MAHA VAIDYANATHA SIVAN

A LEGEND IN CARNATIC MUSIC

BY

SRI GUHADASA TRUST



(1844-1893)

EARLY LIFE

The 18th and 19th centuries may be considered as the golden age of Carnatic music. Great giants were born in Tanjore district in Tamil Nadu. The Musical Trinity, Sri Thyagaraja (1767-1847), Sri Muthuswami Diskshatar (1775-1835) and Sri Shyama Sastri (1762-1827) adorned the field. After Thyagaraja Swami, the greatest singer-composer was Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan of Vaiyachery.

Vaiyachery is a small village in Tanjore district. People used to get down at Thittai railway station, cross over the Vettar river to reach the hamlet, but now good roads have been laid from Nadar (in Kumbakonam-Tanjore bypass) to the village. It is a great *Sivasthala*. Agastheeshwarar and Mangala Nayaki are the presiding deities. It also has a Lakshmi Narayana Perumal temple. It gave birth to famous musicians like Anai-Ayya who were court musicians at the then Serfoji II rule (Marattha rulers). Duraiswami Iyer alias Panchanatha Iyer lived there with his wife Arundathi. Duraiswami Iyer himself was a great musician and proficient in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit. Once while he was singing Thyagaraja Swami's "Chakkani Raja" (*Kharaharapriya*), Thyagaraja swami, who was passing by, blessed him saying that his two sons would become very famous in music.

Duraiwami Iyer had four sons - Sambamurthy, Ramaswami, Vaidyanathan and Sivaraman (or Appaswami). Vaidyananthan was born on 23.05.1844 at 8.42 p.m in the star *Ashlesham* (*Ayilyam*) 3rd padam. They belonged to *Koundinya Gothram* and *Brahacharanam* sect. Duraiswami found that Ramaswami and Vaidyanathan evinced keen interest in music. Accordingly, he trained them in singing. He taught them the fundamentals of Carnatic music. He took them to great musicians in Tanjore district for further lessons. One such was the direct disciple of Thyagaraja Swami- Sri Manambuchavadi Venkatasubramania Iyer.

Ramaswami was eleven and Vaidyanathan seven, when their upanayanam was celebrated at Vaiyachery. Great musicians like Sivagangai Periya and Chinna Vaidyanatha Iyer, Erattai Pallavi Siva Rama Iyer etc were present

on the occasion. Duraiswami Iyer desired that his two sons should sing in their presence. Accordingly, Vaidyanathan gave a mini concert. They all praised him and blessed him heartily. From his upanayanam days, Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer was doing Panchakshara japam, taught to him by his father.

Shortly thereafter, there was a house warming ceremony at the house of Kudiyalam Vasudeva Iyengar, a great patron of music. Peria Vaidyanatha Iyer told Iyengar about the achievements of Vaiyacheri Vaidyanatha iyer and his *pandithyam*. Duraiswami Iyer with his two sons were invited for this function. The boys gave a scintillating performance. This was their first concert. Pallavi Siva Rama Iyer rendered a pallavi in *Saveri* set to Tisra laghu, Tisragati, Misra Chapu talam. Vaidyanatha Iyer in his turn rendered this effortlessly and to the utter bewilderment of the great musicians present there. His name and fame spread far and wide. This led to a series of concerts at various temples, marriages, mutts and palaces. His meteoric rise to fame in a very young age is like the Western Composer Mozart (1756-1791) whose precocious rise to fame became the envy of his contemporaries.

GANDHARVA GAANAM

Vaidyanatha Iyer's voice was rich in harmonics. It had a charming ring in it. It had a wide compass of three and a half octaves extending from Anumandra Panchama to Athithara Shadja. He sang to the pitch of 5. The ringing and fascinating character of his voice and his ability to sing in all the six degrees of speed charmed one and all beyond measure. He had a naturally gifted voice and not a cultivated voice. He used to sing at a stretch brighas comprising a range of 2 and 1/2 octaves with surprising rapidity and fluency and they gave one the impression of brilliant sparks of dazzling beauty witnessed in fireworks. His music was gandharva gaanam. After Thyagaraja, the one voice that reminded all of the sterling voice of the great composer of South India was that of Vaidyanatha Iyer only. During his concerts the audience would be in a state of musical trance.

