

fridayReview

THE HINDU

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KUMUD MISHRA'S SECULAR ACT

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Vinay Kumar

My entry into the world of performative art and storytelling started when I was 10 years old. And that was solely because of my grandmother, who would watch three movies over a weekend. And, I was her main accomplice.

Post-dinner, we had these storytelling, singing, dancing and performance sessions for the kids [we all lived in semi-joint families] before going to bed. That was also the time when *Sholay* came to our town Thrissur — my grandmother got addicted to the movie. Me too, particularly the scene where Dharmendra is on the water tank threatening to jump while proposing his profound love for Basanti, while the cool dude Amitabh Bachchan sits on the verandah sipping *chai* from a saucer with his denim jacket unbuttoned.

I wanted to be like Amitabh Bachchan. I wanted that denim jacket, that saucer, and that chai. After my continued insistence and prolonged tantrum-throwing, she managed to get me all three, but not exactly what we saw in the movie. After wearing the jacket and holding the saucer in my hand, I started transforming into the adult Amitabh.

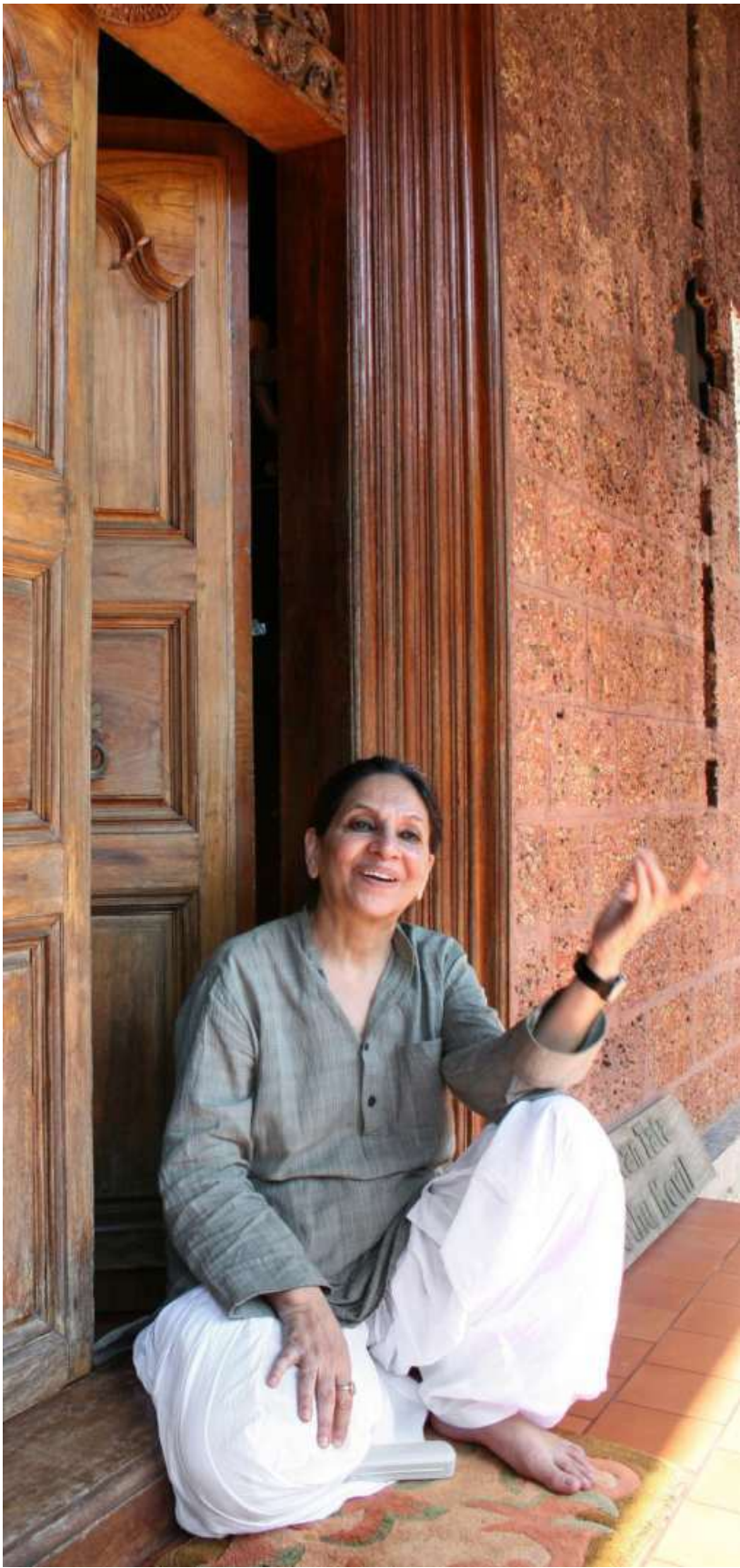
My first audience was my grandmother, who was mightily pleased with my act. Then onward, she started suggesting my little act of Bachchan at every social event in our family. Thus began my journey to tell a story or become a storyteller.

