

# fridayReview

THE HINDU

**A teacher's gift to her students**  
Sheela Unnikrishnan launches SDN's Kriya to offer a performance platform **p2**

**The call of Kishangarh**  
Erstwhile princess Vaishnavi Kumari on the revival of the popular miniatures **p3**



**ON A JAZZ TRIP ACROSS INDIA**  
The World Jazz Festival presented a blend of new pieces and classics **p4**

**S. Poorvaja**  
poorvaja.sundar@thehindu.co.in

## On a Chhau trail

Ahead of World Dance Day (April 29), we look at how the Belgadia Palace in Odisha is helping preserve and promote the folk and martial art form

Plastic chairs and string cots are arranged neatly in a semi-circle under a canopy of trees at Beguna Diha, a village on the outskirts of Mayurbhanj in Odisha. You can hear the sound of practising percussionists, as young men and women get ready for a performance. The audience slowly fills the space. As the drums pick up pace, the Mayurbhanj Chhau dancers take centre stage, and their dynamic movements fill the space with energy and verve. They also encourage the audience to learn a few steps. However, replicating their perfection is a futile attempt.

Witnessing these dancers rehearse proves to be a significant part of a trail of sorts, to delve into Chhau – a martial, tribal and folk dance form. In April this year, the Belgadia Palace in Mayurbhanj, in association with Aadi Naad, hosted The Chhau, a three-day festival that brought together three distinct styles of this dance – the Mayurbhanj Chhau that originates from the same region, Purulia Chhau from West Bengal, and Seraikela Chhau from Jharkhand.

There is much that is unique to each style of Chhau, we soon realise. On a balmy evening, a troupe of Purulia Chhau dancers

dressed in bright yellow, orange, green and black, with masks and elaborate headgear, bring alive the story of Durga and Mahishasura on the grounds of the Belgadia Palace. The dancers effortlessly jump and do somersaults, leaving us in awe of their sharp, nifty movements despite the heavy costumes and masks.

The etymology of the word 'Chhau' can possibly be traced back to meaning Chhauni or military barracks, where the dance was supposed to have originated from foot soldiers practicing these movements. Watching the dancers

depict a fierce battle between Durga and Mahishasura, the martial influences are more than evident in the way they move.

When we witness the Seraikela Chhau, there is a calmness and grace that we immediately notice about this style. The costumes and masks are colourful, but a lot more muted in comparison, and the story we see is that of dancers depicting Krishna trying to court Radha. The lilting beats of the dhol and softer strains of the shehnai enhance the sringara rasa.

"Most of us are generational artistes and we begin learning Chhau when most children are introduced to the alphabet," says Sanjay Kumar Karmakar, who has been dancing since he was four. He points towards the masks with elegantly drawn eyes and says they are not props. "Each mask is different, and helps capture the emotion that represents the character we play. We might wear a mask, but through our dance, we become the character we



**Steps of change**  
(From top)  
Purulia Chhau;  
Seraikela Chhau;  
and Mayurbhanj Chhau.  
PHOTOS: SPECIAL  
ARRANGEMENT AND  
GETTY IMAGES

portray," he says.

While our introduction to the Mayurbhanj Chhau is at Beguna Diha when we see dancers rehearse, nothing can quite prepare us for the spectacle we later see on stage. Performed without masks, dancers decked in silks, turbans and with swords in their hands, nimbly move around the stage, as they bring alive the story of Abhimanyu from the Mahabharata. Courage, valour, the fierceness of a raging battle, and the eventual loss – all come alive on stage. The intense energy of the athletic dancers never once overshadows the emotions in the story they are depicting; a hushed silence falls over the audience when Abhimanyu dies.

Subhasree Mukherjee, chief coordinator of Project Chhauni, a local organisation that has been working to preserve and create awareness about Chhau, says there are 202 socio-cultural organisations and groups of dancers spread across Mayurbhanj. "We worked on identifying dancers, recording different Chhau items, and documenting basic techniques and training," she says. There is much that has changed over the years; many of the dancers we see across the three styles of Chhau work as farm labourers or daily wage earners to make ends meet.

Dancing, they say, brings them special joy.

