

S. Rajam – a rare gem

90th birthday celebrations

S Rajam is a multifaceted genius with creative talents in a variety of fields such as music, musicology, classical painting and acting. Born in 1919, he imbibed his interest for music and art from his father Sundaram Iyer, a well known advocate and music connoisseur of his times, and mother Chellammal.

In the field of music, Rajam is an authority on vivadi raga-s and has done much to popularise Kotiswara Iyer's kriti-s. He is also a repository of many rare Dikshitar kriti-s, having learnt

directly from Ambi Dikshitar. He had direct tutelage under Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Papanasam Sivan, Madurai Mani Iyer, Gowri Amma and many other stalwarts. He has set to tune many compositions, including the *Tirukkural*. Comfortable in all genres of music, he has given innumerable lecdems and trained many students. He started performing at the age of 13 and won many laurels. Veena maestro S. Balachander, his younger brother, used to accompany him on the harmonium and tabla.

Rajam was employed as Music Supervisor for many years with All India Radio, Chennai, where he rendered excellent service promoting Carnatic music. He produced many noteworthy programmes on the works of Kotiswara Iyer, Sadasiva Brahmendra, the Trinity and others.

Rajam acted in a number of films. In the first, *Seeta Kalyanam* he was Rama and his sister was Seeta! He has travelled widely and has been the recipient of many prestigious awards

At home with his paintings and the special 'A Rare Gem' poster presented by *sruti* on his 90th birthday



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including the Sangita Kala Acharya from the Madras Music Academy and the central Sangeet Natak Akademi award.

A rare combination of talents made Rajam the phenomenon he is today. With his deep insight into music and his knowledge of our rich and colourful mythology, he has given shape to a number of musical concepts through his paintings. One of his sterling contributions combining the two art forms is his paintings of the Music Trinity of Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastry, that we all recognise today. His depiction of Gopalakrishna Bharati and the Tevaram Nalvar is indeed unique. He is one

of the earliest gold medal winners of the Madras School of Art.

Rajam has published many books. His illustrated books on the *Navagraha*, *Peria Puranam*, *Tiruvilayadal*, *Musings on Music* and others have been well received and are in constant demand.

Rajam is a member of the Experts' Committee of the Madras Music Academy. He has also been a Contributing Editor of *Sruti* magazine for more than two decades. He adheres to strict classicism and strives to present our ancient art through painting and music, which are like his two eyes to him.

Art that haunts

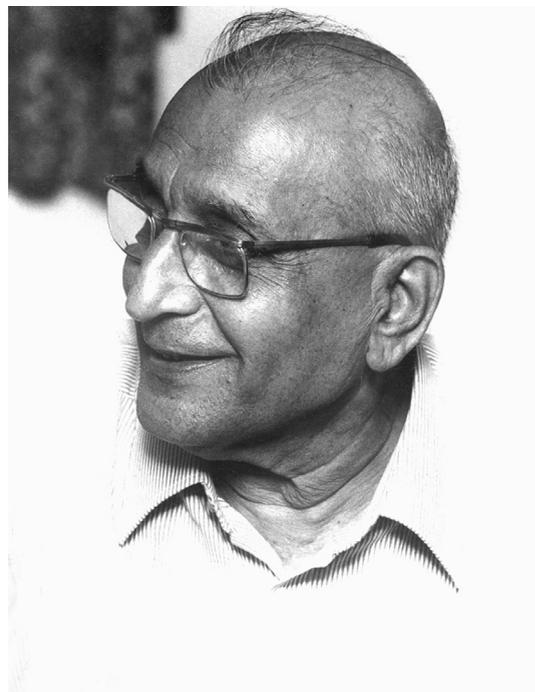
Excerpts from a freewheeling conversation with S. Rajam.

How did you become deeply interested in Indian culture?

I owe it to Lewis Thompson who came to Ramana Asrama, where I used to sing occasionally. He was an English poet, deeply interested in Indian philosophy, ten years my senior. He used to stay with Mr. Ranganathan, the pioneer of Indian library science. He used to write his verses in tiny books. He did his sketches with Waterman pens which he kept losing every ten days or so, as he slept on the beach with his wallet and pen. When we visited the palace in Trivandrum – I was working in AIR there – he told me that Ravi Varma's paintings were calendar art. He sent me photographs of ancient bronzes from wherever he went on his travels. He was responsible for my development and growth in Indian art. He moulded me. He would say, "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." The size of the figures depends on their relative importance. I admired the paintings of Nicolas Roerich in the Himalayas, where he made his own colours. In a painting of his you could see a sanyasi doing pooja before a small lingam on a stool-like rock, under a small tree set in the vastness of the mountains. I learnt to paint like that, but the memory of such art haunted you for days on end after you returned home.

What haunted you like that in music?

It was Dhanammal's music. (Rajam sings in imitation of Dhanammal: *Nareemani*. Look at the emphasis... *sa ni sa ni dha*. Look at the beauty of Khamas, the play with



the tala. She would play the veena and sing. I would sit very close to her and listen. My brother Balachandar used to say there was no tala in Dhanammal's music. Tala is inherent in the music, not in the beats you keep by hand. Take the case of nagaswaram Pakkiri. He could play Natakurinji all day long, perhaps did not know any sahitya. The great Rajaratnam once told Tirukkodikaval Krishna Iyer after his rhythmic exploration on the violin: tala should be in the singer's throat, not in his thigh (where he keeps beat).

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Rajaratnam was a terror when he came to AIR for a concert programme. During a rehearsal before recording, he played a superb succession of swara-s. When I asked him what kriti he was playing, he said, "You write what you like." Similarly on another occasion, Madurai Somu sang a very emotive Tamil viruttam. When my father asked him who composed the song, he said, "Sankaracharya!" I relate these stories to show you how these musicians cared more about the music than the lyrics.

Who were your teachers and role models?

Dhanammal was Saraswati incarnate – she sang and played the veena alternately. I was fortunate to attend her Friday soirees some 40 times. When she sang *Akshayalinga vibho*, she shed tears while doing niraval on the line 'padarivana'. Shouldn't we have the same intensity of feeling while performing? How can you be a real singer if you are not a rasika yourself?

Madurai Mani Iyer. Music was his life. He was a very good teacher who taught me for some five years. All vakra, varjya raga-s. I didn't hear Dhanammal in her youth. I heard her in the last years of her life. I heard

Madurai Mani Iyer from his youth onwards. In his last years, he sang the same way he sang when he started. He did not need to improve with the years, as he achieved completeness very young. Music has to be inborn, it cannot gradually improve.

Madurai Mani Iyer taught me *Nagumomu* with chatusruti dhaivata, while Papanasam Sivan taught me in suddha dhaivatam, the correct way.

How did you get the idea of depicting music in your paintings?

Hari Rao, son of Sangita Kalanidhi T.V. Subba Rao, was the manager of the Higginbothams bookstore. He showed me letter pads with Omar Khayyam illustrations and asked me if I could do something similar for Carnatic music. That is how I did the series for our music. *Sruti* Pattabhiraman saw the letterpads and asked me to do similar illustrations to be published every month. Semmangudi told me he liked the letterpads so much that he did not use them to write letters, keeping them with himself. I wanted people to use them and create interest in our music in the recipients of their letters.

V. RAMNARAYAN
with S. Janaki and Gayatri Sundaresan