

MANNARKOIL BALAJI

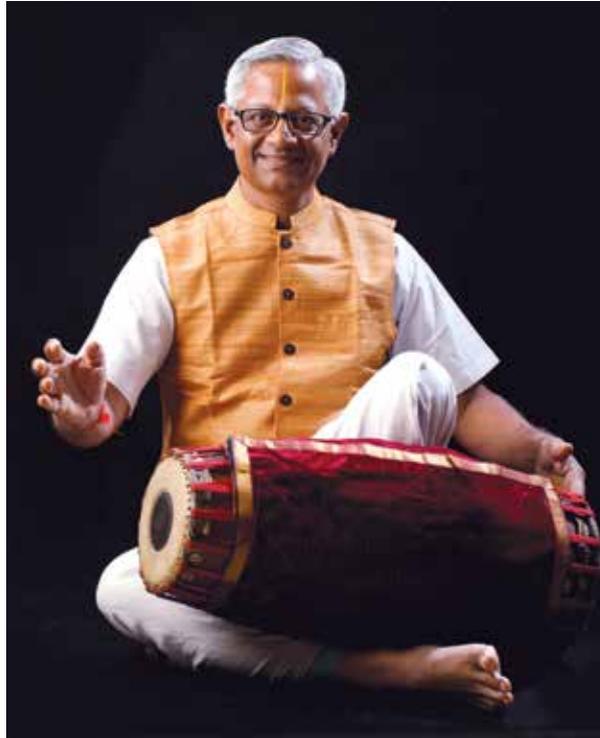
Propelled by passion and practice

Sukanya Sankar

As the night crawls in, a mild mridangam sound rises from one of the walls of the Reserve Bank quarters. A sincere banker and an eager percussionist, Mannarkoil Balaji found a way for his passion and creativity within the confines of reality. Born in a family with no musical lineage, Mannarkoil Balaji today, is one of the most sought after mridangists. It was a journey built through the art of perseverance, love for knowledge, and a meaningful contribution in the sphere of mridangam.

Born on 6 October 1965, Balaji's first tryst with music began at the age of four, when he found a huge fascination towards discarded mud pots. Though the sound of the mud pot for the tender, promising hands was limited, his mother Bhuma Jagannathan identified his interest, which marked the beginning of his musical journey.

His formal tutelage began, at the age of ten, under guru Tanjavur Ramdas, disciple of the renowned Palghat Mani Iyer and later continued with M.N. Kandasamy Pillai, disciple of the legendary Palani Subramania Pillai. Though he initially found this change of percussion school a challenge (Tanjavur to Pudukottai), he later realised that the influence of both schools has vastly shaped his career. And he acknowledges both his gurus with sincere gratitude.



As a teenager, Balaji had his first formal concert at a Navaratri utsavam in Chennai in 1981. He was also hailed for his performance in his first season concert, which was held at the Indian Fine Arts Society in 1984. Balaji had given a few performances before he

Tanjavur Ramdas



M.N. Kandasamy Pillai



came under the tutelage of Kandasamy Pillai who asked Balaji to take a break from his performances for a few months, and fine tune his skills before going back on stage. After a few months, under the auspices of his guru Kandasamy Pillai, Balaji had his formal arangetram in 1985 at Sri Thiagaraja Sangeetha Vidvath Samajam as the mridangist for vidwan Chingleput Ranganathan (vocal), along with Tiruvallur Subramaniam (violin) and Umayalpuram Narayanaswamy (ghatam). He also recalls the tani avartanam he played that day in misra Jhampa tala (two kalai), which was a rarity as

most of the debutants were given Adi tala or misra Chapu tala.

As a student of English Literature in Vivekananda College, Chennai, Balaji's creativity took a turn amidst musicians Vijay Siva, R.K. Shriramkumar and Kartikeyan, involving several hours of musical discussions leading up to the formation

of YACM (Youth Association for Classical Music); Balaji was one of the co-founders of YACM. He reminisces, "YACM was a major 'think-tank' filled with discussions, lecture demonstrations and creativity, with the sole aim to provide constructive, pristine, and quality music. Carnatic music blossomed with YACM and those were memorable years of my musical journey."



The YACM team with M.S. Subbulakshmi and T. Sadasivam



Fast-forwarding today, the virtuoso, along with his concert performances, has been contributing to music in various ways. As a teacher, he strongly emphasises the need to understand the theory of music in addition to playing the instrument. “The first lesson to play layam is to think in layam,” he says. In order to facilitate the process of understanding layam, he has developed course material covering various aspects of south Indian percussion catering to both vocalists and percussionists. Balaji has also conducted several workshops and lecture demonstrations to demystify these concepts of layam. He has travelled extensively for concerts and demonstrations. He has also accompanied several eminent artists. Academically, he holds M.A. degrees in English Literature and Hindi Literature, with a PG Diploma in Journalism. An A-Grade artist of All India Radio and winner of several prestigious awards, Balaji is also the trustee of the Palani Sri M. Subramania Pillai Trust. Balaji’s constant exploration of layam has inspired him to create two new talas—Jayalalitha and Shyamantaka (see box), and he has

Talas by Balaji

Shyamantaka tala

It is a 75-akshara tala. “Shyamantaka” is a bright gem worn by Lord Soorya

Structure of the tala : 8,8,2,2,12,8,8,2,2,12, 8,1,2

This tala does not have kakapada as part of its structure, since kakapada was a later addition to the shadangas. The first five angas of anudruta, druta, laghu, guru and pluta there also connect with the five elements— anudruta with air; druta with water; laghu with fire; guru with space and pluta with earth.

Jayalalitha tala

As a tribute to the former Chief Minister, J. Jayalalitha, Balaji composed this tala on the day she passed away.

It is a combination of two of the existing talas named Jaya and Lalita. These two talas have been taken from a compilation of talas, *Tala Sangraha* written by scholar B.M. Sundaram.

Tala Jaya has 48 aksharas according to Jagadekamalla in his book *Sangeeta Choodamani* and tala Lalita has 20 aksharas according to Haripaladeva in his work *Sangeeta Sudhakara*.

The first tala has 48 counts and coincides with the birth year of J. Jayalalitha. There are two talas combined into one, and half of 48 is 24 bringing us her birth date, month and year as 24-2-1948. The total aksharas are 68 (48-Jaya and 20-Lalita) which signifies the number of years she lived.

Her last tenure as Chief Minister was about 18.5 months which can be rounded off to the nearest major number as 20 and equated with the total aksharas of Lalita tala. Structure of the tala : 1-laghu; 1-guru; 2-laghus; 2-drutams; 2-plutams; 3-laghus and 1-guru.

also composed a tillana in raga Madhuvanti in praise of Lord Ganesa.

At the annual Palani Subramania Pillai festival

