

VIJAYALAKSHMI

GURU SAMARPANAM



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GANA JEGADEVA

IN HUMBLE HOMAGE TO THE THE CARNATIC TRINITY



THIAGARAJA



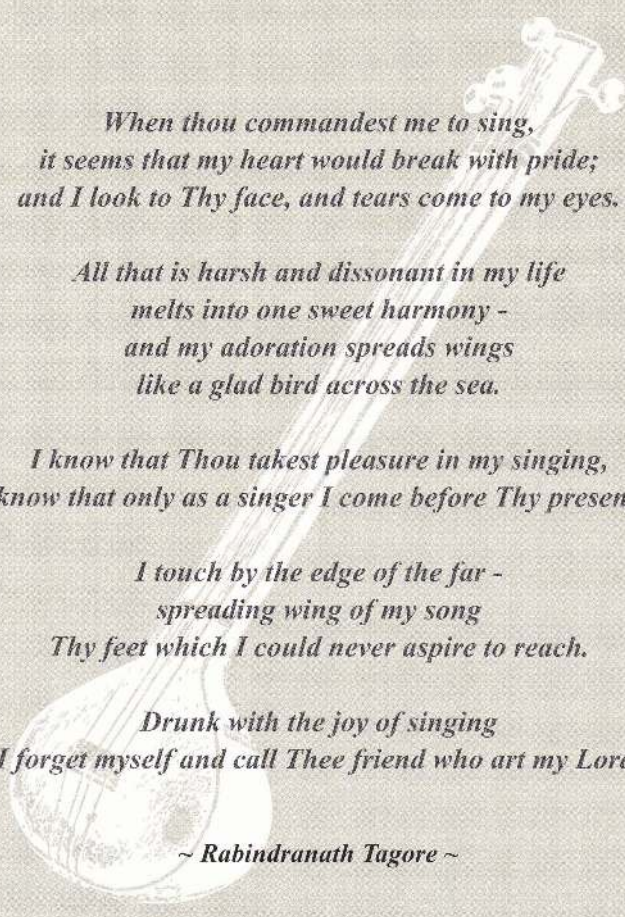
MUTHUSWAMY DIKSHITAR



SHYAMA SHASTRI

(Ink on paper, Nambudiri)

Gitanjali



*When thou commandest me to sing,
it seems that my heart would break with pride;
and I look to Thy face, and tears come to my eyes.*

*All that is harsh and dissonant in my life
melts into one sweet harmony -
and my adoration spreads wings
like a glad bird across the sea.*

*I know that Thou takest pleasure in my singing,
I know that only as a singer I come before Thy presence.*

*I touch by the edge of the far -
spreading wing of my song
Thy feet which I could never aspire to reach.*

*Drunk with the joy of singing
I forget myself and call Thee friend who art my Lord.*

~ Rabindranath Tagore ~

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EPILOGUE

Preface

I am very honoured to be asked to write a preface to this book to commemorate and celebrate the 75th birthday of Mrs. K Vijayalakshmi Akka. This is a story written with a broad brush. It documents a remarkable life journey and captures the many facets of this very special person - her exceptional musical talents, her pursuit of excellence in Carnatic music, her devotion to God, her dedication as a music teacher and mentor to countless children and adults, her role as a caring parent, as the anchor in her extended family and as a dear and loving friend to so many of us.

Life is a journey for all of us. As captured in this book, Akka's journey has been remarkable. While she is now a leading exponent of Carnatic music, her life has not been a bed of roses. Her journey is not just about her achievements as a talented musician but also about her struggles to be where she is today. Although she has faced challenges and endured difficult years, she has never wavered in her journey. She has faced life with amazing courage, fortitude and an unshakeable conviction that God is by her side. Music has been her solace and her inspiration.

I first met Akka in the 50's. It happened when I tagged along with my parents to Kirupanantha Variyar's talks. My ties with Akka's family continued as the years went by. I learnt later that my wife's father the late vidwan Harihara Iyer was one of her early music teachers at the Sabha. The social bonds have grown through the years and we are now more family than friends. Even as a young boy I noticed how she was shy, very elegant on stage but content to stay in the background, effortlessly accompanying Variyar on the violin. She was already a household name even then and it was common knowledge that Variyar would not take the stage when he sited this country if she did not accompany him on the violin. Through her music, teaching and contributions she has now

become a renowned and respected person in the wider community. But she has not changed in one respect – she has remained a shy person and shunned fame and publicity.

This evening is an exception. I know I speak for all when I say that we want her on center stage. She is an inspiration to those of us who give up in despair when faced with adversity. She is an example to those of us, talented or otherwise, who do not walk the extra mile and make the extra effort to pursue excellence. She is an exemplary artiste who has entertained rich and poor on so many occasions with her fluent vocal and violin skills. She has contributed immensely to keeping the culture and traditions of Carnatic music alive through many generations of young people whom she has taught. And, regardless of her age and health, she continues to do all the things that inspire us. For all this and more, we want her to know that this document and the celebrations this evening are a reminder of our very high esteem, affection and appreciation for all the many good things she has accomplished. She has much to be proud of and good things to look forward to.

I feel privileged to join members of her family and friends here this evening to wish her good health, happiness and great years as she journeys ahead.



V. Danabalan

Kuala Lumpur, 21st September 2008

It gives me great joy to share a few observations about Vijayalakshmi Kulaveerasingam arising from our long and cherished friendship which goes back 52 years.

We first met at my wedding reception in May 1956. My husband, Tun VT Sambanthan, was the Secretary of the Mahatma Gandhi Kalasalai (Tamil) School Committee in his home town Sungai Siput. He had invited Vijayalakshmi Akka, as she was fondly known, to teach Tamil school children traditional fine arts in fulfillment of his dream for them. He had literally snapped her up almost as soon as she came to live in Ipoh with her uncle and aunt, Sri and Smt Arupillai. The school song and a special ponggal song had been composed by Yogi Sri Kavi Kuyil Suddhanandha Bharathi. Vijayalakshmi developed the raga and taught everyone both these songs, which are sung until today. The skill of setting words to music, and of developing the tune into a melody, is especially hers. She continued the weekend classes with Mahatma Gandhi Kalasalai children until she came to live in KL after her marriage.

Today on the eve of her 75th birthday we see a life filled with pristine and rich dedication to her calling of Karnataka sangeetham (Carnatic music). We can look back with a sense of delight and awe, on her guru bhakti, devotion and shraddha to the musical tradition she chose for herself.

Vijayalakshmi's expertise on the violin is legendary in these parts. A unique feature in her playing is her alapana ie improvisation of a raga (mode) which demands a special insight and originality in the unfolding of the raga. I have found her alapana reaching great heights of expression and new nuances of the raga performed. She makes the violin sing the gamakas which are usually played on the veena. She has been a great accompanist not only for music kutcheris but also for Bharatanatyam. She has the capacity to accompany great maestros from India and has held her own during these performances. Her solo playing too is of the highest standard. To say that she has complete mastery over her instrument would be to resort to understatement.

As a teacher, she brings out the talent of children who have not had any exposure to classical music, and gives them confidence in maintaining the purity of the raga and the diction of the lyrics whether in Telugu, Tamil or Sanskrit. Sensitivity to the needs of her students has always been a

feature of Vijayalakshmi's craft. At the beginning of her calling as a music teacher in Mahatma Gandhi Kalasalai, she made Carnatic music and the Tamil poetry of Yogi Shuddanandha Bharathi and others, attractive and accessible to her young charges by using suitable catchy ragas. Over this half century of service to classical music, she would have touched every aspirant to Karnataka sangeetham not only in KL but internationally as well. Her students are now scattered all over the world and keep in loving touch with her.

Our friendship has developed over the years along musical lines also! We could always depend on her to set tunes for bhajans for group singing which she did at our request for the Sri Sarada Sangha in the 1960s.

She has carried the same dedication and dignity of approach into the challenges in her personal life, which she has never permitted to overcome the tapas of her dedication to music.

Her music is illustrative of not just knowledge of Carnatic music but the devotion to the Divine which leads to spiritual realisation. This in short, is the essence of Vijayalakshmi's art.

*"Sangeetha Jhānamu Bhakti vinā
Sanmārgamu Galadē Manasa.....
Bhringi Natēsa Samīraja Ghataja
Mataṅga Nārādādulupāsīncē...."
~ Thiagaraja ~*

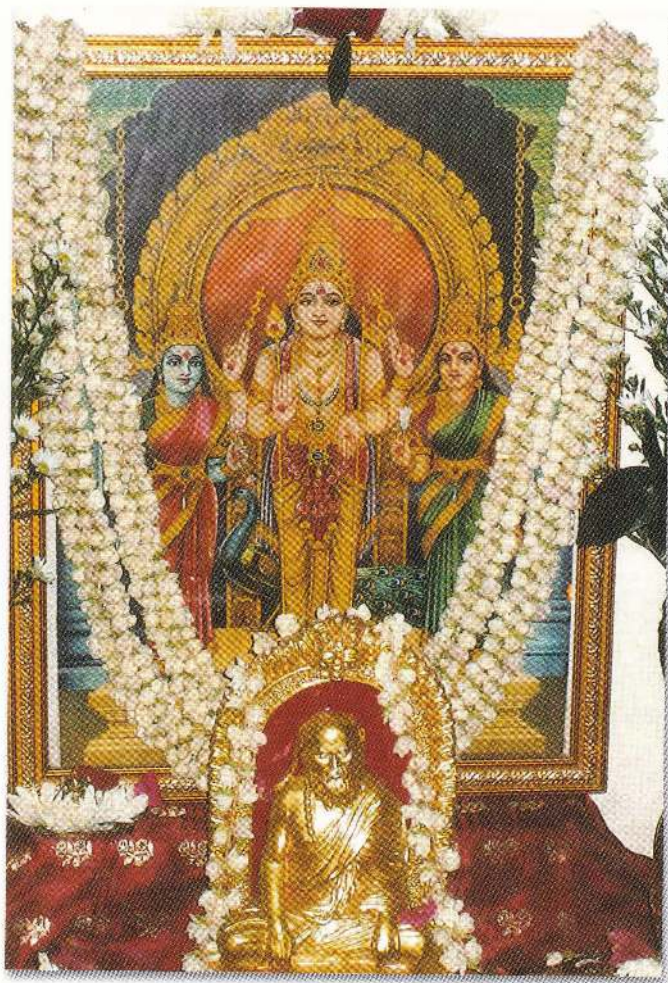
*"O Mind! Mere knowledge of music without devotion,
Can never lead to the right path.
Lord Nataraja, Anjaneya, Sages like Bhringi, Agastya Mataṅga and Nārādā Worship
you through music saturated with devotion.
Is there a superior mode of worship...."*

Dearest Vijayalakshmi, I close this with prayers for your health, long life, and continued puja on the altar of Karnataka sangeetham.