"We have also worked on establishing a fair revenue model where the fees from any performance goes directly to them. We are also keen that they are employable and resourceful, and stress on skill development as well to ensure they are able to support themselves while continuing to practice their art," Subhasree adds.

In Odisha, Chhau is an integral part of the Chaitra Parva or the festival marking the month of Chaitra (April). With the number of dancers diminishing with each passing generation and the increasing need for patronage for the dance form, there has been a sustained demand to recognise Chhau as one of the classical art forms of India. In 2010, Chhau was inscribed in UNESCO's representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

"The Mayurbhanj Chhau speaks of the strength and spirit of Mayurbhanj," says Mrinalika BhanjDeo, who belongs to the erstwhile royal family of Mayurbhanj. "Our vision is to use our ancestral home, the Belgadia palace, as a platform to not only preserve and promote the arts, but also make it an experience through a host of initiatives," she says. For guests like us, who visit the Belgadia palace, Chhau performances are an important part of the itinerary throughout the year.

It's 8 p.m., the sky gets dark and the dancers take the stage for a final performance. As the audience intently watches, you realise that the dance form invokes a strong sense of community and pride in one's cultural history. It brings people together to nourish it and keep it thriving.

The writer was at The Belgadia Palace, Mayurbhanj, on invitation from RARE India

## CULTURE BRIEFS

### Summer theatre fest

Chennai's theatre lovers are in for a treat as Kartik Fine Arts brings back its annual Kodai Nataka Vizha, on till May 3. Started with an aim to nurture new talents while celebrating veterans, the festival has offered a platform for many Tamil theatre groups to stage their latest creations. Held each year during the peak of summer, it offers audiences a mix of plays that spans varied themes and theatrical styles.

The 34th of the vizha, which was inaugurated on April 22, is taking place at Narada Gana Sabha main hall. The 12-day festival is non-ticketed. On June 1, participants will be given awards for Best Play, Best Actor, Best Actress and Best Child Artist. There will also be prizes for best reviews of the plays.

The following is the list of plays to be staged till May 3.

April 25: Brahma Fine Arts' *Yaraitan Nambuvatho?*

April 26: S. Sruuthi's Naatya Naadha Nataka Sangamam's *Agni Praveysam*.

April 27: Augusto Creations' *Akila Kitty*.

April 28: PMG Mayurapriya's *Ennadi Penne*.

April 29: thRee inaugurates *Kalavu Neekiya Padalam*.

April 30: Rail Priya's *Varutha Padatha Vayodhikar Sangam*.

May 1: Fab's Theatre inaugurates *Un Kannil Neer Vazhindhal*.

May 2: Dummies Drama's *Kaanal Neero*.

May 3: Koothapiran Navabharath Theatres' *Leela Vinodham*.

### Sid Sriram's new track

Singer Sid Sriram recently launched a devotional track 'Sivanar', featuring lyrics from Arunagirinathar's Tiruppugazh. He first performed it at the Coachella festival in California last year. The music video, directed by filmmaker and photographer Parasher Baruah, was filmed at the Batu Caves Murugan temple in Kuala Lumpur during the popular Thai Poomsam festival. The song establishes a partnership between Sid Sriram and Warner Music India.



### Three-day festival

Divya Nayar's Dakshina presents 'Anubhuti', a three-day festival of dance, at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore. The first two days of the festival (April 25 and 26) will feature solo performances. Workshops will be held on the last day (April 27).

Details: April 25: 6.30 p.m. - 8.30 p.m.: Shobit Ramesh's

'Viraha: song of the mystic bride' followed by Padmashree and Abhinaya's 'Sending messengers to the Divine', and Dakshina Repertory's 'Mad for the Mad One'.

April 26, 6.30 p.m. - 8.30 p.m.: 'Unbroken: Unfettered' by Meghana Krishnan; 'Shedding Skin: A rite of Passage' by Raveena Singh, 'As he Said', a guest performance by Vaibhav Arekar and 'Sutradharas' by Uma Satyanarayanan.

