

## Sivasakthi Sivanesan: Profile

Sivasakthi was born in 1957 in Jaffna, North Sri Lanka, into a disciplined and knowledgeable family which valued education, religion and the arts. Her grandparents, Procter K C Nathan and Manonmani, were both Tamil pandits from Madurai University. Her father, Sivapragasapillai, a graduate from Lucknow University, worked as a sports officer at Vaideshwaravidyalayam and the ministry of sports. Her mother, Ankayatkanni, having completed her Inter at Benares and a Masters graduate in geography from Queen Mary's, Chennai, was the vice principle at Ramanathan College, Jaffna. Sivasakthi was the oldest of seven children, most of whom went to study in India. Like Sivasakthi, her siblings committed time to their higher education in the sciences, engineering and the arts. Although the family grew up in Jaffna, they now live and work in Canada, the UK and Australia, and are all successful in their chosen fields.

Sivasakthi spent much of her youth learning Indian fine arts. From the age of five, she studied music, dance and Tamil literature from Yalpanam Veeramani Iyer. Her guru studied dance at the Kalakshetra, Chennai, with Rukhmini Arandale, and was renowned as a composer of both lyrics and music, with a vast repertoire of dance dramas and songs for dance and music performances. The guru was a great talent, able to compose expressive and evocative songs in the moment. Veeramani Iyer and his wife did not have children of their own, and treated Sivasakthi like their own daughter. He was an affectionate guru, teaching her the arts as well as acting as a guardian. Under Veeramani Iyer, Sivasakthi performed her dance arangetram in 1971, at Veerasingam Hall in Jaffna. Dr. S. Balachander, the legendary veena artist from India, travelled from Chennai to Jaffna especially to be the chief guest at Sivasakthi's arangetram. It was clear to the arangetram guests that Sivasakthi revealed great talent and commitment to the arts, even at 13 years old. Sivasakthi learned from Veeramani Iyer until she migrated to London in 1983. However, they remained in constant contact despite the geographical distance, through phone calls and visits back to Sri Lanka. Until his death, the guru provided guidance, reassurance and help in Sivasakthi's music and life.

In addition to preparing for her debut performance between 1969 and 1972, Sivasakthi completed the North Ceylon Oriental Music Society (NCOMS) exams up to the fifth year in Carnatic vocal and veena and to the highest standard. Sivasakthi also earned the 'Sangeeta Ratnam' title from Ramanathan Music Academy in 1971, having learned from eminent Indian musicians Chitoor Subramaniyapillai (vocal) and M.A. Kalyanakrishnabhagavatar (vocal and veena). From this young age, Sivasakthi also won a number of arts competitions. In 1969, at the age of 12, she was awarded 1st prize for: the Colombo – All Ceylon Religious Competition; the All District Paaothal; and the All Island Paaothal. Later, for three consecutive years (1971-1973), Sivasakthi was awarded Ilam Kalaingar Mandram and Issail Vizah in vocal and veena. All the while, she studied for her GCE, O level and A level qualifications from Ramanathan College. Sivasakthi was later awarded first prize in the Tamil Marai Kalazham All Ceylon and Tamil Marai Thervu competitions, as well as first prize for vocal and veena in the Northern Province Teacher's Association and Sri Lankan Broadcasting Corporation competitions.

In 1973, Sivasakthi left for India, following in her mother's footsteps to study geography at Queen Mary's in Chennai. Upon her arrival in Chennai, Sivasakthi attended a concert by Shri Lalgudi G. Jayaraman. She was so inspired by his performance, and wanted to speak with the artist after the performance. However, she remembers she could not get to the artist as a large crowd gathered around him, all wishing to say something about his music. Eventually, Jayaraman spoke with Sivasakthi, and he remarked that he could see how the music had moved her. At that point, Sivasakthi realised the profound effect the music had on the audience, and felt inspired to become a musician and teacher. This meeting sparked a long bond between Lalgudi G. Jayaraman and Sivasakthi, and they remained in regular contact during her time in Chennai, and even when she moved to the UK.