VISITS AND CONCERTS

Before the age of ten, Vaidyanatha Iyer had given concerts in many places in the Tanjore district. Ramachandra Thondaiman, the ruler of Pudukkotai, invited Ramaswami and Vaidyanathan to his samasthanam. Veena Subbu Kutty, well known musician, was the Asthana Vidwan. The concert of Vaidyanatha Iyer was greatly appreciated. For some years they took part in the navarathri celebrations of the palace. During one such visit, Veenai Subbu Kutty Iyer and Subba Iyer requested Vaidyanatha Iyer to sing the 72 melaragamalika sung by them in the court of Sakharam Saheb. As it would take long to sing it, Sivan rendered it in Adi Talam, nine *avartanams* (cycles). In one avarthanam, from *Kanakangi* to *Thodi* - eight melakarta ragas were sung. He kept sixteen kalais per *avartanam*. All were astonished at this feat.

The Raja gave luxurious costumes and presents. He had them seated in the Durbar Carriage and had them taken out in procession round the Mada streets to the accompaniment of music. The carriage was drawn by the horses of the royal household.

Some great contemporaries of Vaidyanatha Iyer were Sivagangai Peria and Chinna Vaidyanathan, Patnam Subramanya Iyer, Kundrakudi Krishna Iyer, Thiruvananthapuram Veena Kalyana Krishna Bagavathar, Mysore Veena Subbanna, Flute Saraba Sastri, Coimbatore Raghava Iyer etc. But, Vaidyanatha Iyer topped them all in ***kural valam*.**

Vaidyanatha Iyer next went to Madurai. Shrestadar Venkataswami Naidu and Thasildar Sitarama Iyer arranged the concerts for this little boy of sixteen. The first concert was in the precincts of Meenakshi Temple. The Raja of Ramanathapuram, Muthuramalinga Sethupathy made Ramaswami Sivan and Vaidyanatha Iyer the Chief examiners of the Vidwath Sadas held there annually. The Raja also gave Vaidyanatha Iyer a palm leaf on Kandhapuraana Surukkam and asked him to read it. They gave many concerts at the invitation of the Raja of Ettayapuram. Once Vaidyanatha Iyer was singing Dikshithar's "Aanandha Natanaprakasham" in *Kedaram*. Ramaswami Sivan signalled to him to make it into a pallavi in *Tisra chapu,*

Khanda chapu and *Misra chapu talam*. This talam is called "dhatthathreyam", that is one with three faces and Vaidyanatha Iyer sang it impromptu. All showered their praise on the young singer.

At the invitation of friends, the brothers went to Tirunelveli. The first concert was in the temple precincts. They always used to compose a song in praise of the presiding deity wherever they visited. Accordingly, a thillana was composed in praise of Nellaiappar and Kanthimathi amman in Vasantha Ragam. The opening words were "Guhadasanukku arul sankari". "Guhadasa" was their mudra. They were in Tirunelveli for 9 months. There was a concert in the temple premises in Kutralam. A new pallavi was sung on the occasion. It was in *Naadanamakriya* ragam set to *Panchagathi talam* or *gopuchayathi* talam - 28 *mathras*. The opening words were "Sankara siva sambha pahimam nataraja mampahi." At Tiruchendur temple, Ramaswami Sivan composed "Tiruchendur sandha viruttham, Thiruchendil yamaha-anthathi." Vaidyanatha Iyer sang them.

Ramanathapuram Raja Bhaskara Sethupathi once visited Tiruchendur. In the presence of Temple scholars, Sabhapathi Navalar gave a discourse with strange ideas on Vedas, etc. No one was bold enough to contradict him. The Raja asked Vaidyanatha Iyer for his comments. In his own inimitable style, Vaidyanatha Iyer expounded contrary views with examples and apt quotations. All were thrilled at this.

THE TITLE OF "MAHAN"

The junior pontiff of Kallidaikurichi aadheenam, Sri Subramanya Desikar, was a great scholar. The brothers stayed at the aadheenam for two months. Guru pooja was celebrated in the month of “Thai” or Ashwini star. There was to be a concert by Peria and Chinna Vaidyanatha Iyer at this function. In the year 1856, Pandara Sannidhi desired that the Vaiyachery lad should sing with these veterans. Thandavaraya Thambiran was the judge. Veenai Chinnaiya Bhagavathar was there. First Periya Vaidyanatha Iyer sang followed by Chinna Vaithi.

