

# NAGASVARAM - THE MAGICAL WOODWING OF SOUTH INDIA

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It would be no exaggeration to say that the Nagasvaram is one of the most significant and representative icons of Tamil culture through the ages. Representative in the sense that it participates and mingles with the life of the Tamils at both the mundane as well as the exalted levels quite intimately. Whether as the principal instrument for temple rituals, the indispensable choice for ceremonial occasions, or as the well suited and highly evolved musical instrument for Carnatic classical music, the nagasvaram's versatility is quite unparalleled.

The Nagasvaram is essentially a sushira vadya belonging to the class of wood-wing aerophones. It consists of a wooden conical bore enlarging downwards. The wood most commonly used in its construction is a kind of ebony known as Achamaram (scientific name; *Diospyros Ebenaster*). Ideally, the wood used for making the instrument should be from a tree at least sixty years of age. Into the metal staple at the top called mel anaisu a small metallic cylinder called kendai is introduced (sivali). The mouth-piece is made from a reed called koru-kkai (or korukkantattai) which grows in the marshy regions of river banks. These reeds are ready to be used. A metallic bell called kizh anaisu adorns the

bottom. In some cases, especially in recent times, the top and bottom staple are also made of the same wood as the central bore. Spare reeds and a bodkin of ivory or horn, called gejjikai (which is used to clear the mouth piece of the particles of saliva sticking to the sides and blocking the free flow of air) dangle as a bunch from the top of the instrument. Very often, a chain connected to the metal staple at the top and bell at the bottom displays medallions received by the Nagasvaram player.

There are two varieties of the instrument and these are called Timiri and Bari. The former is shorter in length, i.e., about 18 to 20 inches long and its pitch is 5 kattai (G of the western scale). The latter, which is the one heard most often nowadays, is longer and measures about 2-1/2 feet in length. Its pitch varies from 2 to 3 kattai (D, D#, E). The nagasvaram has seven finger-holes. There are five other holes drilled at the bottom which serve as controllers. Of the five holes, there are two pairs of holes opposite to each other along the circumference. These are called the Brahama svaras and by closing these holes, wholly or partially with wax, the sruti (key-note) of the instrument is adjusted to the desired pitch. The fifth hole called the Adana svara is lower down and serves as

an exit for surplus air.

It is the opinion of some scholars that the instrument known as 'Vangiyam' or 'Peru Vangiyam' in the ancient Tamil texts such as the Cilappatikaram refers to the modern day Nagasvaram; the epithet 'peru' referring to largeness of sound more than the size of the instrument itself. One of the earliest textual references to the Nagasvaram is found in the 14th century Telugu work 'Kridabiramam' of Vallabhacharya. The Telugu version of 'Narasimha Puranam' of Hirabhata (a contemporary of Krishnadeva Raya) also mentions the Nagasvaram along with other instruments. These works call the instrument 'Nagasvaram' along with other instruments. These works call the instrument 'Naga Cinnam'; 'Cinnam' meaning a 'tubular instrument'. In Tamil, the Nagasvaram is commonly referred to as 'Nayanam'. The Madras Tamil Lexicon also gives the authors to associate the name of the instrument 'Nagasvara' with the etymology from Sanskrit 'Naga' meaning snake, there is another contesting hypothesis that the instrument derives its name from the 'Sur-nay' tradition of similar woodwinds which are found in a lot of regions of Central Asia, Egypt and the Middle East. Since the words 'sur' and 'svara' are often interchanged, this viewpoint argues that philologically speaking 'Naga' could be derived from 'Nay' through the intermediate stage of 'Nayaka'. The existence of 'Nai-yandi Melam' (a folk-

ceremonial band in which the Nagasvaram is one of the principal instruments) in south India also seems to support this hypothesis of Nagasvaram belonging to the 'Surnay' tradition.

The contexts in which the Nagasvaram figures as a prominent musical instrument are numerous. One of the most significant of these is the ensemble known as 'Periya Melam' (Tamil: great ensemble). It is basically an outdoor instrumental ensemble comprising of a main Nagasvaram player, a junior supporting Nagasvaram, Ottu (drone nagasvaram), two Tavil players, and a talam 'cymbal boy'. The Nagasvaram's uniquely powerful tone is quite unmatched by any other Indian musical instrument. Its loud and majestic tone when paired up with the insistent and vibrant percussive sound of the Tavil creates a most fascinating and thrilling soundscape. Whether in an outdoor concert or in a procession, the Nagasvaram-Tavil ensemble of the Periya Melam can be quite clearly heard over huge distances.

