

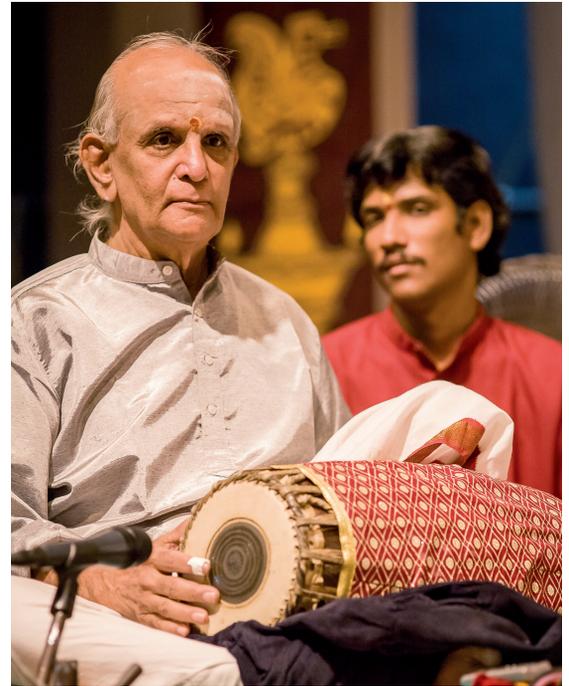
UMAYALPURAM K. SIVARAMAN The maestro at 80

V. Ramnarayan

At the Rukmini Arangam at Kalakshetra one evening a couple of years ago to accompany vocalist Sikkil Gurucharan in a concert to launch the Sruti App, the veteran mridangam maestro reached the venue ahead of the other musicians. He surveyed the facilities at the artists' dressing room, even timed how long it would take for him to go to the washroom from there, in order to be perfectly on time when the concert started. Before that, he had made sure he travelled alone in the car that brought him to Kalakshetra. Completely relaxed and fresh in body and mind, he now unwound enough to chat with the volunteers, crack a joke or two with them, and even bless the *Sruti* team and the App.

On the concert stage, he was as always seated with back ramrod straight, legs folded at the knees, the mridangam a virtual extension of his anatomy, his forehead generously streaked with vibhooti ash centred by a kumkumam dot. Dressed immaculately in a spotless veshti and bright kurta, he was a picture of concentration, yet with the suggestion of a twinkle, an avuncular warmth in his eye, as he silently encouraged Gurucharan, V. Sanjeev (violin) and Sreesundar Kumar (khanjira), the brilliant team of the evening (see photo).

Sangita Kalanidhi Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman in his pomp drew his own devotees to concerts quite independent of the lead musician of the day. And the auditorium would overflow if the vocalist or instrumentalist he was accompanying also happened to be a crowd-puller.



AKIRA IO

Now, as then, there is quite a wait at any of his concerts before he announces his presence on stage with his first resonant thump, though the first song has been seconds old; it is then that the



SIDDHARTH CHANDRASEKAR

concert really comes to life. He has by now absorbed the song with total focus. Every stroke of his nimble fingers that follows is a delight unto itself, embellishing the music on offer, but never drowning it in its amplitude. An object lesson in how to mimic the gait of sung music by coaxing his mridangam to transcend metronomic precision to virtually sing along, this veteran of more than six decades on the concert stage has rewritten the standards of the art he practises.

Carnatic music has always had mridanga vidwans and other percussion artists of high calibre. The recent decades too have produced a few giants, with Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman in the top rung. He is among the most decorated practitioners of his art, with the Sangita Kalanidhi and the Padma Vibhushan the most prestigious honours of his career.



Lata Ramachar

His wizardry on mridangam has enhanced the quality of the kutcheris of successive generations of artists, including the latest crop of young musicians. He is a painstaking, articulate teacher, a researcher and innovator in the art and science of mridangam making – with his fibre glass mridangam an original contribution – and a tireless explorer of the mystic elements of sound. His students include women (khanjira

artist Lata Ramachar, and versatile young mridangist Rajna Swaminathan, for example) and at least one Dalit Christian in Arun Kumaresh, over and above the many other boys and men he has trained in his rigorous school.

Eighty years old in December 2015, and an energetic practitioner of his art still, Sivaraman enjoys accompanying young musicians. He prepares meticulously for every concert, interacting in advance with the main performer, even recommending his choice of songs or ragas to be performed. His periodic quality checks of his many mridangams ensure that they are always in top shape. At the concert, he closely observes every nuance of the main performer of the day. He encourages young upa-pakkavadya artists like Sreesundar Kumar (khanjira) and Giridhar Udupa (ghatam), who for all their reverence for him, can challenge his competitive instincts in concerts. He continues to be the complete professional in all he does.

Sruti 224 of May 2003, which carried a comprehensive profile of Sivaraman, remains one of the more popular editions of the magazine. Here is a quick capsule of that issue.

