

His creativity knows no bounds

Lalgudi Jayaraman's musical odyssey began at the age of two. LAKSHMI DEVNATH profiles the maestro, who has many dimensions.

AMELIFLUOUS maestro... the hall is packed... it is New Year's Day. The strains of the violin permeate the auditorium. The honey like melody emanating from the strings seems to have glued the audience to their seats for they do not get up even during the tani? The concert is over; the audience gives him a standing ovation. The rasikas rush towards him for autographs. No, he is not a new star in the field. He has been playing there every New Year's Day for the past 37 years. But, at 72, Lalgudi's music has not grown stale; rather it blooms afresh every day. He performs with aplomb and his followers await his music with the same eagerness as they have for decades. He has been crowned with numerous awards, the latest addition being the Lifetime Achiever Award to be conferred by the Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer Trust on January 19. Making music has always been Lalgudi Jayaraman's passion, indeed his life's breath. His journey started at the age of two when he playfully translated Karaikudi Subbarama Iyer's raga phrases into swaras. The place was a small village, Lalgudi, on the banks of the Kollidam. It has been an odyssey for him. Jayaraman has undoubtedly created history but could it be that he also redefined geography? The maestro, residing at Madras for the past several decades, is known as Lalgudi. The two are synonymous.

Lalgudi Rama Iyer (1807-1867) felt himself incredibly blessed. His guru — the saint-poet Tyagaraja had at his request not only visited his village Lalgudi, but had also stayed in his house! What was more; he had composed five masterpieces on the presiding deities of this place! The saint's blessings on the 'Lalgudi' family must have been ample as history reveals. One of Rama Iyer's four sons — Valadi Radhakrishna Iyer, took to the violin and was the first violinist in the family. His sons were Kandasamy Bhagavatar, violinist of high repute, and Gopala Iyer. "My father, Gopala Iyer," begins Lalgudi Jayaraman, "was a brilliant man." Apparently, Gopala Iyer seems to have been adept at anything he ventured to do — be it doll making, playing carom (where he could pocket nine coins with one stroke) composing or teaching music. His composing skills

burst forth as kritis in rare ragas like Bhuvana Manohari, Gandharva Manohari and so on. His teaching skills shaped up the music wizard in his son. Gopala Iyer, and to some extent Kandasamy Iyer, laid a foolproof musical base atop which his son, Jayaraman, raised a stately edifice composed of ragas, swaras and everything musical. The structure was cemented with hard work for it must not be forgotten that Gopala Iyer was a strict disciplinarian.

The beauty of Jayaraman's musical structure attracted many. Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar, forced to find a replacement for an indisposed Papa Venkataramiah, told the organisers "Fix up that nephew of Kandasamy Bhagavatar, that boy with the *kadukkan* and the *kudumi* (an obvious reference to Lalgudi)." Ariyakkudi's assessment of the young Lalgudi was echoed at different points in time by several in the music glitterati. Madurai Mani Iyer prophesied "this boy will go places" and Palghat Mani Iyer marvelled at Jayaraman's acumen in the subject. Jayaraman has accompanied scores of vocalists ranging from Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavatar, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer; continuing through noted flautists and veena players to the younger generations of artistes. Indeed a mind boggling six generations of artistes! Says Lalgudi, "Accompanying the main artiste is not without its difficulties, but tell me which other instrumentalist other than a violinist has this unique opportunity of observing the musical nuances of top performers at close quarters? I have immensely benefited from these associations." Extraordinarily intelligent, blessed with a photographic memory and combined with a finely attuned ear for all that is aesthetic in music, Lalgudi has carved out a unique style of violin playing — the prestigious Lalgudi Bani. "My violin playing faithfully adheres to the vocal tradition. In fact the instrument is only a medium to convey my musical ideas. Don't forget that before I learnt to play the violin, I was taught to sing." Yes, his violin does sing, the playing techniques of Jayaraman adding perfection to beauty.

In 1958, Lalgudi emerged as a 'soloist,' again with a difference. Tirukkodikaval



Passing on a legacy: Lalgudi Jayaraman with son Krishnan and daughter Vijayalakshmi. — Pic. by K. Gajendran.

Krishna Iyer is credited with being the first soloist. A long line of reputed violinists graced the stage with their solo performances. However, in 1958, a forceful thrust was given to the status of the instrument only after Lalgudi Jayaraman started performing along with his sister Srimathi. When the two played in tandem, cascades of music flowed down. Laya subtleties were couched in undiluted music, swara korvais were as intricate as they were graceful, the *piece de resistance*, the RTPs, were not mere exhibits of intellectuality. It had tender touches that soothed the heart rather than puzzled the brain. "Talking of RTP," says Jayaraman, "the Alathur Brothers were famous for their intricate pallavis. In fact, the accompanying violinists could

not keep pace with them, they wouldn't even look in their direction. Significantly, these very brothers were pleasantly surprised by Jayaraman's instantaneous and accurate grasp of their pallavi rhythm and were profuse in their admiration.