Between 1973 and 1977, Sivasakthi studied at Tamil Nadu Music College, undertaking her Sangeetha Vidushi (1974-75), and Teacher's Training and Pedagogy degrees (1976), in which she excelled. In 1977, she completed the advanced music course, learning how to structure a performance and satisfy the audience through the delivery of her music and repertoire. During her years in Chennai, Sivasakthi had the opportunity to learn from a number of eminent musicians and dancers. At the time, Sandyavandanam Srinivasa Rao was the principal at the college, and Sivasakthi was tutored by Prof. T.M. Thyagarajan, Prof. K.V. Narayanaswami, B. Rajam Iyer, Thirupampuram Shanmugasundaram, and Shreemati T.V. Rathnam. Her music teachers included Kalpagam Swaminathan for veena, and D.K. Jayaraman (brother of D.K. Pattammal), Dr. S. Ramanathan and Prof. R. Vedavalli for Carnatic vocal. Whilst taking the courses at the music college, Sivasakthi invested her free time in having additional individual classes in veena, vocal and dance. For veena, she received extra few classes from Dr. S. Balachandar, the chief guest at her arangetram in Jaffna. Sivasakthi sought extra guidance in singing the varnams and thillanas of Lalgudi G. Jayaraman through receiving private classes from the composer himself. In dance, she learned from Adyar K. Lakshmanan and also learned nattuvangam. Every morning, Sivasakthi would scour *The Hindu* newspaper for concerts, and would gather a small group of friends to take with her to performances. Having attended college and private classes throughout the day, she spent her evenings attending concerts in the city. Sivasakthi devoted her time in Chennai fully to music.

Upon finishing her studies at the Tamil Nadu Music College, Sivasakthi returned to Sri Lanka in 1977, and began her career at Vembadi Girls' High School, Jaffna, as a singing teacher. In 1978, she joined the faculty at Jaffna University as a music lecturer. Many contemporary Sri Lankan Carnatic musicians were taught by Sivasakthi during her time at the university. Even now as she travels around the world, her past students recognise her from when she taught in Jaffna. In addition to her teaching, Sivasakthi performed veena and vocal and gave interviews for Sri Lankan television and radio broadcasting corporation, and continued to do so until she left the island. During her time at the university, Sivasakthi married Sivanesan. A graduate from Tsinghua University in mechanical engineering and a Masters graduate in Business administration from Greenwich College, London, Sivanesan is currently working as an independent financial adviser. Sivanesan has always been the source of great support and encouragement for Sivasakthi's music.

In 1983, Sivasakthi moved to Beijing to join her husband, and taught at the Pakistani embassy school. Due to the riots in Sri Lanka that year, Sivasakthi and Sivanesan decided to migrate to the UK, where they have lived since that time. Upon her arrival in London, Sivasakthi joined the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan – the largest Indian cultural institution outside of India. Here, Sivasakthi has continually taught Carnatic vocal and veena. This role has included training students of all ages in South Indian classical repertoire, techniques and performance. Additionally, she prepares them for the Bhavan's annual practical exams, which are assessed by external examiners based in India. Sivasakthi has trained many young vocalists and veena players up to a performance standard and they have gone on to perform their arangetrams. Sivasakthi introduced the first veena arangetram in the UK by Joy Sudharshini Pararajasingham. This was Sivasakthi's, the Bhavan's, and the UK's first arangetram, which was presented on 15th October 1989. As well as guiding her students to perform their own arangetrams, Sivasakthi has also given vocal support for all dance arangetrams at the Bhavan, as well as many outside of the institution.

