

friday Review

THE HINDU

Young brigade regaleDancers lend a fresh perspective to traditional pieces **p2****New album on Vallalar's verses**Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Sean Roldan experiment with sounds **P3****AN INDIAN DANCE ADAPTATION OF SWAN LAKE**Sharmila Mukerjee's 'Hansika' narrates the fairy tale in the Odissi idiom **p4**

Men of the Moment

Indian music's triumphant outing at the Grammys

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The cheers and claps that echoed through the Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles on February 4 have died down. After record-breaking wins (Taylor Swift created history with her fourth 'Album of the Year' award) and tear-jerking performances (Beyoncé and Meryl Streep were moved by veteran Jon Mitchell's singing), the musicians will be back in studios or on stage. The show is over, but the show goes on.

So what are the major takeaways of Grammys 2024?

- **Indian classical music** is neither staid nor constrictive. Hence, tabla exponent Ustad Zakir Hussain became the first Indian musician to win three trophies in one evening. Also, since 2015, the Grammy Museum's Mike Curb Gallery has a dedicated section to iconic sitarist Pt. Ravi Shankar, known for his trailblazing efforts to introduce Indian music to the West.

He was the first Indian musician to win a Grammy in 1968. He was also honoured with a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, posthumously.

- **Instrumental music**, which is normally accorded secondary position in the Indian classical hierarchical structure, is stealing the

limelight globally. Zakir's tabla, Ganesh Rajagopalan's violin and Selva Ganesh's kanjira are part of Shakti's *This Moment*, which bagged the Global Music Album Grammy. It also features jazz ace John McLaughlin, and renowned singer Shankar Mahadevan. Selva has successfully turned the kanjira, a humble *upapakavadyam* (second-rung accompanying instrument in Carnatic concerts), edgy and experimental.

- **The conventional classical** music repertoire is a vast reserve of ideas. Musicians can both draw as well as add to it. It also holds enough space to accommodate alien styles. *Pashto* from *As We Speak*, which was declared the Best Contemporary Instrumental Album, features Zakir, flautist Rakesh Chaurasia, American banjo player Béla Fleck and American bassist Edgar Meyer. The song pays tribute to the tradition of Indian classical musicians playing with British imperial bands in early 20th-Century India. Zakir, who had watched them perform as a child, built upon this memory with melody and rhythm.

- **In his acceptance speech** Zakir Hussain, dressed in an Indian tuxedo designed by Manish Malhotra, said, "Without love, without music, without harmony, we are nothing."

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 4

Winning notes
Shankar Mahadevan, Ganesh Rajagopalan, Zakir Hussain and Selva Ganesh with the Grammy for Shakti's 'This Moment'. PHOTO: PTI

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Men of the Moment



Zakir Hussain, Edgar Meyer and Rakesh Chaurasia.
PHOTO: AP

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

And no other Indian musician in recent times has demonstrated it as remarkably as Zakir, who has, over the decades, created a borderless culture world. His triumphs that evening reiterate the need for classical musicians to be open-minded and why art must be rid of labels.

Speaking from Monaco, John McLaughlin, who couldn't be at the awards said, "I don't have words to express my love and gratitude to my brother musicians in Shakti. Our 50-year adventure crisscrossing the planet has enriched my life beyond words."

According to Ganesh, the Ustad has laid the path for the next generation of Indian musicians to reach out to a global audience. "We owe both the legends (Zakir and John) for believing in Shakti and their ability to revive the band and reach it to this stage," said Ganesh, talking on the phone from Los Angeles after the award ceremony.

He credited the Ustad for being among the most influential collaborators to have prompted the Academy to introduce the 'global music' category.

In 1992, Zakir Hussain featured in renowned drummer Mickey Hart's Planet Drum, which also included six other percussionists from around the world, and won the first-ever Best Global Music Album award. A

Wah! Ustad
A day after his historic win, Zakir Hussain messaged saying, "It is my good fortune to make music with such brilliant musicians. My 50-year association with genius guitarist John McLaughlin culminated in a world tour in 2023 and our first-ever studio album, *This Moment* (Abstract Logix) with Shankar, Selva and Ganesh. As *We Speak* was again a great experience working with three virtuosos. We will be touring together this year."

