

## Friday Review Chennai and Tamil Nadu

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### The mridangam, his voice

V. BALASUBRAMANIAN

Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman takes viewers on a rhythmic voyage through 'Mridanga Cintamani', a 7-DVD set.

***I found in Umayalpuram Sivaraman a management guru, who has the skills to motivate a team, says Khanthan.***



#### **TRYST WITH Ilaya: Umayalpuram Sivaraman**

One hundred and thirty hours of shoot canned into a 7-DVD pack that runs for 22 hours! Sounds like a mega serial? It is of a different genre that has been documented for posterity" says S.B. Khanthan, who takes credit for the script and direction of "Mridanga Cintamani," the seven DVDs where Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman takes the viewer through a voyage of logically sequenced mridangam lessons (Umayalpuram style). They were released recently by Swathi Soft Solutions.

"Apart from being an accomplished mridanga vidwan, I found in Umayalpuram a management guru, who has the skills to motivate a team. It was evident during the long hours of shooting and editing schedules. Incredible is his energy level, and he would always be punctual on the sets. You can find his involvement in every frame," says an enraptured Khanthan. Inspired by Khanthan's narrative, we met Umayalpuram at his newly renovated residence in Alwarpet to know more about the DVDs and his music. The catch phrase of the entire conversation was 'divine dispensation.'

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### **A cherished gift**

**Umayalpuram's tryst with music began at the age of three when he started playing various rhythmic patterns on any object that would produce sound. This fetched him a ganjira as a gift from his grandmother. Seventy-odd years since his marriage to laya, and the bonding is still growing stronger.**

**His deep knowledge of metaphysics, economics and other related subjects is amazing. A law graduate, he has been enthralling rasikas the world over in various courts of music. "In music, supply should always fall short of demand. Only then will people treasure it. They should yearn to listen to you," says Umayalpuram, and continues, "Success befriends only those who manage their time properly. Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar was an excellent time manager, packaging concerts within the given time frame. No wonder, he is still considered a superstar of Carnatic music."**

**"About 35 years ago, I had formulated mridangam lessons and named it the Umayalpuram Bhani. Today, many students are following it. I wanted to document these lessons in their entirety as a system not only to benefit my students all over the world but also to students of other schools and rasikas who would want to know more about laya and mridangam. Many mridangam teachers and students constantly refer to me to clear their doubts. These DVDs will serve as a reference point," says the vidwan, in a voice that's as sonorous as the sound emanating from the top of his mridangam.**

**"The raindrops falling on the lotus leaves created a sound that inspired sage Swathi to invent the mridangam, according to Bharata Sastra. Today, it is a strange coincidence that Swathi has taken the responsibility in producing this marathon project," says Umayalpuram, while showering praise on the entire Swathi Soft Solutions (ph: 42316060) team comprising Sudhakar, S.B.Khanthan, Mala Mohan and technicians who were involved in the project.**

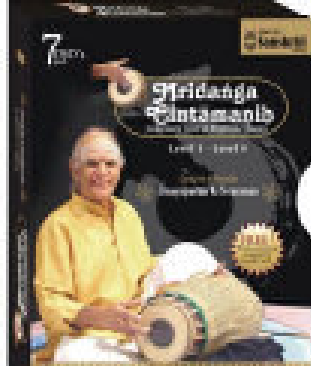
**Twenty nine of his disciples, in the age group of seven to 70, including his son and grandsons, have been featured in these DVDs. A book accompanies the set. The art of playing mridangam has been divided into seven levels. Playing for various vocal styles, instrumental, nadai pallavi in kanda jathi, sahitya bhavam and composing a mora have been covered. In short, they are an encyclopaedia on the art of mridangam playing. His disciples and singers interacting with him clear many doubts. Interspersed are many interesting anecdotes narrated by Umayalpuram.**

**"During the shoot, my playing was all extempore relating to the level that was being filmed," he says, and relates how this is going to further help kindle interest in mridangam the world over. He feels even North Indian percussionists will benefit from these lessons.**



#### **Jazz fusion efforts**

**"In 1962, during my tour to the United States with Dr. S. Balachandar, at a concert, a member of the audience asked us to play 'Ninnuvina' in viloma chapu and requested for me to play tani in the same tala. We were astounded at the knowledge level of that person. We were later introduced to him as Dr. Harold Powers, a brilliant professor of Carnatic music. He gave a lec-dem on Khambodi the same year I got my Sangita Kalanidhi at the Academy. Sabrizeo Casso, the ace sax player of Aka Moon, a jazz group, with whom I present jazz fusion concerts, has a keen interest in our ragas. The Westerners are deeply interested in our music and hence, I am planning to translate all my lessons into Western staff notations," says Umayalpuram. He feels the tani is only an extension of the song and hence one should just not fill it up with beats but reinterpret the song. The mridangam should be depicted as a singing one. He also clarifies that the 'arai chapu' which is his speciality is not half chapu as many people have understood it to be. He explains it is the whipping the mridangam with the fingers and the palm in conjunction at an angle of 35 degrees. Similarly, he is upset at being mentioned as 'mridangist' as there is no such word. Instead, he suggests people refer to him and his colleagues as mridanga vidwans. Umayalpuram advocates constant practice as the only way to hone one's skill. He believes playing for Namasankeertanam is essential. "You should be the first rasika of the main artist for whom you are playing. The eyeball contact with him is as important as the camaraderie with the other players on the stage," advises Umayalpuram.**



**“Listening to the mridangam with tambura sruti early in the morning and meditating is a great stress reliever. Rhythm is the essence of life and it starts with our heart beat; the whole cosmos is united by rhythm”.**

**Umayalpuram rounds off by saying that the mridangam depicts the advaita bhava. The “tha dhi thom nam” is nothing but “Thatvamasi - Thou art the soul of life”.**

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