The Periya Melam performs at certain ritual times within the temple precincts and also accompanies the pageantry of the 'Utsavamurti' as it is taken in grand procession through the streets. Protocols and strict traditional norms and customs are followed with respect to what is to be played and when. Within the temple 'Nagasvaram service' is in strict accordance





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to the scheduled Upacharas (services) for the deity. Right from 'Tirupallieluci' (waking up the Deity at day-break) in raga Bhupala, through each of the Shodasopachara (16 services) the traditionally appropriate ragas are played.

During the ceremonial procession of the Utsavamurti the Nagasvaram player plays the appropriate ragas at the scheduled halts and other spots on the main route. For instance when the Deity is ready for procession-Misra Mallari; on the eve of departure - Alarippu Vinyasa in khanda nadai; palanquin bearers taking charge - raga Nattai; Cirumambulation inside the temple - Mallari (in all jatis other than tripata); when the Deity goes round the main streets - rakti ragas especially Todi, Varali and Arabhi; finally when the Utsavamurti goes to the 'Palliyarai' (bedroom) raga Nilambari is played. Extensive alapana is played and the main and junior Nagasvaram players may alternate. Elaborate rhythmic solos are played by the Tavil between sections of the alapana. While the Tavil plays and during compositions, the time cycle is marked by the talam cymbal boy. On occasions such as 'Tirukkalyanam' (Wedding of the Divine Couple), the Periya Melam plays a variety of compositions such as Lali, Unjal, and Nalanku.

The 'Cinna Melam' ('lesser ensemble') that accompanies the classical Bharatanatyam, the former temple dance is led by

the nattuvaran who recites the jatis (choreographic dance syllables), and at other times marks the tala with talam cymbals. Melodic accompaniment was traditionally the Mukha-vina or the Nagasvaram, though in recent times instruments such as vina, flute and violin are also used. Usually, drum accompaniment in the 'cinna melam' ensemble is provided by the mridangam.

The classical 'Art' music of south India and the temple Nagasvaram tradition were both part of an intimate cultural system that was fostered and facilitated by the generous royal patronage of the Cholas, and later on by the Vijayanagara potentates and Tanjavur Kings. With the temple as the epicentre of this cultural system both temple Nagasvaram tradition and Classical 'Art' music flourished continuously throughout the generations. Muttuswami Dikshitar (1775-1835), one of the most important composers in Carnatic Classical music while describing the ritual proceedings of the annual festival at the Tyagesar shrine of the Tiruvarur temple in his Sriraga composition "Tyagaraja mahadhvajaroha" refers to the Nagasvaram. But it is only in the last hundred years or so that the Nagasvaram came to be regarded as a musical instrument respect, the 4 or 5 decades in the middle of the present century are truly a watershed in the history of the Nagasvaram. It is in this period and in the hands of virtuosos such as T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai, Tiruvengadu

Subramania Pillai and Karaikurichi Arunachalam that the Nagasvaram established itself as a force to reckon with in the Carnatic music concert domain. Not only did they superbly and successfully adapt the Nagasvaram to the rigours and traditions of Classical music but went on to wield such a great influence over the whole domain of Carnatic music. Today, there is

virtually no area in Carnatic music which can claim to be untouched and unaffected by the powerful influence of the musical aesthetics and virtuosity of these Nagasvara vidwans. It would not be an overstatement to say that the Nagasvaram has changed quite irrevocably (and wonderfully so) the course that Carnatic music took during that period.







## DOCTOR T.P. SUBRAMANIA PILLAI

K.N. SHRINIVASAN, *Srirangam*

A certain friend asked me during five or six consecutive meetings with me to sing my composition 'Phanitalpa saayinam bhavaye' in Kambhoji raga and Kanta jati triputa tala. On the last occasion I asked him whether he found anything special about this piece. He told me that once he heard Srimathi Lalita Seshadri singing this song in a night broadcast of All India Radio and ascertained from her that the piece was my composition. He wanted to check up my own version and find whether the Kakalinishada was omitted by Srimathi Lalita. I told him that Kakalinishada was not a 'must' in Kambhoji. Reflecting on myself I realised this deep impression of Kambhoji without Kakalinishada was the result of listening to Thiruvankadu playing Kambhoji for over three hours in a temple festival in a Thanjavur Village during my boyhood.