Sivaraman was born to Dr. P. Kasi Viswanatha Iyer and Kamalambal on 17 December 1935, at Kumbakonam, where the family had moved from Umayalpuram, a village in the Kaveri delta and home to several musicians during the 19th and 20th centuries.

A medical doctor, Kasi Viswanatha Iyer counted a number of musicians among his patients and was a vocalist and violinist himself – a disciple of a disciple of the legendary violinist Tirukodikaval Krishna Iyer, who was a guru to many greats.

The doctor's residence constantly reverberated with the sound of music, provided by Viswanatha Iyer's musician friends. The soirees on the balcony of the house had one regular listener in little Sivaraman, whose constant drumming led to his grandmother buying him a khanjira. With his father actively encouraging Sivaraman's interest in percussion, the boy soon graduated to a bigger instrument in the mridangam.

Sivaraman was unusually fortunate in the way his musical career was shaped by his parents and by family circumstances. In time he had four great and illustrious teachers in Arupathi Natesa Iyer, Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer, Kumbakonam Rangu Iyengar, and his gurubhai – as they say in Hindustani music – Palghat T.S. Mani Iyer, who was himself a disciple of Vaidyanatha Iyer.

Arupathi Natesa Iyer taught little Sivaraman for the first seven years. At age ten, the boy had his arangetram at the Kalahastiswara Swami temple at Kumbakonam, accompanying Srinivasa (or Sona) Iyengar (vocal) and Vedaranyam Krishnamurthy Iyer (violin). His next guru Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer approved the early training Sivaraman had received from Natesa Iyer.

“This boy's fingering is great. Arupathi Natesa Iyer has indeed done a tremendous job of teaching this young lad,” Vaidyanatha Iyer had said while accepting the boy as his disciple. He “opened the floodgates of knowledge” in Sivaraman's own words.

When Vaidyanatha Iyer died in April 1948, leaving Sivaraman feeling orphaned, the boy had a lucky break while a student at the Ramakrishna Mission school at Madras in getting accepted by Palghat Mani Iyer as his disciple. Sivaraman never forgot his father's advice that he must be an intelligent listener of music, at once asking questions and introspecting deep within. He observed Mani Iyer's mridangam playing carefully and

internalised his unique strokes and fingering technique. This quality in the young student greatly impressed the teacher who let him return to Kumbakonam with his blessings. Dr. Viswanatha Iyer once again made a wise intervention by deputing Sivaraman to Rangu Iyengar of nearby village Sakottai, for advanced training in accompaniment for pallavi rendering.

Sivaraman made rapid progress as a concert mridanga vidwan, accompanying many great artists even before he turned 15. The impressive list included the names of Embar Vijayaraghavachari, Sathur Subramaniam, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Musiri Subramania Iyer and Madurai Mani Iyer.

Recovering from the big blow of his mother's death when he was barely 16, Sivaraman resumed training with Palghat Mani Iyer, then living at Tanjavur, but soon moved to Madras following his guru's advice, to launch his concert career properly.

The shift to Madras in 1951 brought not only concert opportunities but also vocal lessons from Kallidaikurichi Mahadeva Bhagavatar and the generosity of several young musicians who sang for him at home to enable him to practise accompaniment. These included the likes of P.S. Narayanaswamy, V.R. Krishnan, Chingleput Ranganathan, AIR Kannan and Palghat Subramania Iyer. Each of them influenced Sivaraman's aesthetics and good taste, making him an ideal accompanist who knew when to decorate and when to desist.

All along, Sivaraman, was gaining a formal education as well, completing his B.A. and B.L. degrees, while

expanding his knowledge of music theory under the guidance of another generous soul – Sivasubramaniya Ayya, a violinist.

Armed with a post graduate education, Sivaraman now decided to focus entirely on his mridangam career. Developing an original new technique that enabled him to produce the most musical sounds with his instrument, he became one of the most sought after accompanists of all time, arguably the greatest exponent of his art after the Mani Iyer-Palani era.

In his long and distinguished career, he has accompanied almost every past master of note and almost every young vidwan of today – not to mention some of tomorrow, if we include the number of child prodigies he encourages on stage. He has also been an enthusiastic participant in jugalbandi and fusion efforts with percussionists south Indian, north Indian and Western, jazz and classical. He even played an outstanding mridangam track in a Tamil film.

Sivaraman is well known for his research in the art of mridangam, and for his lecture demonstrations. He has collaborated with scientists and innovators to make better mridangams. He has written extensively on his art.

At eighty, Sivaraman is as active as ever, as committed to his art. Yet there is a lightness to his touch, a spring in his step. When work is play, the years tend to sit lightly on the player. Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman continues to play, enjoying his mridangam as much as he did when he was eight.