News of Lalgudi's virtuosity spread throughout India and even crossed the shores. At Hirakud, a young rasika nostalgically remarked with unbridled wonder, "Hey violin Lalgudiyaan!" London-1965: A letter from violin maestro Yehudi Menuhin requested Jayaraman's participation at the Edinburgh Music Festival. At Edinburgh, Menuhin was overwhelmed with Lalgudi's artistry. A few months later in Madras, Lalgudi received a gift, a splendid violin from Menuhin! The fiddler from Lalgudi was

now, a globe-trotting phenomenon. The Western world applauded him, and the United States savoured his visits, the South-East Asian countries were overwhelmed with his music. In the USSR, he received a standing ovation that lasted for so long that he had to take the bow six times. In 1980, the International Music Council and the Asia-Pacific Rostrum adjudged his performance as the best among 77 entries. In India, the Ustads of the North — Vilayat Khan, Chaurasia, Amjad Ali Khan, tabla wizards — Shanta Prasad, Zakir Hussain and others gladly teamed up with him for their jugalbandhi performances. Recognition came in the form of awards too right from the public to the President of India. At a concert, one of the listeners overwhelmed with the beauty of a raga unravelled, threw a gold chain on Lalgudi's lap.

There have been other similar expressions of appreciation. The elite organisations of music in India have vied with each other in bestowing titles. The Government honoured him with the Padma Bhushan in 2001. But, the man himself continues to scrutinise his performances dispassionately, a habit inculcated in him by his father.

Over the years the gush of Lalgudi's creativity has taken various forms. He conceived of the triple V ensemble — the violin, venu and the veena. The trio comprising of Lalgudi, Ramani and Venkatraman performed at scores of venues in India. Like everything that Lalgudi touched, this was a roaring success too. There was yet another facet to his personality, that of a composer. He focuses on Varnams and Tillanas.

The Lalgudi creations, however, include Kritis, VadyaVrindas for AIR and operas.

"Dance of sound" — Lalgudi aptly christened the recordings of his Tillanas. The Tillanas of Lalgudi indeed dance to various tunes right from the traditional Vasanta through the earthy Pahaadi to the youthful Madhuvanti. "My first composition was in the year 1956 and I compose even now." His Varnams and Tillanas are popular among leading dancers and musicians; some composed at their requests and to their specifications. His dance opera "Jaya Jaya Devi" is a resounding success having performed at approximately 22 venues

abroad apart from several sabhas in India. In his own words. A much sought after tunesmith, Lalgudi's tunes for various compositions like — "Sarvam Brahmamayam," "Tunga taranga," the Dhanasri tillana his playing techniques that emphasise the lyrics of "Teeratha Vilayatu Pillai," "Chinnanchirukiliye" and others are favourites of both the artistes and the public. Amongst other lyrics, he has also set to tune the famous "Panchali Sabadam" of Va.Ve.Su. "Ideas come in a torrential down pour. I put them down on paper. Later I scrutinise them and refine them."

Over the years, Lalgudi has not only treated his fans to sumptuous feasts but has also educated them. Several are the compositions and ragas that he has brought to the forefront. Kalyana Vasantam, Nasikabushani, Rasali, Bindumalini, Mohana Kalyani and a host of others have gained familiarity as never before. A sought after accompanist, brilliant soloist, composer, tunesmith — Lalgudi Jayaraman is all this and much more. A charismatic organiser, he has played a role in renovating the houses of the Trinity. He has also raised a sizeable fund for the Government School at Lalgudi.

The Lalgudi Trust aids and supports the education of many a music aspirant, sponsors youth concerts and distributes prizes through endowments in various sabhas. He can also justly lay claims to another rare glory, that of a sincere and munificent teacher. Apart from his son and daughter who proudly hold the Lalgudi flag aloft, he has and is still guiding a number of students. Many among them have made a mark in today's concert scene.

Familiar with the flute and the veena, he is known to train aspirants even in these. It is not uncommon to see this extraordinary genius sit on the floor with a ten year old trying to get across the nuances of a Sankarabharanam or a Bhairavi. Such is his devotion to the art, a devotion that leads him to sigh, "The limitations of age tell on me but I am not able to control my creativity. I am nothing without music. Even in all my future births, I want to be born only as a musician. Music has not only been my livelihood but also my path to spirituality."