Selva Ganesh, son of ghatam maestro and Grammy nominee Vikku Vinayakram, was elated as he spoke from Los Angeles. "It has been raining heavily, yet I was sweating out of nervousness when we reached the venue. My initial confidence was slowly giving way to scepticism. Finally, when I heard 'This Moment' being announced, it truly became the moment of my life," said Selva, describing the pre-award mood. "What better way to commemorate Shakti's five-decade journey," he added. A few minutes later, he called to share the joyous news with his father in Chennai.

Eighty-one-year-old Vikku Vinayakram joined the iconic band when it was launched as a quartet in 1974 by Zakir and John. Violinist L. Shankar was the fourth member.

"Though this international recognition has been eluding Shakti for so many years, I knew 'This Moment' would make it happen. The eight-song studio album, recorded during the pandemic, rekindles the emotions of the original Shakti," said Vinayakram.

The band, which has regrouped twice, the latest being in 2020, is known for the easy camaraderie among the different artistes who come on board. "Despite their contrasting personas and musical styles, Zakir and John make them work together to create a seamless sound. I am delighted Shakti won a Grammy during my lifetime. As the group went up on stage to receive the award, I felt vindicated about having made that crucial transition as a 33-year-old, from the Carnatic setup to an international platform, bringing, in turn, the ghatam under the spotlight. Today, the East-West bridge has been strengthened. Let's make some more meaningful crossover music," said the veteran.

Themed on Thevaram

Bharatanatyam dancer Thiruveezhimizhalai Kanaka Krishnaprashanth will present Thevaram hymns and Tirumurai in Margam format at a special performance on February 14, 7 p.m. at R.R. Sabha, Mylapore. Kanaka, along with students of her dance school Sankara Natyalaya, will present 'Sankara Yaar Kolo Chaturai', a Thiruvachagam verse by Manickavasagar.

Aradhana concert

Bharat Kalachar's Tyagaraja Aradhana celebrations (Feb. 11 at YGP Auditorium) will feature a group rendition of the saint-composer's Pancharatna kritis (9.30 a.m.); namasankirtanam (4 p.m.) and UAA's Tamil play Charukesi (7 p.m.).



'Swan Lake' gets an Odissi flavour

Sharmila Mukerjee's adaptation of the classic ballet comes with new-age touches

Charumathi Supraj

Glide' is a word often used in the context of swans. The dance production 'Hansika,' created by Bengaluru-based Odissi exponent Sharmila Mukerjee, highlighted why. A remake of the timeless ballet 'Swan Lake', in the Indian context, 'Hansika' was marked by slow, graceful movements.

Originally choreographed by Julius Reisinger, with unforgettable music by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (released way back in 1877), 'Swan Lake' has withstood the test of time, igniting curiosity in dancers, storytellers and performers.

Watching 'Hansika', it was easy to understand why it is so. The tragic tale of two lovers separated by a curse will never become outmoded, packed as it is with a range of emotions, not to mention the

age-old tussle between good and evil. These emotional elements and the skill of the performance creators allowed for a smooth transfer of the Eastern European tale to an Indian classical dance context. It was indeed creditable that the collaborators had made everything – from the music to lighting and costumes blend harmoniously.

Opening with a spectacular swan dance sequence, the aesthetic motifs and metaphors were established early in the performance. The group of dancers moved as one, their poise and unity conjuring the behaviour of a flock of birds.

