

Interview with a mridangam legend

By: Rohin K. Iyer



This past December (2011), I was fortunate to attend the Music Academy Sadas to witness a landmark event that will go down in the annals of Carnatic music history for posterity. It was an especially proud moment for me personally to see the Sangita Kalanidhi "Birudu Patra" bearing the insignia of the Academy conferred upon a man who, in my mind, has exemplified musical perfection and genius, truly placing Toronto on the world stage. Thus, my contribution to the souvenir this year had to pay tribute not only to Bharati Kala Manram's (BKM's) forty-year Aradhana anniversary, but also to the man who helped to found it all, taking it from much more humble beginnings to its present day grandeur.

Indeed, I am speaking of Toronto's own celebrated mridangam legend, Sangita Kala Nidhi Dr. Trichy Shri Sankaran (or Sankaran Mama as I affectionately refer to him). What follows is a transcript of the interview I conducted via e-mail with Sankaran Mama. A debt of gratitude is owed to him and to his wife, Mrs. Lalitha Sankaran, for being so supportive in making this interview possible. A full PDF copy of this interview will also be posted on www.manram.org and www.torontobrothers.com as well as a live video interview at www.youtube.com/ashwinrohin for the benefit of all rasikas the world over.

Interview:

RKI:

1. Sangeetha Kala Nidhi Dr. Trichy Shri Sankaran Sir – Namaskaram and thank you for graciously agreeing to this interview. It was nice of you to oblige given that you are currently still in Chennai amidst your busy concert schedule!

TSLs:

Well, it is my pleasure to participate in this interview.

RKI:

2. Toronto is extremely proud and honoured that you have been awarded the prestigious Sangeetha Kalanidhi award this year. It is long overdue and only too fitting that you, being the primary disciple of Pazhani Sri Subramania Pillai, are the first to receive this title in the Pudhukottai Bani. Therefore, on behalf of all of Toronto's musicians, rasikas and music lovers, we offer you our humble salutations and "congratulations!"

TSLs:

Thank you for the congratulatory note for my receiving the most prestigious **Sangeetha Kalanidhi** award this year. I am so

honoured and at the same time humbled to be the first and foremost recipient of this award in the **Pudhukottai School**. This could not have happened at any better time than this year i.e. (Dec. 2011 – Jan. 2012), since it marks the 75th anniversary year of the late Pudhukottai Sri Dakshinamoorthy Pillai, 50th anniversary year of my Guru Sri Pazhani Subramania Pillai, and also the birth centenary year of Sri Palghat Mani Iyer. Even though many felt that the honour came rather late, I think that it was the divine will that I should receive this honour at a fitting **commemorative time period** of the great legends I mentioned.

I want to thank all our Toronto musicians, rasikas, and music lovers for their kind appreciation and congratulations.

RKI:

3. You were instrumental in setting up an Indian music program at York University along with Jon Higgins at York University which was the major force behind the BKM Thyagaraja Aradhana. Please share your feelings on the evolution of the Toronto Thyagaraja Aradhana since those humble beginnings. What is needed to keep it going for the next 40 years and beyond?

TSLs:

Yes. Jon Higgins and I were the co-founders of Indian Music Program at York University, Toronto. We came together to start the program in the year 1971. Indian music was one of the major influences for the expansion of other musical traditions under the rubric of 'World Music' in later years at York.