Many years passed. I had the privilege of working with professional companies, performing street theatre, studying in a theatre institution for four years — yet somewhere, as an artiste, as a storyteller, I felt the tools I was using were not rooted and felt alien [maybe because of my exposure to the rich traditional performance culture I had grown up in]. These were random feelings that constantly niggled.

After my theatre studies, I joined a theatre group that enabled me to study martial arts and other traditional forms. This is where I met Veenapani, who had come to work with my director.

For the first few weeks, my interaction with Veenapani was limited [because of my lack of language skills and my inherent Mallu intellectual snootiness]. I thought what is she doing? Not even the revolutionary plays I was familiar with.

My love for Western classical music was at its peak then, but accessibility to titles was limited. I



would travel any distance to get a copy of any music that was available. One day, Veenapani requested me to go to her room and pick up something she needed. Reluctantly, I went to the hotel with a friend, and when I opened her cupboard — what I saw changed my life.

A cupboard I expected to be filled with clothes was stacked with Mahler, Bach, Verdi, Requiem arias, and so on. I came back transformed, and saw Veenapani in

a different light, with respect.

That day we had a conversation that lasted almost three hours. Both of us knew — I had found my guru, and she had found her subject/collaborator.

One agreement both of us had in the beginning of our journey was the magnetic effect of a traditional performer compared to a contemporary performer who relies too much on the intellectuality of their content. Our attempt was to look at the

The Creativity lab

Adishakti's artistic director on taking forward founder Veenapani Chawla's vision through the annual remembrance festival, which begins on April 13



Experimental space (Clockwise from left) Vinay Kumar in 'Bali'; Veenapani Chawla; and Adishakti in Auroville. PHOTOS: S.S. KUMAR AND THE HINDU ARCHIVES

mechanics of varied traditional performances and create a unique Adishakti physical language on stage.

Each of our plays — from *Brhannala* to *Ganapati* — became not mere productions, but research platforms that allowed Veenapani and me to expand the possibilities of the actor's body and dynamism.

Years of this enquiry finally made it possible for us to create a performance methodology based on our investigation of breath, emotion, and anatomical structure.

Veenapani used to say — at the end of the year, if all of us [actors, creative people, staff, etc.] felt we had not grown emotionally or psychologically, then that collective was dead. And she made sure — as teacher, friend, and collaborator — we were all making that leap year after year. After Veenapani's demise, that was the one void we all felt enormously. But she used to say — “If I die tomorrow, you should all rehearse.” And that Herculean challenge is what fell on me.

We had three challenges at that time — one, instead of repeating Veenapani's work, create a new artistic path for Adishakti's second and third generation of creators. Two, make Adishakti an economically self-sustainable organisation. And three, take Adishakti from a closed-in research space to a wider world where more artistes and communities feel ownership.

Along with my collaborator and the current managing trustee of Adishakti — Nimmy Raphael — we took the challenge head-on.

Today, when I look back, we have become a self-sustaining institution for the last nine years. We have been able to create widely appreciated plays such as *Nidravathvam*, *Bali*, *Bhoomi*, *Urmila*, and *Heros*.

This month, we are gearing up for our annual festival — *Remembering Veenapani* — a multi-disciplinary arts festival now in its 11th edition.

When Veenapani's birthday came after her untimely demise, we at Adishakti thought — instead of mourning, we should celebrate her work, vision, and her as a human being. That's where the idea of the festival came from.

When we contacted multiple artistes, they all said — don't worry about money, we will come and perform [at that time we didn't have any money].

From there on, *Remembering Veenapani* became one of the most sought-after festivals for many artistes and spectators.

It's a unique event — without the usual festival trappings — and primarily focusses on the performer. And we are all hoping that we continue this focus on the unique experience a performer can bring.