For me, Subramania Pillai was not great but was the greatest. A ninety-minute treatment of Ritigowla and a ragam, talam, pallavi for 4 hours in another (then) rare raga Kiravani could only be produced by Thiruvankadu Subramania Pillai – but strictly without transgressing the limits laid down by grammar.

Subramania Pillai had a proprietary

grip over Mohanam and this raga never failed him even when his fingers would not readily obey him always. Was not Mohanam a permanent item in the temple of 'Swetaranyeswara Swami' at Thiruvankadu?

Born at Tirunangur – a place where a non-stop 48 hour utsavam is celebrated annually in honour of Tirumangai Alwar – Subramania Pillai inherited nadaswaram from his father 'Paramanatha Nagaswarakarar' and inbibed the spirit of service from the Alwar. Like the Alwar, Subramania Pillai was 'always in Tour'.

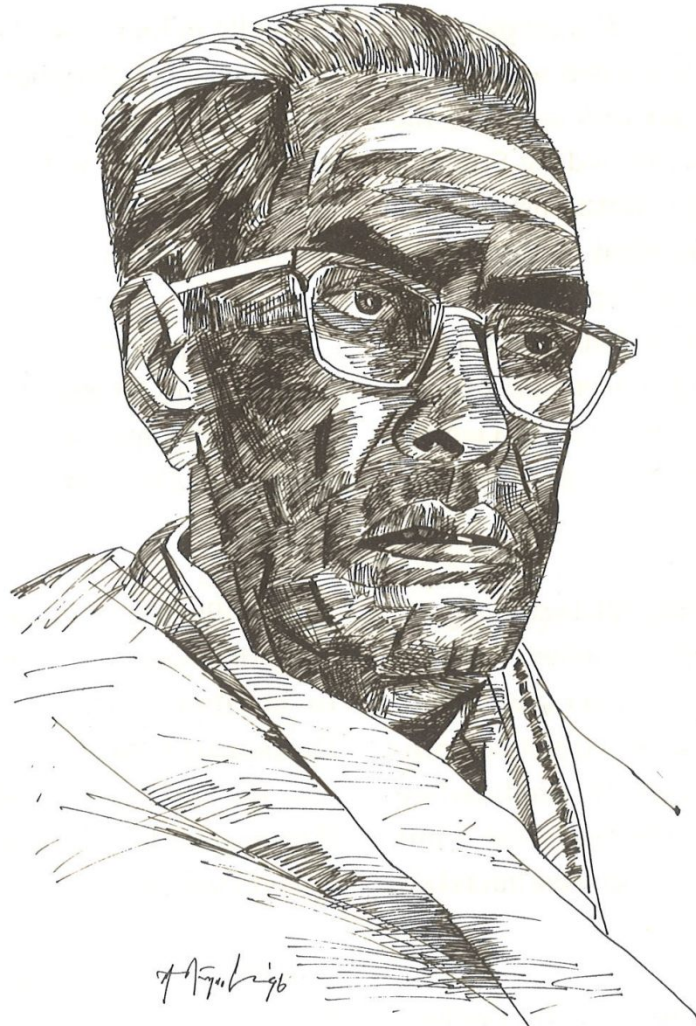
His repertoire was enriched by Thiruvankadu Saaminatha Pillai and this made Subramania Pillai care for the sahitya, unlike many of his counterparts today.

Mellifluence in Pillai's nadaswaram – rendering was the outcome of his devotion to another mentor – Chidambaram Vaidyanatha Pillai. Grandeur in design was the distinctive feature of some of Pillai's great contemporaries but grandeur with mellifluence was the mark of T.P.S.

It was this mellifluence which subdued the conventional critics on the rising against

Pillai's idea of playing to the Sruthi on Tambur and to the accompaniment of Violin and Mridangam. When I listened to one of his earliest performances with these accompaniments, I even thought Violin was adopted by Baluswami Dikshithar and Vadivelu only to await T.P.S. to make use of the sonority of the European instrument.