Having left at the pinnacle of my musical career in India, I felt that I was terribly missing the annual Thyagaraja festival at Tiruvaiyaru, where I have been performing regularly since 1956. Longing for such a great tradition I encouraged some of my close friends in Toronto who started studying with me then, to start the Thyagaraja Festival at their (Dr. Krishnan & Nirmala Krishnan) basement. Many of the local musicians, Jon, and I along with several of my students participated in that festival. There were about 50 people who enjoyed it thoroughly and that gave me immense pleasure and thanks to Mrs. Alamelu Mani a review was published in the Ananda Vikatan under the title "**pani mazhayil isai mazhai**". Immediately the following year Bharati Kala Manram joined forces with York to celebrate this festival year after year. (I remember even Ryerson Polytechnic institute also joined for one year). As we all know, from its humble beginning now it has grown tremendously attracting musicians and rasikas from all over North America and India. I vividly remember Cleveland Sri Sundaram and Sri Balu used to participate here before they started their own festival in 1976. A special word of praise is due to **Bharati Kala Manram** for all their tireless efforts and services in organizing this festival. It is commendable that Manram has set up two annual **Thyagaraja Awards** for the best achievers in Indian Studies and Performance. The festival has given a forum for professionals and amateurs and has encouraged many children to participate every year. It has proven to be one of the best ways to keep our culture and musical tradition.

We should keep it going by encouraging more participation and exercising **quality control** in our presentations. Already Toronto Thyagaraja Festival has set a high standard in rendering

Pancharatna Kritis, thanks to all our participants. We should strive to keep our records high and look for eligible grants to conduct this festival under better facilities and encourage more **local talents** who deserve an opportunity. I think we can go a long way with our excellent organizational capacity and sustained interest in **sampradaya**.

RKI:

4. Sankaran Mama, you have been fortunate to have learnt under the great Pazhani Sri Subramania Pillai from a very young age. What are the circumstances that led to you learning under the great doyen?

TSLs:

I was very fortunate to come under the tutelage of the great Pazhani Shri Subramania Pillai. I started learning mrdangm at the age of 4 first from my cousin Sri Poovalur A. Venkataraman, who himself was a disciple of Sri Pazhani Sir and earlier Sri



Mylatoor Sami Iyer of Tanjore tradition. I was introduced to Sri Pazhani Sir at the age of 7 by my cousin. Sri Pazhani Sir upon hearing me play wanted to take me under his wing immediately. Since I was too young, I was asked to wait to learn directly from him until I was 10 years old. By then I had already had my first **arangetram** in a **Harikatha** performance in Delhi. Also I had the

good fortune of playing before Sri Palghat Mani Iyer at the age 8 at Alathoor Venkatesa Iyer's house in Trichy and receive his blessings.

RKI:

5. In addition to your gurus, Pazhani Shri Subramania Pillai and Poovalur Shri Venkataraman, who are some of your biggest influences in laya and in vocal/instrumental music? Do you have a "favourite musician" to accompany for?

TSLs:

Besides Sri Pazhani Sir, my biggest influence and inspiration in laya were Palghat Mani Iyer and Sri Palghat Raghu. Of course all the vocal and instrumental musicians of that era were my favourite musicians. It is hard to single-out any one of them. However, my most favourite musicians were Semmangudi, Alathoor Brothers and K.V.N. in vocal music, and Sri Lalgudi Jayaraman in instrumental music. I have enjoyed accompanying Sri Semmangudi for several decades, as you all know. I enjoy accompanying the present day front rank artists as well.

RKI:

6. Please share with us some of your earliest reminiscences with maestro Pazhani Sri Subramania Pillai. What was your most memorable moment with him? What was his teaching style like? Was he a strict teacher? What is your teaching style like by comparison?

TSLs:

My most memorable moments with my Guru Sri Pazhani Sir.

First of all, one should be fortunate enough to come under the tutelage of a legendary Maestro like Sri Pazhani Sir. Being with him, watching move with the society, itself was a great lesson to begin with. The opportunities I had to perform in tandem with my Guru were most memorable. He will decide to include me only on the day of the concert, and I should be prepared at all times.

Once we both were listening to a Radio Program of R.T.P. by Sri Ramnad Krishnan, accompanied by Sri Lalgudi and Palghat Mani Iyer. After the program was over my Guru was inspired to show how differently he would approach the Pallavi and play a Thani. I had a field day during that session with him.