With Much Love

Umasundari Sambanthan.
Toh Puan Umasundari Sambanthan





*In the heart of those who recount His name
He doth reveal His gracious feet.
Thus he appears to those who chant
The hallowed name of 'Muruga'!*

~ Nakkirar ~

Prologue

*"I do not wish to dwell in this illusory body,
built of the sky, water, earth, air, fire and desires.
Enlighten me,
that I may praise the glory of your holy name in the wise,
beautiful Tamil tongue."*

~ Arunagirinathar ~

As one turns into 32, Jalan Ang Seng in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur, the whole atmosphere is filled with the loud chanting of the Shanmuga Kavasham. It is the month of Karthigai, auspicious to all Tamilians for whom the son of Shiva - Parvati takes on great significance. The entire hall is packed with young and old, men and women, caught in a frenzy of devotion to Lord Muruga. The altar set up in the centre is beautiful, the bronze statues of Muruga and Ganesh shimmering in all their glory. The air is filled with the fragrance of jasmine and roses. The atmosphere is charged with an air of intoxication, drunk with devotion to the Master of the potent Vel.

This annual celebration of the Kantha Shashti has been tenaciously observed over the last fifteen years. Each year at the end of the twelve hour continuous chanting of the Shanmuga Kavasham, many leave the evening, completely converted to Kaumaram.

They carry with them the inspiration of a Murugan Bhaktha who drew from them an answering devotion. For in the midst of all this, in that crowded hall, there is a voice. A voice so full of love and ecstasy of devotion that it is contagious with its call to pay homage to Kumara, Kantha, VadiVela, the glorious deity, specially precious to the Tamils. The call is melodious, sweet and gentle. And the crowd responds, and joins in a passionate chorus of praise for the Lord.

This is the voice of Vijayalakshmi Kulaveerasingam Kandiah.



What an evangelist, a true crusader! Not for her the spreading of her religion with hammer and tongs or fiery platform speeches, but through the melodious, gentle strains of music. This quiet, unassuming housewife has brought about the propagation of our Sanathana Dharma in the sweetest way possible to reach the depths of the human heart.

Vijayalakshmi, from the quiet of her home, has spread the Bhakthi Maarg. Her devotional disposition is inborn and her music draws its sustenance from her spiritual nature. This spirit she has tried to nurture in all those who come under her tutelage and in a very subtle manner she has been able to pass it on.



A great champion of the Tamil language, she has done for Tamil far more than what many a scholar of great repute with a string of degrees has achieved. From all those who come to her to be tutored in Tamil music, be it a five year old or a seventy year old, she elicits from them melody after melody in Tamil, voices raised in the adoration of God and love for the Tamil language.

The learned say "Know Thyself" before you attempt to understand what the Godhead is. With self-realization comes the knowledge that God is with and within and without the individual being. One of the many paths to self-realization is the austere devotion to Nadabrahma, the austere practice of classical music. Such music, always addressed to God purifies the body, cleanses the soul and sets the spirit soaring towards the Kailasa of ultimate bliss, not only of the singer but of the listener too.

Vijayalakshmi has immersed herself in Nadabrahma. Her life is an expression of this. To this day Vijayalakshmi's day starts with early morning prayers. Her puja room is cleaned and decorated with flowers and garlands and this is followed by chanting of the Shanmuga Kavasham and singing of the Thirumurais.

As Satguru Yogaswami has said, "If a lamp is black with soot, the light

cannot be seen." Similarly, Maya obscures the Atman. Music, devotional, classical, heartfelt music helps dispel the Maya, the illusion that keeps human beings away from their Maker. Man is God. And Man can become One only through the liberating forces such as music.

The greatest contribution of her life time was putting many of the well-known Tamil devotional poems to melodious, catchy tunes. In an environment where there was very little interest for learning the tongue-twisting Thiruvasakams, Thirumurais and hardly known Saivaite songs, her renderings became singularly appealing to all. With her firm grounding in all the intricacies of the host of ragas and talas that abound in Indian music, Vijayalakshmi Akka (as she is affectionately known to all) put all of these into such scintillating tunes that her students hardly notice that they are learning hymns that they had previously so loathed because they were taught by the most uninspiring "othuvars".

The Sivapuranam, (which has so often come to be associated with the monotonous drone of Hindu funerals sung by a cacophony of voices) comes to such soul-stirring melodious heights when sung to Vijayalakshmi's ragas. Beginning with the Thirupaavai, Thiruvampaavai, the Abhirami Anthathi, Vinayakar Akaval, Vinayakar Kavasam and Nadaraja Pathu have all been brought to the knowledge of all and sundry. Even those who have had no basic knowledge of the Tamil Language have unconsciously learnt all these hitherto unknown texts with effortless joy.

The great sage and saint His Holiness Kirupanantha Variyar was a familiar and regular visitor to Malaysia in the 60s. Vijayalakshmi had the singular honour and privilege of accompanying him all over Malaysia and Singapore playing the violin for his Kathak Kalashebam. He began to develop a deep affection for this quiet self effacing young girl and considered her as dear to him as a daughter. His lasting legacy to her was the gift of the Pamban Swamigal's Shanmuga Kavasham. When Vijayalakshmi was expecting her first child, Ranjani, Swamiji gave her a little booklet on the Shanmuga Kavasham hitherto little known in Malaysia, the Kanthashashti Kavasham being the more popular.

Over the last fifty years the Shanmuga Kavasham has been her talisman, her shield and protection. Her faith in Pamban Swamigal's Shanmuga Kavasham, she has passed on to countless number not only to her students



With Kirupanantha Variyar, Vijayalakshmi and Nageswari Vellupillay in Ipoh.

but to Murugan Bhakthas all over Malaysia.

She has had this rare gift of touching all those who come into her orbit with this bounty. With her chaste style, exacting training, shimmering voice and incomparable talent, she bestows music for musicians, devotion in song for devotees and manna for those who are both - rare repast and sincere offering at the feet of the Almighty. She, along with Yogeswari Nagalingam and Rajeswari Rajaratnam, was instrumental in preserving the traditions of the violin as well as Carnatic music in their pristine purity.

Vijayalakshmi Akka is an extraordinary woman. She has triumphed over many personal challenges and has remained steadfast in her love for music. She has asked so little for herself, seeking not the glamour of fame and fortune but only the strength of devotion to carry on her life's work.

She is both the "flower" whose beauty is not wasted on the desert air, and the "gem" whose lustre is seen and loved by her many admirers. This modest commentary on her contribution to Tamil and Music in this country is but a token of the high regard in which all hold her. It is with gratitude for exemplary courage, consistent devotion to her art, generosity of spirit in giving of her best to her students, that this little appreciation comes to her on her 75th birthday.

G. Jega Deva

Gana Jegadeva

Kuala Lumpur 2008



Baby Vijayalakshmi
First born and a bundle of joy to all



CHAPTER 1

Early Childhood

*With form and formless, what is not and what is Flower and
fragrance, gem and radiance
Body and soul, salvation and rules of righteousness
O Lord who comes as all and as Guru
O Guha Bestow Thy Grace.*

~ Arunagirinathar : Kanthar Anubhuti ~

It is the year 2008 , 20 years since the death of Mr. Kandiah; still he is referred to fondly as “Paatukara Kandiah” or “Thevara Kandiah.” Many a Jaffna Tamil family had their religious functions graced by the soul- stirring hymns sung by Mr. Kandiah. For more than half a century, Mr. Kandiah did yeoman service being in the forefront of temples and places of worship. Funeral homes found solace in the heartfelt rendering of the Thevarams and Thrivasakams which was a such an essential part of the Jaffna Tamil funeral rites.

To know Vijayalakshmi’s greatness and contribution to Tamil and Music, it is essential that one knows about the contribution made by her ancestors.

Vijayalakshmi’s success is largely due to her Uncle Mr. Arupillai.

Guardian Angels.*Perriappah - Arupillai**Perriamma - Sithamparam*

Arupillai married Sithamparam Kathiresar from Jaffna. Finding Kandiah a very eligible bachelor, Arupillai got his wife's younger sister, Elayathangam, married to Kandiah Mayilvaganam, a young clerical officer in the Malayan clerical service. This was to be very wonderful union that led to over 50 years of mutual love and respect between both families. Sithamparam and Arupillai showered all their love and attention on the younger sister's children, six of them as their own. It was perhaps a divine destiny that the Arupillai couple did not have children of their own and thus the Kandiah children were their life and blood. The love and total dedication given to the Kandiah family by their beloved Uncle Arupillai and Aunt Sithamparam is legendary.

Throughout their lives Uncle Arupillai's words were law in the home, not so much father Kandiah's. The Arupillai couple devoted their entire life sustaining the family with emotional, physical and financial support. Vijayalakshmi's father, Mayilvaganam Kandiah, thus relieved of much of the duties that a father was usually burdened with, could devote his heart and soul to the greatest passion of his life, South Indian Carnatic music. He took up music very seriously under the tutelage of Vidwan Ghousemian Sahib and Vidwan Sinnaiapillai who were music teachers at the Sabha.

He was one of the founder members of the Sangcetha Abivirathi Sabha. His talents were well expressed in the many dramas and plays staged in the Sabha in the 1920s and 30s. He taught music at the Sabha in those

Beloved Parents.*Father - Thevara Kandiah**Ooramma - Elayathangam*

early years and served the organization indefatigably for over 50 years in various capacities. He served with such dedication that no job was menial to him and he needed no position to serve.

Vijayalakshmi, born on 5th November 1933 in Kuala Lumpur, was the eldest of the Kandiah children. A year later she had a little baby brother, Kamaleswaran; as is the habit of all Jaffna Tamil families, children are given nick names and these two were affectionately called Rasathi and Rajan. Soon after the birth of Vijayalakshmi and Kamaleswaran, Elayathangam was sent off to Sri Lanka due to ill health with the baby, Kamaleswaran.

The little girl, Vijayalakshmi was left with Aunt Sithamparam and Uncle Arupillai. It was the beginning of a life-long relationship that stood the test of time. Being a childless couple they showered her with boundless love even having the luxury of a "black and white Chinese amah" and being driven around in a Morris Minor.

When mother returned from Sri Lanka in 1938, she found the five year old Vijayalakshmi, no longer a little baby she had left behind but a mature, precocious young lady. To Vijayalakshmi, her biological mother was just "Ooramma" whilst her Aunt was her beloved "Perriamma." Whilst other children of her age, were playing with dolls and "masak-masak", little Vijayalakshmi was trotting behind her father, to the Sabha and imbibing the first strains of Carnatic music, practicing the sarali varisai intensely and earnestly. She would follow her father to all the major Hindu festivals



Rasathi (Vijayalakshmi)



*Rasathi (Vijayalakshmi) and
Rajan (Kamahl)*

and be totally immersed in all the rituals and temple worship. Soon the little girl was singing to the accompaniment of her father on the harmonium. As she grew older she participated in the dramas produced at the Sabha; always cast into singing roles like that of Naradha and Ravana.

Recognising the child's inherent ear for music, she was sent at a very early age to the Sangeetha Abhivirithi Sabha for music lessons and to the famed Ramalinga Iyer for violin lessons. After all to father Mayilvaganam Kandiah the Sabha was his second home and it became so for the child as well. Growing up in an atmosphere of singing and music, the young girl began to exhibit a natural flair for imbibing the various ragas and talas. Her first music teacher at the Sabha was Vidwan Hari Hara Iyer followed later, by the well-known Swami Bhagavathar.