In addition to her work at the Bhavan, Sivasakthi set up her own arts organisation 'Vani Fine Arts Society' in 1986. Originally based at the Ackroyd Community Centre in South London, this organisation has continually aimed to organise concerts by Indian and Sri Lankan musicians at the Bhavan, in order to bring about musical exposure to the community in London. As she was inspired to become a musician upon hearing Lalgudi G. Jayaraman in Chennai, she wants to create opportunities for young, UK-based students to become

similarly inspired. Every year, Vani Fine Arts organises around five concerts and workshops, to attract new listeners and develop performance skills for Carnatic music in this part of the world. Additionally, this organisation aims to provide learning and performance opportunities for children interested in Indian music and dance living in South East London. Annually, a fundraising music programme is arranged through Vani Fine Arts for the Ramakrishna Mission and Sivapoomi charitable organisations back in Sri Lanka. Sivapoomi Trust helps underprivileged, orphaned and blind children, elderly people and cancer patients in Sri Lanka. She and her husband also donate to Colombo Hindu College, Thiruketheeswaran temple, Mannar and the school where she studied, Ramanathan College in Sri Lanka. Sivasakthi has performed for many fundraising concerts and asks all her students to perform for charitable events. She is an advocate of guru shishya parampara and believes in a holistic teaching method, where her students are taught about charity and morals, as well as music. Her senior students include the veena artist, Hari Sivanesan, who was chosen by the BBC to perform at The Proms at the Royal Albert Hall in 2011. Many of Sivasakthi's students have also participated in music festivals such as Croydon Music Festival, where they have received prizes across the board.

Whilst teaching has been a key part of her career, Sivasakthi is an experienced performer, singing and playing veena in a large variety of events and concerts. Within the South Asian community, Sivasakthi has sung for many arangetrams around the UK, and has regularly travelled to Denmark to sing for arangetrams. She was also the first person to go to Denmark to sing Carnatic music, perform for dance arangetrams and conduct workshops for Tamil students. Sivasakthi has performed Carnatic music all around the world, including Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Sri Lanka, India, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, China, USA and Canada. Working closely with her colleague at the Bhavan, the Bharata natyam performer and teacher Prakash Yadagudde and his senior students, Sivasakthi has toured all over the world to sing for dance. She has recently toured with Prakash's student, Priya Hema, around Mauritius as part of a Mauritian Ministry of Arts and Culture-sponsored project. Whilst travelling around the world to perform, Sivasakthi has returned to perform well-received concerts during the prestigious music festival in Chennai, India, and was praised for her vocal recital and ability by Subbudu, one of India's most important music critics. With a keen interest in integrating Carnatic music into new musical projects, Sivasakthi also participated with a Granada-based Spanish Flamenco group, working on a dance performance tracing Indian influence in Flamenco dancing. The group toured and performed in Italy and Spain. In 1992, Sivasakthi revealed her talents as a composer, and composed music for the dance drama 'Gitagovind'.

In addition to her teaching and performance, Sivasakthi has performed for many high-profile events in the UK. Sivasakthi participated with Pandit Ravi Shankar and George Harrison to sing on the album Chants of India. This album was particularly popular within the Indian and world music genres, and is a key recording for introducing Indian music to the West. Following her involvement with this album, Sivasakthi, along with a number of musicians, performed at the memorial for George Harrison, the 'Concert for George', in the Royal Albert Hall in 2002. This concert was very diverse, with many high-profile Western artists performing in addition to the Indian orchestra arranged by Ravi Shankar and conducted by his daughter, Anoushka Shankar. Sivasakthi also sang for a recording by the jazz guitarist, Ronny Jordan. As well as collaborating with musicians from a variety of genres, Sivasakthi has also performed Carnatic music for royalty on a number of occasions. She performed, with other artists from the Bhavan, at the opening of the Commonwealth Institute in 1989, where Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth was present. Sivasakthi also performed with fellow Bhavan musicians at Buckingham Palace as part of the Queen's Music Day. Similarly, Sivasakthi performed for Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall during their visit to the Bhavan in London. Along with her colleagues in dance, Prakash Yadagudde, and Carnatic music artists, Balu Raguraman and M. Balachandar, Sivasakthi has also performed in many European countries as well as extensively in the UK.