Thandavaraya Thambiran asked whether Chinna Vaithi and Vaiyai Vaidyanatha Iyer could be asked to sing together. They were told to point out mistakes, if any, noticed in the singing of one another. Nattai and other ghana ragas were ably sung by both. Vaiyai Vaidyanatha Iyer noticed a flaw in the singing of Chinna Vaithi, the swara prayogam being vargam. Chinnaiya Bagavathar asked Chinna Vaithi to sing it again and accompanied him on the veena. Then it was realised that Vaiyai Vaidyanatha Iyer was correct in identifying the error. Vaiyai Vaidyanatha Iyer was then asked to sing separately. Starting from anumandaram, he reached mandaramadhyamam, tharam and repeated it thrice. The raga he sang was Chakravaham. Vaidyanatha Iyer also explained its lakshanam from Sangeetha Rathnakaram. He sang "Sugunamule Cheppukonti" of Sri Thyagaraja. The three sang raga Sankarabharanam elaborately and did thanam also. The pallavi sung was "Mandahasa vadana hare krishna." Periya Vaidyanatha Iyer started it. The young lad's performance was universally acclaimed as the best.

Pandara Sannidhi wanted to bestow a suitable title on the boy. It was decided the title **"Mahan"** would be most appropriate. Ever since, he became **Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer from Vaidyanatha Sivan**. In the history of Indian music, he is the only person to be honoured with the title of "Mahan". He was then twelve years old.

MUSICAL JOURNEY

Sivan Brothers used to sing “Gowri nayaka” thillana set to Simhanandana Thala (128 aksharas, the longest of the 108 thalas, and in the world of music) in *Kalyani* raga. Once Sri Ambalavana Desikar Swamigal, the Pontiff of Thiruvaavaduthurai requested them to sing this thillana in Kaanada Raagam. Immediately Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer responded to the request and sang it impromptu in Kanada ragam much to the delight of the Swamigal. On another occasion, at the request of Siruvayal Zamindar to sing a rare pallavi, he took up Bhairavi raga and elaborated it very well. He stopped at the swaras – dha-ni-dha and used the prayogam of kaishiki nishadham and thrilled the audience. It was novel in those days. The opening words of the pallavi were "Sankara siva sankara sadhanandha" in Parithapaekaram thalam - 17 aksharas.

At the age of sixteen, Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer had the blessings from Kodaganallur Sundara Swamigal, a great saint of those days. Now the Swamigal initiated him into several mantras, taught him *Chatur Veda Thatparya Sangraham, Siva thatva vivekam, Soodha samhitai*, etc. He taught him the daily pooja *vidhi*. Before the age of twenty two, Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer had given concerts in all the eleven districts of the then Madras Presidency. Aayilyam Thirunal, the Maharaja of Travancore, invited the Sivans. Their stay was for two months and they gave twenty concerts. Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer was 22 then. In one concert, the palace aasthana vidwan Kalyana Krishna Bagavathar could not reproduce the Thodi ragam sung by Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer. The Raja gave Vaidyanatha Iyer a green silk peethambaram which was seen in Vaiyachery. Vishakam Thirunal, who succeeded Aayilyam Thirunal also invited the Sivans to his court where they gave forty concerts.

72 MELARAGAMALIKA

In the palace of Sakharam Saheb of Tanjore, there was an ancient maraathi manuscript in 72 mela ragamalika composed by the court poet Venkata Rao. The Raja desired that this should be sung. Patnam Subramanya Iyer and Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar tried it, but in vain. Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer set it to music in a week's time and sang it before the Raja. The Raja was very pleased and gave large presents. But Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer was not pleased with himself. The whole composition in Sakharam's Court was a mere **nara-stuthi**. So he reached Thiruvaiyaru and in the temple precincts composed the **72 *melaragamalika*** in praise of the presiding deity**, Pranatharthihara**.

These 72 ragas were divided into twelve chakras with six ragas in each. It begins in Sri Ragam with the opening words "Pranartharthihara prabho purare". It is set to adi talam. It covers all the mela raagas starting from Kanakangi to Rasikapriya. Ramaswami Sivan added chittaswarams to this piece. After singing the first mela ragam, the swara-amaippu(solkattu) of the second mela raga would follow, and in this fashion the entire swarams were made.

The 72 melaragamalika, the pride of Carnatic music, and the longest single composition, ranking along with Muthuswami Dikshitar's 108 raga thala malika, is an achievement without parallel in the sphere of musicial compositions. This is his **magnum opus** and has both a lakshana and lakshya value.

