

## In Focus

### B. Rajam Iyer

*Carnatic music maestro Sangeeta Kalanidhi B. Rajam Iyer celebrated his sathabhishekam-- 81st birthday-- on 31 May in Chennai. There was a religious function in the morning and, in the evening, a social function, with speeches, a Carnatic vocal concert by T.V. Sankaranarayanan and a dinner. A beautifully got up 'souvenir' with a profile of the maestro and a multitude of photographs was distributed on the occasion. Sruti is pleased to present a brief profile of the maestro as gleaned from the souvenir and excerpts from two interviews, one in which he spoke about music as nadopasana and another in which he spoke about aspects of art music.*

### Eighty & Still Going Strong

B. Rajam Iyer was born on 1 July 1922 in the village of Patharakudi (near Karaikudi) in that part of Tamil country known for the affluence and influence of the Chettiar community. His parents were Balasubramania Iyer and Lakshmi Ammal. He had his preliminary training in Carnatic music under Ganapati Iyer of Karaikudi, who played the gotuvadyam and the jalatarangam. After about five years of this, he entered Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar's household as a live-in-disciple, when he was barely 15 years of age. This direct apprenticeship lasted about a decade and it is this that shaped the youngster's musical talents. One special aspect of this was that he also became a legatee of the *Tirupavai* and *Rama Natakam* kriti-s which Iyengar had set to music.

There is another strong strand to the musical wealth acquired by Rajam Iyer, namely the compositions of Muthuswami Dikshitar which he learnt from T.L. Venkatarama Iyer, a jurist who was as well an expert on the subject.



A third aspect of Rajam Iyer's musicianship is his interest and accomplishments in the lakshana aspects of Carnatic music. He was a co-editor of the Tamil version of Subbarama Dikshitar's *Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini* published by the Music Academy. He was Professor of Musicology in the Tamil Nadu Government College of Music from 1966 to 1981, and Principal of the Music Academy's Teacher's College of Music from 1983 till he retired recently. He has undertaken many lecture tours and

conducted workshops in the the U.K., U.S.A. and Canada. He served as a Visiting Professor at Amherst University, in Massachusetts, U.S. for one semester.

Rajam Iyer has received many honours. Noteworthy among them: Kalaimamani awarded in 1981

by the Tamil Nadu Government; the 1986 Sangeet Natak Akademi Award; and the Sangeeta Kalanidhi title bestowed on him by the Madras Music Academy at the conclusion of the 1987 annual conference over which he presided.

## **- GAYATHRI SUNDARESAN**

### **Music A Tapas**

**Rajam Iyer claims that, for him, music has been a tapas, a penance. He has also emphasised music as nadopasana, as a pathway to the realisation of god.**

**Perhaps this is the reason he has been more active as a teacher than as a performer in a long career spanning both.**

**Our national lore offers examples of tapasvin-- those performing arduous penance-- who angered quickly. Two who come to mind easily are Viswamitra and Durvasa.**

**To this list we can add the name of our contemporary, B. Rajam Iyer. He is known to have become enraged on several occasions and *Sruti* too has been a target of his anger. But he has been as quick to make-up.**

**We also know how rishi-s of yore, especially those who were quick to anger, could and did hurl hurtful curses on their targets. Like the curse Ahalya's sage-husband angrily threw at her: "You will turn into stone!"**

**It is a popular belief that Rajam Iyer too is prone to fling curses on those who displease him. Like the one he is reported to have thrown a few years ago at a music critic who made an unfavourable comment on his music: "You and your family will pay for this sin for seven generations to come!"**

**Worse, some people believe that his curses are for real and do bring distress to the 'beneficiaries'.**

**I touched this alleged aspect of his personality, which is in striking contrast to the religiosity reflected in his face, when I spoke at the function organised to mark his sathabhishekam. I asked: If it is really true that Rajam Iyer can cause havoc with his curses, won't he even today be in New Delhi, at the side of Prime Minister Vajpeyi, hurling a string of curses at the Dictator-General across the border to the North? Acknowledging that we all curse someone or other at sometime or another, I**

**also wondered aloud: Would our Rajam Iyer really curse someone if he really knew it would affect the other person adversely?**

**My point was-- and is: Let us accept Rajam Iyer's claim he has pursued music as tapas, without reading anything further into it.**

**- N. PATTABHI RAMAN**



**See Hard Copy for more Photos & Interview with Rajam Iyer**