

# fridayReview

THE HINDU

**Celebrating dance**  
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**BRIDGING EAST AND WEST**  
A tribute to Situ Singh Buehler, who pioneered Western classical music in India **p4**



Deepa Venkatraman

**T**he violin, though originally a Western instrument, has long been an integral part of the Carnatic music landscape. Over time, others such as the saxophone, mandolin, guitar and the piano followed. The latest addition is the keyboard, which is gradually finding its place in the classical sphere.

In the mid-1980s, harmonium exponents Palladam Venkataramana Rao and P.R. Venkatasubramanian were among the first to recreate Carnatic nuances on the keyboard. They learned to use the inbuilt synths and settings such as portamento (essential for Carnatic *gamakas*, allowing continuity, sliding and gliding of the swaras) and the pitch-bender (a lever enabling smooth note transitions) from keyboard artists who played for film music.

**Rhythmic fusion**  
Apart from performing solo keyboard concerts, Venkatasubramanian, also known as 'Keyboard Subbu', introduced the instrument in Bharatanatyam recitals. He first used the Roland Promars synthesiser for a dance performance in Salem in 1985.

He says, "Initially, the keyboard as an accompaniment in Bharatanatyam performances was met with apprehension. However,



## The KEY makeover

How the keyboard, a Western instrument, is finding its place in Carnatic music

dance gurus soon recognised its versatility and made it part of their presentations."

Venkataramana's violinist-daughter Brinda Raghunath, who has done her research on her father's contributions to the harmonium, says, "After successfully implementing the gayaki style manually on the harmonium, he adapted it to the electronic keyboard."

Recalls flautist Prapancham Balachandran, son-in-law of Venkataramana Rao, "He recreated the veena's tonal richness on the Yamaha synthesiser DX100 and played the swaras seamlessly by adjusting the technical settings."



**An evolving journey**  
Vocalist and flautist Palakkad Sreeram began experimenting with ragas and talas on a Casio MT-31 synthesiser at the age of 13. He later explored the more advanced Casio CZ-101, eventually mastering its adaptation through MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface), a system that digitally connects instruments to share musical data. After completing his post-graduation in music from Calicut University, he moved to Chennai to pursue a career in Carnatic music. However, he faced resistance for championing a Western instrument.

Recalling his lec-dem and concert at The Fine Arts Society, Chembur, in Bombay in 1998, arranged by his guru T.R.

Subramanian, Sreeram says, "During the interactive segment, I asked the audience to sing any raga or song and played them with gamakas on my synthesiser. Veteran artistes T.K. Govinda Rao and T.R. Balamani, who were in the audience, and quiet a few rasikas were amazed."

Sreeram, who performs three-in-one concerts – flute, synthesiser and vocal – is a known name in the world of film music too. He has also been part of several fusion ensembles.

According to Sreeram, "Carnatic maestros including U. Shrinivas, Chitravina N Ravikiran, A. Kanyakumari, T.V. Gopalakrishnan and M. Balamuralikrishna have mentored and supported young Carnatic keyboardists. This helped change perceptions about this instrument."

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(Clockwise from below)  
Palakkad Sreeram;  
Venkatasubramanian;  
and Venkataramana Rao

Apart from training several youngsters, senior keyboardist M.S. Martin organises large Carnatic keyboard ensemble concerts.

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Scan to Chat







Arjun and Narayanan

‘Keyboard Brothers’ Arjun Sambasivan and Narayanan were introduced to Korg by Keyboard Sathya. “We soon learnt its technicalities,” say the brothers, who, at the age of seven, were initiated into Carnatic keyboard classes of Korattur Sahasranamam. “Despite initial challenges, opportunities for keyboard artistes have improved over the years. We both are grateful to have been mentored by Mandolin Shrinivas, who, impressed by our Shanmukhapriya rendition agreed to guide us. Though we wished to learn the mandolin, he advised us to continue with the keyboard,” says Arjun.

Narayanan developed a tone close to the mandolin. “Sir was pleased with our first basic tone and asked us to use it in concerts,” he adds. The brothers honed the gamaka-playing technique under Chitravina N. Ravikiran. Arjun recalls how once during a lec-dem, “When our guru was asked if he would perform on an electronic chitravina, he told the audience that there are artistes, including his disciples, who play Carnatic music on an electronic keyboard.” Musician and educator Anil Srinivasan helped them understand the Western nuances on the keyboard.

