

PARASSALA B. PONNAMMAL A gem of purest ray serene

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Padma Shri awardee Parassala B. Ponnammal, the nonagenarian vidushi, has been leading a simple life in her modest house in Valisasala Street in Trivandrum after retirement, teaching music to senior aspirants of music and spending time with her family. Till her satabhishekam, she never dreamt of attaining international recognition and honours nor did she ever clamour for fame or wealth. Having acquired the great treasure of unadulterated music from great gurus like Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavtar, her only way of life had been to present chaste Carnatic music in her concerts and to pass it on to the next generation of musicians. She had been faithfully following the words of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* and doing her duty without expectation of reward. Ponnammal's life took a different turn after her 82nd birthday and had accolades and awards showering on her. (See *Sruti* 282, March 2008 for Interview).

Early years

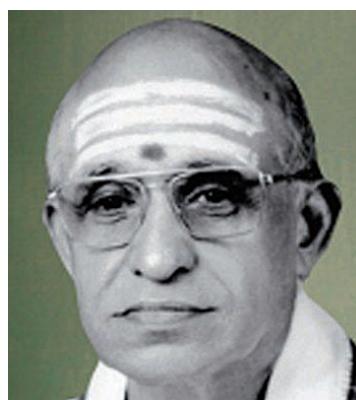
B. Ponnammal was born to Bhagavati Ammal and Mahadeva Iyer on 29 November 1924 in Parassala—a municipal town, 34 kilometres from Trivandrum. She studied music and Sanskrit from a very young age from Paramu Pillai Bhagavtar and Ramaswamy Bhagavtar. It was a turning point of sorts, when the young Ponnammal participated in a music competition held to mark the birthday celebration of Sri Chithira Tirunal, the Maharaja of Travancore. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and a few other senior musicians were the judges and the young girl fearlessly sang *Kamalambam bhajare* in Kalyani with alapana, niraval and swarams. She won a gold medal in the



Muthiah Bhagavtar



Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer



competition and went to Trivandrum along with her father to receive it from Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavtar who urged her father to take transfer to Trivandrum so that Ponnammal could join the Swati Tirunal College of Music (formerly known as The Music Academy) and equip herself for a career in music. Women giving public performances was taboo in those days and so the family hesitated. But Muthiah Bhagavtar arranged for her father's transfer to Trivandrum, and Ponnammal was directly admitted into the second year of the three-year Gayika course in the Music Academy, Trivandrum. She passed the course with Distinction in 1942. At the Academy, she was blessed to learn under Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavtar, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, K.R. Kumaraswami Iyer, M.A. Kalyanakrishna Bhagavtar, C.S. Krishna Iyer, K.S. Narayanaswamy, N.V. Narayana Bhagavtar, Vadakanchery Mani Bhagavtar and Kallidaikurichi Harihara Bhagavtar and also from G.N. Balasubramaniam and Musiri Subramania Iyer who occasionally came as visiting faculty. Her gurubhakti is astounding. Whenever

we compliment her for a particular concert or congratulate her on an award, she says with folded hands and closed eyes, "All because of the deivanugraham and the blessings of my gurus". She remembers her first guru Paramu Pillai Bhagavtar with gratitude: "He had to walk several miles, which he did with enthusiasm, just to teach me". She passed the Ganabhooshanam course in the First Class from the same Academy with a Gold Medal—the first lady student to acquire the degree from the Academy. This was just the beginning for the many firsts she was to achieve later in her life.

Muthiah Bhagavtar had a special affection for Ponnammal. He introduced her to all the musicians, organisers and distinguished personalities and very soon she started getting concert invitations from most of the temples and sabhas in Kerala and the erstwhile Madras State. He taught her some of his compositions like *Sakti Ganapatim* in Nata, *Mantrini matangatanaye* in Hemavati. Because of his initiatives, Ponnammal started singing in AIR-Tiruchi right from the age of sixteen (AIR-Trivandrum had not started functioning at that time). She was directly given programmes without audition. Senior accompanists of those days like Nellai Mani and Nellai Devarajan started accompanying her. Soon she received calls from many other AIR stations also for music programmes. Her father accompanied her to all the programmes. Every year, her concert was arranged in Anantha Lodge and many other places in Trivandrum for Navaratri, Skanda Shashti and Rama Navami. Those days, it was a status symbol to have concerts in marriages and Ponnammal was invited to sing in many 'kalyana kutcheris', attended by many top musicians. Frequent reviews of her concerts in magazines brought her much publicity at a very young age. When she was about twenty years old, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavtar heard her in a marriage concert in Coimbatore and was greatly impressed by her sruti suddham, manodharma and the serene atmosphere she created. He blessed her and also arranged for her concert in his native town and gave adequate publicity to the young vidushi. Following this, she was invited for a concert tour to Ceylon which too received wide press coverage. In 1953, she performed at the Bharatiya Music & Fine Arts Society, Mumbai, and in 1976, she performed at the Madras Music Academy in the 3 pm slot and also recorded for AIR-Chennai and Doordarshan. Ponnammal is the only musician to have been singing as an A-Grade artist in All India Radio for more than fifty years before being upgraded to the A-Top Grade.

Ponnammal was extremely modest in her appearance, body language, facial expression and demeanour. Very

soon she became a model for modesty and demeanour. While studying for the Ganabhooshanam course (1942), she joined the Cotton Hills Girls High School, Trivandrum as a music teacher, and continued there for ten years. In 1952, Ponnammal joined the Swati Tirunal Music Academy and became the first woman faculty member there. In 1970 she was appointed the Principal of the R.L.V. (Radha Lakshmi Vilasam) Academy of Music, Tripunithura, (later renamed as R.L.V. College of Music and Fine Arts)—the first lady principal in a music college, a post she held with dignity till her retirement in 1980.

During Ponnammal's stint as the principal of R.L.V. Academy of Music, the institution attained new heights. It was then offering only up to the Ganabhooshanam course. Ponnammal took earnest steps to start Ganapraveena as also courses for violin and mridangam. Ponnammal's stint at the academy witnessed many stressful situations. There was a school under the Institute of Fine Arts teaching Kathakali, pottery, Bharatanatyam, drawing, painting and sculpture. In 1972, the Govt. of Kerala passed an order to merge both the institutions and bring them under one roof, common pay scale and management. The Academy staff and students vehemently resisted this move because of space constraints. They felt that the music classes needed a calm atmosphere which would be disturbed by the Kathakali and pottery classes. Principal Ponnammal then took exclusive premises on rent to house Kathakali and other activities. The pay scale of the staff was brought at par with the Academy staff. Though this was a testing period for her, she managed it with her calm demeanour. In 1997, the college was renamed R.L.V. College for Music and Fine Arts and it was a great honour for Ponnammal when she was invited to inaugurate the new premises. But her job responsibilities in the Tripunithura Academy while taking care of the family retained in Trivandrum, restricted her outstation concert engagements.

Malladi Brothers with Ponnammal

