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L. Subramaniam: The Doctor Who Chose the Violin

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L. Subramaniam is an Indian violinist and composer who trained as a doctor. He wrote music for the New York Philharmonic and for Hollywood-era films. This lesson follows him from a music-teaching home in Jaffna to the Padma Vibhushan.

1 Who was L. Subramaniam?



L. Subramaniam performing violin. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0.

L. Subramaniam grew up in a family of musicians. His father, V. Lakshminarayana, taught music at the university in Jaffna. His mother, Seethalakshmi, sang and played the harmonium and the veena. His brothers L. Vaidyanathan and L. Shankar also became violinists.

When did he first perform?

He gave his first concert at the age of six. His father was his teacher and guru. Lakshminarayana dreamed of making the Indian violin known across the world.

> **Quick check 1.** L. Subramaniam gave his first concert at the age of six. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: indianviolin.com; hindustantimes.com; asia-archive.si.edu

2 Why did he study medicine?

His parents wanted a safe career for their children. His mother told him he could not leave home until he was a registered doctor. He finished his MBBS at Madras Medical College.

What did he study after medicine?

He then took a master's degree in Western classical music at the California Institute of the Arts. He began graduate school there in 1973. He had been offered a scholarship in Germany, but he finished medicine first.

> **Quick check 2.** He finished medicine before he moved to California to study music. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: hindustantimes.com; latimes.com; indianviolin.com

3 What did he compose?

Zubin Mehta commissioned a work for violin and orchestra from him. It was called Fantasy on Vedic Chants. The New York Philharmonic premiered it in September 1985, under Mehta.

What is Violin Chakravarti?

Violin Chakravarti is a title given to him at the age of 25. The Governor of Madras and the Carnatic master Chembai Vaidyanathan Bhagavathar honoured him with it.

> **Quick check 3.** The New York Philharmonic premiered Fantasy on Vedic Chants in 1985. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: latimes.com; indianviolin.com; subramaniamfoundation.in

4 Which films used his music?

He wrote the music for two films by Mira Nair. They were Salaam Bombay! in 1988 and Mississippi Masala in 1991.

Did he play on other film soundtracks?

Yes. He played the violin on Bernardo Bertolucci's Little Buddha in 1993. He also played on Merchant-Ivory's Cotton Mary in 1999. He advised Peter Brook on the 1989 film The Mahabharata.

> **Quick check 4.** He wrote the music for Mira Nair's Mississippi Masala. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: hindustantimes.com; asia-archive.si.edu

5 What honours did he win?

He received the Padma Bhushan in 2001. In 2025 he received the Padma Vibhushan, India's second-highest civilian award. President Droupadi Murmu presented it at Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Which family and school came with this fame?

He married the playback singer Kavita Krishnamurti in November 1999. Together they started the Subramaniam Academy of Performing Arts in 2007. He has played with Yehudi Menuhin and Herbie Hancock.

> **Quick check 5.** He received the Padma Vibhushan in 2001. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: hindustantimes.com; gulfnews.com; music.sapaindia.com

Practice MCQs

1. At what age did L. Subramaniam give his first concert?

A. Three

B. Six

C. Twelve

D. Eighteen

See answer ↓

2. Which medical degree did L. Subramaniam complete at Madras Medical College?

A. BAMS

B. MD in surgery

C. BDS

D. MBBS

See answer ↓

3. Which conductor commissioned Fantasy on Vedic Chants, premiered by the New York Philharmonic in 1985?

A. Herbie Hancock

B. Zubin Mehta

C. Leonard Bernstein

D. Yehudi Menuhin

See answer ↓

4. Which pair of films did L. Subramaniam score for the director Mira Nair?

A. Salaam Bombay! and Mississippi Masala

B. Little Buddha and Cotton Mary

C. Aurat and Andaz

D. Mother India and Aan

See answer ↓

5. In which year did L. Subramaniam receive the Padma Vibhushan?

A. 2025

B. 2007

C. 1988

D. 2001

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The answer is six. His father, V. Lakshminarayana, was his teacher. Twelve and eighteen are far too late. Memory hook: six strings of age, one violin. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** The answer is MBBS. His mother insisted he register as a doctor first. The other three are different degrees. Memory hook: doctor first, then violin. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** The answer is Zubin Mehta. He conducted the New York Philharmonic at the premiere. Menuhin was a violinist, and Hancock is a jazz pianist. Memory hook: Mehta commissioned, Subramaniam composed. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** The answer is Salaam Bombay! (1988) and Mississippi Masala (1991). Little Buddha and Cotton Mary used his violin, but other directors made them. Memory hook: Nair means Salaam and Masala. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** The answer is 2025. He received the Padma Bhushan earlier, in 2001. The Subramaniam Academy of Performing Arts began in 2007. Memory hook: Bhushan 2001, Vibhushan 2025. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** He was six. ↑ 1
2. **True.** His mother insisted on the MBBS first. ↑ 2
3. **True.** Zubin Mehta had commissioned it. ↑ 3
4. **True.** He also scored Salaam Bombay!. ↑ 4
5. **False.** it is false. 2001 was the Padma Bhushan. ↑ 5

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