S. Harikrishnan

Harikrishnan, son of well-known ghatam artiste T.H. Subash Chandran, took to the keyboard on his father’s advice. He presented his first solo concert at age 13 and also became part of his father’s ensemble ‘Shankara’. He also accompanied exponents Chitravina N Ravikiran and T.V. Gopalakrishnan in concerts. After his initial training under musician-composer Ramesh Vinayagam to play western notes on the keyboard, he began to play Carnatic music on the Korg Triton keyboard by himself.

Inspired by Venkataramana Rao, Harikrishnan released his first album *Prakruthi*, based on Carnatic kritis, featuring his father. Three years ago, he released the album *SwaraArpana*. Harikrishnan also launched the ensemble Swarhythm to turn the spotlight on the keyboard. “The idea was to highlight the instrument’s Carnatic dimension and give it an international recognition. Besides my father, I drew inspiration from my uncle Vikku Vinayakram, who put the ghatam on the global stage,” says Harikrishnan, who is currently training under senior violinist and vocalist Delhi Sunderrajan.



PHOTOS: SHIVA RAJ VEDHAN



Vigneswar VG

Vigneswar feels blessed to have trained for 20 years under the legendary T.V. Gopalakrishnan. “He would sing the sahityam and swaras, which I would reproduce,” he recalls. On his guru’s advice, Vigneswar upgraded to a Roland GW8 keyboard and trained in the gayaki style. To promote the instrument, his guru had him accompany him as the sole

melodic support for 25 concerts. Speaking about his first international performance in Malaysia in 2017 – where he played at his guru’s vocal performance, Vigneswar says, “The audience was amazed by the instrument’s broad musical range.” Apart from solo concerts, he has performed for Ghatam Karthick’s Heartbeat Ensemble, Sikkil Gurucharan’s Janal Oram, and Subashree Thanikachalam’s QFR.

The KEY makeover

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Srivaralaxmi Maya

“When the keyboard was little known, I had to give demonstrations to sabha organisers to showcase it during the Margazhi music season,” says Srivaralaxmi. She belongs to the musical lineage of vidwan Kothavasal Venkatrama Iyer and Kumbakonam Brothers – S. Shankaran and S. Vishwanathan. She received her initial training from her grandfather and her mother, vocalist V. Nandhini. “They made me practise daily for long hours, as intricate gamakas are challenging to play on a Western instrument, especially in ragas such as Varali, Sankarabharanam, Kiravani and Arabhi. Over time, I perfected these on my Korg TR-61.”



LOCATION COURTESY: ASHMITA

A.S. Ram

In 2009, A.S. Ram, Kadri Gopalnath’s disciple, composer and sound engineer, who has given Carnatic concerts on the keyboard at various venues, began to explore the enhanced features of the handheld keytar, a keyboard blended with keys and guitar features. Says Ram, one of the first musicians to perform Carnatic music on the keytar, “I felt the keytar that replaces the keyboard’s pitch bender with a fretboard (guitar’s part where fingers press strings to play notes) brought out the nuances of the raga bhava. With my technical background, I developed a tone, a combination of veena and mandolin – Mandolina.” He has played Carnatic compositions on the keytar in his fusion band, The Pulse. Film music directors Manikanth Kadri and Joshua Sridhar have used Ram’s keytar tracks in their compositions.



Choreographic tribute

Guru Samarpanam featured pieces by various masters

Srividya

Kala Mela, organised by Kalakshetra Foundation, began with Guru Samarpanam – a tribute to gurus – through the Bharatanatyam margam. It featured timeless compositions of the acharyas and was held at the Bharata Kalakshetra Auditorium.

The evening commenced with Nandi Choll, a vibrant nritya piece, an invocation to Nandi, followed by a Dikshitar kriti in raga Vasantha set to Tisra gati Adi tala. It was choreographed by Adyar K. Lakshman.

Next in the margam sequence was a jatiswaram, performed skilfully with perfect coordination by the dancers. A composition of the Tanjore Quartet in raga Chakravakam and Rupaka tala, it was a tribute to the gurus of the Pandanallur bani.