T.P.S. had other 'first' distinctions also besides his 'on tour' and Violin preferences. He was the first 'piper' to get a doctorate and the university to honour him was the Tamil university. I have a list of the titles conferred on him. Shall I leave to other contributors and satisfy myself adoring him for the bequest to me - 'the special Khamboji without Kakalinishada'?







# THE NAGASVARAM

T.S. PARTHASARATHY

Art arises from the play impulse in man. Art is both static and dynamic. Dynamic arts are those of movement and rhythm, such as music and dancing. Music arises as an art from a spontaneous desire for vocal expression or through an exhibition of human emotion.

India possesses a rich variety of musical instruments. Almost all the types, representative of the stringed, wind and percussion groups are seen here. Instruments of varying degrees of loudness, compass and tone colour are seen in our country. Wind instruments are those in which the sound is produced by the vibration of a column of air in the tube and they are of two kinds. In the first variety, the wind is supplied by some mechanical contrivance, commonly a bellows, like an organ or a harmonium. The second type is the one which is blown through vibrating reeds like the Nagaswaram and the Shehnai.

A number of musical instruments are referred to in the Sangam literature of the Tamil country dating back to the 2nd century A.D. The flute was the chief wind instrument and was of various kinds. There were also different forms of trumpets of which the 'Kombu' was instrument and is

not mentioned in the Sangam literature and the instrument is obviously of a later origin, round about 800 A.D.

*Its name* A controversy raged some time ago as to whether the instrument should be called 'Nadasvaram' or 'Nagasvaram'. The protagonists of the first name claim that it is a combination of the words 'Nada' and 'Svara'. But later research showed that the various names of the instrument included Nagachinnam and Naga-saram. Besides, the earlier form of the instrument was perhaps the pipe of the snake-charmer called the Bhujangasvaram and hence the name 'Nagasvaram'. Ahobala, in his 'San-gita Parijata', separately describes the two instruments Nagasvaram and Mukha Vina. The final proof to support the name Nagasvaram is found in Muthuswami Dikshitar's song 'Tyaga-raja' in Sriraga where he refers to the instrument as 'Nagasvaram.'

*Its popularity* The Nagasvaram is perhaps the most widely-heard musical instrument in South India from early morning till late in the night. One can hear it in all temples and marriage functions. Performers on the Nagaswaram can be reckoned in hundreds and many of them are in the pay of temples. It is considered

as a Mangala Vadya or an auspicious instrument and its very sound emanating from a place is indicative of an auspicious function. It is indispensable for processions of the deities and being an open air instrument, its shrill sound can be heard for long distances. The Nagasvaram is called 'Nayanam' in Tamil.

**Construction** The Nagasvaram belongs to the family of wood-wind instruments. It consists of a wooden conical bore, enlarging downwards. The wood commonly used for making it is called Aacha Maram but the instrument can also be made from redwood, ebony, sandalwood and even silver. There are Nagasvarams made of soap-stone and they produce a good tone.

The Nagasvaram has seven finger-holes. There are five other holes drilled at the bottom which serve as controllers. Of the five holes, there are two pairs of holes opposite to each other and near the circumference. There are called the Brahma Svaras. The fifth hole lower down is called the Adana Svara and serves as an exit for surplus air.

The wood used for making the instrument should be taken from a tree which is at least 60 years old. Into the metal staple at the top, called Kendai, is inserted the mouth piece, called the Narukku or Sivaali, made from a reed. A chain connected to the metal staple at the top and bell at the bottom is used and medals

received by the player are attached.

**Varieties of Nagasvaram** There are mainly two varieties of the Nagasvaram called the Timiri and Bari. The former is shorter in length, about 18 to 20 inches and its pitch is 5 white on the harmonium or G. Bari is the longer type, about 2 1/2 feet or more and its pitch varies from 2 to 3 viz. D.- D. sharp and E. Ever since the Nagasvaram became a concert instrument, it has become the fashion to play the Bari type and the Timiri Type has been relegated to temples, Mutts etc. There are other types of the instrument like the Mukha Vina, a short pipe, which is played before deities during worship at night. The drone for the Nagasvaram is also a wind instrument called the Ottu, although some players in recent years changed over to the Tanpura and the sruti box.

