

fridayReview

THE HINDU

First bioplay on M.S. Subbulakshmi

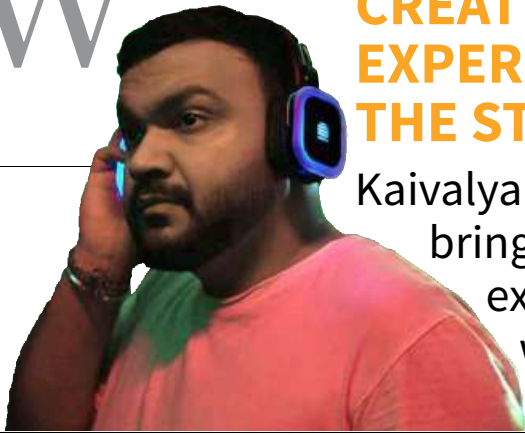
Tracing the legendary musician's journey through her songs **p2**

Spirited flute recital

Hariprasad Subramanian exuded energy throughout his performance **p2**

CREATIVE EXPERIMENTS ON THE STAGE

Kaivalya Plays bring multimedia experience to the world of theatre **p4**



Vedaranyam Vedomurthy, whose centenary is being celebrated this year, improved the nagaswaram's tonal quality by bringing about significant modifications

Winds of change

Lalitha Ram

If one were to make a list of all-time great nagaswaram artistes, centenarian Vedaranyam Vedomurthy's name is certain to make it to that list. Born on September 10, 1924, and having lived only 38 years, Vedomurthy etched his name permanently through his significantly modified instrument and its unique tone. He adopted a style, which was based on serenity and subtlety. Vedomurthy's life is well-documented in works such as B.M. Sundaram's monumental *Mangala Isai Mannargal*. His maternal grandfather was the multifaceted genius Ammachatram Kannusami Pillai, under whom nagaswaram exponent T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai honed his skill. Vedomurthy had his training, both in vocal and nagaswaram, under Kannusami's son A.K. Ganesa Pillai. As a youngster, Vedomurthy had acted and sung in a few films including *Thayumanavar*, which had M.M. Dandapani Desikar in the lead role. Interestingly, Vedomurthy is one of the first names that come to mind when talking about sweetness in the nagaswaram's tonal quality. Yet, all accounts point out that he was not naturally gifted with a sweet tone, and in his initial days, his style was more focused on displaying mastery over complex arithmetic patterns. It

is also mentioned that he inserted a metallic extension in the nagaswaram, between the Ulavu (the pipe with seven holes to play the notes) and the Anasu (the conical section at the end), which resulted in getting a rich, ringing tone. While it is true that Vedomurthy did modify the instrument, his efforts in doing so have been grossly undermined. Fortunately, the modified instrument is still preserved by his brother thavil maestro Vedaranyam Balasubramaniam. Upon examining it, a few key nuances have come to light. **Distinct style** According to Balasubramaniam, the original instrument was a gift from the nagaswaram legend Thiruvengadu Subramania Pillai, and its original pitch was in three *kattai* (scale). While the metallic extension did bring the pitch down, it must be noted that the natural tonal pitch of the modified instrument was much higher than the one that we hear in the recordings (about 1.5 kattai). The pitch of the double reeds (Seevali), attached to the nagaswaram for blowing, is neither the natural pitch of the modified instrument nor the pitch at which Vedomurthy used to play in his concerts. It is clear that the modifications that he made were not a 'plug and play' kind. Rather he had to compensate for the asynchrony with his blowing. It is with this insight that Vedomurthy's

conquest of attaining his desired tone needs to be appreciated. It leads us to the question, why would an artiste bring in features that would create difficulty in playing an inherently finicky instrument? Unfortunately, we do not have first-hand sources to answer this. However, the handful of recordings that has cemented an undeniable place for Vedomurthy in the music world suggests that his significantly different 'aesthetic choices', when exploring ragas, could have nudged him towards the modifications, despite its limitations. Entering the music world when T.N. Rajarathnam Pillai's style was taking the entire Carnatic music world by storm, Vedomurthy's