“Swami, naan undan adimai endru ulagamellam ariyume”, a well-known Nattakurinji varnam composed by Papanasam Sivan and choreographed by Krishnaveni Lakshman was the next gem presented. Through alternate sequences of nritya and abhinaya, the dancers conveyed the glory of Shiva weaving together episodes such as Manmatha dahanam, protecting Markandeya from the clutches of death and the majestic tandava that embodies creation and destruction.

Next in line was a soul-stirring Kshetraraya padam in Ananda Bhairavi raga and Misrachapu tala. An abhinaya-oriented piece, choreographed by Bragha Bessell, it brought out the emotions of the proshithabhartruka nayika (whose beloved has gone away).

The mood shifted from despair to delight when a scene from the dance



Saluting mentors Synchronisation was the highpoint of the performance. PHOTO: B. VELANKANNI RAJ

drama ‘Meenakshi Vijayam’, choreographed by Rukmini Devi Arundale in 1977, was presented. The iconic composition ‘Velli ambalthil natanam seidhar’ depicted Shiva’s sandhya tandavam (raga Kamboji, Chaturasra Ata tala and Adi tala, music by Bhagavatulu Sitarama Shastri). It was performed by a group of male dancers.

What followed was a beautiful depiction of sringara rasa through a Jayadeva ashtapadi in Ragamalika. Choreographed by Krishnaveni Lakshman, it showcased the uniqueness of the Radha-Krishna bond.

The evening concluded with a tillana in raga Brindavana Saranga (Adi tala). Music composition was by Madurai N. Krishnan and choreography by Adyar K. Lakshman.

The music ensemble included K.P. Rakesh on the nattuvangam, Sai Shankar and Vinayak on vocals, Karthik Balaji (mridangam), M.B. Srinivas (violin), Sashidhar (flute) and Parameswari (tambura).



Classic A scene from Bhama Kalapam. PHOTO: B. VELANKANNI RAJ

Unfolding the layers

Veena Murthy Vijay and her disciples presented the diverse facets of the Kuchipudi repertoire

Manasa Vijayalakshme C

The second evening of Kala Mela, was a vibrant showcase of Kuchipudi repertoire by Veena Murthy Vijay and her disciples from Shri Rajarajeswari Kalaniketan, Bengaluru.

The evening commenced with Purvaranga Vidhi, a preliminary rite that sanctifies the stage.

This was followed by Ramayana Shabdam, a narrative tracing the arc of Rama’s life from birth to coronation. Set in Ragamalika and Adi tala, the story unfolded episodically – Rama’s valour at Mithila, his exile, Sita’s abduction, Hanuman’s leap to Lanka, the great war and finally the Pattabishekam at Ayodhya. While the choreography carried the stamp of tradition, the ensemble ensured clarity in storytelling without letting the narrative slip into monotony.

The highlight of the evening was Sandhya Tandava, where the

dancer executed the vigorous solo with command over karanas. The choreography envisioned Shiva’s celestial twilight dance in Kailasa, where he instructs Brahma to maintain the tala even as he conquers the six inner weaknesses – desire, anger, greed, delusion, arrogance and jealousy. The clarity of charis and rhythmic jatis gave this piece its luminous power, embodying both technical precision and spiritual depth.

The mood softened with Bhama Kalapam, a jewel in the Kuchipudi repertoire. Veena depicted Madhavi, sparring gently with Satyabhama in a playful yet poignant dialogue. The conversations stood out for their natural flow. As the drama unfolded, the allegory deepened: Satyabhama’s pride gave way to yearning, while Madhavi’s banter underlined the futility of ego. The symbolic exchange of the nose ring, representing surrender of the self, was handled with subtle abhinaya. This episode reminded the audience that *Bhama Kalapam*

is not just about conjugal quarrel, but the soul’s longing to unite with the divine.

The repertoire continued with Shiva Tarangam, where disciples displayed agility while balancing on the brass plates. It depicted Ganga’s descent and Shiva’s subjugation of her pride, the dancers’ synchrony in jathis enhanced the appeal.

The finale, Simhanandini (Chitrannrityam), offered a spectacle and scholarship in equal measure. Set to the formidable 128-beat Simhanandana tala, the motif of a lion was drawn on stage by Veena , her footwork etching the sacred image in rhythmic precision. Traditionally performed in temples as an offering to goddess Katyayini, this number evoked echoes of the devadasi tradition while simultaneously situating itself in the modern proscenium.

