

SATHUR A.G. SUBRAMANIAM (1916-1977)**Upholder of tradition****S. Janaki**

Sathur A.G. Subramaniam was a well respected musician and teacher of his time. He was a musician's musician. He was born in 1916 at Angarai in Tiruchirappalli, to Thailammal and Ganesa Sastrigal. In his early teens he moved to Sathur where his initial music training began. He then came under the tutelage of T. Sabesa Iyer, Tanjavur Ponniah Pillai and Tiger Varadachariar at the Annamalai University, where he obtained the Sangeeta Bhooshanam degree in 1936. S.V. Parthasarathy, T.S. Krishnaswamy, T.K. Rangachari, Mayavaram Rajam and K.S. Narayanaswamy were his collegemates. He gave his first public concert at the Tyagaraja Aradhana in Tiruvaiyaru in 1938, and from then on there was no looking back.



Vaidyanatha Bhagavata, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, G.N. Bala-subramaniam, and Madurai Mani Iyer. Well known writer and critic S.V. Seshadri remarked that had Sathur added more colour to his voice, few could have matched him.

Sathur was in the habit of meticulously maintaining a diary in which he noted down several details about his concerts including the date, venue, sabha, and the artists who accompanied him. The diary reveals that Sathur Subramaniam performed all over India, in the choicest of sabhas and had some of the great stalwarts of yesteryear accompany him.

He was a traditionalist to the core. This was reflected in his dignified demeanour—white half-sleeve shirt and veshti, bordered angavastram, sacred ash with a kumkum dot on his wide forehead, and hair tied back in a tuft. He was conservative by nature and diligently performed his daily rituals. He believed in upholding traditional values in life and music and stood firm by the pathantara taught to him by his gurus.

Sathur had a sonorous and stentorian voice. His singing, marked by speed, was rich and open, but uninflected and without frills and fancies. Besides vocal music he had trained in playing the mridangam, which helped him execute ragam-tanam-pallavi with aplomb. He had his own following of rasikas who attended his concerts to listen to his pallavis in four ragas. His knowledge of Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil and Hindi enabled him to understand the import of the compositions which he rendered with perfect diction, even as he brought out their depth of emotion and expression. He was a close friend of musician V.V. Sadagopan and GNB. On his visits to Tiruvananthapuram, he would stay in the house of V.V. Sunderarajan and learn Swati Tirunal kritis from his wife Jayalakshmi Sunderarajan. Sathur taught a number of these kritis to his disciples.

He managed to hold his own in the music scene which had giants like Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Chembai

Some of his violin accompanists were Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai, V. Sethuramaiah, Papa K.S. Venkatramaiah, T. Chowdiah, Parur Sundaram Iyer, T.N. Krishnan and Lalgudi G Jayaraman. His mridangam accompanists often were stalwarts such as Palghat Mani Iyer, Trichy Sankaran, T.K. Murthy, Umayalpuram Sivaraman, Vellore Ramabhadran and Palghat Raghu. One of his contemporaries at Annamalai University was the noted scholar-musician Dr S. Ramanathan.

Sathur performed at the Music Academy in 1942, 1943, 1946, 1948 and 1952 (silver jubilee year) and sang extensively in all the major sabhas of Chennai in the decades between 1940 to 1970. Besides this, he traveled to places like Shimla, Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, Nagpur, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Orissa, and Trivandrum, not to mention important places in Tamil Nadu. He sang the inaugural concert for the Sri Rama Navami celebrations at Coimbatore for several years till his death in 1977. He also performed regularly at the Kanchi Mutt and the Sringeri Sarada Peetham. The traditionalist that he was, he refused to entertain offers requesting him to perform overseas. Oldtimers say he was probably the only musician to immediately apportion and distribute on stage the remuneration given to him at the end of the concert.

What endeared him to his rasikas were the elegance and balance of lakshana and lakshya in his alapanas, commendable manodharma, brigas and quality of voice. It is said that crowds would gather much before

the concert commenced at the Tyagaraja Festival in Kumbakonam. His mikeless concerts at the Noorukaal mandapam in Tiruchi, where he sang for over four hours, were a huge draw. He was also very popular in Bangalore and Mysore. His gramophone records *Sadananda tandavam* in Bahudari and *Innum sandeha padalamo* in Keeravani were hits and his rendering of *Yamunavihara* in Bheemplas, *Dayai puria tamadama* in Malayamarutam, and *Rama ninnu nammina* in Mohanam, were favourites.