**Playing technique** The system of fingering adopted in Nagasvaram play is the same as that of the flute but it varies from gharana to gharana. After some proficiency is attained, fingering is done away with and semitones and quarter-tones are produced by skilful adjustments in the pressure of the air blown. The technique of play of the Nagasvaram will be a matter of interest to students of comparative musicology.

The Nagasvaram party, called the Periya Melam consists of two pipers (one senior and the other junior), one or two



drummers on the Taval, a large percussion instrument, a performer on the Ottu, the drone and a time-keeper who clangs a pair of bronze cymbals.

The Nagasvaram can produce all the nuances of Karnatic music and in the hands of an expert, it can almost speak like the human voice. Its performers claim, not without justification, that there is no aspect of music which cannot be played on the Nagasvaram. But there is a long tradition behind Nagasvaram play and departures are frowned upon. The Nagasvaram player should be familiar not merely with raga alapana, the playing of compositions and swara, Pallavi singing etc. but with ritual music played in temples and in homes during weddings etc. Concert musicians playing other instruments are not required to do so.

*A galaxy of players* During the past 50 years there were a number of outstanding players on this instrument and it is difficult to enumerate all of them. In the previous generation, Madurai Ponnuswami Pillai, Sembonarkoil Ramaswami Pillai, Tirumarugal Natesa Pillai, Chinna Pakkiri, Tirvizhimzhilai brothers and Angappa

pillai were among the stalwarts. They were succeeded by Veeruswami Pillai, Tiruvenkadu Subramaniam, Vedaranyam Vedamurti and Karukurichi Arunachalam. The current popular players include Namagiripettai Krishnan and Sheik Chinna Moulana, who is a Muslim. As in the North, there is no Hindu-Muslim difference in music in the South and a few prominent musicians happen to be Muslims.

*Tiruvenkadu Subramania Pillai* The 90th birthday of Tiruvenkadu Subramania Pillai, brought back memories of the great artiste who was noted for his sweet tone and vast repertoire. He was perhaps the first Nagasvara Vidwan to be conferred a Doctrate by the Tamil University. He was so popular that he used to be out of his home town Mayuram for months together. He toured Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia and played music in films and received numerous titles and honours. He was patronised by the Saivite Mutts and the Kanchi Acharya.

The world of Karnatic music pays its homage to this great vidwan on this memorable occasion.



## NAGASWARA BANI

N. PATTABHI RAMAN  
*Editor-in-Chief, SRUTI*

Music played on the nagaswaram, accompanied by tavil for rhythmic support, has been part of the temple tradition in South India for many centuries. Inside the temple, it is still played at specific times of the day as part of the rites of worship. In places like Tiruvidaimarudur, it was played as the temple deities were taken out in procession and this was what caught the imagination of the general public. It is on record that great nagaswara vidwans revelled in playing ragas elaborately during such processions when thousands of people lined the streets to listen to the pied pipers whose musical imagination rose to great heights on these occasions.

The source of the nagaswara vidwans' great imagination in raga elaboration has puzzled some. In my view one plausible explanation is the following. Carnatic vocalists have by and large been influenced by the great respect given to the veena tradition, and to some extent to the place given to the veena, at least in the past, in the teaching-learning process. In particular, the veena has been considered the instrument par excellence to convey nuances of gamakas. But the human voice has much greater flexibility than the veena and this has been realised only by those influenced by the nagaswara bani.

Nagaswara players have generally remained outside the influence of the veena tradition, while their chosen instrument has made it possible to give rein to the imagination. I believe research will confirm this view.

Also contributing to the expansiveness of raga elaboration in nagaswara music was the rapport between the performers and the audience during temple processions, as also the overall ambience that transcended constraints of space and time. The listeners, drawn not merely from the population of the town hut from neighbouring villages too, were prepared for the open air feast of music for the most part of the night, since the procession along the four streets adjoining the temple often lasted six hours or more. The close interaction between the performers and the audience acted as a stimulant to the former to bring out the best in alapana, swaraprastara and laya vinyasa, in terms of both quality and quantity. The possibility of elaborating a raga at length and the free play of creative imagination fed each other.

