age of six. She had her formal 'arangetram' after two years, to the accompaniment of Terazhundur Balu Pillai on the violin and Kuttalam Sivavadivelu Pillai on the mridanga. With this, she followed the trail of earlier women pioneers in the field like Keeranoor Jayalakshmi (aka 'Silk Papa'), Valadi Rukmini and Nanna Bai. Muthu Pillai died a year after her debut. The Navaneetham family house in Tiruvidaimarudur has been named 'Muthukuzhal' in his memory.

As concert engagements increased, Navaneetham shifted to

nearby Kumbakonam, as travelling was more convenient from that town. She had further coaching in flute playing from Paravakkarai Srinivasa Iyer. When he died on the day he was to give a radio concert, Navaneetham was asked to fill the slot; she considers it as 'guru kaanikkai'. Later, she also learnt from Tirupamburam Swaminatha Pillai.



MANNA SRINIVASAN

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Navaneetham qualified herself in a composite manner to become a competent musician, learning vocal music from the age of eleven from Paravakkarai Narayanaswamy Iyer for many years and later from the doyen Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer for six months. Navaneetham proudly mentions that the musical great from Maharajapuram used to come to their house at Kumbakonam to teach her. For her vocal debut, the accompanists were Subramania Pillai (violin) and Sivavadivelu (who had played for her flute debut) on the mridanga (see photo).

Pleasant Memories of the Golden Past

Manna Srinivasan

Navaneetham is one of the few surviving musicians who had the opportunity of listening live to the legendary Dhanammal in Kumbakonam where they were neighbours. This contented 'Kalaimamani' has many pleasant memories of those harmonious days.

She once had the privilege of playing with such high profile accompanists like Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer (violin), southpaw Palani Subramania Pillai (mridanga) and the redoubtable Zamindar of Seithur (Sevuka Pandia Thevar) on the khanjira! The rarity happened as a result of the resourceful initiative of the Zamindar himself, who was greatly impressed with Navaneetham's flute playing on an earlier occasion. The generous patron presented her, then a teenager, with an emerald ring. (The Zamindar was the dignitary who inaugurated the first conference of the Music Academy in 1929.) Kapisthalam Ramasami Moopanar (uncle of Karuppiyah Moopanar) was another patron who conveyed his appreciation with a gift — a

‘venu’ itself, to the ‘gaanam’ presenter.

The nagaswaram maestro T.N. Rajarathnam Pillai (TNR), on one of his visits to Navaneetham’s house, showered praise on her after listening to the Kambhoji played by her. He also gave her valuable tips on the nuances relating to ‘viraladi’ so integral to wind instruments, and stressed the importance of sustained hard work. These tips were to prove most fruitful to the flutist.

Widely travelled within the country on concert engagements, Navaneetham recalls that in a concert in Mumbai, she played Todi, emulating her mentor TNR; and the response was such that she got six more bookings on the spot, necessitating an extended stay for twenty more days.

Another such chance interaction with an all time great, was with T.R. Mahalingam (Flute Mali). Since the initials T.R. and the musical instrument they played were the same, many were under the impression that the two were siblings. Once a party from Kovilpatti called on Mali to arrange his concert, and in the course of the conversation they posed the same question. Mali could not contain his curiosity and true to his uninhibited nature, he chose to go in search of the other T.R., along with the visiting group. At the first meeting itself Navaneetham did not hesitate to ask Mali about the secret of the uniquely beautiful ‘prati madhyama’ in his flute playing which she wanted to try. The flute genius then and there demonstrated the technique for her benefit!

Kumbakonam, in those days, was a major ‘sangeeta sthalam’ with many stalwarts residing in the town. This provided opportunities for meeting and interacting with musical greats like Dhanammal, Brinda, Muktha, and Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. With an open ‘ear’ and mind Navaneetham absorbed many good aspects of

music from different sources like Chittoor Subramania Pillai, C.S. Jayaraman and GNB. She fondly recalls a Sree Ramanavami Utsavam concert in Bangalore with T. Rukmini on the violin. T. Chowdiah was present on the occasion and was so pleased that he took the initiative to arrange her concert at the Mysore Palace in the presence of the Maharaja.

Navaneetham joined the music college in Tirupati on a teaching assignment in 1971. After a year, she shifted to the Govt. College of Music in Madras and continued to teach there till her retirement in 1982. Her students include Pakkirisami Bharathi and Raju, presently Principals of the colleges of music in Chennai and Coimbatore respectively.

Navaneetham has not made any commercial cassette recordings, nor has she gone on foreign tours.

The music and dance legacy is kept up in the family at many levels. Karunanidhi, a grandson, who learnt the violin from Alandur Nataraja Iyer is presently in the teaching faculty of the Govt. College of Music in Chennai. He is also trying out some structural changes in the instrument by introducing mandolin pattern string arrangements.

A picture of humility and personification of an integrated value based cultural make-up, the reflective Navaneetham attributes all her artistic achievements and happy frame of mind to ‘guru arul’ (teachers’ blessings) and the good fortune she had of listening to, and interacting with so many great personalities in the music field. A witness-participant of a harmonious, if romantic, musical scenario, Navaneetham has much to convey.

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