It was at this time that the little girl used to longingly watch the senior students of the Sabha walking into the Sabha with mysterious elongated boxes which she soon learnt were the much coveted violin cases. The melodious strains of the stringed instrument so enraptured the young child, she would sit for hours watching the students being tutored.

A young man, seeing the child lost in a world of her own, offered to take her to a music shop and get her a little violin. It was none other

than Mr. V. R. Nagalingam^a (the famed violinist, Yogeswari's husband, himself) who took the little girl and purchased a child-sized violin for her. Vijayalakshmi fondly recalls how Yogeswari painstakingly taught her to hold the bow and draw on the strings for the first time.

Mother returned from Sri Lanka in 1938 with four year old Kamaleswaran. The family grew with the birth of Sornalakshmi in 1940, Vigneswaran in 1941, Jegatheswaran in 1943 and Thanalakshmi in 1947. These were also the war years when families went through great hardship, fear and trauma. As the family grew in number, the joint family system continued, the Arupillais finding much joy in the pains and pleasures of a home overflowing with the sounds of the innocent prattle of children and the Kandiahs more than welcoming the loving physical, emotional and financial support given by the former. It is said that Perriamma had to occasionally part with some bits of jewelry in order to provide the family with rice during those traumatic war years.

From March 1942, father Kandiah was a clerk in the Railways. When he was eighty years old, Kandiah wrote in his memoirs "with self-sacrificing dedication – an ideal inherited from noble orthodox Hindu ancestry and with boundless trust in the gentle hands of Providence" he helped provide provisions daily from February 1944 to May 1944 to the prisoners of war at great risk to his own life. The climax of the war years ordeal was when Kandiah was detained for four months in Pudu jail by the BMA suspected of collaborating with the enemy. Perriappa Arupillai had to employ the services of eminent lawyer, Ramani for a fee of a \$1,000 a very large sum for those days. Kandiah was found not guilty and was released and returned to work as a clerk in the Malayan Railways.

There were also happy memories of the Princess Road days with close neighbourly interaction with families like the Navarednams (Noella, Bella & Dulcie), the Amrasingams and the Doraisamys. Christmas was a great time of enjoyment when even the Hindu children joined in the Nativity play and went carolling. One year Kamaleswaran was Joseph and Sothie Doraisamy, Mary.

Overseen by two mothers, Ooramma and Perriamma and a Chinese "Aamah" as well, the children never knew want.

Like all Jaffna Hindu Tamil families, there were certain traditions that were strictly adhered to. The family were orthodox Hindus, hence strict fasts were observed on Amavasai and Purnami, the first and fifteenth of the month. Both mothers would be busy fasting and preparing a full banana leaf vegetarian lunch complete with payasam and vadai. Lunch would be served only after father and uncle had a bath and sang all the routine thevarams and performed arathi to all the Ravi Varma paintings of the Hindu pantheon hanging on the hall walls.

Chicken, mutton and seafood were served to the family only on the non-auspicious days. Vijayalakshmi began to develop an aversion for non-vegetarian food. The young child's conscience was awakened by the soul stirring talks given by the late Ramanathan Chettiar (father-in-law of Tan Sri Somasundaram) whom she used to listen to, accompanying her father. "When there was such delicious alternative as served during the Amavasai and Purnami fasts why the need for any other type of food?" she used to think. At age 14, she decided to become a strict vegetarian, a crucial decision that was to hold her in good stead in the years to come.

The Kandiah family.



(Vijayalakshmi – away in Sri Rangam)
Seated: Kamaleswaran, mother, father, Rani flanked by Vigneswaran and Jegatheswaran. Behind: Somalakshmi



CHAPTER 2

Off to Sri Rangam

*This talent, this skill, this knowledge and this
devotion do not belong to me.
These are the gifts of Muruga.
It is only you Lord Muruga, who makes me sing.
~ Arunagirinathar: Kandhar Anubhuti. ~*

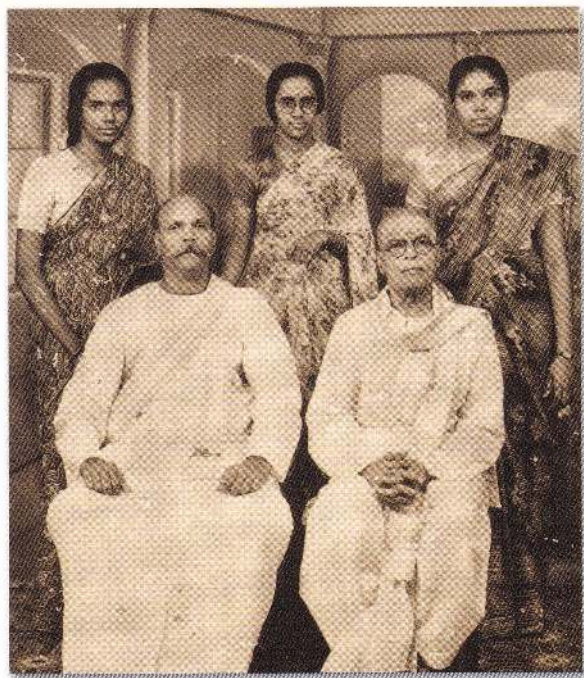
Vijayalakshmi had her early education in St Mary's and secondary in the Methodist Girls' School Kuala Lumpur. Her teachers remember her for her excellent, print perfect handwriting. Often the girl would be called to sit by the teacher and fill in report cards and mark sheets. Even to this day, her music students marvel at the music sheets she churns out for them; whether they be in English or Tamil they are works of art.

But alas, her interest lay in anything but the mundane curriculum of the post war classroom and destiny took her down a less trodden path. Like most of her generation she was one of the many thousands who had been affected by the war years. She was older than some of her classmates. Whilst studiously going through the motions of school and the severe discipline of Miss Marsh and the Methodist mission tenets, her whole heart and soul was totally immersed in the challenging discipline of

South Indian Carnatic music. The weekly violin lessons with Ramalinga Iyer at the Sabha was something she cherished and looked forward to as the highlight of her life.

It was at this time, aged 19, and in the year 1952, she realised music was her passion and decided she would pursue it at whatever cost. Her cousins, Parameswari Swaminathan and Maheswari Naguleswaran, seemed to have paved the way for the young Vijayalakshmi. They had gone from Jaffna to Chidambaram and completed a four year degree course in Carnatic music. Wanting to further hone their skills at the violin, they proceeded to Sri Rangam to pursue a course in music under the famed violin guru, Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer. In the days when young girls were not given such leeway, Mr. Swaminathan took a whole house for the girls and went over to personally oversee his daughters' progress.

***The people who made it all happen.
Sri Lankan uncle and cousins.***



*Seated : Uncle Swaminathan & Vadya Vidya Marungapuri
Gopalakrishna Iyer
Standing : Vijayalakshmi, Maheswari Naguleswaran,
Parameswari Swaminathan.*

This was a splendid opportunity for their Malaysian cousin to persuade her home folks to let her follow suit. Her Periaappa could of course never deny anything that his Rasathi wanted. He had retired by then but he took on a job with Dr. Karthigasu (of Sybil Karthigasu fame) in Ipoh. Not only did he finance Vijayalakshmi's music education but he even sent his wife to accompany the young girl to distant India and keep home for her. For two whole years the elderly Uncle Arupillai lived in a rented room in Ipoh, bereft of the comforts of home cooked food and loving wifely care. To that extent Perriappa would go for his niece.

Vijayalakshmi and her Aunt left for uncharted waters, taking the S.S. Chithambaram and enduring the three week arduous journey by sea, they landed at Madras. They were met by cousin Satchi who was doing his medical studies there. From there onwards to Trichy and finally Sri Rangam, the famed temple city of Andal fame and the great Sri Ranganathar temple.

Guru and shisya.



A flow of divine nectar to the listener.

Vijayalakshmi decided that she would take up the violin, a rather recent innovation into the South Indian Carnatic kutcheri scene. Thus it was to master this phenomenal instrument that she left her home land in search of her guru. Her first meeting with her violin guru still remains firmly etched in her memory. A non-descript elderly man, Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer, would stretch himself on a deck chair, and sharply

follow the ragas played by his student. With eyes closed, he would be able to instruct her on the delicate placing of fingers and the drawing of the bow. He would often veer away from the main lesson by chatting on this or that aspect of music or of a particular raga or composition. Often the student would be kept wondering, for he would keep singing to himself, thinking out a new turn of phrase, perfecting something he liked, roaming around in a realm of imagination. Then he would suddenly call out to her and ask her to pay attention to how he was handling a particular snatch of raga. And finally, he would pick up the instrument and finger it fondly; when he played it, was the flow of divine nectar to the listener.

Being a young girl she could not adhere to the strictly gurukula tradition. Living with the guru and serving him twenty four hours the shishya and guru would form an intangible bond leading to a transfer of knowledge that just cannot be fathomed by modern Western educators. However, staying in close proximity with the guru and the daily and diligent attendance of class, she imbibed every aspect of the guru's temperament. A very vivid Sanskrit sloka outlined the characteristics of a good shishya:

*"Kaka snanam baka dhynam
Shirvan nidra tataivacha
Alpaharam Grahatyagam
Ithe sishya panchama lakshyam."*

Crow's bath, crane's vigilance, dog's sleep, little food and sacrifice of home comforts – these are the five qualities of a disciple. South Indian tradition had it that the fullest benefit could only be derived from service to the guru.

Vijayalakshmi made the best of practising these ancient rules of the gurukula tradition. Even though she did not stay in the home of her guru, she practiced all the observances of a devoted disciple. She spent very little time on personal care like long baths and dressing up, went about her music lessons with total one pointed concentration. She partook of the simplest of vegetarian meals sans spices, ghee etc and sacrificed all the usual Malayan comforts, sleeping on mats on the floor, enduring the heat of the Sri Rangam nights with just a hand fan etc. It was no wonder then that until his death, on Vijayathasami day, Vijayalakshmi would receive a musical composition by post from her guru, Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer.

Three months into her lesson with her violin guru, he requested that she vocalise a raga that he was introducing. On the very first session on hearing Vijayalakshmi sing, he was captivated by the extra-ordinary melodious quality of her voice. Her swaras sparkled in perfect unison with the sruti. Before him was an unsophisticated girl with no apparent interest in any thing but music. So impressed was her violin guru, that he insisted that she enrol herself for vocal as well. She thus had the good fortune of being tutored by the well-known V. S. Krishnamoorthy Rao of Sri Rangam.

^b "By virtue of the special nature of modern Carnatic music being divided into kalpita sangita (composed music) and manodharma sangita (extempore music) it was absolutely necessary to have a personal guru. Gamakas ^c make notation of Carnatic music difficult as they can only be taught by the oral method. Notation may make a musician aware of the structure of a varnam or kriti but the actual rendering of it has to be learnt from a personal guru. Manodharma sangita or extempore improvisation forms the acid test of a musician's caliber. There are hundreds of raga and tala varieties, but each one can acquire an individuality depending on the genius and sadhana of individual vidwans. The kriti itself provides infinite scope for improvisation in the form of niraval. While the actual rendering of a kriti may not be changed, the musician is allowed to select a phrase that is striking and take off into a flight of fancy. Niravals when expertly handled can give a fresh sparkle to the lyric."

