

Maharaja Sri Swati Tirunal Rama Varma

(1813 - 1846)



The four illustrious dynasties of South India, Chera, Chola, Pandya and Pallava Rulers have contributed so much to the cultural and artistic heritage of India that they have drawn universal acclaim. The world famous sculptures and temples, which have stood the test of time, are testaments of the rich heritage and their contribution.

Sri Rama Varma, born April 16, 1813 under the auspicious star SWATI to Lakshmibai and Changanacheri RajaRaja Varma Thamburan, was an

illustrious king of the Chera dynasty. Befitting his predecessors Udiyan Cheraladan, Cheran Chenguttuvan and Kulasekara Alwar, Sri Rama Varma left an everlasting imprint of greatness on the cultural heritage of India, especially in the field of Music. True to Chera tradition, Rama Varma was known as Swati Tirunal adding glory to the illustrious star Swati. Tirunal in Tamil means "Good day." His birth was indeed a boon to the erstwhile Travancore Kingdom, as his birth warded off the application of the political threat of annexation of the State, the weapon the 'Doctrine of Lapse' that British used

generously against Indian kingdoms then.

Swati Tirunal was 'GarbhaSriman', 'auspicious by/before birth.' His mother, Queen Lakshmibai, ruled the kingdom on his behalf and when she died, the queen's younger sister Parvatibai became the regent of the king Swati Tirunal, who was two years of age then, and ruled the state for 14 years like Bharata for Lord Rama. A precocious child and prodigy, Swati Tirunal ("the Maharaja") was already a composer when he ascended the throne at the age of sixteen. Being a master of thirteen languages (including English and French), the Maharaja's compositions were in Sanskrit, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, Gujarati, Marathi and Hindi to name a few. His tutors in Carnatic Music included the renowned Kokila KanTa Meruswami aka Ananta

by **Sangeeta Acharya
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Sangeeta Acharya Thiruvaiyaru SR Krishnan has been a Carnatic musician since when he was nine years of age. Having trained under legendary musicians such as Gaana-bhoosha Nam Brahmasri Kumaramangalam Srinivasaraghavan, his father, and Sangita Kalanidhis Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Madurai Mani Iyer and G.N. Balasubramaniam. Krishnan has presented 'Divya Naama Sankeertanam' & 'Harikathas', encompassing Carnatic and Hindustani systems of music, for more than five decades and across four continents of the globe. An International Banker for 48 years, Krishnan has been a distinguished Fellow of several Royal Academic Societies/Institutions of the United Kingdom since 1978. He is a founder principal of three International Fiduciary corporations since 1987, two of which work for several Federal & State Agencies of the US Government. He and his wife Radha are patrons of several philanthropic institutions in India, which care for mentally challenged and destitute, who the Krishnans describe as 'God's favorite children.' More than 45 CDs from about 16 live recordings are currently available free from his website www.sankeertanam.com.

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Deeply devoted to His Master Lord Padmanabha, the Maharaja believed in the dictum that a musical composition is of no value if it is not in praise of or on God. When the Thanjavur maestro Vadivelu composed a varnam in the Maharaja's praise, the Maharaja told that he was just a servant of God and that a mortal should not be praised. Vadivelu promptly recast it on Padmanabha to the admiration of the royal patron. Swati Tirunal's life was a fight against the clock and calendar in the field of patronage and composition. The scholarly and superlative compositions did not secure the wide currency they deserved. An eminent musicologist, Prof. Srinivasan attributed this to (a) the compositions being mostly in Sanskrit, (b) the dominant 'Sopana' style of Kerala music could not easily take to the Maharaja's eclectic note and (c) that the Maharaja had no disciples to carry the torch; being a ruler, there were constraints in assembling a band of dedicated disciples to popularize his compositions.

Quite contrary to the culturally affluent, affable and intellectual society he enjoyed in his court, Swati Tirunal, nevertheless, was unfortunate to have dealt with unreasonable and painful interference by the British Political Agent; and after several years of struggle, the disappointed the Maharaja withdrew from

matters of kingdom administration. Despite these odds and struggles, he was remarkable as a reformer and pioneered the establishment of the first public library, the first munsif court, the first English High school, the first astronomical observatory. He also published a book on grammar and a dictionary in Malayalam and compiled the penal code.