Sakharam Saheb learnt music from Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer for some time. The asthana vidwan, Veena Aadimurthi Iyer desired Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer to sing a pallavi in Lakshmeesham Thalam. Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer detailed Aanandha Bhairavi and sang the pallavi with the words "Sambho umapathe pahimam".

RECORDING DESTROYED

The Mysore Maharaja invited the Sivans to his durbar. There were three such visits. It was customary to wear a coat and a turban while going to the royal presence. Knowing the habits of Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan, the Maharaja ordered a special gown of silk to be stitched and in the turban a special kalki saram was attached. In the concert, while singing Bhairavi raga song "Chintaya Maakanda", without Sivan's knowledge, the Maharaja managed to record the music on Edison's Phonograph. After the concert was over, the record was played to the Sivans. The Sivans were pleasantly surprised. Unfortunately, however, this record got destroyed in the fire outbreak in Jagan Mohan Palace some years ago.

The Venkatagiri Samasthanam Raja asked Sivan to sing a Pallavi in gopuchayathi thalam with 33 maathras. Accordingly, Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan took up Arabhi Ragam, sang a thanam and then the pallavi in that thalam. The opening lines were "Sambo sabhapathe pahimam saambasiva kunchithapaada mampahi".

CONTESTS AT MADRAS

Venugopala Naidu, a powerful singer and an adept in the intricacies of the Thala system, challenged Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan to face him in a contest. The contest was held at George Town. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan was asked to sing first. He rendered the raga Narayanagowla. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan sang his own pallavi "Sambha siva sankara vibho, samba sadaasiva maa hara hara" set to adi talam, mukkal edam, nangu kalai chowkam. Venugopala Naidu could not recognize the raga and he was humbled. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan was 47 then.

At Madhava Perumal Koil in Mylapore, there was a contest between Mayuram Veenai Vaidyanatha Iyer and Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar with Patnam Subramanya Iyer as the judge. Veenai Vaidyanatha Iyer took up Kalyani Ragam and rendered a pallavi in lakshmeesham thalam. Patnam Subramanya Iyer ruled that this thalam was against the rules of pallavi singing. At the request of some friends, Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan came to the temple and clarified that the thalam was indeed rare, but pallavi could be rendered in it and also demonstrated the same. Namakkal Narasimha Iyengar could not reproduce the pallavi. Then Iyengar rendered a pallavi in Bhairavi set to Trayadhvayam thalam which Veena Vaidyanatha Iyer could not reproduce. Both were adjudged victorious. After the event, Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan spoke with a heavy heart that such contests were unhealthy and unsuited to Carnatic music and there should be no competitive spirit among musicians.

LARGE HEARTED

A concert was arranged in Triplicane. The organisers had, without the knowledge of Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan collected money at the gates. Noticing this, he refused to sing at the place. He said that the next day he would sing at the Parthasarathy Temple and all could come and hear it free of cost. He sang for three days immersing the listeners in aesthetic bliss.

Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan sang for two hours at a marriage house in Palghat. Parasu Bhagavathar who sang next wanted the same accompanists. He sang exceedingly well. Sivan who was asleep then got up from bed hearing Parasu Bhagavathar's beautiful singing. He came to listen to Parasu Bhagavathar and praised him heartily.

PERIYAPURANA KRITHIS

Ramaswami Sivan composed Periyapurana Krithis. It was released in the Thiruvaavadudurai Adheenam. Both Ramaswami Sivan and Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan composed the Guruvanakkam. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan started it and Ramaswami Sivan completed it. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan composed the four lines of *pallavi* and *anupallavi* and four lines in the second charanam. This song is in *Punnagavarali* ragam and Mishra chapu talam. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan was good at doing Pravachanam in Sivakathai/Harikathai, Stories of nayanmars, etc. The programmes used to be Pravachanam on one day and a musical concert on the next day. A portrait of Aruvatthimoovar was presented to him at Devakottai where he stayed for five months. This portrait was there in his house at Thiruvaiyaru.

In the temple precincts at Vaiyachery, a sannidhi was erected for Lord Nataraja. The idol given to him by Thiruvaavadudurai Adheenam was installed there. A matching idol of Sivakama Sundari was found while renovating the temple tank. This was also installed. The Kumbabishekam function was for 11 days in 1891-92. Poojas and Festivals are conducted to the above deities even now at Sivan Temple in Vaiayachery.