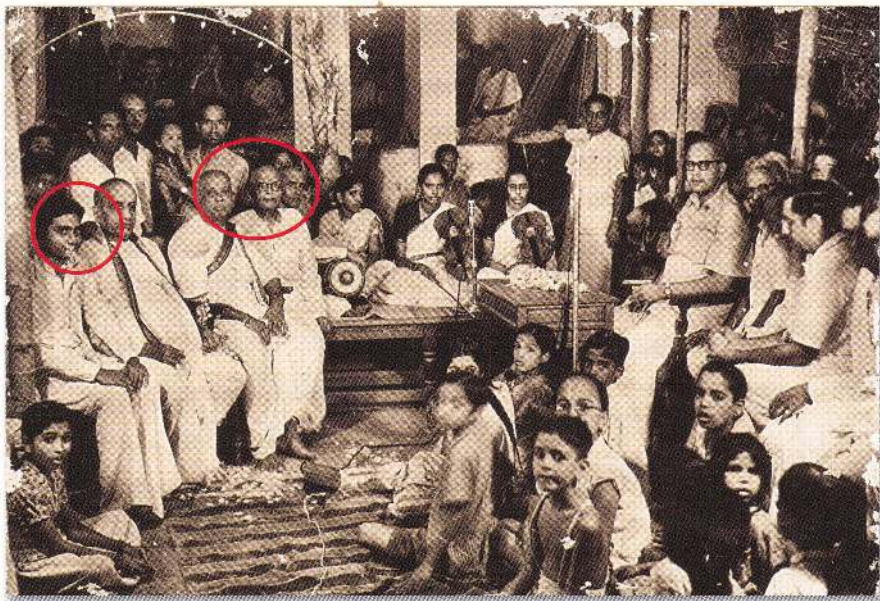
All this Vijayalakshmi had to master within the brief two year stint she had with Sri Krishnamoorthy Rao. She pays tribute to her guru who initiated her into all the intricacies and finer points of Carnatic music. Over the two years he equipped her with a large repertoire of songs which remain as precious gems in her treasure chest.



1973 – After her marriage on the way on her husband's world tour, she stopped at Kumabakonam to play at the specific request of her vocal teacher - Sri Krishnamoorthy Rao. (circled)

Realising that she had been sent at great cost and financial expense to the family back home, she spent her two year stint with one pointed concentration on precisely what she had set out to achieve. Brother Kamaleswaran was to be sent off to Adelaide around this time and Uncle could not support the two of them. So the young girl was bent on mastering as much as she could in the brief two year period that she was in Sri Rangam. She could not afford the luxury of a four year degree course at Annamalai University as her cousins had done.

For two years she was totally immersed in early morning rituals waking up at Brahma murthum times performing the early morning pujas, decorating the front entrance with decorative kolams to the strain of the Sri Venkateshwara Suprabhatham and performing the morning prayers. She set herself an extremely grueling routine of waking up at 4.00a.m. going through the scales on the violin, helping with household chores, then off to the violin guru's home for three hours of intensive one-to-one coaching, lunch and then going through the kritis that were taught in the morning, tea and bath and coaching from the vocal teacher till late evening. Evening prayers and dinner and once again revision of theory, writing down and making notations of all that was taught for the day. Those were the days of no continuous TV serials and she was



**Shri Thiyaagabrahma Karnataka Gurukulam 5th year.
22nd Thyaga Brahma Arathana Celebrations, Sri Rangam 2nd. January 1953**

During the two year stay in Sri Rangam, Vijayalakshmi's skill on the violin was put to serious scrutiny as she had to often perform before extremely learned musical vidwans, who were only waiting to detect the slightest error. She was put to the test and she emerged tops.

Seated : Sri Chockalingam Pillai, Capt. Sami Desikachary, Sri Ramanuja Iyengar, Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer, Sri Malayappa Iyer, Miss Janaki, Maheswari and Vijayalakshmi on violins. The group is flanked by well known personalities, in Sri Rangam like the district judges, ICS officers and the Chairman of Sri Rangam.

Sri Chockalingam Pillai (circled) was the son of the Zamindar Rajagopal Pillai with whose family Vijayalakshmi lived in the second year of her stay in Sri Rangam.

Sri Ramanuja Iyengar (circled) was one of the revolutionary musical icons who left an indelible mark on the modern Carnatic music scene. He was responsible for refashioning the concert structure in the 1920s.

Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer (circled), Vijayalakshmi's vadya vidwan. The mutual affection and respect between guru and shishya, which began during this period was to last a life time.

so disciplined that her mind was not distracted by the sari shops nor the cinema, a great attraction to visitors to India.

With her willingness to always please and her quiet, winning ways, Vijayalakshmi had the capacity to capture the hearts of whomever she met and she did so when she went to Sri Rangam as well. Her violin guru, Gopalakrishna Iyer introduced the young girl and aunt to Zamindar Rajagopal Pillai whose son learnt violin under him. She spent the second year of her stay in Sri Rangam in the luxurious home of the Zamindar

and family. Having three daughters and two sons of his own, the zamindar treated his Malayan visitors with much love and respect.

She considers the two year period that she spent in Sri Rangam as one the happiest and most fulfilling years of her life. In addition to the enriching experiences she gathered in Sri Rangam, one of her most cherished memories of her two year stay in India was the December pilgrimage to Madras to the vibrant music festivals that were becoming a rage in the South Indian Carnatic scene. Plunged into such an artistically invigorating pattern of life and enlivening company made a world of difference to Vijayalakshmi as a person. She shed some of her inhibitions and shyness and was blossoming into an accomplished lady fast leaving her bashful teens behind.

Achieved her goal with flying colours.

23rd. Thiyaabrahma Aradana Celebrations Sri Rangam 23-1-1954

*The conferment of the title – Vadya Vidya Visaradaha
To Shrimathi Vijayalakshmi Kanthiah of Malaya*



Sitting left to right: Shri Chitoor Subramanya Pillai (circled), Principal Annamalai University, a renowned centre for Carnatic music education.

Shri K. Srinivasan, Shri Ramamurthy Miruthangam Vidwan Shrimathi Vijayalakshmi, Vadya Vidya Ratna Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer Violin Vidwan, Thri Twami Desikachari, Shri Ramuni Menon, I.C.S., District Judge, Trichy.

The early fifties were burgeoning years in the history of Carnatic music. The cultural renaissance, sweeping across the country amidst political upheavals and mechanical advances in the mass media had far-reaching impact on the growth of Carnatic music. The renowned Ariyakudi Ramanuja Aiyangar had revolutionized and established an attractive kutcheri format, enabling the masses to enjoy a kutcheri with ease. He was hailed an innovator; by introducing a compact formula in his own concerts. He reduced the concert to manageable proportions with a mix of heavy and light items so as to sustain audience interest.

It was also the era when women were making their appearance on the kutcheri circuit. It was an added bonus of these annual trips to Madras for the December Music Festival that Vijayalakshmi was being exposed to such great names like the Madras quartet MS Subbulakshmi, T. Brinda, D.K. Pattamall and M.L. Vasanthakumari. Vijayalakshmi found herself in a blissful state of joy merely listening to these doyens in the world of South Indian Carnatic music. Such exposure to the real was to have tremendous impact on the young, impressionable mind.



Amongst the women who transformed the musical scene after 1930s, four names stand out. (top left clockwise) M.S. Subbulakshmi (1916-2004), D.K. Pattammal (1919-), M.L. Vasanthakumari (1928-1990) and T. Brinda (1912-1996). Appearing at a critical moment in the history of Carnatic music they broke out of the casteist, sexist milieu to become equal partners with men in a common endeavour of creativity, though intensely rooted in tradition.
The Madras Quartet by Indira Menon

Vijayalakshmi was also fortunate to have entered an era when there were revolutionary changes occurring in the kutcheri scene. A little digression here into the history and evolution of the violin into its present place in Carnatic music will not go astray here, being Vijayalakshmi's preferred instrument.

^d "The accepted format of a South Indian Carnatic music concert is the vocalist who would be aided by the mridangam (supporting and maintaining the general rhythm and tala of the performer), the thambura (maintaining the sruti) and the veena or flute or much later the violin (following the singer like a shadow, keeping the singer in tow with the raga and the gamakas etc.) The veena is one of the oldest instruments of India and coming closest to the human voice, it could bring out the gamakas of Carnatic music better than any other instrument. It far superceded instruments like, the harmonium which was considered unsuitable for South Indian Carnatic vocalists – instead of producing a progressed, unbroken continuity from one note to the next, the sound jumped from one note to the next. It was too digital to suit the gamakas of Carnatic music.

So, the veena became the favoured accompanying instrument when Carnatic music developed its kutcheri system in the second half of the 19th century. The veena however had one disadvantage, by virtue of its size it was too cumbersome to be carried around. The innovative South Indian mind was ready for a change and it came in the form of the violin.

Muthuswamy Dikshitar (1775 – 1835) and his brother Baluswami were invited by the British in Fort St. George to produce some fusion music. The two men were fascinated by the handsome little instrument with which the English musicians were producing brilliant musical sounds. Dikshitar was amazed at the accuracy with which this instrument could produce raga music and Balusami soon became a master of the instrument. The felicity with which the wholly Western violin was transformed into a "South Indian instrument" was largely due to the ingenuity of the Tamil intellect, particularly of Baluswami.

“There were two reasons for the success of the violin. Its flexibility to pitch and tuning enabled it to produce the subtlest gamakas. At the same time its timbre quality was closest to the human voice, which was important in a basically vocal system like Carnatic music. The convenience of the handy violin made it quickly accepted for the kutcheri circuit, the traveling accompanists could easily tuck it under his arms whereas a vecna would have required a porter to transport it.

