

# friday Review

THE HINDU



**GOING STRONG**  
A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine continues to charm after 32 years p2

**S. Janaki**

**M**usic and dance embellish, enrich and elevate each other. The symbiotic relationship between the two is explored in depth in the Natya Sastra. Bharata states: "Sangeetam nrittam cha ekam bhavati" (music and dance are one and the same). In fact, the term 'sangeetam' encompasses vocal and instrumental music and dance. They are considered complementary expressions of the same artistic impulse.

The legendary T. Balasaraswati has often been quoted as saying: "Bharatanatyam, in its highest moment, is the embodiment of music in its visual form."

There is a close relationship between abhinaya and raga. Music becomes the catalyst for mime, as it unravels endless options for the dancer to interpret a theme.

In an article in the 1974 journal of The Music Academy, Carnatic musician and composer V.V. Sadagopan writes: "Any art experience, music and dance in particular, is the externalization of the inner joy experiencing the Beauty of Being and Becoming. Music and dance are inextricably intertwined twin expressions of inner beauty. It is the dance of the spirit which is externalized as music for the ear, and the music of the spirit as dance for the eye." This is what he goes on to say is the perfect match of raga-bhava and sahitya-bhava, or 'dhatu-matu samanya'.

Senior Bharatanatyam dancer Alarmel Valli expresses similar sentiments. "When I dance, I sing with my body." The key to her intuitive understanding of dance is the close relationship between movement and music, and the rasika is able to "see the music and hear the dance".

Nandini Ramani, veteran Bharatanatyam dancer-scholar and Balasaraswati's disciple, recalls that such was the musicianship of her guru that she collaborated with the best musicians for her performances. Because, Balasaraswati realised that orchestral support is crucial to the success of any classical dance performance. Her guru Kandappa Pillai and later K. Ganeshan ruled the orchestra with their musicianship and did the nattuvangam. Balamma's mother Jayammal, Kanchipuram Ellappa Pillai, the two musical giants Gnanasundaram (or Gnan) and Narasimhulu, flute maestro T. Viswanathan, clarinet experts Balaraman and Radhakrishna Naidu, and mridangists Kuppuswami Mudaliar



## Music as, dance's muse

The skill of the musicians in the orchestral ensemble is crucial to the success of a dance recital

(the first SNA awardee for dance mridangam) and T. Ranganathan were a part of the orchestra at different times.

Famous nattuvanars of those days were expert musicians too. Their rhythmic compositions and choreography were guided largely by musical principles. Stalwarts such as Thanjavur K.P. Kittappa Pillai, Pandanur Subbaraya Pillai, K.N. Dandayuthapani Pillai, S.K. Rajarathinam Pillai, Kalyanasundaram Pillai and K.J. Sarasa raised Bharatanatyam concerts to a higher plane with their nattuvangam and singing. Natyacharyas M.V. Narasimhachari and C.V. Chandrasekhar were trained

musicians too.

One can recall Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai conducting the performances of his star disciple Kumari Kamala with S.K. Rajarathinam Pillai and K.R. Radhakrishnan as vocalists in the orchestra. Similarly, Ramaiah Pillai used to conduct the programmes of dancers Anandhi and Radha with M.S. Subbulakshmi singing padams. Kittappa Pillai's nattuvangam with Shyamala Venkateswaran's singing added immense value to Vyjayantimala's dance recitals. Those days, Bharatanatyam dancers had the luxury of having an almost permanent curated orchestra under the baton of their guru. They worked as a team.

Singing for dance calls for a different skillset – apart from having an excellent vocal range, precise intonation and correct pronunciation, the singers need to match, if not enhance, the bhava and nritta of the dancer.

Well-known dancer-musician duos include Kamala Narayan and S. Rajeswari, Yamini Krishnamurthy and her sister Jyothishmathi, Padma Subrahmanyam and her sister-in-law Shyamala Balakrishnan, Kalanidhi Narayanan and Vijayalakshmi, Lakshmi Viswanathan and Charumathi Ramachandran, Sudharani Raghupathy with Kittappa Pillai, then S. Rajeswari and Padma Rajagopal, Shanta and V.P.



**Seamless blend** (Clockwise from left) Balasaraswati with her orchestral ensemble during a performance; Padma Subrahmanyam with Shyamala Balakrishnan leading the orchestra; Shanta and V.P. Dhananjayan; Alarmel Valli and Vyjayantimala. PHOTOS: GETTY, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND THE HINDU ARCHIVES



Dhananjayan with the likes of Babu Parameswaran, Regi George and Aravindakshan, Chitra Visweswaran with T. Sethuraman and later with her husband R. Visweswaran, Alarmel Valli and Prema Ramamurthy, Srividya with her mother M.L. Vasanthakumari, singer Kanakadurga for Kuchipudi doyen Vempati Chima Satyam's productions, and the Odissi duo of dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi and singer Raghunath Panigrahi.

