

I started learning the *mridangam* at the age of eleven. My father, Mr. Thangavelu, was a well-known mridangam artist. He used to play mridangam for *Bharathanatiam*, *Kuchipudi* and *Mohiniattam* performances. As any other Indian child, I, a South-Indian child at the age of 3-4, along with my siblings, started (taking) singing classes, followed by violin classes and then dance classes.

We are five children and I am the eldest. I learnt the mridangam. I got interested in the mridangam due to a general presumption that girls should be taught only very soft fine arts. Singing, violin, the graceful Bharathanatiam – all of which were (seen as) not so difficult art forms were meant for women. We were three sisters and my father taught all three of us these art forms only. I used to go for dance programs with father. Even during the dance performance, my concentration would be on the mridangam. My father would be playing the mridangam, and I would be in awe of my father playing on stage. The more I heard the sound of mridangam, the more my interest in it kept growing. In school, I used to continuously play on the tables. Most of the time, I was an outstanding student, meaning, that they would say, ‘Lakshmi is making a lot of noise!’ and they would make me stand outside the class. Due to all this, I got interested in the mridangam. I have two younger brothers and I used to take both of them for mridangam classes since I wished to learn the mridangam. Being the elder sister, I was assigned the responsibility of taking them to class.

One day I told my father that I wanted to learn the mridangam. He said, ‘Fees is not a problem, but will you be able to learn?’ He did not say no to me, ‘Can you learn?’ I said, ‘No, I will learn.’ So, my learning started like that – my father used to train me, then other masters like Vasudeva Rao sir, Shanmugam sir came along. Then in one of the competitions, TV Gopalakrishnan sir was the judge. He felt so happy that a girl, that too in Bangalore, was playing so well. ‘Her hands are so good! I will teach her. Send her to Chennai,’ he told my father. As soon as I finished my 10th grade, father sent me to the *gurukul* to train with sir; (and) my fingerpicking changed forever. My fingerpicking was fine-tuned to suit the mridangam. (But since) everyone has their own individuality, it was not forced on me. TVG sir trained me in such a way that he saw which style would suit my hand, which chords will suit my hand. He took utmost care.

This is the main reason why I am still unmarried. (It is widely held that) once you’re married, you can sit at home and take classes, but you will not be allowed to perform. There is no chance of performing and all. So this was my answer to them, ‘In my next birth I do not know whether I will have the interest in music, but marriage, whether I am born as a girl or boy, will happen.’ So, (in) this life I want to live for myself. My mother and father are

unhappy that I have made such a decision. They ask me how I would survive unmarried, being a woman. But there is music; I believe it will save me. For all women in this field, for that matter in any field, if a woman wants to excel in that field, it's very challenging for her, I remind myself.