April 27: Workshops 'Insight into Tamil Shaivite Bhakti Poetry' by Jayakumar S, and 'Word, Meaning and Movement', an exploration with Vaibhav Arekar will bring the three-day festival to a close.

### Lec-dem on dance

Natarangam, the dance wing of Narada Gana Sabha, and Karnataka Bharatagama Pratishthana jointly present a lecture demonstration on Karnataka Nrutya Parampara (Mysore School of Bharatanatyam) by Padmini Shreedhar and team, on April 26, 6 p.m. at Swami Haridoss Giri Mini Hall. The lecdem will throw light on the four styles that are prevalent in Karnataka — Muger, Mysore, Kolar and Nanjanagodu. A team of 10 artistes from Bengaluru will present unique adavus, the technique and the distinct repertoire.















Narendra Kusnur

Dressed elegantly in blue-grey, Netherlands-based alto saxophonist Femke Mooren did a charming rendition of jazz great Cannonball Adderley’s ‘Wabash’ at the Mumbai leg of the World Jazz Festival recently. She followed it up with her upcoming original release ‘Nellie’, in a duet with trumpeter Charlie Philips. Joined by the vibrant Venezuelan pianist Francisco Rodriguez, Spanish bass player Eva Serrao Alarcon and Dutch drummer Rafael Slors, the two women filled Mumbai’s St

Andrew’s Auditorium with wafts of melody. Over the next three hours, the audience was transported to sounds from various parts of the world, as 17 artistes performed in different permutations and combinations. Curated and presented by Dutch tenor saxophonist and bandleader Alexander Beets, the evening seamlessly blended old-school jazz with modern sounds, with an eclectic dose of Indian fusion added to the mix. The flow of sounds, assigning of musicians and sequencing of tunes plays an important part in such a multi-artist concert, and Beets handled these details with elan. This was the fifth edition of the

World Jazz Festival in India, and covered Delhi, Pune, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Dehradun, besides Mumbai. Launched in 2020, it is conceived and produced by Banyan Tree, in collaboration with the Amersfoort Jazz Festival of the Netherlands. On this tour, there was representation from the Netherlands, Brazil, Venezuela, Italy, Spain, Suriname, South Africa, Australia and Thailand. In Mumbai, one attraction was Brazil-bred, Amsterdam-settled saxophonist Lucas Santana, who dazzled on his original ‘Trouble Maker’. South African trumpeter Darren English did his interpretation of Winston Mankuku Ngozi’s tribute

to anti-apartheid activist Desmond Tutu. This was followed by a crossover interaction where musicians from the Banyan Tree Shishya’s Collective played with jazz artistes. Vocalist Swar Sharma, sarangi player Sandeep Mishra, flautist Hrishikesh Majumdar and tabla player Rohit Deo later returned for the evening’s final track, an Indo-jazz version of Duke Ellington’s ‘It don’t mean a thing (If it ain’t got



**‘My roots will always be Brazilian’**

Raised in Brazil and settled in Amsterdam, saxophonist Lucas Santana first came to India two years ago as part of the World Jazz Festival. “It was great to meet Indians, show them a bit of Brazilian culture, and learn a bit about Indian lifestyle and music,” says Santana, who plans to collaborate with an Indian musician.

Born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Santana grew up in the countryside where his father had taken up a music teaching project. He initially learnt the clarinet but took to the saxophone when he was 11, moving from classical music to jazz. “I was watching this movie, and I saw this guy play a saxophone. I wanted to be exactly like him. Besides classical orchestras, my early influences were Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller, but slowly I got drawn to John Coltrane and Charlie Parker,” he recalls.

After getting scholarships from the Music School Of State Of Sao Paulo and later the Latin Grammy Foundation of Netherlands, Santana shifted to Amsterdam. “It’s a city where all people and cultures come together. That helps me learn more about other kinds of music, though my roots will always be Brazilian,” he says.

