

## COVER STORY

### THETAKUDI HARIHARA VINAYAKRAM

## His pot of gold



BHARGAVII MANI

Among the senior ghatam vidwans of southern India, Vinayakram has enjoyed a long and successful career as a professional musician. In playing the ghatam, he has evolved a style, which though rooted in the conventional technique, is highly individual in spirit. His is also a style that is responsive to other systems of music, accounting for his success with Western ensembles. He has exhibited his improvisatory genius playing complex rhythms for various fusion groups such as *Shakti*, and for J.G. Laya—an experimental group of musicians including pianists and percussionists.

Vinayakram was born on 11 August 1942 at Tiruchirapalli in Tamil Nadu. He received his training in playing the ghatam initially from his father T.R. Harihara Sarma, and later systematic instruction in the art at the Sri Jaya Ganesh Tala Vadya Vidyalaya, Chennai. He made his concert debut at the age of 13. As a ghatam accompanist, Vinayakram has performed with a host of eminent Carnatic musicians.

Among musicians of both the West and the East, he is known for his crisp play and deep knowledge of rhythm. Vinayakram has trained a number of students

and lectured on percussion at institutions in India and abroad. He briefly served All India Radio (1970), and worked as Lecturer in Ghatam at the Centre for World Music, Berkeley (1974). He has been Principal of the Sri Jaya Ganesh Tala Vadya Vidyalaya since 1978. The school, which has about 100 students on its rolls, imparts training in percussion free of cost.

Several members of Vinayakram's family are versatile percussionists. Brother T.H. Subashchandra is a ghatam vidwan, teacher and konnakol artist. Youngest brother T.H. Gurumurthy is a violinist and ghatam artist Chandrasekara Sharma and khanjira artist Harihara Sharma are his sons. Vikku's eldest son Selvaganesh is a star khanjira artist, his second son Umashankar has taken to the clay pot like his father, third son Mahesh and daughter Sangeetha are singers. Sangeetha is married to mridanga artist N. Ramakrishnan. The father and sons often perform together as an ensemble.

Extremely popular with audiences, Vinayakram has performed talavadya kutchcheris with éclat at the Festivals of India in England (1982), France (1985) and Japan (1988). The simple man and his simple instrument earned global recognition when he became

an integral part of John McLaughlin's *Shakti* group, and later played for the Grammy award winning album *Planet Drum* by Mickey Hart.

Vinayakram has been honoured with several awards including the title of Kalaimamani conferred by the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram (1982), the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1988), the Grammy Award (1991), Sangita Kala Acharya from the Music Academy, Chennai, the Padma Shri (2002), Fellow of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi (2012), and the Padma Bhushan (2014). He is the Asthana Vidwan of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham.

The ghatam is an unusual percussion instrument used in Carnatic music; it is quite simply a clay pot, though only certain types of clay can be used in making a proper ghatam. Metal quartz powder is added to give the pot tensile strength.

Reference is made in Valmiki's *Ramayana* to the playing of this instrument in Ravana's court. Krishna's flute-playing was often accompanied on the ghatam by cowherds. In Kashmir, Rajasthan, and south India the clay pot is used in folk music. It is unique among musical instruments in that, except for the reed-flute, it is the only other monolithic instrument; hence the scope for varying its pitch is very limited. The style of playing the ghatam, keeping the narrow mouth close to the abdomen, moving the instrument about, turning its mouth in different ways, and striking it in different places to produce distinct sound patterns and special effects like *ghum* and *gana gana*, distinguish the manner in which it is played in the south.

The humble clay pot first crossed the seven seas in the



Vinayakram receiving the Padma Bhushan award from President Pranab Mukherjee

1960s. Its distinct tones have been heard in Europe, the Americas and elsewhere, thanks to a small-made, smiling and unpretentious exponent of it by name Thetakudi Harihara Sarma Vinayakram. The ghatam has been the magic medium that brought him and the instrument international recognition. It has not been easy for Vikku to reach where he has, as a Carnatic musician and award winning exponent of world music. It was a triumph of his spirit over the confines of his environment and the local musical hierarchy. It was the result of continuous and conscious adventure, and the ability to face challenges with the courage of his conviction, determination and doggedness.

SAMUDRI

In concert with his sons Selvaganesh, Mahesh and Umashankar



AVINASH PASRICHA