Another moment that I have quoted before is the **Beach Korvai** incident. Being the youngest of all disciples, I had the privilege of accompanying him and his wife Rajammal once to the Marina Beach in Chennai. I left them alone for their privacy, but my Guru abandoned his wife (for the moment) and came directly to me and taught a korvai in tisanadai. I have named that as the **Beach Korvai** and have performed this on numerous occasions.

Yet another moment was when he was overjoyed upon hearing me play with Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna at a Radio Sangeet Sammelan in Hyderabad in 1960. Generally he won't openly express his appreciation with so many words, but this was a special moment that made him very proud. The following day when he went to see Sri Chembai, the first conversation they had was how well his disciple Trichy Sankaran played in the Sammelan concert.

Other memorable incidents include where the Guru will send me to the concerts that he had accepted but couldn't go. To take his seat in concerts of top rank artists were thrilling but quite scary. The concerts that I had substituted for him include Madurai Mani Iyer, Semmangudi, M.A. Kalyanakrishna Bhagavatar, and others.

Such was the great confidence the guru had in his sishya.

Yes, Sri Pazhani Sir was a very strict teacher. Since I joined him at an advanced level, I had no problem in grasping the material. In fact as a chief disciple, I had taught many of his students. The master will be able to check the progress of a student whenever he had time, as he was always busy with his concerts. Whenever he had a group session of all students, I have noticed students will fall one after another like the wickets in a cricket match, in the end only my Guru and I left performing. Most of my learning occurred on stage when performing with the stalwarts. The looks of the Guru conveyed so many things. There were no rehearsals or practice sessions before the concert, and so I had to be alert all the time, and reply back in performance, grasping things right then and there. What he

liked in me the most was how I would respond to many of the intricate patterns, korvais he would play without obstructing his mood and thought process. The humility with which I handled the situation pleased him immensely. This is the essence of our **Gurukula** system.

My teaching style by comparison is very different. In India I have always followed the Gurukula method. But teaching abroad, in an academic institution made all the difference. I have a holistic approach to teaching that I developed over the years while teaching at York University. I assessed the situation of Canadian students to whom South Indian music/drumming is only one of several courses. I could not make too many demands on them to perform, but rather than looking at it negatively, I have been educating them in developing rhythmic skills and acquire better musicianship. I have focused on adaptation techniques and application to their own music (be it jazz, rock, Classical or Pop). The students at York are mostly trained in pursuit of knowledge with hands-on-experience on the drums, **mrdangam and kanjira**. The study of **solkattu (konnakkol)** has also been one of the main instructions. At the same time I have also encouraged many Canadians into performing mrdangam and Kanjira. Many of my students are educators, professors and concert performers. It is all a result of my hard work as a professor, researcher and collaborator. I have performed with many world music ensembles in the idioms of jazz, African, classical, Gamelan, and other contemporary ensembles. My classroom lectures come from my own concert-experience. I have been teaching history, theory and performance to both graduates and undergraduates. I have been acclaimed for integrating Western lecture based pedagogy with traditional oral teaching methods. I have created a hybrid method of instruction –blending written music notation with the spoken rhythmic tradition. My books **The Rhythmic Principles and Practice of South Indian Drumming (published in 1994)** and **the Art of Konnakkol (Solkattu - published in 2010)** are now part of York University syllabus, and in fact my text books are used by many music colleges and universities in North America for training students in rhythm.

But with my Indian and Srilankan students, it is a different story. I teach them privately at my home in the traditional gurukula method, focusing on the hand techniques, patantaram and laya aspects. I have done at least 5 arangetrams so far, and to me quality presentation is much more important than the number of arangetrams.

RKI:

7. Many of us can sense that the Pudukottai style of playing is quite different than the Thanjavur style. Can you elaborate on some of the major differences?