In June 2005, Sivasakthi was admitted as a Fellow of Trinity (the International Examination Board) in Carnatic Vocal Performance, awarded by HRH the Duke of Kent. Sivasakthi has continuously worked with the aim of making Carnatic music accessible to a wide audience in the UK. She has contributed to the music scene in the UK by performing and leading workshops at a vast variety of arts centres, venues and festivals, including the Southbank Centre, Horniman Museum, Saddler's Wells, Bath Festival, Royal Albert Hall, and the 'World Stage' at the Millennium Dome. She has also conducted lecture demonstrations at many of Britain's universities. Sivasakthi's work in propagating Carnatic music in the UK and around the world has been recognised by the press and the musical community in Chennai, India. Her commitment to teaching and developing musical appreciation is reflected in Sivasakthi's efforts to record 15 CDs for learning and enjoyment. These include classical and devotional recordings, as well as a series of CDs which are aimed to help students of Carnatic music with their own practice. She sang with her guru, Dr. T. V. Gopalakrishnan on two of her CDs. As well as presenting Carnatic music through classical performance, Sivasakthi has participated in radio, television, and film in Europe. She has given interviews for radio and television in the UK, and has sung for a number of television programmes, documentaries and films, including BBC's 'Shape of the World' and 'Blue Peter', 'Footstep' and the French film 'Monique'. Sivasakthi has also performed classical programmes and given interviews for television and radio around the world, including Deephams TV, Toronto TV and broadcasters in Singapore and Malaysia.

Since joining the Bhavan, Sivasakthi has been developing her music from the eminent Indian musicians Prof. T. V. Gopalakrishnan and Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna. She regularly learns from these gurus, and on her 25th year of musical service at the Bhavan, Prof. T. V. Gopalakrishnan wrote: Sivasakthi 'is a unique combination of chaste music, correct Carnatic traditions, committed votary of serious music education and a great performer in Vocal Music & Veena.' Since 1985, workshops and summer schools by visiting artists from India have taken place at the Bhavan. Over the years, Sivasakthi has invited legendary musicians specialising in a wide range of teaching techniques, trends, innovations, calculations and ragams. As a result, Sivasakthi has had the opportunity to continually develop her art form with her contact with these musicians, as well as providing her students with excellent musical opportunities to learn. These musicians include: Mysore Doraiswami Iyengar, Kalpagamswaminathan Suma Sudendra and Veena Jayanthi, for veena. For vocal music, Dr. T. V. Gopalakrishnan, Dr. Balamurali Krishna, T.K. Govinda Rao, P.S. Narayanaswami, B. Ramkumar Iyer, Rajkumar Bharathi, M. S. Sheela, Neela Ramgopal, and Sukanya Prabakar, to name a few, have taught at the summer school. All the while, Sivasakthi had continual contact with her first guru, Veeramani Iyer.

Since she started in 1983, Sivasakthi estimates she has trained thousands of students in Carnatic veena and vocal music, as well as providing musical tuition for the Bhavan's dance students. The Bhavan has been key in Sivasakthi's musical career in London. Under the late director Mathoor Krishnamurti and current director Dr. M. Nandakumara, Sivasakthi has had the privilege of meeting many world-renowned politicians and legendary classical musicians, dancers and playback singers of India and the West. On 21st March 2010, the Bhavan honoured Sivasakthi and her colleague, Prakash Yadagudde, with music and dance performances on their 25th anniversary at the institution.

Despite the richness of Sivasakthi's career so far, she has future plans for a number of educational projects. She hopes to add to her work so far with developing the opportunities to learn Carnatic music through media, such as teaching DVDs. Sivasakthi also wishes to continue to further Carnatic music within the world music genre, and to help musicians from other musical backgrounds gain greater understanding about the art form. She hopes to create a better understanding of gamakas amongst non-Indian music performers, and promote the practicalities and richness of performing these ornamentations, particularly within the fusion and world music genre. Similarly, she hopes to create greater awareness

about talam and the 72 melakarta, and to continue her first guru's, Veeramani Iyer, work in this area. She also hopes to undertake a project exploring the importance of the notion of the planets' movement and Carnatic music. Sivasakthi continually works to create greater awareness and accessibility for Carnatic music in the UK, and for the art form to become more integrated in the West.

