

Sangita Kalanidhi B. Rajam Iyer

B Rajam Iyer was born in Tiruvona asterism on 13 June 1922 in Patharakudi (near Karaikudi) to Balasubramania Ayyar and Lakshmi Ammal. His ancestors were into Veda adhyayana, and he was the first person in his family to emerge in the field of Carnatic music. He was among the top-ranking scholar musicians in the Carnatic music tradition and could bring out the essence of the raga in the shortest span. He had his initial training till the age of 14 with vidwan Ganapathy Iyer (gotuvadyam and jalatarangam artist) of Kunrakudi till the latter passed away. Young Rajam became the disciple of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar from 1937 onwards.

In 1947, B. Rajam Iyer took part in the Mysore Dasara celebrations along with his guru Ariyakudi. Soon after, there was a performance under the auspices of the Mylai Sangeetha Sabha in which Justice T.L. Venkatarama Iyer was in the audience. It was Venkatarama Iyer's wish that B. Rajam should learn Muthuswami Dikshitar's kritis from him, and after seeking Ariyakudi's approval, he undertook the same. Some of his masterpieces include – *Jambupatey* in raga Yamunakalyani, *Parimala Ranganatham* in Hamir Kalyani, *Saundararajam* in Brindavana Saranga, and *Pasupatiswaram* in Subha Pantuvarali.

B. Rajam Iyer was known for his repertoire of the music trinity and for rendering the Tamil compositions of Arunachala Kavi and the *Tiruppavai* hymns of Andal, which were set to music by his guru Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. He was highly



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religious, and his musical rendering of the Navavarana and Navagraha kritis was much appreciated by everyone. His repertoire included kritis of Purandaradasa, Swati Tirunal, and Kavadichindu, apart from padams, javalis, tillanas and other compositions.

The scholar musician presented several music concerts, workshops and lecture demonstrations in the U.S.A., London and Malaysia. He was invited as Valentine Professor of Music for Spring at Amherst College in Massachusetts, U.S.A., and gave many performances in other cities in America during that period. The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London, specially invited him to conduct workshops, concerts and lecdems in the summer school session.

Rajam Iyer was proficient in five languages – Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, Telugu and English.

He gave a lot of importance to education; he brought his three younger brothers to Chennai, and ensured they received a good education. Dr. B. Vaidyanathan learnt Sanskrit and Ayurveda simultaneously and became a scholar in both subjects. He did great service in establishing the well-known Ayurvedic manufacturing company IMPCOPS. Rajam Iyer taught music to his three younger brothers. Krishnamurthy who studied at the Government Music College, Chennai, went on to become a notable musician and respected teacher popularly known as Prof. B. Krishnamurthy. The youngest brother B. Rajagopal undertook technical education and

became Director of Central Training Institute for Instructors, Guindy.

In the 1970s, Rajam Iyer started a sabha for promoting art and culture and named it the Nandanam Arts Academy. Two programmes were conducted every month in different disciplines of the arts such as music, dance, drama and Harikatha.

On 25 September 2005, B. Rajam Iyer was elected as president of Sri Thyagaraja Sangeetha Vidwath Samajam, which he served well, taking care of the welfare of the Samajam.

He started a trust in the name of his guru, the late Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, along with other disciples, K.V. Narayanaswamy and Madurai N. Krishnan. His guru's jayanti and anniversary celebrations used to be conducted annually by the Trust on 19 May and 23 January, respectively,



B. Rajam Iyer (vocal) and R.K. Shriramkumar (violin)

by organising concerts of veteran musicians as well as up-and-coming artists.

He also individually launched the trust R.A.M.A. "Sri Rajam Iyer's Centre for Music and Arts" to promote the traditional arts and culture. After his demise, the Trust has been revived by his eldest son-in-law T.R. Srinivasan, who nominated all the family members and Cleveland V.V. Sundaram as trustees. The trust conducts regular programmes.