TSLS:

Pudhukkottai style is based on intricate laya aspects and **sollu** development. Accompanying style is also different. Tanjore style focuses more on percussive aesthetics of different kind and emphasizes its own set of moras and korvais. In fact these two styles are not poles apart. The famous Sri Dakshinamoorthy Pillai himself had come under the influence of Sri Narayanasamy Appa of Tanjore School, when he started learning mrdangam

first. Differences can be noticed in the patantaram, repertoire, embellishment, and accompaniment.

RKI:

8. What are your thoughts on the format of mridangam arangetrams conducted today compared to those conducted the olden days, when the guru and shishya were both on stage?

TSLS:

Traditionally the Arangetrams are done with the Guru and Sishya – both performing on the stage. It is the Guru who decides when sishya is ready for arangetram and not the other way around. Quality was more important. I had my arangetram in the concert of the famous Alathoor Brothers and Sri Lalgudi, playing in tandem with my Guru Sri Pazhani Subramania Pillai at the age of 13. Unless I was ready in the assessment of my Guru, I would not have been put on stage. Even after arangetram, the learning and teaching continued.

In modern times, things are quite different. The quality of arangetrams in general has deteriorated, perhaps with some exceptions. Gurus are put under lot of pressure to conduct more arangetrams every year. It has become an annual feature and some families spend lavishly on arangetrams. Do the candidates keep up their performance after arangetram - is a big question mark.



Arangetram of Trichy Shri Sankaran. Left to Right on Stage: Lalgudi Shri G. Jayaraman, Trichy Shri Sankaran, Alathoor Shri Sivasubramania Iyer, Alathur Shri Srinivasa Iyer, Pazhani Shri Subramania Pillai. Seen in the audience front row, right side, is Alathur Shri Venkatesa Iyer.

RKI:

9. You have said before that mridangam players should train their hand in such a way as "to be able to handle any complex pattern". What is your advice to the young aspiring musicians in Toronto? How frequent and intense should practice be to gain ultimate proficiency in mridangam playing?

TSLS:

Practice should be on a regular basis and totally focussed. Mere physical practice is no good. Physical as well as mental concentration is important. Aim of the practice is to be able to handle any complex pattern and to develop what I call "hand memory". Advanced players should focus on percussive aesthetics as well. The response from the brain to the hands in motion has to be well coordinated during sadhana. Disciplined and intelligent practice is important, and it should be "where the

mind goes the hands go". Always practice with precision of laya. One should spend quality time for practice.

RKI:

10. You stand as an example of a vidwan who has managed a successful career as a professor of music as well as a full-time musician. How did you balance both? What is your advice to young students who wish to pursue both a career in music and other careers in parallel?

TSLs:

Well, you know that it is not easy to manage a successful career as professor of music as well as a full-time musician. I joined York as an academic professor at the pinnacle of my musical career back in the 70s. Essentially it is my **determination, devotion, and dedication (3 Ds)** that brought me success in my dual career as Professor – musician. I have worked hard in building my academic career to the senior-most professor level that I am now, which involved research, publication and gaining training in Western music and developing interest in World music, etc at all levels. Teaching is a noble profession. With my educational background of M.A. degree in Economics from the Madras University, I developed interest in research that I applied to music. Also having an open mind to appreciate other cultures and their music helped me a lot. The passion that I have for teaching and performing is what proved to be successful. When I walk into the classroom for lectures I leave behind all my accolades as a top rank performer, and when I am on stage performing I don't think of my academic role. The kind of balance in maintaining my dual role, I found to be very important. Professional integrity as a professor and as a musician matters very much to me.

Young and aspiring musicians who wish to pursue double career can very well do so if they work hard in both disciplines with the 3 Ds I suggested. I don't think there is any easy way out to this.

RKI:

11. The mridangam has undergone several structural enhancements such as the use of synthetic ropes and tuning bolts instead of leather straps. These lend greater tunability and stability to the instrument. Numerous other technological innovations (mp3s, YouTube, etc.) have also been introduced to the field of music in general due to the digital music era. Do you believe these innovations are detrimental to the preservation of Carnatic percussion music or helpful?