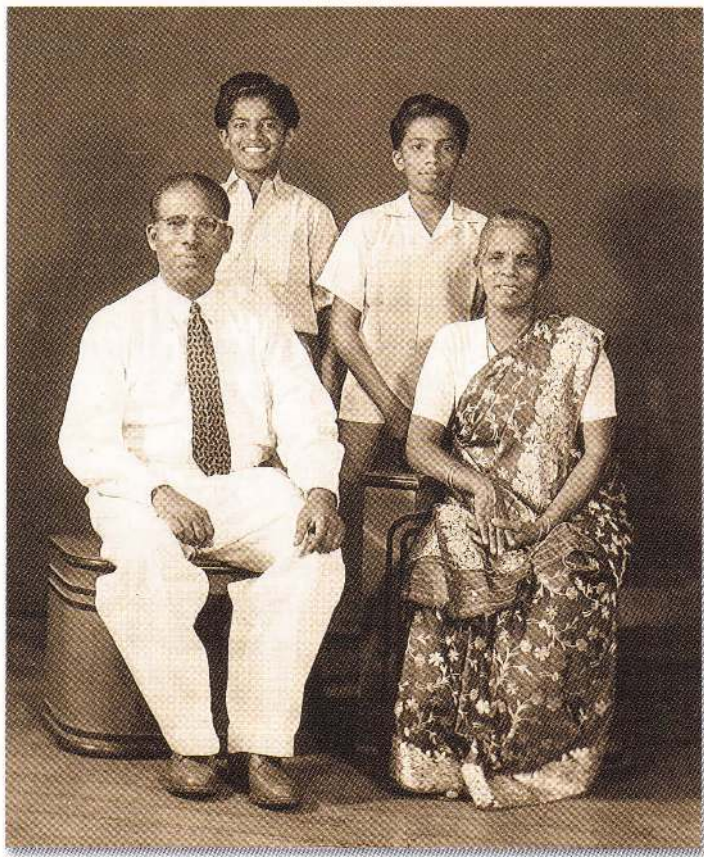
Even the way the violin was held was cleverly adapted to Indian needs. The resourceful South Indian simply sat in a modified padmasana and turned the violin into a convenient lap instrument. The sound was just as sweet. Hence, the violin borrowed from the West and adapted to Indian music became the standard equipment. One finger gliding up and down a single note could produce a spectrum of tones to match the most intricate gamakas – a technique of making the human voice perform seemingly impossible feats. The increasingly popular use of the violin in the 19th century was further emphasized in the 20th. The violin as a “Carnatic” music instrument was here to stay!”

This innovation in Carnatic music came at a very momentous time in Vijayalakshmi’s life. She mastered all the intricacies of the violin, thus equipping herself with all the skills that enabled her to become one of the most sought-after violinists in Malaysia. When in 1954, the twenty one year old Vijayalakshmi left the shores of Madras, she had attained maturity as a musician and was far more confident of herself than when she arrived as a girl on the S.S. Chidhabaram two years earlier.

Vijayalakshmi had chosen a path less travelled by, and it indeed did make all the difference.

Love for family

*Vijayalakshmi has a deep love for parents and siblings,
kith and kin*



Parents with brothers Vigneswaran and Jegatheswaran.



CHAPTER 3

Back to Home Shores

*You are the embodiment of love who has no equal, who is
enlightened, who gives happiness to all.*

*When would the rose petals of your Lotus Feet
extend their gentle grace to my heart ?*

*When would you come,
mounted on your beautiful transport of peacock
to give me the treasure of your grace ?”*

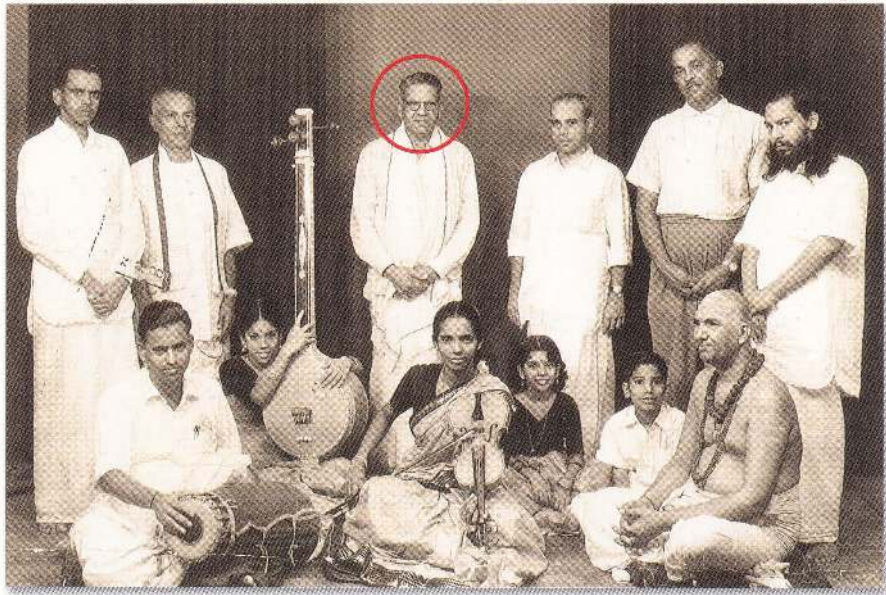
~ Ramalinga Swamikal: Deiva Mani Maalai. ~

Uncle Arupillai was working in Ipoh. Vijayalakshmi started her music career in Ipoh. “Dr. Karthigasu suggested to my uncle that I should start teaching music in Ipoh as Kuala Lumpur already had enough teachers.” Teaching music was something that ran in her veins and as a young musician she started off teaching at the Sangeetha Sabha Ipoh and the Sungei Siput Gandhi KalaSalai. Ipoh suddenly came alive and interest in Carnatic music began to spread like wild fire.

Her fame began to spread and she was much sought after as accompanist to many famous visiting singers from India. The first singer the now accomplished Vijayalakshmi accompanied was the very well-known singer Shanmugaratnam from Sri Lanka.

It was at this time that she came under the grace of spiritual leaders like Kirupanantha Variyar; who grew so fond of her that he soon considered her like a child of his own. She accompanied him on his Katha Kalashebam through out the country, as far as Singapore even, with Uncle Arupillai closely following as chaperone to his young niece.

On a ten day Kathakkalashebam tour of Singapore with Kirupanantha Variyar



Uncle Arupillai (circled) always a pillar of strength, standing tall and proud.

She also played Pakavathium to the Kathakkalshebams of Mani Bagavathar and Kamalabai Embar Vijayaragava Chariyar. She showed her talent much to the pride and joy of both, her parents and Uncle and Aunt. It was a credit to her skill that she was invited to accompany famed musicians like Ayaloor Krishnan, Maharajapuram Santhanam, T.K. Govinda Rao, Rukmani Rajagopalan, Swami Haridas Giri, Jesudass just to name a few. She became a renowned Indian music artiste. As a violinist she was conferred with Carnatic honours of Vadya Vidya Visarada and Sangeetha Vidva Kalabhushanam by Sri Chittur Subramanya Pillai, the Principal of Annamalai University at Chidambaram. Swami Kirupananda Variyar gave her the title of Sangeetha Jyothi.

The time had come for marriage and proposals came pouring in. Steeped in music and devotional practices, marriage was the last thing on the mind

of the young girl. However she realised marriage was necessary to give any Indian woman the necessary protection, especially for one who had taken on a career that projected one on stage and the public eye. Being unmarried, Uncle had to accompany her everywhere, sometimes even as far as Singapore. An unsophisticated girl with no apparent interest in anything beyond music, she was happy to be protected by her extended family leaving all decisions to her uncle and father.

So when marriage proposals were discussed, the only prerequisite for her was that the man she married would appreciate music and wondered if her spouse would share the same love and passion her family had for Carnatic music. More importantly that whoever married her should share the same love and regard she had for her beloved uncle and aunt, the Arupillais.

Father Kandiah suddenly realized that the bridegroom was in his own home – his sister's only son- an accountant graduate from Perth – Kulaveerasingam. It pleased her parents and the Arupillais had known him from childhood- it seemed to all the most suitable.

On 4th of September 1959 she married her own cousin, Kulaveerasingam. She moved to Kuala Lumpur and her home became the centre of her music classes.

Niranjani was born on 12th September 1960, Nithiyani on 29th March 1964 and Guhan on the 2nd December 1966. She had a deep attachment to family and was a very creative housewife.

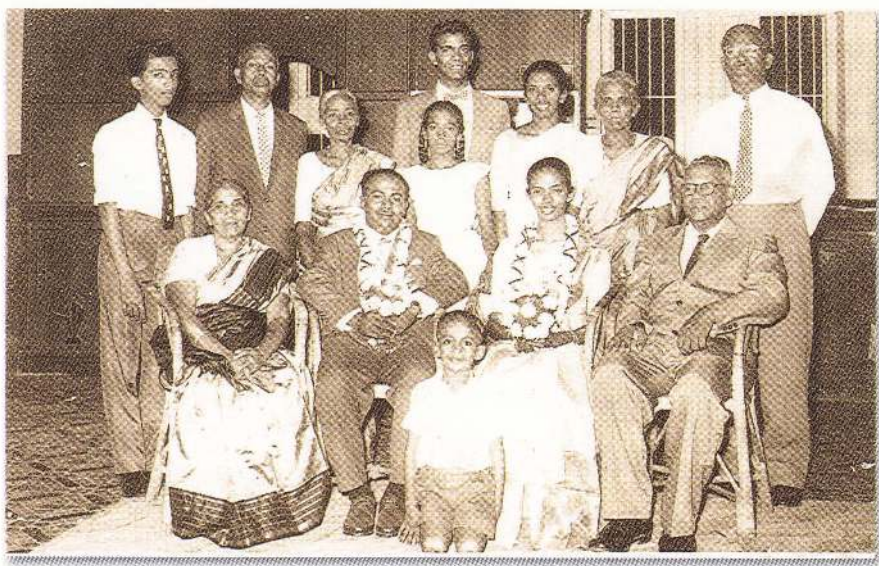
Apart from the time she spent on teaching Carnatic music, she enrolled herself with the well-known cake instructor, Mrs. Fernando. She became very skilled in icing. Beginning with her youngest sister Rani and then going onto her own children and that of friends, she became the official cake maker, thrilling one and all with Mrs. Fernando's Jack and Jill and Humpty Dumpty birthday cakes. She was also a very deft needlewoman; Rani recalls with great fondness the many exquisitely smocked dresses that her older sister made for her and the beauty of seeing the little one clothed in one of her handiwork was sheer joy to Vijayalakshmi. Later on she found great joy in adorning her two daughters with similar smocked dresses.



*Young, handsome cousin,
Kulaveerasingam*



*With cousin Kamaleswaran while
studying Accountancy in Perth.*



Joyful union for all.

From the 1960s onwards, she organized the yearly Thiagaraja Arathana and the Mumurthi Vizha commemorating the works of the Carnatic Trio. With the growing responsibilities she continued to keep her music career going. Her students regularly performed at the Sabha during the period of Navarathiri. She was a regular feature at all temple functions always obliging by singing during the period of Shivarathiri, Karthigai and Chathurthi.



A new phase.....

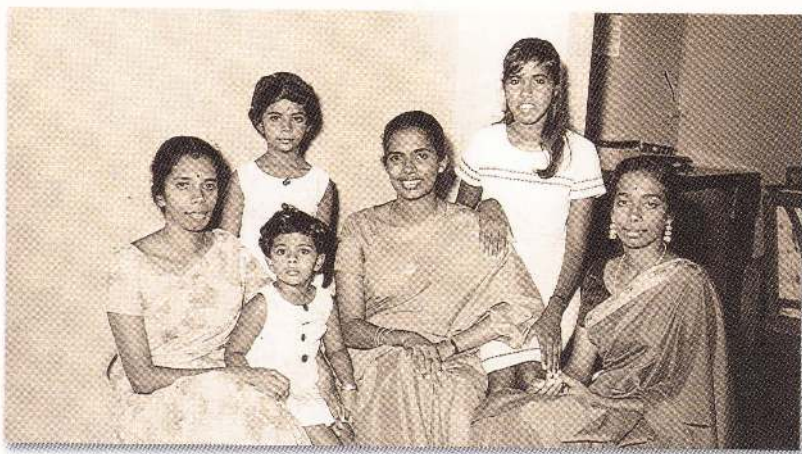


The years go by

In 1971, Vijayalakshmi was drawn by the charisma of Swami Shantananda; her hunger for spiritual satsang was more than fulfilled as she regularly attended His Holiness spiritual satsangs and the chanting of the Thirushethi became part of her repertoire of early morning prayers.