What stood out was the cohesion of the troupe, uniform costuming, measured movements and an evident devotion to the idiom.

CALENDAR

Music contest

The Music Academy conducts the annual music contest at its premises on October 4 and 5. Details about the competition and application form are available on the Academy’s website. For more details contact 044-2811 2231/2811 3162. Last date is September 26.

HCL series

The Music Academy will feature the following programmes at Kasturi Srinivasan Hall: September 15, 6 p.m.: Vignesh Krishnamurthy. September 16, 6 p.m.: P. Sundaresan (Bharatanatyam).

Endowment concert

The Music Academy has organised Brindha Manickavasakan’s vocal concert, featuring Thanjavur K. Ponniiah Pillai’s compositions, on September 13, 10 a.m., at Kasturi Srinivasan Hall. The accompanists are N. Madan Mohan (violin) and R. Akshay Ram (mridangam). The programme under the endowment instituted by Shri & Smt. S. Krishnaswami and V. Vijayagopal, in memory of Sarita Vijaygopal for a research-based presentation.

Three-day festival

The Divine Life Society, Chennai branch, presents Triveni Vizha – a commemoration of the 139th jayanthi of Swami Sivananda and 35th anniversary of Sivananda Foundation at Ice House, Triplicane, and the 47th year celebrations of Sivananda Satsanga Mandir, at Madhavaram, will be held from September 13 to 15. The three-day event includes namasankirtanam, Tirumurai rendition and harikatha.



Achuthan T.K.

Koodiyattam exponent and teacher Margi Madhu's two new directorial ventures, presented at the annual Nepathya Koodiyattam festival in August, stood out as interesting innovations. They revealed how imaginative touches can enliven a centuries-old art form renowned for its strict adherence to structure and convention.

Nepathya presented an elaborate version of *Mathavilasa Prahasanam* (Dance of a Drunken Sport) – a 7th Century farce, loaded with sarcasm and wit, written by the Kancheepuram-based Pallava king Mahendra Vikrama, and *Atavyankam*, the Fourth Act of Bhasa's *Pratima Natakam*.

*Mathavilasam* has been performed for centuries, but only at temples as an offering, where only two couplets from the original text are used. A longer attaprakaram or actor's manual was first composed by P.K. Narayanan Nambiar in the 1990s. The current version, directed by Madhu, expands on this by including certain parts that have been left out and introducing Malayalam for the dialogues of some key characters speaking Sanskrit and Prakrit.

The plot revolves around the drunken antics of Sathyasoma, a kapali and an unorthodox Saivite mendicant who seeks god through begging, dancing and drinking. His companion Devasoma, along with the loss and recovery of their kapalam or skull-bowl, drives the



### The festival featured Margi Madhu's innovative take on two iconic Koodiyattam works

narrative. An inebriated Sathyasoma suspects the Buddhist monk Nagasena of stealing his bowl, but after a heated exchange, he discovers it was taken away by a dog. The recovery of the skull-bowl also involves Babhrukalpan, a Saivite of the moderate Pasupata order, and Unmathakan.

Though the play is over a thousand years old, its values – intolerance, hypocrisy, and the primacy of ritual over the spiritual – remain relevant. David Shulman, an Indologist and Sanskrit scholar, says: "The text is witty and full of vitality. The play is interesting because of the way it embodies the early

crystallisation of the tradition, and also because of its conceptual and philosophical contents and highly dramatic conclusion. Madhu has made the text come alive and showed us the deeper meanings it offers us." These deeper meanings are what Sanskrit scholar, K.V. Vasudevan, referred to in a paper presented at the festival. He suggested that the arguments, though seemingly superficial, can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, Unmathakan in the play is not a lunatic but a



Contemporary appeal (From Far left) Rama (Rahul Chakyar) flanked by Lakshmana (Nepathya Yadukrishnan) and Margi Madhu (Bharata) in *Atavyankam*; and Margi Madhu as Kapali and Indu G as Devasoma in *Mathavilasa Mathavilasa Prahasanam*. PHOTOS: T.K. ACHUTHAN

belonged to Nepathya's three young actors. The arguments and the quick ripostes between kapali (played by Nepathya Yadukrishnan) and the Buddhist monk (played by Nepathya Rahul Chakyar in Malayalam) were spirited and enjoyable. Though at times the banter did slip into slapstick, it was Unmathakan (played by Nepathya Sreehari Chakyar) who stole the show in a brief but powerful performance.