TSLs:

It is good to venture into technological innovations but to what degree of success is a big question. I have experimented building a fibreglass drum and have tried on drums with tuning bolts and synthetic ropes. I found synthetic ropes to be useful in replacing leather straps, when changing heads (valanthalai and thoppi) of the mridangam. But the tuning bolts, the metal part is not good for the hands. I don't think they lend greater tuneability or stability. These structural changes have nothing to do with the preservation of percussive music, rather they may affect the player's hands, and in turn, their techniques.

MP3s, and You Tube is a different matter. The technology has advanced so much that the music of any kind is now available at one's fingertip. It is great that we get to hear the music of so

many. The problem is too much music by too many artists ranging in quality from poor to better to best are found and as a result, to discern what is good, what should be listened to, what should be avoided – becomes a serious concern. These days anything can be uploaded. If care is not taken in discerning good from bad, it can be detrimental to the preservation of quality Carnatic percussive music.

RKI:

12. I have noticed that your method of tuning the mridangam is unique. Can you share with us some of your techniques for tuning and maintaining your instruments in such excellent condition? This is undoubtedly helpful in maintaining the tonal quality of the instrument.

TSLs:

Maintaining mrdangams in good condition is always a challenge, particularly in adverse weather conditions like in Canada. Avoid keeping the drums near the heater and try to keep them in a room of ideal temperature. Humidifiers can be used during wintertime as it is too dry, and de-humidifiers can be used during summer time, if necessary. I always take my concert drums to India to get them repaired as there are no repairers available here.

In tuning, care should be taken to align the **meettu and chapu** perfectly. Some players may prefer to keep the chapu slightly sharper than the meettu and that is fine. Every player should know how to take care of minor works in tuning: to scrape off a bit from the center if the chapu is higher, and add a bit to the center if the meettu is higher. Developing perfect sense for tuning is important.

RKI:

13. At the Music Academy morning session this year, it was suggested that mridangam be given its own 30 minute solo slot in concerts. Thanks to you, the mridangam and kanjira have been elevated to the status of solo instruments. What is your hope for the role of the mridangam in Carnatic music concerts in the future?

TSLs:

Mrdangam has come a long way from its back-seat time keeping role to the forefront of equal partnership with the main artist (melodic soloist) over centuries. Yes, it was suggested that a 30 minutes solo slot be given to mrdangam in concerts. While I welcome this as a mrdangam vidwan, I should also point out its implications and repercussions. Having a separate solo has an advantage to choose one's own talam, kalapramanam, prepared compositions (moras and korvais,) etc. Can this be justified as a separate concert? Should it be featured in between major concerts? All these questions arise. The interesting thing about a solo as part of a regular concert is, the mrdangam vidwans face the challenge of talam, kalapramanam that have not been pre-planned. There is an interesting surprise element, which you may not find in prepared solo slots. Anyway I like both. Thaniavarthanam concerts are on the rise these days, and the role of mrdangam in future will have even more impact, in my opinion.

RKI:

14. Can you tell us about some of the innovations you have introduced to the mridangam, kanjira, konnakkol, and the notation systems used to document mohras and korvais?

TSLs:

My textbook *The Rhythmic Principles and Practice of South Indian Drumming* combines general stylistic and historical description, notated exercises, photographs and line drawings, producing a comprehensive and exhaustive instructional guide useful for novices as well as more advanced players. I have developed a notational system that correlates performance with the vocalization of drum syllables. This notation is intended to aid the student in gaining a thorough understanding and application of complexities and subtleties involved in the art of playing mridangam. I have found the notation to facilitate the western students' orientation towards notation as a means to learn musical material. In addition, it adds a new element to the rich oral tradition and pedagogy of South Indian music. Notations are useful for preserving patantharam for posterity.