Sivasakthi is a talented, kind and caring musician and teacher. She has devoted her life to learning the classical art form and passing this on to others. Since moving to London, she has worked extensively to encourage younger generations and new audiences to learn about Carnatic music, and contributes to the Carnatic music scene around the world. She works tirelessly to provide opportunities for students and enthusiasts to listen to, and learn from, top South Indian artists. As well as this, she regularly contributes to society back in Sri Lanka through her charitable work, from which she gains great satisfaction. She humbly refers to herself as a student, perpetually learning from her gurus and from her experiences with visiting artists. Sivasakthi has been key in bringing about understanding, accessibility and collaboration of Carnatic music amongst the British South Asian community and within the wider society in the UK. She is a passionate teacher, much loved and respected by her students and colleagues, and provides her students with opportunities to learn, perform and become inspired, as she herself had done in Chennai. She endeavours to bring out the full potential of her students, and to share her love and knowledge of Carnatic music with them. Sivasakthi's passion for the continuation, development and dissemination of this music is clear from all that she does, from her recordings and performances, to her Vani Fine Arts organisation, workshops, and teaching.

### **Recordings and publications:**

#### *CDs*

Voyage I - Sarale Varisai to Upper Sthayi Varisai

Voyage II - Datu Varisai, Alangaram and Gitam

Voyage III - Swarajathi to Varnam

Voyage IV - Songs and Alapanam

Voyage V - Songs and Alapanam

A set of two CDs for Ragam and Tanam

Varnamalika I, II, and III

Sangeethanjali

Shraddhaanjali

Shakthi Manthram in praise of Raghavendraswami

London - Highgate Hill Sri Murugan Anthathi Kirthanaikal I and II

## Books

Edited Veeramani Iyer's handwritten manuscripts into 10 books, in Tamil. Titles include:

Thirukural Keerthanaikal

Vannai Shri Venkadeshan Keerthanikal

Thirukethesvarak Kuravanji

Tiruchenthur Murugan Keerthanaikal

Natiya Nadakankal

Krithawa Keerthanaikal

Ambal Keerthanaikal

Vinayakar Keerthanaikal

72 Melakartha raga Thirumayilai Karpagambal Keerthanaikal

## Accolades

*"Greatly impressed, Sivasakthy's dancing is superlative"* - S Balachander, Chief Guest at Sivasakthi's arangetram in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, 1971

*"I am really happy that you are working tirelessly to bring our culture and music to a new generation in a foreign land"* – Lalgudi, Sir, 1984

*"I am happy to learn that you are doing great and useful work with regard to art and culture. Thank you for keeping me informed, it is very nice of you"* - Bharata Choodamani Aryar K Lakshman ,1985

*"When you were studying at Ramanthan academy under Chittoor Subramaniam Pillai, he told me that you have got strong layam and sruthi and that you will become a great musician. How true Chittoor Iyey's prediction was."* Mridangam A S Ramanathan, 2002

*"Smt.Sivasakthi Sivanesan is a unique combination of chaste music, correct Carnatic traditions, committed votary of serious music education and a great performer in vocal music and veena. It seems like yesterday – but over two decades have elapsed after my first encounter with this serious graduate musician of the star studded Govt Music College, Chennai. At this time, this college was brimming with all the greats in Carnatic Music. She had learnt from them all and others. To cite a few; D.K.Pattamal, M.S Amma, M.A Kalyanakrishna Bhagavathar, T.N.Krishnan, T.M.Thyagarajan, K.V.Narayanaswamy, B.Rajam Iyer, D.K.Jayaraman! She was introduced to me by the great cultural Ambassador Sri Mathur Krishnamurthy – Mathurji to one and all – during my first visit to the Bhavan - sometime in 1987 or so – The next time he told me that Sivasakthi is a golden pillar bearing the whole weight of the Southern Culture - music ,dance and south Indian culture within the Bhavan and insisted that I groom her in whatever way for her attaining the pinnacle as a performer and teacher"* Guruji. Dr.T.V.Gopalakrishnan, 2010.