choices were in total contrast. Unlike playing long drawn-out phrases and extensive elaborations on the higher octave, that projected the majesty of the instrument, Vedomurthy chose to paint his raga canvas with precise yet delicate notes. The meaningful pauses between his phrasings gave a mystic charm to his renderings. His elaborations were mostly in the middle register, only occasionally touching higher register notes without lingering on them. The recordings and song lists we have, though limited, indicate that his choice of ragas (e.g., Surutti, Nattaikurunji, Sahana, and Dhanyasi) fits his chosen style of playing. **Handling jaarus** In veena, handling of jaarus - a type of gamakas produced through seamless sliding from a note to a relatively far note, result in the rounded effect as it enables the artistes to slide over the strings smoothly. But to produce the jaarus with the same effect on the nagaswaram can be quite challenging. Vedomurthy's handling of such slides (for example the slide for Pa to Ri in Sahana) has led many to define his style as 'playing veena on the nagaswaram'. During his time, it was perhaps the norm that raga alapana took the centre stage. And even when played before a kriti, the focus was on exploring the raga and not really keeping the chosen kriti as a central theme for the raga exposition. Vedomurthy differed in this aspect too. His approach was unique and there was a sense of balance and connection in the duration of the raga alapana as well as the content of the exposition with respect to the kriti that followed. His adherence to an unhurried approach was also seen in the choice of slower than usual kalapramanam (tempo) for several pieces not just in kritis, but in javalis and Tiruppugazh as well. Vedomurthy introduced his modified instrument in 1952 at the Arunagirinathar festival in Tiruchi. His career, with this instrument, lasted for slightly less than a decade. Probably, less than 20 hours of his recorded music is in circulation. But, there is more than enough sparkle in those recordings to keep his name afloat among the greatest even after six decades of his passing away.

ILLUSTRATION: SAAI

CULTUREBRIEFS

Dedicated to Sivan



Papanasam Sivan Rasikar Sangam in association with Narada Gana Sabha will commemorate the 134th birth anniversary of Papanasam Sivan on September 26 at Sathguru Gnanananda Hall. Musicologist Ritha Rajan will be the chief guest and Cleveland V.V. Sundaram, the guest of honour. The evening will begin with the rendition of Kapaleeswarar Pancharatnam by eminent artistes at 5 p.m. The evening also includes the conferment of 'Sivanisai Selvar' title upon vocalist Saketharaman (6.15 p.m.) followed by his concert at 7 p.m. H.N. Bhaskar (violin), N.C. Bharadwaj (mridangam) and S. Karthick (ghatam) are the accompanists. Vocal concerts by K. Gayathri (Sept. 27, 6.30 p.m.) and Shertalai K.N. Renganatha Sharma (Sept. 28, 6.30 p.m.) will take place at the Sabha mini hall, as part of the celebrations. The sangam in association with Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore, has organised special concert by Sriranjani Santhanagopalan on October 1, 6.30 p.m. as part of the 51st remembrance day of the composer.

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Neha Kirpal

Sitting in a dark room, a three-dimensional soundscape gets you to enter Josef K's world. Armed with high-quality wireless headphones, you experience sounds as if they're all around you – footsteps from behind, whispers from the side and the bustle of a courtroom.

Welcome to *I, Josef*, a 45-minute deeply immersive and thought-provoking multimedia experience that invites audiences to slip into the shoes of Franz Kafka's most well-known character, who gets unexpectedly arrested and put on trial for an unspecified crime. This adaptation of Kafka's *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*) is re-imagined through a unique first-person perspective that immerses the listener into K's world through binaural audio. Presented by Kaivalya Plays in collaboration with the Goethe Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi, to celebrate #100YearsKafka, it was staged recently in slots with only 30 audience members in attendance at a time.

Relevant script

Despite being written over a century ago, *The Trial* remains strikingly relevant in today's world, particularly in India. According to Kaivalya Plays' general manager Gaurav Singh Nijjer, who directed and designed the play, themes of bureaucratic complexity, the struggle for justice and individual freedom in the face of authority are more pertinent than ever. *I, Josef* aims to bring these themes to life in a visceral way, encouraging audiences to reflect on their own experiences with societal structures and personal freedoms. "The narrative of an individual suddenly arrested without explanation and entangled in an opaque, unyielding legal system resonates strongly with contemporary experiences. Moreover, the



Plug in

Kaivalya Plays recently staged *I, Josef*, based on Franz Kafka's well-known character, in an innovative theatre format

novel's exploration of isolation and loneliness speaks to our modern condition, where digital connectivity often paradoxically leads to human disconnection," elaborated Nijjer.