The years went by thus. The children grew up and married. Niranjani married Vadivel and has two children, Gayathri and Shivabalan. Nithya married Indran and has two children, Raenuga and Vishnu Dev. Despite the inevitable constraints put on the daughter-in-law, wife and mother, Vijayalakshmi tenaciously clung on to the sanctuary of her puja room and music. The violin became the panacea for all the vicissitude of her domestic life. The more she expressed her self in soulful surrender to the One above, the more the challenges grew. But her steadfast faith and confidence in prayer sustained her through the most trying times, building within her an enduring and resilient spirit that has upheld her to this day.

Vijayalakshmi is a strong believer in the efficacy of traditional temple worship so regular visits to the Maha Maraiamman Temple and the Sri Kanthaswamy Kovil in Scott Road was very much part of her routine. After her husband's retirement, she found much joy in the daily sojourn to Kottu Malai Pillayar temple in Pudu; both husband and wife would leave home as early as 4.45 a.m. to witness the early morning abishegam, celebrate the puja and be back home by 7.00a.m.



*Sisters sharing happy moments
Sorna, Rani & Vijayalakshmi and an ardent student, Sugi with the tiny tots.*



*Mom - expert cake maker
Nithya*



Baby Guhan



Precious Guhan

The unbreakable bonds of Sisterhood.



Ranjani and Nithya



Vijayalakshmi and Sorna



*Abundance of Love
From two sets of grandparents.*



*More additions to the family Ranjani marries Vadivel. Children-
Gayathri and Shivabalan. Nithya marries Indran.*



*Joyful moment for grandmothers - marriage Sri Vadivale (grandson of
old time friend, the Vetri Vadivales) to Gayathri (granddaughter of the
Kulaveerasingams)*

This routine had to end with the death of her husband on the 24th. November 1996. From thence onwards she was drawn to Nageshwari Amman Temple in Bangsar, gracing the temple functions during the period of Navarathiri, Thiruvamba and Adi Pooram.

At the dawn of the century, she set herself a very ambitious task. Her friendship with Sri La Sri Dr. Mohana Veni, a direct disciple of Sri La Sri Ramachandra Swamigal of Thiruparankundram in Tamil Nadu, inspired her to more musical endeavours. She went to great pains setting the entire gamut of Pamban Swamigal's compositions to a host of melodious tunes. Then gathering her students, teaching them and then getting a recording done – a Herculean task for a frail woman who was also at this particular time undergoing some serious medical problems. She organized regular visits to numerous Murugan temples where Pamban Swamigal's Shanmuga Kavasham was sung; in the process neglecting her deteriorating health. Finally, her daughters had to force her into being hospitalized and immediate surgery had to be done. However, soaked in such devotion and trust, her Murugan did not fail her. She recuperated in the soonest possible time and she was back to what she loved doing most her harmonium and her students.

She faced the many trials and tribulations that came her way with utter devotion and courage, to her nothing was unconquerable. This quiet, self-effacing musician belies a strong and calm faith that has drawn the admiration of many. It was and is her unshakeable belief in that Vel Murugan that has kept her sweet and beautiful with inner light to this grand birth year.



***A gift of a gold locket.
Token of love to spiritual
daughter from Kirupanantha
Variyar***

Vijayalakshmi Isai Gnana Jothi



CHAPTER 4

Music runs in the Family

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

~ Robert Frost ~

The passion for music and song did not begin and end with father, Thevara Mayilvaganam Kandiah or otherwise known as Pattukara Kandiah.

Vijayalakshmi revealed this passion, Sorna, Rani and Vigneswaran all sing and enjoy music but it is two of her younger siblings, Kamaleswaran and Jegathesvaran together with Vijayalakshmi who have left an indelible mark in the world of music. Happily this has also gone down to a third generation of the Kandiah clan. All three chose to “travel the road less traveled by and that has made all the difference.”

All the Kandiah children grew up in an atmosphere of South Indian Carnatic music. The gramophone and the radio were an essential part of

the home and the whole atmosphere pervaded with the thundering voice of Thigaraja Bhagavathar and the melodious strains of MS Subbulakshmi. Kamaleswaran, as a young child, had been enrolled in the music classes of the Sabha. He can still recall his embarrassment having to follow his older sister, Vijayalakshmi and being the only boy in a class brimming with girls.

His one unforgettable memory of those early years was the music concert he attended given by the celebrated Sri Lankan singer, Shanmugaratnam. The singer was accompanied by his sister, Vijayalakshmi, on the violin. Kamaleswaran was spell bound by the sound of Shanmugaratnam's voice. His voice was sheer magic and the young boy longed to hear him again but never did. It had such a lasting impact on him

In the Sabha he was taught the basics of South Indian music and the Thirumurais. The music was learnt by ear with no musical notation as is prevalent in Western music. He actively participated in the MummorthiVizha, Navarathiri festival, Tamizhosai Vizhza and Thevara chanting.



Kamaleswaran with Uncle Arupillai



Kamahl with wife, Sahodara, Rajan and Rani, both have careers in the field of music.

^f In 1953 Kamaleswaran left for Adelaide to continue his studies at King's College. But he was soon to impress everyone with his timbre, beautiful, rich baritone voice. The Adelaide News headlines screamed in the face of the readers "Here's a voice you'll remember" it said. It was not just the range and quality of voice but also the maturity of his approach. "Kamahl" was born! His voice was unique on the Australian music scene.

Kamahl was to become by far the biggest selling recording artiste in Australia. Beginning with his *Around the World* for charity, royalties gained from this performance went towards the Save the Children Fund. He conquered Britain with his appearance at the London Palladium, the mecca of variety entertainment and from thence on became a world acclaimed singer starring in one of Australia's highest rating national television programmes. Kamahl was now a household name in Australia – the heart-throb of the women particularly. "Oh, isn't he a young Kamaaaahl!" was a common enough compliment for any good-looking Indian boy! In a manner of speaking, Kamahl had put Indians "on the map" in Australia with his rich and wonderful voice and his charming demeanour.

In 1982 he made his concert debut at the Petaling Jaya Civics Centre with a sell-out performance. Kamaleswaran, the Sentul born, had become Kamahl, an international star! Among the audience were both his parents and aunt, savouring the moment of glory for their son, who had also chosen "the road less traveled by" in a very big way.

Royalties from his famous Elephant song went towards the WWF project for the preservation of elephants. His contribution towards the Save the Environment won world wide acclaim with a string of famous presentations like *Save the Oceans* in 1976 and *Save the Whales* in 1980 both in aid of the WWF. There were such glorious occasions like performing at the Royal Variety Charity Concert before Prince Charles in Adelaide in 1981, before Prince and Princess Michael at the Opera House and again before the Queen and Prince Philip at the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane in 1982. In the Australia Day Honours List of 1994, he was made a Member of the Order of Australia in recognition of his service to the community and to his industry. His impossible dream had indeed come true.

Then there was younger brother, Jegatheeswaran born in 1943 hence ten years younger than Vijayalakshmi and nine years younger than Kamaleswaran.

Perriappah and father had to some extent been disappointed by the way Kamahl had succumbed to the world of music instead of returning home as an engineer or architect they had dreamt he would. Every Ceylonese family would put itself to much travail in order to see their sons become doctors, lawyers or engineers. Not only did this bring pride to families but it fetched large dowries from prospective brides. Kamahl by venturing into a career that was still not quite tested by the community and by marrying a girl of his own choice was by Ceylonese standards of the times not the norm.

Hence when it came to Vigneswaran and Jegatheswaran, they were strictly prohibited from getting involved in serious music. They would go to the Batu Road Primary School and from thence on to the prestigious Victoria Institution and then embark on a "respectable" career approved by family and applauded by the community. Jega was closely watched and was not allowed to take up music seriously as it may lead to yet another son away from his studies into an airy fairy world of performance.

Can one stop the water from gushing forth from a spring? Or stop the eagle from soaring into the clouds? Jega's love for Carnatic music was unquenchable. Stealthily he learnt the rudiments of the violin from his Akka Vijayalakshmi, who would give him the basics sporadically during the school holidays. Soon he was performing alongside his sister in duets in various temples and the Sabha and accompanying other musicians on the violin for vocal recitations and radio programmes. He had an uncanny sense of the swaras and ragas and a sharp ear with the ability to detect even the minutest fault in the singer or the stringing of the tambura. This gift of a fine ear and his unceasingly listening to Carnatic music resulted in a very perspective and sagacious connoisseur of Carnatic music. His famous brother Kamahl had this to say of him:

"It was ironic that even though Music was my profession, it was Jega who seemed to derive a greater sense of satisfaction, a spiritual and religious fulfillment from his vast knowledge and love of his music. It was as if

he was in a hypnotic trance when either listening or playing. He was generous and willing to share his Art and his home with everyone, and encouraging those with talent beyond their reach."

He had abundant knowledge on ideas regarding the violin which he used to share with other young violinists setting up the instruments and providing his own violins for concerts. Many of the experts in Chennai



*Uncle Jega was always there, giving loving encouragement and his time.
Nithya, Ranjani and Rani (on the Thambura) supported by mother and uncle.*

commented on how never had they seen anybody tune the thambura as fastidiously as he did.

Big names like Unnikrishnan, V. Ramnarayan and Gowri Narayan, Sanjay Subramanyam, Ganesh Prasad and Shashank Subrmanyam, all of them and many more in Chennai pay such glowing tributes to this unusual human being. It was an irreplaceable loss to all young musicians in Chennai when he died in 2002 aged 59.

The impact that Jega had on the music world in Chennai could be seen when six years after his demise one of the most sought after classical vocalists, Unnikrishnan, presented a two hour kutcheri in Petaling Jaya in his memory on 2nd. May 2008.



Mother safely hands over her musical talent to daughters Nithya and Ranjani.

So much for the three direct prodigies of the Kandiah lineage. Who after them? The grandchildren and great grandchildren too have inherited this musical passion. Vijayalakshmi's two daughters have a keen ear for music and well schooled by their mother in the complexities of the Musical Trinity. Ranjani, the older of the two girls, has a melodious voice and has mastered the basics of Carnatic music. But it is the younger, Nithya, who has taken over her mother's role of teaching music. For the past twenty years, Nithya has been doing yeomen service, carrying on the family tradition of imparting South Indian Carnatic music to the young in the Klang Valley.

Whilst the two girls have achieved a certain standard, it is the grandchildren of Vijayalakshmi who seem to have made a special mark in the music arena. Ranjani's daughter, Gayathri, learnt her first kritis at her grandmother's lap. She soon proved to have an excellent ear; she was quick to master the finer essence of Carnatic vocal singing. After her SPM she was fortunate to take advantage of her Uncle Jega's sojourn in Chennai. He motivated her, by taking her to various music concerts during the music season and inspired her by getting her to meet the top musicians.