*"I bless Smt Sivasakthi Sivanesan for the enormous service she has done to Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in the field of music. I wish her many more years of sound health and musical*

*service to this institution where she has trained hundreds of students with devotion, discipline, dedication. My blessings to Sivasakthi.” Dr. Balamuralikrishna, 2010*

*“I have known Smt Sivasakthi Sivanesan for the last ten years. She is an excellent teacher and a dedicated sprit which along with her enthusiasm has made London’s Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan a very well known artistic institution. Sivasakthiji’s orchestral support for dance arrangetram have always enriched the programmes. I join in felicitating her for the service she has given, through the Bhavan, to our art” Late Dr Saraswathi Sundaresan, 2010.*

*“I’m very happy to learn that Mrs.Sivasakthi Sivanesan is being honoured by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan London for her meritorious services in the field of fine arts in general and classical music in particular. She is an excellent performing artiste of today in both vocal and veena and a good teacher too” – Mandolin U Srinivas, 2010*

*“Shiva’s love for Carnatic music is limitless. She has also extended that love to all the performing musicians She brings artistes from India every year to come and teach at the Bhavan’s Summer School. She also arranges, through the Bhavan, workshops to benefit both her students and established and upcoming artistes from India” – Rajkumar Bharathi, 2010*

*“I, and Kumaresh take great pleasure in congratulating Sivasakthi Akka for her exceptional work in teaching at the Bhavan and especially on completing 25 long years. She is a very great source of inspiration to her students, to other teachers, musicians, rasikas and also to the large community and culture that she represents. Sivasakti Akka has dedicated her life to music in all its dimensions and we sincerely pray God for her to have a long, healthy, peaceful life in service of Music” – Ganesh and Kumaresh, 2010*

*Hearty congratulations on the completion of 25 years of service at the Bhavan. As a musician it is your hard work, dedication, good heart and selflessness to serve classical art that has taken you to where you are. It feels so nice to be associated with wonderful people like you. For senior musicians and young musicians like me, you have always been a source of support and encouragement. It is not easy to be one of the best teachers but you are one and loved most by all your students” – Unnikrishnan, 2010*

*“Smt Sivasakthi Sivanesan has been doing fantastic service to the community in London for the last 25 years. She has been a pillar of strength to the music section of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan conducting classes in Vocal and Veena” – Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 2010*

*“It is important to be a good person, not only a good teacher. There is a lot more to teaching than the subject matter. Teaching is one medium by which you show what life is about, what discipline is about , what you have to learn to be and do in life. Sivasakthiji has been brilliant.” Dalalji 2010*

*“Sivasakthi is a many sided person as shown by all the remarks made by our present and former students as to how she has invested our tradition in the Indian subcontinent, how she has invested so much of herself. She has put herself body and soul into teaching. She is a joy to have with us.” Dr Marr, 2010.*

*“There are not enough words to help us convey to you our experience that we had with Aunty. So I would like to use my own words.*

*A – Amma*

*U –You’ve been like a second mother to us, teaching us discipline, telling us how to overcome challenges in our life.*

*N –Nurture – nurturing tradition and culture, it wasn’t only music and it was for us to be good*

*people as well*

*T – Telling off – helped to have good discipline, to learn our music and other things in our life.*

*Y – Years of 25 for hard work, determination, happiness and many more years to come to be there to share her experience with everyone around the world.” Suji (Student) 2010*

Written by Jasmine Hornabrook and Ben Thancanamootoo.