

S. RAJAM

‘Greatness sat lightly on him’

Lalitha Ram

The very thought of S. Rajam makes me emotional. It reminds me of his benevolence and all the time I spent with him. S. Rajam was a great human being, many of us know, but I shall confine myself in this article to an analysis of his musical style and contributions. The prime sources for my analysis are his concert recordings and private recordings of his teaching sessions.

Most of the recordings available are those after 1980. The few rare recordings from his younger days suggest that Rajam had a pleasant voice that could produce high speed phrases with ease—an example is his rendition of *Nadopasanaiye* based on *Nada tanumanisam*, for a film song). It is evident even from later day recordings that he could comfortably sing in all three octaves. It is noteworthy that the volume that he retained in the lower octave, as in the chittaswaras touching the mandra panchama in the Keeravani kriti *Velava*, was unique. The recordings also indicate a slight nasal tinge in his voice. Despite the fact that his voice was a great asset, Rajam chose not to project it; his focus was always to project the raga or the composition. That perhaps gave his voice its longevity. The recordings by the veteran, while in his eighties, suggest a slowing down due to age but the voice quality remains intact.

In his own words, he was never a “platform musician”. As a result of the stability provided by his job with All India Radio, he was free to pursue and perform what he liked. His approach to concerts was mostly to enrich



the listener’s knowledge, present uncommon ragas and songs and try to popularise them. Here is a sample concert list of a radio concert:

1. *Anandamritakarshini* - Amritavarshini (Dikshitar)
2. *Ninu vina e gati* - Sakuntalam (Tirupati Narayanaswami)
3. *Sri Janaka tanaye* - Kalakanti (Tyagaraja)
4. *Ika parasukhadayaka* - Vachaspati (Kotiswara Iyer)

I asked him about this rather unusual selection. He said that AIR was a particularly useful platform to popularise rare songs. He also jocularly remarked, “If I went overboard, the listener always had the

luxury of switching off the radio!” He would attempt to present such songs even in his regular concerts and also share their musical highlights with the audience, which probably gave it the feel of a lecdem or a music appreciation session rather than a typical concert experience. That however suited his agenda.

Another popular misconception about his music was that it was devoid of gamakas. Those who have heard Rajam speak on this topic might have even formed the opinion that he was anti-gamaka. In reality though, you could find quite a bit of gamakas in his renditions, especially of ragas in the true Carnatic mould. He was against excessive use of gamakas. Regarding scale-based ragas, he preferred to dwell on the suddha swaras rather than oscillate them.

As I listened to several recordings of S. Rajam, one element that stood out, I found, was the effortlessness in his renditions. Be it a raga alapana or kriti rendition or kalpana swara, there was no urge driven by restlessness or excitement, to push the limits. He sang even complicated musical elements without losing out on visranti.

As a youngster, Rajam was greatly inspired by the raga essays of violinist Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer. He would often say, “If you want to know what is absolutely necessary for the raga, you should listen to Sundaresa Iyer. There is absolutely no wastage.” Perhaps that is the reason why you can hardly find a raga alapana of Rajam exceeding ten minutes (although there is a recording of a very detailed alapana

in Vasanta raga). An exception to this feature are his ragam-tanam-pallavi recordings of the melakarta ragas for All India Radio. He has explored each raga for over twenty minutes followed by the pallavi chosen from a Kotiswara Iyer kriti with the raga mudra.

Rajam has gone on record to say that he drew inspiration from the music of GNB and Madurai Mani Iyer. Interestingly, the exploration of the raga through short phrases, focussing on the purity of notes and long sustained karvais are striking features of Madurai Mani's style, while Rajam's vocalisation, crisp sangatis and sarvalaghu swaras are reminiscent of the GNB style.

Rajam's raga renditions of melakarta ragas, including the vivadi melas, are well known and need no elaboration. He had internalised the swaras so well that he could sing any scale with ease. As Rajam's prime purpose was to popularise rare ragas, he would present a fairly detailed exposition of such a raga before rendering the kriti. Some examples are ragas Veeravasantam, Sakuntalam, Chenchukambhoji, Manoranjani and Suddha Vasanta. Rajam's name has become synonymous with vivadi and rare ragas, so much so that people sometimes wonder whether he did render the commonly heard ragas at all. Having gone through all the recordings available, I can say that Rajam has rendered the likes of Todi, Kalyani, Kharaharapriya, Kambhoji and Bhairavi quite frequently and extensively as well.

Rajam's greatest passion was to learn kritis from a variety of sources. He

had the opportunity of learning songs from very authentic sources (Ambi Dikshitar, Gowri Amma, Madras Lalithangi) and in some cases from the composer himself (Muthiah Bhagavathar, Papanasam Sivan). He stayed true to the pathantaram in his renditions but never disrespected other sources and variations. He was critical if a rendition went totally against the idea of the composer (for example, *Nagumomu* in Abheri) but in general was not critical of improvements or embellishment with new sangatis.

Rajam was meticulous in getting to know the meaning and the intent of

of his contemporaries and also from his juniors. He would often say, "AIR might not have given me a lot of money, but it gave me immense satisfaction to learn and propagate rare kritis. The famous Purandaradasa song *Srikanta enagishtu dayamado* is usually sung in Kanada. But when a young girl from Mysore had come for a recital she sang it in raga Kannada. I learnt it from her and included it in my concerts as well. It was only AIR that gave me such opportunities." Once, when I visited him soon after his student Akshay Padmanabhan's class was over, he spoke to me with pride for over ten minutes about the tillana Akshay had composed.

Rajam's best known contribution is his rendition of all the 72 melakarta kritis of Kotiswara Iyer. There are many more gems. His recordings covering the entire story of the *Ramayana* based on Arunachala Kavi's *Ramanatakam*, *Nandanar Charitram*, special programmes on Neelakanta Sivan, on 20th century composers and Sadasiva Brahmendra compositions are fortunately archived. In fact, he gave a radio concert on the day of the Kumbhabhishekam of the Kapaliswarar temple in Mylapore. He had structured the concert to cover different composers as he presented a composition on each shrine in the temple complex. Rajam was among the few to include in his concerts some of the *Tirukkural Madhura Keertanaigal* tuned by Mayuram Viswanatha Sastri.

While singing Hindustani raga based pieces, he would intersperse them with akara based taans. Interestingly, a similar approach can be seen in his rendition of ashtapadi, though the raga rendered was Kosalam.



Rajam's line drawing for *Sree Ganapatini* in Saurashtram

the composer. He would take care not to mutilate compositions by inappropriate splitting of words in oft-butchered kritis like *Manasuloni marmamulu*. His repertoire of the compositions of the music trinity was enormous. But what was amazing was his penchant to learn the compositions