

## A great loss to Sruti

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**S**ruti was devastated when its founder Pattabhi Raman died in December 2002. The recent passing away of Contributing Editor S. Rajam has been no less a loss. His was the sage counsel we sought whenever in doubt about matters historical or technical in music. He responded enthusiastically to our repeated requests for illustrations – both independent and to accompany his expert contributions on Carnatic music. Till the very end he showed the curiosity and excitement of a schoolboy while constantly seeking to add to his substantial knowledge. He drew and painted until about a month ago. His doors were always open to us, as indeed it was to any genuine student of the arts and their history. He taught and encouraged countless students of music and any artist who sought his gentle but firm mentoring. He retained his inexhaustible fund of enthusiasm for the great cave art of India – Ajanta, Sittannavasal, and so on – all his life. Even as recently as November 2009, he hosted a slide show of Ajanta paintings and sculpture at his Mylapore residence by Prof. Subramaniam Swaminathan, sharing his boyish excitement and sense of marvel at the astonishing wealth of the art on display.

He was a master of two arts, music and painting, though he perhaps did not make a major mark as a concert musician. Still, it is difficult to determine which was his better suit, his music (as a scholar and teacher) or his painting. It is reasonable in view of his twin gifts to assume that we shall probably never see the likes of him again.

Last year, *Sruti* featured him on the cover for our profile of him to mark his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. We used a photograph from his youth, a superb profile in which he looked every bit



as handsome as a Greek god. In the interview, he had said of his youth, “Those days, I had long hair and looked smart, cycling everywhere. ‘Master Rajam,’ they used to call me.” When we suggested that with his dashing good looks and multiple talents, he had probably been a ladies’ man in his youth, his denial was instant and vehement.

He was hugely popular at *Sruti*. The reason was not far to seek. He was not only a gentle person, but one who treated you with utmost respect and courtesy regardless of how old or important you were. He was a big hit

with youngsters because he took their work seriously and never talked down to them. Interviewing him for last year’s profile was a breeze, with a whole lot of us sitting around him while he regaled us with stories as varied as his music concert tours in India and abroad or his explorations of Ajanta and Sittannavasal in his youth. The only time he became excited was when he recalled the music of some past master like Naina Pillai or Dhanammal or the great art of India. “The Sistine Chapel was nothing compared to Ajanta, where there were no facilities,” he almost shouted, but he was self-effacing while talking of himself, casually dismissing significant events of his life, as when saying of Balachander, “He used to play the tabla with his right hand and the harmonium with his left hand,” speaking of his own part in the movie *Seeta Kalyanam* whose success

led to the concert tours with Balachander, or explaining why his film acting career was short-lived (his wife did not approve of his cavorting on screen with other women).

Anyone who has visited Rajam’s Nadu Street home at Mylapore knows what a simple life he led and how frugal he was. Like many others of his generation, he conserved resources, did not like to throw away things that could be reused like his

S. Rajam with his paintings and the special *Sruti* poster



## COVER STORY

famous one-side paper. In his home, he knew exactly where everything was in the midst of a bewildering chaos of paper, painting and drawing materials and bric-a-brac. He rode everywhere on a scooter into his eighties, wearing a 2-yard veshti or lungi. In earlier years, he enjoyed a smoke and had no qualms about eating non-vegetarian food.

Rajam's father Sundaram Iyer gathered great musicians like Ariyakudi and Maharajapuram at home and organised concerts at a hall he built upstairs. Rajam could learn songs from many leading musicians like Ariyakudi, Papanasam Sivan, and Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar.

The atmosphere at home was steeped in music. Rajam started playing the veena as his father did but switched to vocal music to explore the scope of the human voice. He first performed on All India Radio at age 13.

An English poet, Lewis Thompson, deeply interested in Indian philosophy, whom Rajam met at the Ramana Asrama, was his inspiration in matters of Indian art, philosophy and literature. He told Rajam, "Art must represent nature, not reproduce it. That's why you see that Akbar is bigger than the horse in the miniatures. Learn perspective but ignore it once you have mastered it."

Rajam rendered All India Radio immeasurable service as a music supervisor, reviewing its concerts before they went on air and making corrections and improvements, even in the case of very senior performers. He was in his mid-twenties then. It never occurred to him to separate his official and private lives. His work in AIR was just an extension of his work elsewhere and he did

not change into an office mode when he entered the station. While staying at distant Pallavaram, we are told he carried the surplus milk the family cow yielded to AIR every morning, to share it with colleagues.

For a gentle, soft-spoken person, Rajam could be outspoken, even blunt, when it came to critiquing art, artists and those connected with the arts, if they did not meet ethical or artistic norms. A mediaperson was once at the receiving end as soon as he entered the Rajam household for an interview. "I can judge a man by the way he enters my doorway," he told an onlooker. "Look at the arrogant way he flung his footwear around before he came in!" The reputation of the person did not bother him either, when he felt compelled to speak his mind. He did not spare an awardee when a lecdem by her students supervised by her failed to rise above the mediocre. He showed his ire quite openly when his recommendations were overlooked while choosing prizewinners during the Academy's season concerts. "Why ask me to listen to all the concerts, take notes and evaluate the performers, if you have already made up your minds?" he once asked.

He approved of most things we at *Sruti* did, but did not fail to correct us when necessary. He was never fully satisfied with the way we reproduced his paintings. His letter to 'the editor sir' on this subject was a masterly effort, though it needed the use of a magnifying glass to decipher his tiny lettering. For over two decades, he was our best friend and most constructive critic – an epitaph almost anyone who came into contact with this gentle giant of music and art could have written. ■