My second book *The Art of Konnakkol (Solkattu)* provides a complete guide to the dynamic spoken art form. The principal rhythmic concepts of Carnatic music are outlined, explained and demonstrated in detail - including mora, korvai, and koraippu and the accompanying CD contain a wealth of rhythmic information, including examples from my research work. Here is what Prof. Russell Heartenberger of Nexus, U of T has to say: "Trichy Sankaran has changed the landscape of Canadian and American music education with his innovative approach.... He has solved the pedagogical problems inherent in cross-cultural education by creating a course of study which enables musicians from any culture to grasp the essentials of South Indian music and thereby understand the elements of rhythmic theory which apply to all music".

RKI:

15. You have contributed immensely to the globalization of South Indian percussion through your work with acclaimed musicians from world music genres. Can you discuss some of these collaborations? Do you have any new and/or interesting projects coming up in the next few years?

TSLs:

Yes. I have contributed substantially to the globalization of South Indian Percussion music. I have collaborated with famous musicians of different musical genres. The names are too numerous to list. The genres include African, Jazz, Gamelan, classical and World music. I have toured many countries and performed Mridangam and Kanjira at major international festivals like EXPO86, 87 Winter Olympics Calgary, EXPO88 Australia, EXPO 2000 Hanover, Germany, etc. with World Drums. These performances gave the performers and the worldwide audience an idea about the place of Mridangam and Kanjira among World Percussion and what they are capable of in terms of tonality and rhythmic development. There were many exciting, climaxing moments when I had exchanged dialogues with African drummer, drum-set player, steel pan player, Middle-eastern frame drum player, Djembe, Dumbak – and the like –all of high quality playing, and not to mention the dialogues I have had with the famous Zakir Hussain (tabla) over the years. These performances opened up new doors for my creative ability, adapting to the situation, enhancing the team spirit, while keeping my performances at a highest virtuosic as well sublime levels.

Through numerous performances worldwide and collaborations with noted musicians and in composing a number of original cross-cultural ensemble works, I have helped to broaden the Canadian musical landscape. What was considered exotic 40 years ago is now the mainstream in all respects.

RKI:

16. The interest in North America for Carnatic music and aptitude of the students here has grown immensely in recent years with aspiring musicians from Canada and the USA now performing regularly in the December music season. What are your thoughts on this?

TSLs:

Indeed it is a welcome feature. We should be proud at the fact that our youngsters have given serious consideration to perform regularly during the December season. Regardless of the mixed views about the social and musical cultures of the season, undoubtedly December is the most important time to perform in Chennai and establish one's name. The atmosphere and the concert spirit surround the entire city and that is the good time to get motivated for performing. Also the season offers plenty of (perhaps too many) opportunities to listen to various concerts. Since learning through listening is a key concept in Carnatic tradition, December is the ideal season.

RKI: For want of time and space limitations, only a subset of the questions we would have liked to ask you could be included in this article. Do you have anything further to add at this time that you would like to share with the Toronto audience?

TSLs:

Today's young musicians sometimes seem too eager to diversify, involving themselves with a variety of instruments and traditions before they have achieved a firm grounding and solid knowledge in any one of the areas. A period of concentrated effort and some degree of success in one chosen discipline is bound to make things much easier later, when seeking to master others.

RKI: Once again, thank you so much for your time Sangeetha Kalanidhi Trichy Shri Sankaran! The young aspiring musicians of Toronto are all truly fortunate to have you in our city and seek your blessings for success in the arts!

TSLs:

You are welcome. My blessings and best wishes to all the young and aspiring musicians. May God bless us all!

About the author:

Rohin obtained his Ph.D. in Biomedical Engineering in 2012 and is also an aspiring young musician. He and his brother, Ashwin, known as Toronto Brothers, are disciples of Padma Shree Awardee Sangeetha Kala Acharya Shri S. R. Janakiraman.