

Memories of a much loved teacher

Dr. S. Ramanathan—whose centenary is being observed beginning this month—was a much loved musician and teacher of Carnatic music. His humility and easy accessibility successfully hid his depth of knowledge and intellectual prowess from the casual observer, but he was an inspiring mentor and resourceperson to musicians and music scholars who sought his help in their researches. As *Sruti* N. Pattabhi Raman said in his obituary in the April 1988 issue of the magazine, he “was the first person in Carnatic music who shone as both a musicologist and musician.”



Ramanathan loved his legion of students and they adored him, too, to go by the stories describing the sheer joy and informality pervading his classes. S. Sowmya, today a much respected vocalist known as much for her scholarship as her musical depth, spoke at length to *Sruti* correspondent M.V. Swaroop about her guru back in 2010. The result was an entertaining and enlightening feature in the September 2010 issue (*Sruti* 312). It included a description of the professor’s classes and teaching methods: “Dr. Ramanathan was a busy teacher well into his seventies. On a normal day, recalls Sowmya, the house was bustling with students from 6.30 in the morning, until around nine o’clock. Then the male singers came and the classes continued in *their* *sruti*. After that, there would be some veena classes until around 10.30, when he would break for lunch. On some days, there would be a session around eleven o’ clock for a batch of women—often learning series like the

Navavarana kritis or the Pancharatna kritis. He taught at institutions like Kalakshetra, the Music College, Kalapeetham, Soundarya Ladies Club and other places in the afternoons.”

“Most evenings, Sowmya remembers, if he wasn’t performing himself, he would listen to concerts. Classes for his daughters (and Sowmya, when she was around), veena or vocal, would happen after dinner.

‘I’ve even slept over the veena at times!’ she said.”

Ramanathan often taught in large groups, with the students singing in a chorus sometimes. Because he knew each student’s voice, he knew exactly who in the group had made a mistake. His pointing out the erring student did not hurt, and the pupil was never sacred of him.

A linguist, Ramanathan translated the *Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini* of Subbarama Dikshitar into Tamil. If this helped him to master the new songs he learnt, he believed in listening to as many concerts as possible and encouraged his students too, to do so.

Born on 8 April, 1917 at Tirukovilur, he was only seven when he started learning music from Ramudu Bhagavatar there. He had many gurus thereafter, including Tanjavur Ponniah Pillai, Tiruvaiyaru Sabesa Iyer, Sathur Krishna Iyengar, Subrahmanya Ayya and Tiger Varadachariar at Annamalai University, where he secured the

With daughter Vanathi and disciple Sowmya



Sangeeta Bhushanam diploma. His further tutelage under Valadi Krishna Iyer and Devakottai Narayana Iyengar made him a consummate vocalist and veena vidwan.

A researcher at the Sangeet Natak Akademi at the state level and associated with a number of Indian universities as dean or member of their boards, he spent many years in the U.S.A. as a visiting professor. He also earned his doctorate for research on 'Music in *Silappadhikaram*', besides giving chamber concerts. His student Bruno Nettl wrote in a May 1984 issue of *Ethnomusicology* that the professor had a highly intellectual approach to all music and a special interest in pedagogy.

On his return to Madras, Ramanathan gave Nettl "a lesson on how to grow older and younger at the same time." There could not have been a more accurate description of Ramanathan

in the afternoon and evening of his life. Those of us who watched him in action then will agree with Nettl's description of him as "a changed person, a man with prodigious energy who had many things to do, many ambitions, many demands on his time all of which he tried to satisfy, a man always on the go, obviously loving this busy style of life."

He had by then discarded Western clothes for a simple shirt or jibba and veshti, and sported a luxuriant, unkempt beard, but the most prominent parts of his appearance were his ready smile and twinkling eyes. Whether he was teaching a single student or an overflowing classroom, or flitting from one part of the city to another to clarify a scholar's doubt or deliver weighty discourses or lecture-demonstrations with such titles as *A Day with Tyagaraja* or *Ramayana Triveni*, he was always gentle, soft-spoken and an eternal optimist.

Ramanathan's children and their spouses are all involved in the arts and literature, carrying his legacy of inquiry and self-enrichment forward. They share his breadth of vision that allowed for cross fertilisation of ideas across cultures and civilisation. His daughter and veena vidushi Geetha Bennett, married to American jazz musician Frank Bennett, has for instance, embarked on a journey of recording in her voice, all the songs her father taught her though she has been battling ill health for decades.

In this issue, we offer a brief insight into Dr. S. Ramanathan, the man, provided by Geetha Bennett. As our tribute to him in his centenary year, we hope to feature from time to time more articles and reminiscences from people—mostly from the music world—who knew him and his work.

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