Literary and Poetic contributions

the Maharaja's interest expanded from literature to Champoo to Harikatha and the like. This resulted in his creation of works like Kuchelopakhyanam and Ajamilopakhyanam fit for Harikatha kalakshepam. He also introduced poetic forms of the Maharashtrian style such as Saki, Ovi, Mandi and Abhanga in his works. Meruswami wove them into a musical narrative. In Stotra style, his Bhakthi Manjari is distinguished. His poetic creations are Syanandurapura varnana prabhandam (in champu style) and Padmanabha Satakam (a Sanskrit work of 100 slokas with different metres).

It is a tall task to do an appreciation of his musical compositions numbering 400 in a random essay like this. A brief attempt is made here. His compositions can be categorized into Kritis for concert, Navarathri songs, songs in major melodies, songs in medium tempo etc. He had the flair to select the most appropriate raga for the lyrical content and the mood of the song. This has resulted in aesthetically pleasing gems. While he used

popular ragas like Sankarabharanam, Kambhodi, Thodi, Bhairavi, Kalyani, Panthavarali, Madhyamavati and Kedaragowla for several of his compositions in a recurring manner, he also employed rare ragas like Lalitha Panchamam, Dvijavanti, Gopikavasantam, Saindhavi, Paraj, Navaraj, Bhooshavali and Mangalakaisiki. Navarathna Mala describes the nine kinds of Bhakti in praise of Lord Vislmu. Swati Tirunal was noted for his penchant for Ragamalikas (a garland of different ragas). Pannagendra Sayana portraying Bhakti as Love between Nayaka and Nayaki where the Nayaki divides the period of waiting into eight parts of the night with corresponding moods (in eight ragas!) is one of his masterpieces. The other famous garland is Kamalajasyahrida in ten ragas sung in praise of the ten incarnations of Lord Supreme. There is a difference between the old ragamalikas and these. Unlike the older ones, Swati Tirunal's garlands do not employ the device of providing for a link between stanzas. This is what is called Makuta Swara Prayoga by which the last note of one raga with a slight twist leads to the next naturally. Dancers delight in two other ragamalikas which have four ragas each. Bhavayami Raghuramam, is a beautiful Ramayanam song in Saveri. As the musicians used to skip the charanams and sing the first and last stanzas, the octogenarian musician Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, with the permission of the royal family, turned it into a ragamalika and tagged on exquisite swara sequences in six additional ragas. The version was popularized by the eminent musician Bharata

Padmanabha Goswami and Vadivelu brothers of the Thanjavur Quartette. Ranga Ayyangar and Syed Sulaiman Seth contributed to his learning of the Hindusthani tradition of Music. While he was adept in Music and Literature, he was very knowledgeable in Natyasastra as well. He was as much a vocalist as was a vainika. Not only did he rule his kingdom in the tradition set up by his illustrious ancestor King Marthandavarman as "Padmanabha Dasa - servant of Lord Padmanabha", he also composed his songs as 'Padmanabha Dasa.' His vast range of compositions, about 400 in all, included Varnams, Padams, Kirtanams, Tillanas, Javalis etc. in the Carnatic tradition and Bhajans, Dhrupad, Khayal, Tappa, Thumri, Ghazal etc. in the Hindustani tradition as well. His passion for music not only brought Thanjavur to

Travancore (Trivandrum) but also the rest of India to his kingdom. Kings are mostly lovers and/or patrons of arts and music but Swati Tirunal was a composer and a musician himself. His imaginations and innovative spirit were constantly at work that he laid the foundation for the unity of the country through Music, south or north.

