

SAVAL JAVAB

### THIRUVAARUR BAKTHAVATHSALAM

## Total focus the secret of his success



#### How did you take to music?

Ours is a traditional musical family. My mother Tiruvarur P.R. Anandavalli hails from Tirukkannamangai village, and my father belongs to Madurai where he was a businessman. When I was barely 2-1/2 years old my father passed away. My maternal great grandfather, Ramdas Nainakkarar was a renowned nagaswara vidwan and he followed the Vaishnava culture and tradition as he played regularly at the Tirukkannamangai Perumal Temple. He was also the nagaswara vidwan for the 18 Vatima villages around Semmangudi.

With a scarcity of good teachers in Tirukkannamangai, my mother went to Tiruvarur to learn vocal music from Tiruvarur Sethuraman. She also learnt from Madurai Srirangam Iyengar, Tiruvarur Namachivayam and T.M. Thiyagarajan (who was also related to us). During this time we migrated to Tiruvarur and settled there; that is why I have Tiruvarur as the prefix to my name and not Tirukkannamangai.

Our house reverberated with music throughout the day as musicians including nagaswara vidwans visited us. I was more interested in music than school, and did not focus on my studies even as a young boy. They would lock me in a room and my sister would scold me to study, but I would somehow open the door and try to listen to the great music of the vidwans. As my mother and sister were of the opinion that mridangam playing could not be taken up as a full-time profession, they wanted me to obtain a degree and a stable job while continuing to play the mridangam, but God willed otherwise.

#### What was the impact of such listening on your mridangam playing?

I was drawn to laya vadyas like the tavil and mridangam and I used to listen to my uncle play the mridangam. I was also adept at singing kritis thanks to my constant exposure to my mother's singing during practice sessions, concerts and classes. As a five-year-old, I am told, I used to play the mridangam pretty well for *Sree Subramanyaya namaste* and some other kritis although I did not then have any knowledge of tala or its intricacies like arudi or teermanam.

#### Tell us about your guru and your early concerts.

I learnt to play the proper way from my maternal uncle Tiruvarur Krishnamurthy, a disciple of Kunju Iyer—from the basics till the advanced level. I belong

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In conversation with  
Mannarkoil J. Balaji

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to the Tanjavur style propounded by Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer. I started learning at the age of six. I had no proper arangetram but often played along with my uncle. By the time I was nine years old, I started playing in concerts which my uncle could not attend. I wish to recall an incident from that period.

When my uncle was unable to play for Sathur A.G. Subramaniam at Tiruturaipundi, he sent me as a replacement with a letter in this regard. I reached the place and went to meet Sathur to pay my respects to him and to inform him that I was the accompanist. He however presumed that I had come as assistant to Tiruvarur Krishnamurthy and he allowed me neither to talk nor give him my uncle's letter. He even ordered the hosts to serve me some food. After sometime I gathered enough courage to hand over the letter to him and after reading it he enquired about my background and then said in good humour: "Don't play whatever you learnt for those five-six years with Krishnamurthy!" and laughed.

#### **When and why did you come to Chennai?**

When his job took my uncle to Pondicherry, I moved to Chennai. It was sometime in the early 1970s when I was about 19 years old. My primary aim was to listen to all the concerts and to learn the laya intricacies from stalwarts. I never thought of learning directly from senior mridanga vidwans in Chennai. What I wanted to do was to listen to them, observe and assimilate the best—from fingering and accompaniment techniques, and planning of the tani avartanam. My plus point was that even as a child I had "paattu gyanam". I have maintained this proportion of 75% paattu gyanam and 25% laya vyavaharam.

By that time Trichy Sankaran had left for the U.S.A. and Karaikudi Mani was gaining in popularity. I listened to a host of mridanga vidwans like Ramanathapuram C.S. Murugabhoopathy, Coimbatore Ramaswamy Pillai, Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman, Palghat Raghu, T.K. Murthy, Tanjore Upendran, and Ramanathapuram M.N. Kandaswamy Pillai (khanjira). Listening to such great vidwans helped me to improve my playing.

#### **Who motivated you to remain in Chennai against the odds?**

As we had a big house and property back home, many discouraged us from moving to Chennai. They told my mother it would be very difficult to survive as a mridangist in Chennai as there were already many senior artists and the number of concert opportunities was not substantial those days. I was living in a single room in Chennai and used to practise behind closed doors after padding all the windows and doors with bedsheets and towels. Here I must acknowledge the encouragement I received from Tanjore Upendran. He assured me that I could make a name in

mridangam and Chennai, provided I had a firm belief and conviction. He also advised me that I should not go back to Tiruvarur, and that I should only rely on hard work to come up in my career.

As a first step, he asked me to join the Sri Thiagaraja Sangeetha Vidwath Samajam as a life member, through which I could gain the contacts of musicians, and if some of them liked my mridanga-playing, they could call me to accompany them in their concerts. His words came true and today I play for K.J. Yesudass only because I became a member of the Vidwath Samajam and accompanied him during one of the akhandams. After my first concert in the late 1970s for Yesudass, I have been accompanying him on the mridangam for more than three decades at the Mylapore Fine Arts Club and The Indian Fine Arts Society during the music season.

#### **With whom did you hone your laya vyavahara skills?**

After coming to Chennai and listening to stalwarts I was able to develop a keen sense of laya vyavaharam on my own. I also played in several concerts for different artists. I came in contact with khanjira vidwan Mayavaram Somu who extensively taught me the nuances of laya and vyavaharam. He took me along to concerts and shared many secrets of laya including playing the tani avartanam for difficult Tiruppugazh talas. He also taught me how to set mora and korvai for difficult talas.

#### **How did you come to accompany famous musicians like M.L. Vasanthakumari, Maharajapuram Santhanam and Semmangudi?**

Tafe Mahadevan, who was close to several musicians including MLV, P.S. Narayanaswamy and Karaikudi Mani, was responsible for my providing mridangam accompaniment for MLV. After our first concert in Andhra Pradesh, I started playing regularly for her. During the 20 years I accompanied MLV I would have rarely played a ragam-tanam-pallavi in Adi tala. Most of the talas were difficult ones in 12-1/2, 13-1/2, 7-1/2 or 17 aksharas, and I came up with the laya vyavaharam mostly on the spot and also played the tani avartanam.

I had opportunities to provide mridangam accompaniment based on sheer hard work and merit. Maharajapuram Santhanam heard me at a concert at Ayodhya Mandapam, Chennai, and after that he started having me as his regular mridangam accompanist.

Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer also heard me in a concert and enquired about me. He told me that he knew my mother and my great grandfather and asked me why I had not prefixed Tirukkannamangai to my name. He immediately called me to play for his concert the next day at the Sringeri Mutt. I later got opportunities to accompany him on many occasions.