Bharatanatyam dancer and scholar Padma Subrahmanyam recalls: "My sister-in-law Shyamala Balakrishnan was in tune with my creativity and I was equally a shadow of her music. Though I was the composer, her voice brought out every emotional nuance in my instantaneous satvika abhinaya. As Natyacharya V.P. Dhananjayan points out, "To achieve unison, the dancer and the musician need to put in long hours of *sadhana*".

That is not always possible in today's times, when dance musicians are not attached to one bani, dance school or guru. However, over the years, many young Carnatic musicians have come forward to provide musical accompaniment for dance.

Of course, to reap the benefit of such associations, it is important that dancers are well-versed in the nuances of music, so they can react and respond to create a 'wow' moment on stage. That said, occasionally, individual egos might get in the way, with the dancer or singer perceiving their art form as the most important. But, the truth is that only an equal collaboration leads to a well-synchronised performance.

Musician, scholar and writer Sujatha Vijayaraghavan sums it up perfectly when she says that only when sangeetham, sahityam and natyam converge are *rasa* and *ananda* created in the minds of the audience.



## RaGa's concert took listeners on a cultural voyage

The sisters' singing was infused with pan-Indian flavour

**P. Srihari**

**W**hen Ranjani and Gayatri present a concert a deep devotional fervour intertwines with melodic brilliance, resonating with the divine vision of the great composers. Their thematic recital 'RaGa Bharatam' at Narada Gana Sabha emerged as a three-dimensional celebration of music, spirituality, and national pride. The synergy of the accompanying team comprising Vittal Rangan (violin), K. Sai Giridhar (mridangam), and Anirudh Athreya (kanjira) enhanced the concert's appeal.

The core pieces of the recital were Tyagaraja's 'Evarimata vinnava' in Kamboji, dedicated to Lord Rama, and an RTP in Jonpuri as a tribute to the nation. Save for a medley at the end, the duo adhered to the traditional

concert pattern, infusing it with a pan-Indian essence while creating a mosaic of cultural and linguistic heritage.

Dikshitar's Nattakurinji kriti 'Parvathi kumaram' and the kalpanaswaras lent a sparkling start.

The fast phrases in the top octave highlighted Ranjani's nuanced Lathangi essay. 'Bharati deviya nene', an ode by Purandaradasa to Hanuman's mother Anjana, was an interesting choice, considering the resemblance of the song's opening to the theme. The kriti was rendered with felicity, followed by gripping niraval and swara exchanges at 'Sankara suravaravandita charane' in the charanam.

'Kulimathi vadane', a Swati Tirunal padam in Malayala-manipravalam, set to Dhanyasi in Misra Chapu by M. Jayachandran, ushered in an ethereal calm. In a classy Kamboji, Gayatri



**Rich in emotion** Ranjani and Gayatri. PHOTO: R. RAGU

unfurled delightful phrases in the top octave. Vittal's bow work was imbued with the raga's sweetness. Every note in the leisurely

kalpanaswaras at 'Bhaktapradhinudu' brimmed with bhava. Interesting patterns and vibrant interplay marked the crisp tani by Sai

Giridhar and Anirudh. Arunachala Kavi's 'Kanden kanden kanden seethaiyai' in Vasantha served as a pace-setter ahead of the RTP.

Jhonpuri, a melody that evokes a deep sense of yearning, was a fitting choice for the thematic pallavi. Ranjani and Gayatri alternated in unravelling its emotive hues. Vittal kept the reflective mood intact. The tanam was deftly presented in ascending speeds, culminating in the pallavi, a musical tribute by RaGa to Bharatam. 'Kaalaakaalaamaay dharamum kaatha maanilame; raagabhabavamaay potriduvom bhaarataame', set to Khanda Tripura tala, featured a blend of chatusra and tisra nadais. It was an impassioned presentation by the siblings, with niraval and kalpanaswaras in two speeds. Ranjani's swara passage in Saranga was followed by Gayatri's in Sarasangi.

The latter's signature grahabedham effortlessly transitioned into Dharmavathi and Tukaram).

Madhuvanithi capping off a magnificent rendition of a meaningful pallavi.