Reminiscent of the court of the Illustrious Emperor Bhoja, Swati Tirunal assembled in his court the cream of talents in various fields. A few famous luminaries who adorned his court were: Shatkala Govinda Marar, Palghat Parameswara Bhagavathar, Koil Tampuran of Kilimanur, Kanniah Bhagavathar (a disciple of Saint Tyagaraja), Meruswami (treated as 'kula guru'), Iravi Varman Tampi, Kshirabdi Sastrigal, Subbukutti Ayya, Srirangam Nagarathinam, Thanjavur Pichu Bhagavathar and the list is not exhaustive. The presence of Kanniah Bhagavathar and Thanjavur Vadivelu (disciple of yet another trinity, Sri Mudduswami Dikshitar) gave the king the benefit of intimate appreciation of the divine compositions of two out of the three great composers who strengthened and

re-codified the system of music from the late 18th century. A vast number of music lovers and musicians alike place Swati Tirunal as one with the Trinity making a foursome, though he was much younger to the Trio as a contemporary. Despite differences of opinion on this passionate representation, we can say that without disturbing the foundation, the Maharaja added one more illustrious floor to the great marvel of Music built by the Trinity, since the Maharaja's contributions were to both Camatic and Hindusthani systems. Shyama Sastri, the oldest of the Trinity liked the rhythm known as Misra Jati more than other forms. The youngest, Mudduswami Dikshitar excelled in and liked Vilamba Kala, i.e. slow tempo giving a leisurely pace. Thyagaraja liked the medium or Madhyama Kala most. The compositions of the Trinity were rich in poetic excellence, but dipped in Devotion. Yet, Thyagaraja with his emphasis on melodic beauty made it a vehicle of Madhurya Bhava. Swati Tirunal, the youngest contemporary, combined the nuances from the big three and stood out as the fourth. He followed the model of Margadarsi Sessa Ayyangar (17th century) and was inspired by the compositions of Tyagaraja. He sent his compositions to him and Tyagaraja reportedly praised their merit and the king's erudition. Swati Tirunal wanted to secure the presence of Tyagaraja to his court and sent Govinda Marar as the distinguished emissary. Marar received cordial reception, praise and this meeting was even believed to have triggered Tyagaraja's composition of the famous ganaraga Pancharatnams. This meeting was



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Ratna M.S.Subbulakshmi.

He composed 21 Varnams, six of which were devotional and the rest, romantic lyrics. Of these, ChalaMela (Sankarabharanam), Saami Ninne (Thodi), Sarasijanabha (Kambhodi), Suma Sayaka (Kapi) are a few favorite concert pieces. Padam was another format in which the Maharaja excelled. Sixty five padams delight the dancers and bring the admirable lure of Bhakti and love. Fifty of them are in Malayalam, ten in Sanskrit and five in Telugu. The manipravala padam Alarsara Parithapam in Surati, Rajivaksha, a Kannada piece in Sankarabharanam and Nrithyati Nrithyati in Sankarabharanam (again in Sanskrit) are some of the oft-repeated melodies. He also composed five Tillanas the most popular being the one in Dhanasri, a dancers' delight again. The two Javalis still

in circulation ITu Sahasamulu (in Saindhavi) and Saramaina (in Behag) are regulars in concerts. While Hindi remains to be a foreign language to many in southern provinces and has remained an irritant to many in South India thanks to the Indian politicians, the Maharaja composed 37 delightful songs in Hindi. Transcending the differences between the North and the South, acquiring proficiency in Hindi, the bhajans that he composed may be said to have laid the foundation for national integration about 150 years ago. If Hindusthani music has struck roots in the South, quite some credit goes to the Maharaja.

A keen statesman, an eminent composer and an unparalleled patron of arts, Swati Tirunal suffered a setback in that his royal powers were curtailed and his freedom

curbed in the political arena. He transcended this setback by making cultural history and a new era in the advancement of music. All this and more he achieved before he turned 34. He reached the lotus feet of Lord Padmanabha in December of 1846. The eighteen years on the throne might be argued by a disgruntled few to be too short for an achievement of such outstanding proportions as known to the music world, but for the Maharaja Swati Tirunal, such appeared adequate.

“Whom the Gods love, are taken away young” is a saying that is true of extraordinary men like Swati Tirunal; Markendeya and Adi Sankara are some of the earlier examples.

