

R.S. Jayalakshmi: a scholar and vainika

V. Karpagalakshmi

Veteran R.S. Jayalakshmi is a respected vainika, teacher and musicologist. She was initiated into music when she was just six years old. Jayalakshmi used to observe her older sister in music class, and had a natural flair for repeating all the lessons that she heard! Realising her innate talent, her father, R. Subramanian Iyer, arranged to teach music to his younger daughter also. As he owned a store that sold musical instruments, both the sisters were initiated into learning instrumental music. As her sister played the violin, Jayalakshmi chose to learn the veena.

Jayalakshmi's first veena teacher was Muthiah, a staff at All India Radio. As managing class timings with a busy career became difficult for him, she moved on to learn from vidwan V. Raghavan (vocalist Sriram Parthasarathy's grandfather). He began straight away with a varnam when she was perhaps only seven or eight years old. Jayalakshmi continued to learn vocal music along with her sister till the latter got married, after which Jayalakshmi started attending the vocal classes conducted at Sri Krishna Gana Sabha by Kittamani Iyer.

Jayalakshmi did her schooling at Sarada Vidyalaya, where too, she chose to learn music; her teacher was A. Meenakshi, sister of mridangist



Kalpathi Ramanathan. Later, she enrolled for the Teachers' Training Course at the Music Academy. Ramachandraiah was in charge of pedagogy, and some of her teachers like Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer, B. Krishnamoorthy, and T. Jayammal were eminent musicians. When she was 21 years old, Jayalakshmi obtained a Government of India scholarship to pursue veena lessons from Pichumani Iyer. By then, she had started performing for All India Radio as well as at sabhas like Sri Krishna Gana Sabha and the Indian Fine Arts Society. Jayalakshmi had the opportunity to learn padams and javalis from the inimitable T. Mukta who also taught her several compositions of Muthuswami Dikshitar and Subbaraya Sastry.

Around this time, Jayalakshmi got married, and soon after, got a job in the Department of Music, Madras University. Jayalakshmi recalls,

“Parur Venkatraman (violin) and I (veena) joined the University to teach under the diploma course; any graded performer of AIR was eligible for the post. K.R. Lakshmi was teaching vocal, and after her retirement, vidushi Suguna Varadachari came to that position. There was no age limit or special qualification required to enrol in the course

which was taught between 2 and 5 pm. The student strength was quite high, but many of them had no idea about music! The syllabus was tough; within two years they had to learn 51 kritis, including the Pancharatna kritis, the navavaranas, and ragam-tanam-pallavi. It was difficult to teach that level of students, but we had the responsibility to help them pass the course. Later, the syllabus was made slightly easy.”

In 1984, the diploma course was discontinued and a Masters course in music was introduced. Some colleges which earlier offered a Bachelor's degree in music, discontinued it; and what remained was a correspondence course at the University. As a post-graduation degree became imperative for teachers of the master's course, Jayalakshmi and Suguna successfully completed their B.A. and M.A. by correspondence. Now, M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. courses are offered.

Jayalakshmi in concert