The sisters evocatively depicted the dasya bhava (sense of subservience) to God. Nammazhwar's pasuram 'Appane adalaazhiyane' was sung as a virutham in Mohanakalyani and Malayamarutham by Gayatri and Ranjani, respectively, followed by a Kannada verse 'Ninna paduven nina pogaliven' by Gayatri in Kalyanavasanam, ahead of the Devaranama 'Innu daya baare'. The grand final piece was a medley of four melodies in Desh, strung from as many languages – 'Vande mataram' extolling the nation (Sanskritised Bengali, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee), 'Rama namame thudhi' (Tamil, Thanjavur Sankara Iyer), 'Hey govind hey gopal' (Brij, Surdas), and 'Tu hi sharan aayi' (Marathi, Tukaram).

Credit: Photos: R. RAGU



# A musical about dreams and reality

Arjun Sajnani's *A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine* continues to charm audiences 32 years after it was first staged

## Malini White

The BLR Hubba 2024 spread much cheer with its line-up and featured eclectic performances. Arjun Sajnani's production of *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine*, staged at Chowdiah Hall, Bengaluru, in December, was part of the offerings. Sajnani first produced this show 32 years ago.

Comprising two unconnected acts, the first half was a musical tribute to Hollywood of the 1930s, when it dominated the dreams and aspirations of young hopefuls. In the play, the ushertettes of the famous Graumann's Chinese Theatre take to the stage, imitating their screen idols, singing and acting out their aspirations.

The pastiche of songs from the 1930s was enjoyable, and music director Maya Mascarenhas' group of singers did justice to the songs. However, only those over 95 would have been familiar with them. So, it possibly was not as meaningful to the current generation in the audience. Familiarity adds greatly to one's musical enjoyment, as people often hum along to a well-known song. The fact that 'Somewhere



over the rainbow' was the most popular part of this half, attests to this. For, even the younger generation knows the song that has, like the rainbow, arched over decades, to brighten musical skies.

Without betraying the period, the older unfamiliar songs could have been substituted with "classics" such as 'Summertime', 'Blue Moon' and Cole Porter's favourites, have endured, thereby adding to the audience enjoyment.

The songs fell seamlessly into place, helped by the vivid visuals

evocative of the period. Technology was definitely the mainstay of this first half. One wonders how this show appeared 32 years ago, with only conventional static stage sets and without the benefit of technologically projected scenery. Clay Kelton's well-sourced visuals recreated that era, with clips from movies, and illustrations for the song lyrics.

Visuals of a sinuous dragon set the scene for the famous Graumann's Chinese Theatre, and the piano keyboards unfurling

across the stage, were particularly appropriate for the snappy, catchy piano pieces.

It was a delight to witness so much young vocal talent in Bengaluru, particularly Priya Mendens, who displayed fine control and modulation in her solo, 'The Best in the World'.

Unfortunately, good as the music was, the segment lacked the necessary slickness that is the essence of Hollywood musicals. Instead of snazzy well-executed dancing, the choreography here

**Classic revisited** From *A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine*.  
PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

was rather basic, executed rather self-consciously. But, that is understandable, for this cast was obviously chosen for their singing voices. And, it is rare to find local amateurs who excel at both singing and dancing.

The dull and baggy ushertettes' costumes were another sore point. They did not convey the elegance of the time when Graumann's Theatre was the ultimate magnet of chic and sophisticated moviegoers.

### Tribute to Marx Brothers

The second act, *A Night in the Ukraine*, loosely based on a Chekov story, was a wonderful tribute to the Marx Brothers. Despite the 32-year gap, the original cast of thespians in the Ukraine segment are still active and they resumed their roles admirably.

It was hilarious nonsense, cobbled with Marx Brothers' famous one-liners, slapstick and vaudeville. Tuffy Taraporewala was superb as Samovar. Without attempting a physical resemblance to Groucho, he nevertheless

embodied the spirit of that great comedian. He can also sing! His "tango" duet with Priya Mendens as Mrs. Pavlenko was sheer enchantment. The romantic interest was provided by a younger couple played by Vidyam Samuel and Satvik Chenjeri, whose musical interchange was also of a high vocal standard.

Viveck Shah subsumed his assertive voice and authoritative presence in the role of Gino, based on the "dumb" silent Harpo Marx. He enjoyed doing justice to a difficult role that excluded any vocalisation and relied instead on animation. His antics were greeted with delighted shrieks from the children in the audience.

Ashok Mandanna was hailed with cheers, being a well-known presence. Unfortunately, his lack of clarity was further impeded by the accent he assumed as Carlo.

Sajnani is a veteran producer who has been active in Bengaluru's English theatre scene, coming up with productions almost every year. It is heartening to see the city's younger generation being given a chance to showcase their talents. Maybe, Bengaluru can look forward to an annual musical theatrical offering in the future.