He was a perfectionist to the core, a fine teacher with excellent pathantara. His written notations were crystal clear. He had no reservations about teaching the student what she or he asked for. When a lesson was taught and completed he was very strict with the follow up and did not proceed to the next one till the student perfected the song. Many of his students blossomed into musicians with scholarly leanings. Notable among them were Ananthalakshmi Sadagopan, Seethamani Srinivasan, Sulochana Pattabhiraman, Sirgazhi V.R. Subramaniam and Sirgazhi Jayaraman (Sirkazhi Brothers), Musiri Ranjgarajan, Trichy Natarajan and his daughters Lalitha Santhanam and Bhuvana Rajagopal (Sathur Sisters).

His disciples say that Sathur Subramaniam did not get the recognition due to him and remained an unsung musician. The only major recognition came late in his life in the form of the Kalaimamani title conferred on him by the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram. Sathur breathed his last on 20 November 1977. He did not emerge as a celebrity singer despite being ranked high by his contemporaries. ■

Celebrations in Chennai

A sincere teacher, a great performer, our lucky charm, a wonderful human being, an honest friend, a loving father ... these are some of the words used by those who recalled their days with musician and teacher Sathur A.G. Subramaniam at his centenary celebrations organised at the Raga Sudha hall in Chennai, on 15 July. Mridangam maestro Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman, chief guest for the evening, released *Parampara Thrayam*—the audio CD of Sathur's concerts along with the notation booklet titled *Pathantara Ratnangal*. Guests of honour, violinist M. Chandrasekaran and scholar-writer Sujatha Vijayaraghavan received the first and second copies respectively.

It was a nostalgic evening for many at the centenary celebrations, as Krishna Ramaratnam transported the audience back in time, with a moving documentary on his grandfather, combining his music, rare photographs

and tributes. The documentary had a host of distinguished speakers share fond memories and anecdotes about the maestro. Mridanga vidwan T.K. Murthy said, "Subramaniam also played the mridangam and his knowledge of laya was exceptional. His supreme rendition of *Amba Neelambari* is unforgettable".

Recalling his days with the doyen, Trichy Sankaran, who accompanied him on the mridangam on many occasions, said, "AGS sir was the lucky charm for many sabhas who would inaugurate their festivals with his concert. In fact, the Rama Navami festival in Coimbatore would always begin with Sathur Subramaniam's kutcheri".

"His voice was facile, with a slight nasal twinge. His unparalleled rendition of ragas Huseni and Kalyani are still ringing in my ears," said T. Rukmini, who played the violin for Sathur on many occasions. "AGS sir encouraged many youngsters". Lalgudi Jayaraman, M. Chandrasekaran, Trichy Sankaran and Umayalpuram Sivaraman accompanied him on many occasions. Vidwan T.V. Gopalakrishnan said, "He planned every kutcheri. His music was organised and it was a pleasure playing for a vidwan like Sathur Subramaniam".

In his presidential address, Umayalpuram Sivaraman proudly said that his debut concert was at the Perambur Sangeeta Sabha in 1951, when he accompanied AGS sir. He regaled the audience with many anecdotes from various kutcheris including the amusing 'attar and kadambam' perfumes sale by the maestro.

AGS sir was known for his adherence to sampradaya sangeetam and he was held in high regard by all his contemporaries like Ariyakudi, Mani Iyer and GNB. A stickler for detail, he was particular about the notations and also maintained a daily diary of his activities. His disciples recall him as a passionate guru, fastidious about kalapramana. It was really interesting to hear Sujatha Vijayaraghavan reiterate this, as she narrated numerous incidents that occurred during her mother Ananthalakshmi Sadagopan's training with AGS sir.

"The atmosphere in our house was always brimming with good music", recalled Sathur's daughters. He was an ardent devotee of the Kanchi Paramacharya from where stemmed his bhakti sraddha in music and life." The family and disciples of Sathur organised the three-day festival to commemorate his birth centenary. The celebrations included concerts by Vikku Vinayakram, O.S. Thyagarajan, N. Vijay Siva and Ramakrishnan Murthy.

SUKANYA SANKAR