**Emotional Bharata**  
The festival was back to the familiar territory of the *Ramayana* for the second play, presented over three days. The gist of Act 4 of Bhasa's *Pratimanatakam*, which has not been performed in at least 300 years, was Bharata's emotional encounter with Rama, Lakshmana and Sita in the forest. What stood out here was 'Paduka Pattabhisheka'. Madhu says an old *kramadeepika* (performance manual) prescribes an actual temple priest to conduct the ritual. To ensure that the ceremony merges seamlessly into the drama, Madhu invited amateur Kathakali artist and a professional priest, Hari Nelliode, to be the priest in the play. It created the right stage effect and the ritual, combined with the theatrical, made for an unforgettable scene.



## The protest act

Kannada theatre group Samudaya, which turns 50, uses the medium as a tool for change

Shilpa Anandraj

Samudaya, a Kannada theatre group founded in 1975, recently celebrated its golden jubilee at Ravindra Kalakshetra in Bengaluru with a three-day festival, featuring popular theatre songs and plays.

Inspired by Brecht's philosophy that art is not just for art's sake, Samudaya was set up during the Emergency to raise voice against social ills and corruption. It is a protest form of theatre, which was popularised by Badal Sarkar. It has had among its members stalwarts such as Agradhara Krishnamurthy, Prasanna Heggodu, K.N. Nagaraj, M.C. Venkatesh and Shashidhar Bhariyat. C.K. Gundanna, secretary of the cultural forum and winner of the Karnataka Rajyotsava Award, shares Samudaya's journey and its ideologies.

"Though in the 1970s this medium was seen as a means of entertainment, our aim was to use theatre as a tool for change with plays such as *Sattavara Neralu*, *Jokumaraswamy*, *Ghashirama Kotwal* and *Jasma Oden*. When B.V. Karanth directed the play *Chhe*

*Guevara* we began to be termed as communists."

To begin with Samudaya focused on street plays. Says Gundanna, "In Bengaluru itself, we have staged 20 street plays, but the number has gone down. We have protested against issues relating to water scarcity, price rise and factory labourers

through our street plays. If a play

was to be staged in Kundapur or Gulbarga, members of that unit would act and also direct it."

"Apart from artistes, Samudaya also has academicians and literary personalities as its members. Vijayamma, a journalist, also joined us," shares Gundanna, adding that the name 'Samudaya' (meaning community) was coined by Keeram Nagaraj, an academician.

Among the many iconic plays with a social message, staged by Samudaya, Gundanna speaks about *Huttava Badidare*, written by K.V. Narayana, which deals with the exploitation of people by a king. "We also staged

Brecht's *Mother*, which had music by Karanth, who had composed it differently to highlight the social message in the lyrics."

Looking back at Samudaya's five-decade journey, Gundanna feels happy about how the group faced all challenges to reach this milestone. Today, the group has branches across Karnataka including Mangaluru, Mysuru, Tumkuru, KGF, Dharwad and Hospet.

"We had 35 units earlier, of which only 10 are active now. We needed someone to co-ordinate among these units. I volunteered," says Gundanna, who joined Samudaya along with his friend C.G. Krishnamurthy (known as CGK), to become an actor, but got busy with secretarial, backstage and organisational roles."

"Samudaya, never banked on government funding, hence, there have been times when we have not staged a play for a year or two due to lack of funds. Yet, when a pressing issue had to be addressed, we have taken loans to stage plays and later cleared them. The aim has been to use theatre to create social, religious and political awareness. But we do not live in the illusion that our plays will revolutionise the society overnight. We look at ourselves as agents instrumental in making people think and be aware of the happenings around them," says Gundanna.



### Remembering a maestro

Legendary Carnatic vocalist Ramnad Krishnan's 107th Jayanthi celebration will be held on September 14, at 10 a.m. at Sadguru Gnanananda Hall, Narada Gana Sabha. Scholar Ritha Rajan, a well-known disciple of the maestro, will preside and present the Ramnad Krishnan's Award of Excellence to musician Vegavahini (daughter of T. Brinda). This will be followed by Jayashree Aravind's veena recital. She will be accompanied by Praveen Sparsh on the mridangam and Chandrashekara Sharma on the ghatam.



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