Santana has released three albums – *Reflections*, *Ambivalence* and *Bosquejos do Brasil*. He explains the latest release: “Bosquejos means sketches. I have worked with the string quartet called Adam, and that gives a new dimension to my music. Hopefully, I will be able to come up with many more concepts like this,” he concludes.

that swing’. Both tunes had good individual parts, with pianist Rodriguez enjoying himself, though one felt a little more group preparation was necessary. Post-interval, the audience was transported to the 1930s and 1940s, as vocalist Graziella Hunsel Rivero of Suriname rendered Ellington’s ‘Drop me off in Harlem’. Her selection of standards included the Billie Holiday-popularised ‘What a little moonlight can do’ and ‘Crazy he calls me’, Ellington’s ‘Mood indigo’ and ‘In a mellow tone’ and Dinah Washington’s ‘Mad about the boy’.

Accompanied by the Round Midnight Orchestra, she interacted charmingly with the crowd, walking down the aisles and getting people to scat along. From the classics, the set moved to Thai saxophonist Pang Saxpackgirl, who played two originals ‘Steppin up’ and ‘Dream town’. Her performance was filled with energy and smart improvisation, and one wished she played a couple of more tunes. Likewise, it would have been great to hear saxophonists Adam Simmons and Rolf Peter Delfos as lead artiste, though they played in the group settings. One point worth noting was the presence of six saxophonists and two trumpeters. These days, one normally sees more prominent use of keyboards and guitar, but this time it was welcome to have raw horns and consistent use of the grand piano and double bass. Quite simply, it was jazz as older fans have known it.



**Unique fusion**

Michael Brook.  
Singer Devika (below). PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# Song by the Brook

Composer Michael Brook and singer Devika come together for ‘Wisteria’

Neha Kirpal

Celebrated for her fusion of Sufi/Indian folk and contemporary music, singer-songwriter Devika recently joined forces with Grammy-nominated composer and producer Michael Brook for their new collaboration ‘Wisteria’. The poignant Punjabi ballad, with its universal themes of unrequited love and restlessness, blends Devika’s emotive vocal melodies with Michael’s timeless production. The collaboration started with Devika listening to a few short guitar sketches from Michael’s library. The one that spoke to her was called ‘Wisty’ – it inspired her to create a melody and lyric. “The song is a heartfelt expression of love, longing and restlessness. It was a reminder of past bittersweet moments,” says Devika. In her formative years, Devika was obsessed with *Night Song*, a collaboration between Michael and Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Nominated for the Best Global

Music Performance Grammy Award, it was the first album to blend the sounds of traditional Eastern folk singing with new-age Western electronica. Needless to say, she was thrilled when she got the opportunity to meet Michael in his home studio and start working with him. It was a fulfilling, interconnected song writing process. Devika would record vocals and send them over to Michael. Her vocals inspired additional compositional development from him, such as adding the violin, guitar and other instruments. Those additions would shape her next iteration. “It was an open and exploratory process – we weren’t trying to restrict ourselves to any specific formula, format or genre; we were just creating something that was meaningful and impactful for both,” she recalls. The collaboration resulted in a soulful Punjabi ballad that blends traditional roots with a contemporary feel. “It is full of surprises and has unique elements – vocals that transition

varying levels of intensity, and a rich palette of music – nylon string guitar, 12-string guitar, bass, cello, violin and string instruments,” adds Devika. Trained in Hindustani classical music, Devika has been collaborating across genres, including with renowned artistes such as Bohemia, Amaan Ali Bangash, Ayaan Ali Bangash, and Mike Klooster of Smash Mouth. Her tracks ‘Jab se piya’ and ‘Mast qalandar’”, were submitted for Best Global Music Performance category at the Grammys. The San Francisco-based, New Delhi-born artiste’s voice also features on Apple’s iMovie App’s Bollywood Trailer.