The contrasting music that followed in the next scene clearly marked the shift to masculine energy as two hunters enter the space, looking for game. One of the hunters is prince Siegfried, who has been ordered by his mother to choose himself a bride at the earliest, we might

know, if we are familiar with the plot of 'Swan Lake'. Here, we see the young prince separated from his friend, wandering by the lake, searching for the elusive swans that mesmerised them just a few minutes ago. He meets Odette, who, transforms by night from

The elegant dancing by the artistes of Sanjali Ensemble made 'Hansika' a rich experience of viewing a dance rooted in more than one form

swan to woman, living the curse of an enchantress, who, in this version of the Russian folktale, happens to be her jealous sister. The lovers' meeting and courtship depict the innocence of first love as we witness Odette's sharing how she came upon this dual existence. The classical

Odissi sequence that followed showcased the competition between the sisters (both talented dancers even in the tale) that takes a nasty turn when one sister gives in to an evil streak and curses the other.

In the scenes that followed, the ones that stood out for me were the preparations for the almost-married and the staging of an act of deceit that seals the lovers' fate forever. The never-say-die enchantress, as she gloats over their plight, left the audience with a question on how long even the swans might last since the lakes are drying up on a dying planet. This was the only point in the performance that was ambiguous as it did not resonate with the character of the enchantress or come through clearly.

Sharmila graciously acknowledged this when we spoke about the performance the next day. "The

performance evolves every time it is viewed", she said. "It took us a year. Music was the first layer of the work," she added, describing how "fascinating" it was to watch Praveen D. Rao design the music for it.

Praveen's process of work inspired her to choreograph and envision the performance well before she got the dancers together on the floor. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the music was pitch-perfect and almost a character in itself.

The use of the pakhawaj, flute, sitar, violin and vocals held the story and the movements in a warm embrace, while retaining the twang of the original classical ballet music created by Tchaikovsky years ago.

This, coupled with the elegant dancing by the artistes of Sanjali Ensemble made 'Hansika' a rich experience of viewing a dance rooted in more than one form.

Hear them out

Firefly Women explores the idea of using theatre as a protest tool

Powerful Firefly
Women was staged in Auroville.
PHOTO: DE-DA PRODUCTIONS



Girish Shrivastava

Will songs be sung even in times of oppression," asked revolutionary theatre personality Bertold Brecht during the dark times of Nazi Germany. And then, perhaps, foreseeing the future of the world, he himself replied: "Yes, only

songs of oppression will be sung."

The interactive physical play 'Firefly Women', staged last week at Kripa auditorium, Auroville near Puducherry, was a voice of creative rebellion against State repression and draconian laws under which a group of student activists was arrested during the nationwide anti-NRC movement in India.

The play also attempted to explore the ideas of a feminist Utopia against the backdrop of letters written from jail by three women activists – Devangana Kalita, Natasha Narwal and Gulfisha Fatima. Incidentally, all three happen to be students associated with 'Pinjada Tod', an organisation based out of Delhi that seeks to make hostel and paying guest regulations less restrictive for women students.

About the central idea of the play, director Manjari Kaul explained: "We endeavour to make inroads into solidarity, collective dreaming, resilience and hope. We try to explore the voices of an intersectional feminist revolution that focusses on hope and courage to fight the oppressive times we live in today.

"This is how we wove in the heart-wrenching letters written in jail by the three incarcerated inmates with a similar story *Sultana's Dream* written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain," Manjari added.

These women wrote about their memories of cold winter nights at

protest sites, Shaheen Bagh and other spots, learning from their fellow inmates, the numbing monotony of prison life, keeping hope alive, and the need to keep the work going.

Today, just writing a play on the theme of these sensitive letters, and touring and staging this across the country is a challenging, risky job. And, in Auroville, there were back-to-back performances.

Staged in the black box space with hanging electric bulbs to make it look like a prison cell, it was difficult for the two performers to act and move through the swinging bulbs.

A projector attached to a laptop handled the sound system and visual display on screen. Though the text of the play was socio-politically heavy, performers Priya and Manjari engaged the audience with their gripping movements, animated interactions with spirited songs and poems and displaying puppets and card games.

Sound design by Neel Chaudhuri and dramaturgy by Nisha Abdulla were innovative.

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