I, Josef is a natural evolution of Kaivalya Plays' long-standing interest in audio-based theatrical experiences, including radio play adaptations and immersive audio experiences, such as *Lifeline 99 99*. "We wanted to transform the third-person narrative into a direct, first-person encounter that challenges the audience to experience Josef K's world from within. Throughout the

performance, listeners are challenged to engage with Kafka's themes on a personal level, feeling Josef's confusion, despair and search for meaning as if they were their own experiences," said Kaivalya Plays' artistic director Varoon P. Anand, who scripted and adapted the play.

Sound technique

Adapting *The Trial* for binaural audio was a multi-step process. The team first rewrote the narrative to focus on auditory elements, ensuring that characters identify themselves and that actions are described

For an immersive experience From the plays *Pillowman* and *I, Josef*.
PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



through recognisable sounds. They then created a 3D soundscape using binaural recording techniques, which captured sound as it would be heard by human ears. "This allows for a fully immersive audio experience where sounds can be perceived as coming from different directions and distances," explained Anand. Next, the team carefully selected and rehearsed with actors to find the right voices for each character, recording in both English and German. They procured state-of-the-art wireless headphones and other materials for the installation. Finally, they incorporated subtle projection mapping to enhance the overall immersive experience without detracting from the audio narrative.

Last month, Kaivalya Plays staged Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* in the capital. An edge-of-the-seat dark comedy set in an unnamed totalitarian state, it tells the chilling story of a writer whose macabre tales of child murders blur the line between fiction and reality. The visually stimulating performance, which was performed under license from Concord Theatricals, blended different ideas of storytelling, including projection mapping, live

transmissions and audio-video interactions with actors in real-time. Kaivalya Plays plans to continue exploring innovative theatrical formats.

Next month, they will present their two-year research on safety in the performing arts and artificial intelligence at the India Foundation for the Arts Research Conference in Bengaluru. In November, they will help a group of young artistes to debut as directors on the Delhi stage with a new self-written production *The Golden Commode*. They will also stage *Mining Hate*, an improvised interactive play about the disinformation attacks on Indian journalists that uses AI tools in real time. Further, their new improv team will stage *Conspiracy Theory*, a long-form improv comedy show about conspiracy theories. Apart from this, they will host workshops by artistes from Australia and Germany this month, bringing more opportunities for Indian artistes to learn from global performers, especially in the area of technology for theatre. "We envision creating performances that can travel beyond traditional arts spaces, entering classrooms, offices, courtrooms and even the Internet," concluded Nijjer.

CALENDAR

HCL concert

The Music Academy will feature Himaja Samraj's vocal recital on September 26, 6 p.m., at the Kasturi Srinivasa Hall. The accompanists are Saket Pantula (violin) and Nandan Kashyap (mridangam). The programme is organised as part of HCL Concert series.

Memorial concert

Kedaram has organised a concert in memory of N.V. Subramaniam on September 21, at Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Mylapore. Subramaniam, who was the secretary of Saraswathi Vaggeyakara Trust, took efforts to promote Carnatic music, and the compositions of the Trinity and Narayana Tirtha. The evening will feature Shreya Ravikumar's vocal concert at 4 p.m. followed by that of Bharat Sundar at 6.15 p.m.

Dance performance

- Natyarangam, the dance wing of Narada Gana Sabha, presents the Bharatanatyam recital by Ashwitha Krishnan, disciple of Kirti Ramgopal, on September 21 at 6 p.m. Venue: Narada Gana Sabha Mini Hall.
- L. Nivedita Sri, disciple of Gopika Varma, will present her thematic Mohiniyattam recital 'Paavaiyar Potrum Pamalai', on September 21, 11 a.m., at Rasika Ranjani Sabha.



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