# Dynamics of the Carnatic drum

The art and science of crafting and tuning the mridangam

## Sahana TS Anirudh Subramanian

The December music season is known as much for the music and dance performances as the insightful lecture demonstrations. The Music Academy's morning academic sessions, particularly, have been popular for several decades. From yesteryear stalwarts to new-age musicians and scholars, these sessions remain a great source of information for young learners and teachers. Taking a look at one such session from the 2024 edition.

Presented by senior mridangist Tiruvarur Bhaktavatsalam and mridangam maker Valangaiman Navaneetha Krishnan, the topic of the session was 'A Tuned Mridangam'.

Bhaktavatsalam described the mridangam as a percussion instrument crafted from seasoned jackwood, coconut wood or 'Kodukkai kattai', with cow, goat or buffalo skin used for the 'valanthrai' (right side) and buffalo or goat skin used for the 'thoppi' (left side). The older the hide and wood, the better the tonal quality. He emphasised how external factors such as

light, humidity, air conditioning and weather affect tuning the sruti. While hot temperatures are manageable, cooler temperatures can untune or dissonate the instrument and can even cause odour.

On a lighter note, Bhaktavatsalam shared an anecdote about Thanjavur Upendran, who carried almost 10 mridangams to concerts to tackle these issues.

Mridangams vary in length and construction. 'Daggu' mridangams measure 24 inches, 'Sthayi' mridangams 22 inches, and others



**Sound journey** Tiruvarur Bhaktavatsalam with his students at the academic session.  
PHOTO COURTESY: K. PICHUMANI

18 inches. The mridangams are classified into 'Kuchi' and 'Kappi' depending on the granules of stones put between the membranes. Bhaktavatsalam explained that the thoppi is tuned to the 'ati mandhra sthayi shadjam' (lower tonic) and the valanthrai to the 'Madhya sthayi shadjam' (upper tonic), ensuring all 16 'Kannus' (tuning points) resonate with the

Navaneetha Krishnan elaborated on the 'Sadam', the circular black portion on the valanthrai, made of iron granules and rice. Adjusting the sadam - scratching it to lower the 'meetu' or adding layers to raise it - requires precision.

Mridangist Sumesh Narayanan added that a drop of water is often spread to the size of a coin to scrape the sadam gently without

causing cracks. Bhaktavatsalam shared insights from his gurukulavasam, and his presence of mind in cutting the vaaru to adjust the 'Echhu kannu' (high-pitched kannu) in a rare case of emergency during a concert trip where his mridangam initially tuned to F# increased to G# due to temperature differences. He credited vidwan TV.

Gopalakrishnan for suggesting mridangam sizes for different srutis, such as Daggum Mridangams 25 inches in length and 7 to 8 inches Vaay (diameter of the valanthrai) for bass pitches like A# and Sthayi Mridangams of 25 inches length with 6.5 inches Vaay for higher pitches.

Modern challenges in mridangam maintenance include declining cow skin quality and as well as using plastic ferrite instead of 'Seeruttu' rava paste for the thoppi. However, there is a significant difference in the tonal quality. In colder weather

conditions, the wood expands, making the thoppi inflexible. This is mitigated by applying castor oil and further maintenance by the mridangam makers.

During the Q&A session, mridangam maestro Trichy Sankaran highlighted how electronic tamburas that do not have harmonic frequencies as compared to traditional tamburas affect the tuning of the mridangam and placed a question to vidwan Patri Satish Kumar as to how to handle Meetu Chapu differences in nut and bolt mridangams, to which latter mentioned that many artists carry separate moods for different srutis. Trichy Sankaran also

**The senior mridangist explained how external factors such as light, humidity, air conditioning and weather affect tuning the sruti and how to fix them.**

mentioned an old practice of Tani Avartanams being played only with the 'Sarani' and 'Anusarani' strings on the tambura.

Sangita Kalandhi-designate T.M. Krishna concluded by emphasising how difficult it is for mridangists to manage their instrument parallelly while enhancing the music created on stage. He mentioned how 'Kalasai' affects the tonality of every stroke played and how the technique of playing must be altered accordingly, including rotating the mridangam to find the pitch-perfect 'kannu'. He also shared his research findings on 'Kittankallu' (sadam), which contains ferrite and ferrous elements and that the Thada stone also contains a layer of quartz. He celebrated the artistry of mridangam makers, who are the first to experience the instrument's sound, underscoring the deep interplay of art, science, and tradition in crafting this revered instrument.