Both the sounds of the instruments and the element of expression in Indian music appealed to me deeply

MICHAEL BROOK



Michael has previously collaborated with artistes such as Brian Eno, The Edge, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Youssou N’Dour, Hukwe Zawose and The Pogues. His recent production of *Chain of Light*, consisting of rediscovered recordings from Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, was *The Guardian’s* World Album of The Year for 2024. He has also collaborated on film scores for *Into the Wild*, *The Fighter*, *Brooklyn* and *Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Michael was first exposed to Indian music through little snippets in songs by The Beatles. “Both the sounds of the instruments and the element of expression in the transitions between notes, such as gliding, deeply appealed to me. I don’t know why,” says Michael. Later, he began trying to add some of those expressive elements to his guitar playing, but was limited by the fact that a guitar doesn’t sustain that long. In 1972, he saw musician Bill Nelson play with an EBow that electronically bowed the strings, giving more sustain, which allowed for more focus on the transitions between notes. When Michael ordered one, his order got lost. He decided to create something along similar lines. “The device I came up with, the Infinite Guitar, worked out very well for me and became an integral part of my music,” he elaborates. The Infinite Guitar has also been immortalised in U2’s ‘With or Without You’. Devika has some exciting collaborations and concerts in the works. Michael has some concerts for the 40th anniversary of his first solo album, *Hybrid*. He is also working on music for a new album. “I also hope that Devika and I can do another collaboration, as this one turned out so well, and the process was enjoyable,” he concludes.

**CALENDAR**

**In memory of GNB**

A special event has been organised to mark the 60th memorial day of the legendary musician G.N. Balasubramaniam. Nalli Kuppuswami Chetti will inaugurate the event at 6 p.m. To be held on May 1 at Narada Gana Sabha mini hall, the evening will have Shubasree Ramachandran rendering some of the songs popularised by GNB. This will be followed by Trichur V. Ramachandran's lecture demonstration 'The Maverick Genius Maestro' at 6.35 p.m. It will highlight GNB's manodharma in kritis, ragas, niraval, swaras and RTPs, his own compositions and tukkadas. Recordings will be played by Shiv Viswa.

**Special line-up**

As part of the year-long samvatsara mahotsavam, being conducted by Veenavaadhini Sampradaya Sangit Trust, to celebrate the 250th birth anniversary of Muthuswami Dikshitar, a series of special programmes will take place on April 27, at Arkay Convention Centre, Mylapore. To be inaugurated at 8.45 a.m. the line-up begins with Mala Chandrasekhar's flute recital (9 a.m.). She will be accompanied by M.R. Gopinatah (violin), Neyveli K.V. Ramkumar (mridangam) and H. Prasanna (ghatam). This will be followed by V. Navaneet Krishnan's vocal recital (10.45 a.m.); Usha Rajagopalan and Meera Sivaramakrishnan's violin duet (12.30 p.m.); Radha Bhaskar's vocal concert (2.15 p.m.). The celebration concludes with a special four-hour veena recital by Jeyaraaj Krishnan and Jaysri Jeyaraaj Krishnan (4.15 p.m.).

**Flute recital**

Samunnati and Rasikapriya jointly present the flute recital by J.B. Sruthi Sagar at the Hiranandani Club House, OMR, on April 27 at 5.30 p.m.

**Discourse**

Madhuradhwani has organised the Sangeetha Natya upanyasam ‘Tirugnana Sambandar’, on April 26, 6.15 p.m. It will feature a performance by S. Ramaratnam and Gayatri Ramaratnam. The event includes some of the compositions of Prof. P.N. Natarajan.

**HCL concert**

The Music Academy will feature K. Shahana's Bharatanatyam recital as part of the HCL concert series. The event will take place on April 28, 6 p.m., at the Kasturi Srinivasan Hall.

**Bhavan’s short-term courses**

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chennai Kendra, has organised ‘Summer Camp 2025’ for the performing arts, yoga, arts and crafts, storytelling, cultural tours, and shloka chanting from April 28 to May 9, 10 a.m. - 1 p.m., at its Mylapore venue, and conducts short-term courses from May 1 to 31. For details call 98843 35700 / 98843 66700 or 98843 64700.

**Thematic performance**

Jagyaseni Chatterjee, disciple of guru Lakshmi Ramaswamy, presents her solo Bharatanatyam recital ‘From Flame to Fragrance: A Journey of Devotion, Desire and Dharma’ at Rasika Ranjani Sabha on April 28 at 6.30 p.m.

**Lecture**

Tattvaloka has organised an illustrated lecture on ‘Ancient Temples of Tamil Nadu’ to be presented by historian Chithra Madhavan tomorrow at 6 p.m. Venue: 76, Eldams Road, Teynampet.