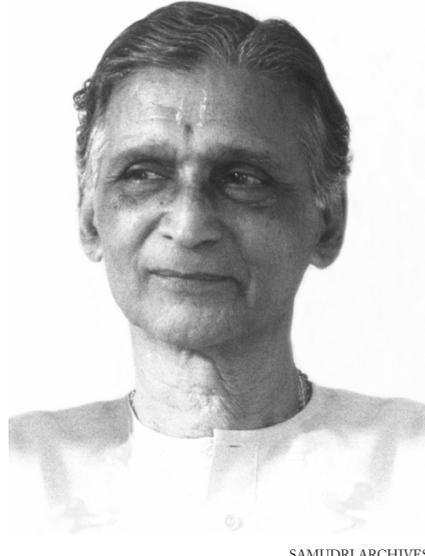


S. Rajaram

S Rajaram was a Carnatic musician, composer and arts administrator. Born in 1925 in Mysore, he learnt to play the mridanga from D. Seshappa and Yella Somanna, the jalatarangam from Devendrappa and vocal music from his famous grandfather Mysore Vasudevacharya. Rajaram served All India Radio for over three decades and later Kalakshetra in Chennai as Principal of its College of Fine Arts. He was appointed Director of the Kalakshetra Foundation, Chennai in 1995 and served the institution till 2005. He moved to Bengaluru after his retirement.

A prolific composer, Rajaram composed the music for several dance-dramas produced by Kalakshetra – including some in the famous



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Ramayana series, and others like *Bhakti Vijayam*, *Bhakta Jayadeva*, *Akka Mahadevi*, and *Karna Sapatham*. When approached by private

organisations and individuals, he also composed the music for individual items and thematic presentations like *Sakuntalam*, *Natya Veda*, *Sree Krishna Jananam*. Rajaram composed a number of varna-s and tillana-s for solo Bharatanatyam. He travelled widely, leading the Kalakshetra troupe to festivals in Europe, the Far East, and the former Soviet Union. He received many prestigious awards from various sabha-s and institutions including the central Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 2001.

Simplicity and modesty were the hallmarks of this vidwan. In spite of his knowledge of music and the prestigious positions he held, Rajaram was an unassuming gentleman. He passed away on 1st June 2009 in Bengaluru at the age of eighty four. ■

Musician, composer and arts administrator

I met Rajaram in 1953 soon after he arrived in Adyar with his grandfather Mysore Vasudevachar. I came to know him really well when I joined Kalakshetra as Superintendent of Studies in 1956. He was unofficially designated as a personal assistant to Rukmini Devi (Athai), because he was then working as a staff artist in AIR-Madras.

He arrived punctually at 7.30 in the morning to teach vocal music to part-time students. His school was adjacent to my office room in a thatched cottage. It was a pleasure to watch and listen to him teaching the children. He laid a firm foundation and brought out the best in each child. There was a happy atmosphere all around and the children eagerly came to his classes.

In the 33 years I worked in Kalakshetra, Rajaram became a close associate of mine, though he always called me “Teacher”, refusing to address me by name. His humour was subtle and his ready smile was warm and friendly. He was a connecting link between his grandfather and all of us at Kalakshetra – from Athai and Sankara Menon downwards.

Peria Sarada and the pundits at Kalakshetra edited the Valmiki *Ramayana* verses and gave the matter to Rajaram. He would return with the finished songs composed by his grandfather and sing them before Sarada and others. Rarely would Sarada need a verse to be recomposed to suit the mood better.

Rajaji once told Rukmini Devi that dancers should not portray gods and

goddesses on stage. However, as he was fond of Athai, he agreed to attend the premiere of *Seeta Swayamvaram* staged at the Museum Theatre in 1955. At the end, with tears in his eyes, he blessed her saying: “Rukmini Devi has made Sree Rama and Seeta come alive before us.” Thereafter, he witnessed all the Ramayana productions of Kalakshetra with eagerness and enthusiasm. It was only in 1960 that the next two parts of the Ramayana series – *Rama Vanagamanam* and *Paduka Pattabhishekam* were staged. These were great favourites of rasika-s who bathed in the soulful music of Vasudevachar and the dance creations of Athai.

Thatha passed away and there was again a gap of five years before *Sabari Moksham* was taken up.

Rukmini Devi was undecided as to which well known musician she should invite to continue the music composition of the Ramayana series. Peria Sarada, with Sankara Menon's support, was able to persuade her to invite the reluctant Rajaram, as he was fully conversant with Thatha's style and had assisted him in the music composition till then.

Rajaram composed the music for *Sabari Moksham*, but wanted the credit line to be given to his beloved grandfather. Thus even to this day it is officially stated that for the first four parts of the Ramayana, the music was composed by Vasudevachar! Sarada and I feel strongly that this should not be so hereafter.

Sabari Moksham was a great success. After its premiere, the Kalakshetra troupe and Athai went to Bombay to present an art festival. She expressed her wish that I should arrange for the staging of *Sabari Moksham* instead of *Paduka Pattabhishekam*. It was, however, not possible to do so at the last moment.

In 1968, *Choodamani Pradanam* was staged. Rajaram's music for this was beautiful. Seetarama Sarma also composed music and sollukattu-s for some verses. He assisted Rajaram in different ways in those days. I would often find them together in Sarma's house doing pooja for the production.

Maha Pattabhishekam was staged in 1970. Rajaram and Sarma had worked together to make it a success. Athai used to say: "Sree Rama went to the forest for 14 years. I have also taken 14 years to complete the Ramayana series of six dance-dramas after surmounting various difficulties! The Ramayana series was



Rajaram teaching students at Kalakshetra

USHA KRIS

staged again and again because of its great music and dance creations which excelled our imagination.

When M.D. Ramanathan, who was the Principal at Kalakshetra, passed away in 1984, Rukmini Devi invited Rajaram to become the Principal. He later became the Director after the demise of Sankara Menon. I recall how Sarada tried to persuade Rajaram to return to Kalakshetra after he retired from All India Radio. When we went to Delhi, Rajaram telephoned me from Jalandhar and spoke for over an hour, and promised to return to Kalakshetra.

His teaching of senior students was very interesting. During his teaching sessions, he would often pull out a booklet or a paper, choose a verse or two, compose music on the spot and teach it to the pupils. He was very popular with them. He composed music for verses in Sanskrit, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and Tamil. He made sure of their meanings, understood the inner import of the songs which he brought out in beautiful music which expressed the mood.

Rajaram was like a real brother to me. He spoke to me from Bangalore on

the morning of 1st June. He passed away the same evening. I remember he was cross with me when I asked him whether he had forgotten Sarada and me! He said, "You know very well that I always call on you whenever I come to Chennai. I will meet both of you soon when I come to the city. Keep some matter ready for me to compose music." Sadly this was not to be. Whenever Sarada and I requested him to compose music for a production, he agreed with enthusiasm. We have presented several dance-dramas at the Theosophical Society's annual convention with Rajaram's music.

Sarada has written about the life of Rukmini Devi in simple Sanskrit verse. Rajaram composed the music, and the dance was created by Krishnaveni Lakshmanan. The Central Production Centre (CPC) of Doordarshan filmed it at the Kalakshetra theatre years ago. We hope it will be released soon, as it would be a befitting homage to two personalities – Rukmini Devi and S. Rajaram.

Rajaram is not with us in person, but his life's fragrance will ever remain with us.

G. SUNDARI
As told to S. Janaki