THE CONCERT PATTERN

Sitting erect with closed eyes and with no gimmicks of head or hand the concert would look like a yoga nishtai. His expertise in alapana was remarkable as he knew inside out of raga lakshanas. He would avoid vikaara chorkal like "ya" "ra" "la" "va" "om" in doing alapana. He was a master of laya. He would put thalam with his fingers with no sound. He

wore yoga veshti and panchakacham, with rudraksham and vibuthi. He would always start his concert with “Nama Parvathi pathaye Hara hara Mahadeva” and also end with the same. Ramaswami Sivan sitting to his right would keep the tampura in a horizontal position and tune the sruthi. The concert would begin with ” Vataphi Ganapathim” in Hamsadhwani followed by Ramaswami Sivan's "Ekkalathilum Maravene" and then by songs of the Trinity and Aayilyam Tirunal. About four kirthanais would be there. Then the main raga for the day would start with alapana, thanam, pallavi, niraval and swarams. More than three-fourths of the concert time would be devoted to this aspect. Then there would be his own thillana, a ragamalika slokam or songs from thevaram/thiruvachagam and it would end with mangalam. His repertoire included the following krithis:

SONG	RAGAM
Vathapi Ganapathim	Hamsadhwani
Sri Subramanya Namasthe	Kambhoji
Thyagarajaya Namasthe	Begada
Naajivadhara	Bilahari
Chintaya MaKanda	Bhairavi
Kanjadalayadakshi	Kamalamanohari
Anandha Sagarame	Garudadhwani

HIS GREATNESS

Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan was very proficient in manodharma sangeetha - that is alapana, thanam, pallavi, niraval, and kalpana swaras. Therefore, his repertoire of classical compositions was not very large. However, being Ekasandhaagrahi, he would quickly grasp whatever was sung before him and reproduce it to perfection. His varnam in Kambodhi - Pankajakshipai in adi talam is a remarkable piece of craftsmanship. The sparkling gems of swarakshara along with swarasthana, as well as the phrases in sama-yati and mridanga-yati make it remarkably beautiful. His kriti Pahimam Sri Raja Rajeshwari in Janaranjani has fine chittaswarams. His tamil songs Muthukumarayyane in Sankarabaranam and Malmaruganai in Bilahari are very famous Thiruvaavadudurai Adheena

Pundit (the well-known Tamizh-thatha), Dr. U. Ve. Swaminatha Iyer and a few others have composed verses in praise of Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan.

SENSE OF HUMOUR

On a lighter note both Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan and his brother Ramaswami were very clever in the art of punning. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan always wore a rudraksha mala (garland of rudraksha with beads). Once, when he was singing in the presence of Raja of the court of Ramnad, the Raja, impressed by his divine music, asked for the courtiers to alter the silver beads of his rudraksha mala into golden beads. On receiving this valuable gift from the Raja, Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan gave a witty remark: *" வெள்ளி வில்லை தங்கவில்லை "* with a double meaning- one, is the silver bead did not stay , the other, is the silver beads have now been replaced by golden ones.

THE LAST DAYS

The two brothers had two houses in Vaiyachery. They had two houses in Thiruvaiyaru in Baavaswami Agraharam in one of which the Aruvatthi-moovar portrait was there. The properties in Thiruvaiyaru were bought when Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan was 43/44 years old. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan fell ill at Vaiyachery and was bed ridden for some time. Ambalavana Desikar and Bhaskara Sethupathi helped the family a lot. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan once again fell ill at Thiruvaiyaru when he was 49. On 27.01.1893 at 1.30 p.m. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan breathed his last uttering "Siva Siva" with folded hands.

He led a simple life. His habits were simple. He was scrupulous in doing his daily siva pooja, chanting mantras and doing Sandhya Vandhanam which he never missed at any cost.

In spite of being a "Grihastha", he led the life of a seer (sanyasi). Not only is he a role model for everyone in music but also in leading a life of high

values. He was a “Naadhayogi” who knew the true essence of life to attain eternal bliss and merge with the supreme!

SRI GUHADASA TRUST :

Many members of SRI GUHADASA TRUST are native of Vaiyachery and direct descendants of Sri Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan and his brothers. Trust has taken the initiative to guard birth places of Sivan brothers at Vaiyachery. One of the objects of the Trust is to propagate their compositions to music fraternity and build a memorial for Sri Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan, at Vaiyachery. Interested people can get in touch with

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Reference:

Article on Sri Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan published in carnatic corner website
“Isai Ulagil Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan” by Dr. V.S.Gomathy Shankara Iyer

NAMASKARAMS
THANK YOU !