Ranjani and Gayathri of Chennai fame – the gurus of our Gayathri.

Ranjani, Gayathri of Chennai fame became her personal gurus and she learnt the finer elements of music from these artistes. Gayathri is adept in both the violin and vocal. The CD "Yathra – a journey", is one of her co-productions that has hit the Malaysian music scene. Her tutelage continues firmly at the feet of her grandmother, who is her first and last guru.

Shivabalan, Ranjani's son had his early music education with grandmother and continues to enjoy listening and appreciating Carnatic music while pursuing his career.

Nithya's two children, ten year old Raenuga and eight year old Vishnu Dev are also gifted. Whilst other children of their age are playing computer games and spending their time in frivolous past-times, these two can sit through a whole day of the annual Kantha Shashti chanting of the kavasham, keeping accurate timing with the cymbals, the "jalra."

Raenuga and Vishnu Dev have inherited their granduncle, Jega's ear for tuning the violin, possessing an uncanny sruti sense. It is a treat to watch the two of them prop up the violins under their chins as their tiny fingers glide up and down the ferrets with admirable confidence.

Kamahl's own two children, Rajan is a producer and composer; Rani is a singer and song writer. Rajan produced several of his father's song tracks whilst Rani made a return appearance at the Opera House at her father's last performance there. They sang a duet, the old Nat King Cole hit "Unforgettable" and Rani also sang one of her own compositions, "Things can't get much better."

The rest of the Kandiah grandchildren as they pursue their own chosen careers also have an interest in music appreciation and have mastered some instrument or another. It is inevitable that those who have sat for the Pianoforte Exams have the examiners always write the comment "has a natural flair and a keen ear for music."

By nature and by nurture the Kandiah passion for music has come down two generations.

Music runs in the Family



Granddaughters Gayathri and Raenuga



Three generations of music lovers



Raenuga and Vishnu Dev, Vijayalakshmi's grandchildren have a very promising future in the world of music.



REMEMBERING A DEAR FRIEND –

Padma Subramanyam

Vijayalakshmi and Padma forged a deep friendship held together by their common love for Carnatic music. Padma was the daughter-in-law of Vijayalakshmi's first violin guru, Ramalinga Iyer.

Being of Sri Lankan Tamil origin, it was difficult for Vijayalakshmi to break into the hitherto Brahmin dominated hold in the circle of established and recognized gurus of Carnatic music. However what were considered Brahminical virtues came to her naturally. From the time she was a child, tuning the thambura in her father's home, she had nurtured within her an auspiciousness – in the way of food, dress and manner. And her knowledge of the intricacies of the complex Carnatic music, no one could challenge.

Padma was one of those who recognized this and their respect for each other was mutual.

From 1998, both collaborated by organizing regular monthly concerts where their young music students were exposed to the works of composers like Papanasam Sivan, Swathi Thirunal, Puranthara Das, Oothukadu Venkata Subbaiyar, Subramanya Bharathiyar, Shuddhananda Bharathiyar and others.

The two of them soon became inseparables on the Bharatha Natyam arangetram circuit. The audience would be taken to the heights of ecstasy with Padma's timbre, rich, husky voice supported by the melodious strains of Vijayalakshmi's violin.

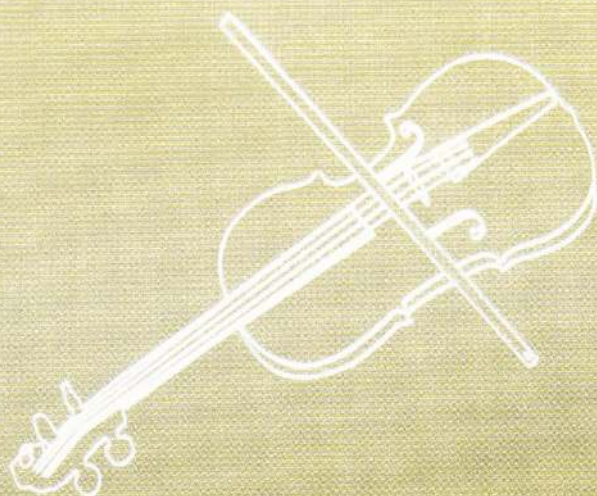
A special bond was further established when both found solace in the chanting of the Shanmuga Kavasham.

Padma's untimely death in 2002 was a great loss not only to all Carnatic music lovers but on a personal level to Vijayalakshmi. She had lost a soul mate.



Above : Soul-mates - Vijayalakshmi and Padma.

*Previous page : Honouring Vijayalakshmi at the Sri Lankan Award Ceremony
Padma flanked by Ramgopal Shivadas (Mridangam), Subramanyam (Padma's husband on the violin), Vanisha K. (on the thambura)*



Presented on behalf of Sri Lanka
High Commission in Malaysia
to Madam Vijayalakshmi Kulasheerasingam
in recognition of the yeoman
service rendered to Malaysians
of Sri Lankan origin, in the
field of Carnatic music
by

Lionel Fernando
High Commissioner for Sri Lanka
in Malaysia
22nd May 1999



CHAPTER 5

Tributes & Accolades

*I have scaled the peak
and found no shelter in fame's bleak
and barren height.
Lead me, my Guide,
before the light fades,
into the valley of quiet
where life's harvest mellows into golden wisdom.*

~ Rabindranath Tagore ~

Vijayalakshmi has always shunned limelight and has kept to the background – just like the quiet drone of the thambura like the sruthi “ simple and yet grand with majesty.

As she concluded her music studies in India in 1954 she was awarded, the Sangeetha Vidva Kalabhushanam by Sri Chittur Subramanya Pillai, The Principal of Annamalai University at Chidambaram. As a violinist she was conferred the Carnatic Honours of Vadya Vidya Visarada. In appreciation of her total dedication and consummate skill, accompanying Swami Kirupanantha Variyar on the violin, he bestowed her with the title of Sangeetha Jyothi.

The highlight of her musical career was when the land of her origin Sri Lanka decided to give her due recognition.

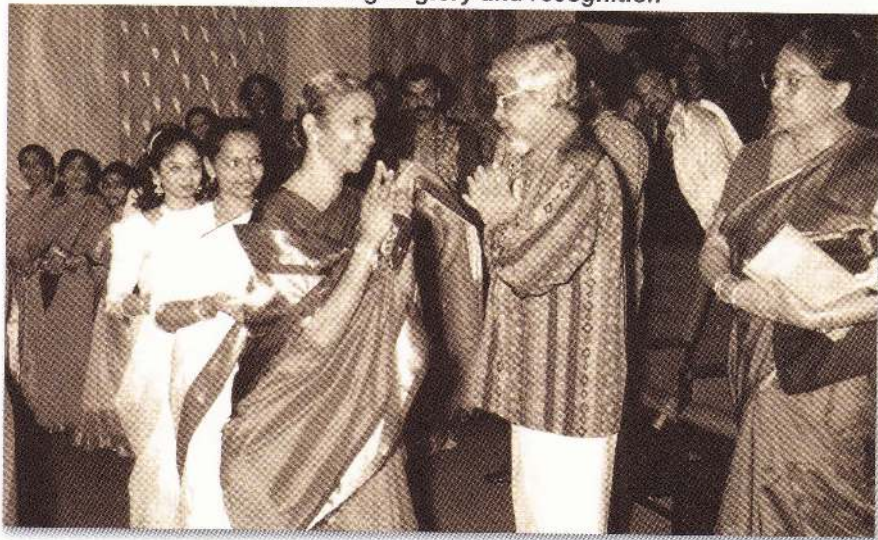
On May 22nd 1999, the Sri Lankan High Commission honoured her and gave her a grand reception organized by the Sri Lankan High Commissioner, Lionel Fernando, himself. The Indian High Commissioner and other dignitaries and members of the cultural fraternity showed their appreciation by performances and their very presence.

This event was followed by an all expense paid trip to Colombo. A reception was again organized on the 14th. July where she was again showered with honours and tributes. Present were the High Commissioner to Malaysia, Shamasudin Abdulla and Nadarajah Paramjothy, Secretary to the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs.

In 2005, Swami Brahmananda Saraswathi of the Dhyana Ashram in Kulim honoured her by draping her with the golden shawl. Surrounded by students and friends, a very meaningful thanksgiving prayer session was held, thanking the Lord for the very crucial role Vijayalakshmi had played in the dissemination of spirituality through music.

More important than all these titles and accolades are the unspoken, unwritten tributes that are etched in the hearts of each one of her numerous students. They are unerasable and indelible.

An evening of glory and recognition



Honoured by the Sri Lankan High Commissioner, Lionel Fernando and wife.

Felicitations



The Indian High Commissioner



Old time friend - Mother Mangalam



1993 - 60th Birthday celebration. Flanked by Perriamma and husband.



2005 - Swami Brahmananda Saraswathi of the Dhyana Ashram - showers of blessings



Spontaneous greetings from fellow artistes.



Sri Lankan High Commisssioner Lionel Fernando savouring her music.

"Music is the easiest way to attain Godhood" M.S. said to Vijayalakshmi



With Scott Road Temple Chief Priest - Siva Sri Sabaratna Parameswara Kurukkai



With M.S. and husband Sathasivam



***Down Memory Lane
with Toh Puan Uma Sambanthan***

1956 - Tun V.T. Sambanthan invited Vijayalakshmi to teach music at the Mahatma Gandhi Kala Salai.

"He literally snapped her up as soon as she came to live in Ipoh," Uma.

Thank you! You brought so much joy to the children of Sungei Siput. Vijayalakshmi never missed her weekly lessons with the children until she left for Kuala Lumpur after marriage.

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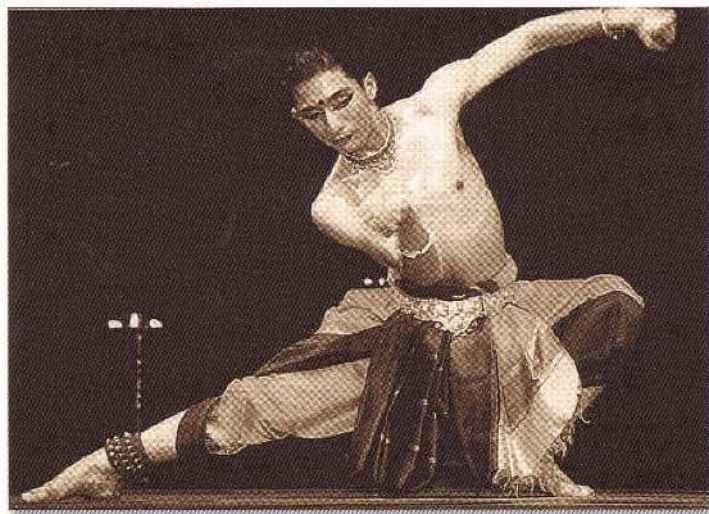
A TRIBUTE FROM

Haima & Family

Gurubhyo Namaha!!