My personal experience

It is a great blessing to be born into this family of legendary musician Sangita Kalanidhi B. Rajam Iyer. My

parents, T.R. Srinivasan and Padmavathy, initiated me to learn music from Padmavathy Ananthagopalan at the age of five, and then I continued to learn from the disciples of B. Rajam Iyer. I had the opportunity to learn directly from grandpa at the age of 13.

One of the strong points of my grandfather's method of teaching was that whatever he taught remained etched in our memory. He laid emphasis on language, diction and singing without referring to the text the next day itself. He would not go to the next sangati or line until we had perfected the first sangati. The swaras and anuswaras had to be perfect; he could not digest the singing of apaswaras. Some of his noble qualities included guru bhakti, simplicity, punctuality, and keeping his word. He was pious, unassuming, and affectionate. He taught many students without expecting fees from them.

He did his sadhakam, or regular practice at home after his morning walk; he was in the habit of feeding bananas to the cow. He would sing a varnam and the navagraha kriti pertaining to the day and advised me to practise in the same manner. My grandfather inculcated in me a deep thirst for music and I am proud to be following in his footsteps. I am working as assistant professor in the Department of Music at Central University of Tamil Nadu, Tiruvarur.

His music

He ensured that the ragas chosen in a concert had contrast. His way of singing was crisp and followed his guru's pathantara by way of showing creativity only in the manodharma aspects – raga alapana, swarakalpana and niraval without adding any extra sangatis. The Central Sangeet Natak Akademi even gave a grant for students to learn music at advanced level from him. He would have remarkable discussions at home on music with acquaintances like Sri Tirumala I.A.S., and Dr. V.V. Srivatsa.

Some of his notable students include Anandhi, Sheela Balaji, Mallika and Venu Srinivasan, J. Jayalalithaa, and Vyjayanthimala.

The person behind his success was his wife Amirthavalli, who showered hospitality on everyone, especially his students, to whom she would offer food after class with grandpa.

Awards & Honours

B. Rajam Iyer was the recipient of several prestigious awards and titles. Notable are:

- ❖ **Kalaimamani from the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram (1981)**
- ❖ **Sangeeta Kala Sikhmani from Indian Fine Arts Society, Chennai (1981)**
- ❖ **The Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1986)**
- ❖ **Sangita Kalanidhi from The Madras Music Academy (1987)**
- ❖ **Kalaratna from Rasika Ranjani Sabha, Chennai (2000)**
- ❖ **Padma Bhushan from the Government of India**
- ❖ **Sangeeta Acharya from Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai (2001)**
- ❖ **Sangeeta Seva Niratha from Sri Thyagaraja Sangeetha Vidwath Samajam, Chennai (2006)**



Centenary Celebrations

Centenary celebrations earmark an artist's journey and his service and contribution to the music world. B. Rajam Iyer's centenary was celebrated by Rajam Iyer's Centre for Music and Arts (R.A.M.A.) on 21 and 22 May in 2022 on a big scale at the Sathguru Gnanananda Hall of the Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai.

The lighting of the kuthuvilakku and the welcome address were done by Cleveland V.V. Sundaram, and felicitations were by Nalli Kuppaswami Chetti, Harikesanallur Venkataraman, and maestros T.V. Gopalakrishnan, M. Chandrasekaran and Guruvayur Durai. Sangita Kalanidhi S. Sowmya presented a Carnatic music concert on the first evening, and Kamalamba Navavarana



S. Sowmya and T.V. Gopalakrishnan releasing the book as Nalli Kuppaswami Chetti, Cleveland V.V. Sundaram and Harikesanallur Venkataraman look on

kritis were rendered by singers Archana and Arathi on the second day.

One of Rajam Iyer's senior students, Namagiri Ramesh, impressively compered the programme.

The book *Amruta Gaana Manjari*, authored by his granddaughter S. Seethalakshmi and published by Pranav Journals was released

by Sangita Kalanidhis T.V. Gopalakrishnan and S. Sowmya during the event. The book includes basic lessons and alankaras in three speeds, as well as exercises in tisram, which would help sing pallavis at the advanced stage.

S. SEETHALAKSHMI
(Carnatic musician and academician)



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