It is interesting to note, in this context, that the ideal held out virtually for all instruments of melody is to follow the vocal style as closely as possible. Contrastingly,



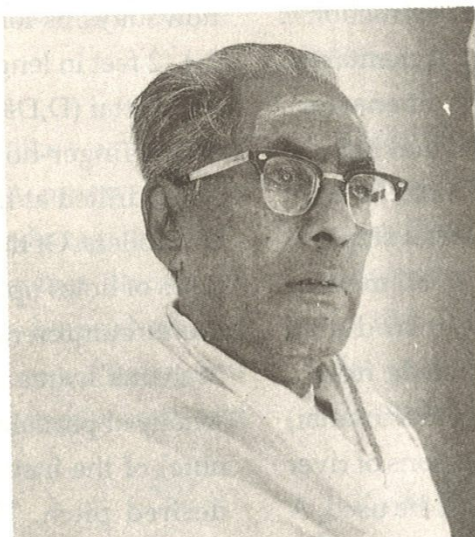
it is the music played on the nagaswara that has opened up new vistas for vocal music.

There is little doubt that the expansive raga alapanas played on the nagaswara by renowned vidwans of the distant past, as well as by masters like Thiruvavaduthurai Rajarathnam Pillai, P. Veeruswamy Pillai, Tiruvenkadu Subramania Pillai and Karukurichi Arunachalam, has inspired generations of Carnatic vocalists to emulate these aspects and add an extra dimension to their singing. The result has indeed been pleasing in that this extra dimension has helped to emphasise that Indian music is raga music, and that the ethos of Indian classical music is to project the image of any selected raga, utilising both the kalpita and kalpana aspects of a composition in that raga.

One of the great vocalists who fully utilised the new vistas opened up by

exemplars of nagaswara music was the late G.N. Balasubramaniam. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer is another vocalist influenced by the nagaswara bani. There have been others too.

But influence or inspiration is one thing, imitation is another. When a vocalist, inspired by the example of great nagaswara vidwans, infuses his exploration of a raga and its contours with expansive imagination, while yet retaining the attributes of vocal music intact, it is a matter for appreciation by all true rasikas. But the same cannot be said when a vocalist chooses merely to imitate the music of nagaswara maestros and tries, as some musicians do, exactly to reproduce passages as played on the nagaswara and incorporates hallmark passages, like those of TNR, and even the gasping for breath that often punctuates nagaswara music.





# When his 'nadhaswaram' recital was considered a status symbol by all

By G.V. Krishnan

The Times of India News Service  
MADRAS, June 12.

Gone are the days when temple festivals continued for weeks and a wedding used to be a five-day affair. And a *nadhaswaram* recital was an indispensable feature throughout the festivities.

In today's marriages, held in hired community halls, the *nadhaswaram* has been reduced to a background sound-track that accompanies the rituals. *Nadhaswaram* artistes are a vanishing species of musicians.

On Saturday, a commemorative function is being organised at the Music Academy hall to mark the 90th birthday of a *nadhaswaram* legend, the late Tiruvengadu Subramania Pillai.

Subramania Pillai was a leading exponent of the *nadhaswaram* during the days of marathon marriages. Status-conscious families eager to have him at their weddings even re-scheduled marriages to fit in with his busy concert schedule.

It is recalled that, during the Chidambaram temple festival in 1934, Subramania Pillai held devotees enthralled all night long with his recital. He started playing at 10 p.m. and continued until dawn.

Subramania Pillai is remembered

in carnatic music circles for his contribution in raising the *nadhaswaram* to the status of a mainstream musical instrument. Though the *nadhaswaram* was a part of traditional temple rituals for centuries, it was only during the last 100 years or so that it came to be regarded as an instrument with a distinct identity in the domain of classical music.

Subramania Pillai was among those musicians who played the *nadhaswaram* as a solo instrument at concerts, using the violin, the *mridangam* and the *kanjira* as accompanying instruments. These instruments are usually used to accompany vocalists in concerts.

Subramania Pillai's personal stature helped the music establishment accept his experimentation with the concert format. Lesser artistes could not have broken away from the tradition of using the *tavil*, which was the conventional percussion accompaniment for the *nadhaswaram*.

So phenomenal was his public appeal that Subramania Pillai was honoured with top awards in Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaysia.

Born into a family of musicians, Subramania Pillai started giving public performances at the age of ten and continued performing till he was 70, when he suffered a paralytic stroke. He died ten years ago, at the age of 80.