In Hinduism we always believe in offering salutations and respect to our Guru even before we offer our prayers to God. There is a reason for this....it is after all a Guru who teaches us, inspires us and encourages us to achieve our full potential in our chosen field. And that is exactly what Vijayalakshmi Mami has done for all of us. I have had the opportunity to live in many countries and learn Carnatic music from various teachers. It was when I started to learn from Mami that I was able to appreciate the richness, joy and significance of this great art. Mami is the one who gave me that confidence. I am sure many of you have probably felt inspired and encouraged to pursue this art thanks to Mami's commitment, support and tutelage. She teaches this great art for the love of the art ...and that comes out in the bhakti and laya that flows from all the songs she sings, tunes and teaches us. Hence if any one asks me who has taught you I say "Many teachers including Vijayalakshmi mami"... but if any one asks me who is your Guru the answer is always without a doubt "Vijayalakshmi Mami".

My family and I offer our namaskarams to you and more than anything our gratitude and love to you. Each one of us have indeed been blessed to have gotten the opportunity to learn from you and to be in your presence.



A TRIBUTE FROM
Mavin Khoo

Vijayalakshmi “Mami” is truly one of the great treasures of music tradition in this country. Her knowledge and dedication to the classicism of the Carnatic genre is one that has inspired and nurtured hundreds of students. Her accessibility in terms of an ability to understand what the student needs is one that enables her to impart; be it in the pure joy of bhajan singing or the intricacy of a Thiagaraja kriti.

My journey with this great lady began over 20 years ago when as a young boy she played the violin for one of my Bharata Natyam performance. When I became her student, her desire to impart led her to guide me not just in learning music compositions but more importantly, to understand the “life” that exists within the raga. This was nurtured by making me listen and listen and listen.... something so simple but so effective as it slowly developed a musical sensitivity to sound.

The term “musical” is one that is often associated to rhythms and complex tala frameworks. Through Mami’s love and care, I started to understand

that one may be rhythmically proficient, even excellent, but that does not necessarily be being musical.

Musicality actually lies in the ability to surrender, thus allowing the music to sing through the pulse, heart and mind.

I am humbled by this gracious artiste. Renowned musicians from all over the world speak in praise and respect of her and she has accompanied several great maestros (at their great request).

Vijayalakshmi Kulaveerasingam is like the sruthi that is so part of her musical attitude. A perfect sound, simple and yet grand with majesty.

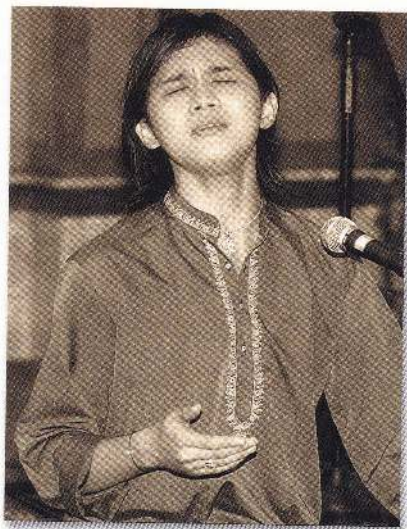
*With a mother's love,
Vijayalakshmi, nurtured in Mavin a passion for Carnatic music.*



Mavin as a child dancer.

(left to right) Nithya, Jeya Shekar, Vijayalakshmi, A. Vijayalakshmi, Geeta Shankaran, Ramli Ibrahim, Mohana Harendran, T. Ramanan, Sathialingam

Seated : Mavin, Co-dancers, Umesh Shetty.



A TRIBUTE FROM
Chong Chiu Sen

My journey towards music started in 1998 under the tutelage of Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Kulaveerasingam. She guided me through the early years with such patience and care befitting a mother and a teacher. Over the years she painstakingly taught me all the basics of Carnatic music, a few basic varnams. Being a Chinese she would correct my *thamizh* as well. But most importantly she was a real example of the traditional guru-shishya tradition in Indian classical music:

namely she never bothered about money as long as I learnt well she was very caring and always ensured that her students learnt well when they came to her house. She conducted classes even if she was not well. There was once when she was extremely ill. But she insisted on having my class. I was deeply touched. She troubled herself lying on the sofa in pain and still she insisted on teaching me.

Words are not enough to describe such a loving teacher. Both my mother (Mrs. Chong) and sister (Chong Shu Ling/Seetha) were also her students. My sister said she had never met a loving teacher like Mrs. Vijayalakshmi

before. Being a Chinese, language was our biggest problem. But Mrs. Vijayalakshmi taught us patiently, word by word till we got the proper pronunciation in thamizh.

She prepared me to study under one of the last of the great names in the Carnatic music world with confidence - DK Pattammal.

A million thanks dear teacher, Vijayalakshmi - there are not many like you in this world!!

(If only my English was better, how much I can write about you but words are not important.)

(25 year old Chong Chui Sen is currently a disciple of the famed DK Pattammal, one of the three Carnatic queens and the last of the remaining legends of yesteryears. Coming from a Chinese background with no connection to anything Indian, Chiu Sen is indeed a miracle boy. Vijayalakshmi gave him the firm grounding and confidence to become part of the challenging world of the Chennai Carnatic scene.)



Vijayalakshmi's love extends beyond her family - from grandchildren to many others like Chiu Sen, Mavin and hundreds of others



A TRIBUTE FROM

Sugi
(NEW ZEALAND)

My music started at the tender age of 4 years. It was at the Perak Sangeetha Sabha in Ipoh. Music classes were conducted in the evenings and Acca was the music teacher. Being the smallest, I sat under the teacher's nose and while I was learning, I also had the task of pumping the bellows of the harmonium while Acca played.

I could not read at that age and I learned the songs by listening to them. It was at that time that Tun Sambanthan from Sungei Siput invited Acca to teach music in Sungei Siput. Acca went to Sungei Siput every Saturday, accompanied by Periamma. I got to go too. En route Acca taught me some more songs. I still remember some of the ones that I learned on those trips!

When Acca got married, she moved to Kuala Lumpur and it was sad, as the music classes stopped in Ipoh and we lost our beloved music teacher. Somewhere, somehow, I ended up going to Kuala Lumpur for the holidays

where I stayed with Acca's parents and resumed music classes with Acca. All the family were very generous with their welcome and hospitality. This was a time when Jega, Acca's late brother, used to encourage me to sing while he played the violin. I was too young to realise that I had a talent that was God-given. I enjoyed the sessions with Jega. Jega was a devoted and highly talented musician. I was doubly fortunate that I had two dedicated people who encouraged and taught me. Acca is patient in her teaching - always encouraging and was inspirational.

She was generous in her sharing of music and encouraged students who came to her classes.

In between schooling in Ipoh and spending time in Kuala Lumpur I was invited to sing at Sabha functions - and Acca accompanied me on the violin. It is this kind of exposure that gave many of us confidence in singing and performing music in public. Even after all these years of living abroad, when I come back home to Malaysia I am given a special time schedule so that I can learn some more songs. I am privileged to have been given the opportunity to have learned music through Acca.

And not only music, but to have spent a lot of time with Acca, Periamma and Periyah, Sornam, Mama and Mami, Appan, Jega and Rani.

Brian and I would like to take this opportunity to wish Acca a Very Special Birthday. I have been blessed and privileged to have and be one of Acca's many music students. She has shown herself a worthy vessel to carry the Carnatic music tradition.

Acca is deeply spiritual. Her pooja room is a testament to this. With her years of experience and teaching music, her gifts to us are beyond price and a form of worship in themselves, gentle and profound.

If time stood still, and I was young again, and knowing what I know now - I would return to learn music from Acca - and learn to sing songs with that passion and intensity that her presence brings out.

A DEDICATION - Gnanamathy Mathiapparanam

O Guru, Beloved of Goddess Saraswathy
 Bestowed a Gift Divine
 A Voice so Rich, so Malleable
 Singing Praises of the Divine
 Perfect Sruthi, Clear Swaras
 Flawless Tala, Beautiful Bava
 No Hesitation, No Doubt
 Captivating Gods and Mortals

Bow in hand
 Nimble fingers deftly, skillfully
 The violin you caress
 Ragas mesmerising
 The Gods enchanted
 Showering Blessings

O Guru
 One so Dedicated, One so Caring, One so Humble
 Lovingly Teaching
 Painstakingly Imparting
 Intricacies of Carnatic Music
 To One and All
 No turning away

O Guru
 Beautiful Ragas You Set
 Vinayakar Agaval, Lord Ganesha Entranced
 Sivapuranam, Lord Siva Delighted
 Pahari Kadithal, Lord Muruga Enticed,
 Appearing Astride His Peacock
 Pancha Mirtha Vanam, Lord Skantha Revelling,
 An Abisheka so Pleasing
 Shanmuga Kavasam, Mortals Appreciating
 A Sheath so Powerful
 Abirami Anthathi, Ambal Enthralled

Songs, So Pleasing, So Soothing, So Divine
 Touching Hearts, Easing Pain

Thank You GOD, Thank You Guru,
 Your Dedication, Your Humility, Your Creativity
 Your Patience, Your Grace
 Touching Us, Enriching Us, Guiding Us.

Epilogue

*With folded hands, O Ruler of all worlds,
shall I stand before You face to face?*

*Under Your great sky, in solitude and silence with humble heart,
shall I stand before You face to face?*

*In this laborious world of Yours,
tumultuous with toil and with struggle, among hurrying crowds,
shall I stand before You face to face?*

*And when my work shall be done in this world,
O Ruler of rulers, alone and speechless,
Shall I stand before You face to face?*

~ Rabindranath Tagore ~

As we enter the twilight years of our life we tend to look back and assess the role we have played on the stage of life. Civilisation has been preserved by ordinary people who kept on doing ordinary tasks in an extraordinary way. Vijayalakshmi Akka has done just that!!

It is not the magnitude of her musical knowledge, or her skill as a top violinist or her expertise as a much sought after teacher that has endeared her to all of us. Instead, it is her ingrained qualities of goodness, simplicity and self-effacement that has won the day.

Unassertive, unobtrusive, orthodox in a graceful sort of way, an old fashioned plainness has remained with her all through her life. Strictly conforming to time worn Tamil tradition, always clad in traditional Kanchipuram silks or Coimbatore cottons; vibuti and kumkum on her forehead and a jasmine garland adorning her neatly knotted chignon. With widowhood the flowers have gone so has the kumkum and she wears nothing but muted colours but her inner beauty and dignity still remains.

With her self-imposed discipline, she emerges as a figure representing piety and sacrifice and this she has passed on to all those whose lives she has touched; she translates music into an act of worship. Her entire being becomes suffused with a spirit of total surrender, lending a richness of emotion to her musical renderings and this has been her unique contribution to her students.

She has had more than her share of troubles to grapple with and she has triumphed over all of them. She has the gift of Ranjani, Nithya and Guhan who attend to all her comforts and material needs unfailingly. She has been blessed to witness the marriage of her eldest and special granddaughter Gayathri to Sri Vadivale, grandson of old time family friends, the Vetri Vadivales. She is engulfed in the abiding love of her siblings Kamahl, Vigneswaran, Sorna and Rani, grandchildren, nephews and nieces, in-laws and all others who truly cherish her. How blessed is she!

Heroism in the brilliant triumph of soul over external challenges and Vijayalakshmi Akka has truly emerged heroic.