CULTUREBRIEFS



Prasanna Venkatraman; Salem Gayathri Venkatesan; and Jayakrishnan Unni.

Celebrate with music

Sabhas in the city will present special concerts for Tamil New Year. Mudhra's 'Chithirai Isai Vizha' will begin on April 13 (6.30 p.m.). To be held on all Sundays till May 11, it will feature six music concerts focussing on Tamil songs. Time: 6.30 p.m. The schedule: April 13: Maharajapuram Ganesh Viswanathan. April 14: Tamil New Year concert by Jayakrishnan Unni. April 20: Abhishek Ravishankar. April 27: Sreyas Narayanan. May 4: Mohan Santhanam and May 11: Girja Shankar Sundaresan.

The concerts can be watched on www.paalamtv.com

● **Rasika Ranjani Sabha Foundation** and R R Sabha Arts Academy present the following programmes at its Kamakoti Hall. April 14, 6 p.m.: Lecture by Madhusudhanan Kalaichelvan supported by Adithya Rangan and Padmasree Srinivasan

(vocal), Pakkala Giridhar (violin) and Hariprasad (mridangam). April 16, 6 p.m.: 'Kritis on Rama by vaggeyakaras upto Tiruvavur Trinity', featuring Prasanna Venkatraman's vocal with M. Vijay (violin) and Poongulam Subramanian (mridangam).

● **Madhuradhvani's** festival at Arkay Convention Centre will feature R.P. Shravan (April 14), April 15: Salem Gayathri Venkatesh, April 16: Akshay Padmanabhan, April 17: Sai Vignesh. Time: 6.15 p.m.

● **Bharat Kalachar** presents the following performances at YGP Auditorium. April 13, 5.30 p.m.: Bharatanatyam by M. Lakshmi Priya Raja's students and 7.15 p.m.: Students of Ishwarya Balabharthy. April 14, 5 p.m.: Bharatanatyam Kavitha Srinivasan's students and 7 p.m.: 'Theenthamizh Manakkum Thirai Padalgai', a lec-dem by Isaikavi Ramanan with vocal support by Ritvik and Anusha.

Golden Jubilee special

Kartik Fine Arts' golden jubilee celebrations will be held on April 14 (5.30 p.m.) at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore. On the occasion, Kartik Lifetime Achievement Awards - 2025 will be given to Prameela Gurumurthy (musician and musicologist), Madurai S. Balasubramanian (violinist), Kamala Kamesh (theatre artiste) and Kutty Padmini (theatre artiste). The Kartik Awards of Excellence -2025 will be presented to Subhasree Thanikachalam (music curator), Shertalai R Ananthakrishnan (mridangist), Ratnam Koothapiran (actor, playwright and director), S.S. Sundarajan (theatre artiste), A. Ravi Kumar (theatre artiste) and Radha Badri (vocalist, dance).

Chief guest K.V. S. Gopalakrishnan (former Special Director, Intelligence Bureau) will release the souvenir and present the awards. Prameela Gurumurthy's book *Matru Pitru Acharya Devo Bhava* and 'Sri Jayadeva Hare', audio files of 24 Ashtapadis tuned by P.S. Srinivasa Rao will also be released.



In memory of a scholar

The English transliteration and translation of Prof V. Raghavan's *Sri Muttusvami Dikshita Caritam*, a book of long poem in Sanskrit written in the 1950s will be released on April 17 (6 p.m.) at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. The scholar was bestowed with the title of 'Kavi Kokilam' for this work in 1955 by Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, the 68th pontiff of Kanchi Math. The translation has been done by Sumitra Vasudev.

Prof. Shrinivasa Varakhedi, vice chancellor, Central Sanskrit University, New Delhi, Prof K. Srinivasa Rao, secretary, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, and mridangam maestro Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman will launch the book.

Organised as part of the scholar's 46th remembrance day by Dr. V. Raghavan Centre For Performing Arts, the evening also features a musical tribute, 'Sri Dikshita Krti Manjari', to mark the 250th birth anniversary of Muthuswami Dikshitar, featuring Gayathri Girish, Amritha Murali, Sumitra Vasudev, K. Gayatri and Girijashankar Sundaresan. R. Hemalatha (violin) and N.C. Bharadwaj (mridangam) are the accompanists.

Musical experience

S. Parthasarathy, senior advocate, Madras High Court, is organising the third K. Saravabhauman Memorial Lecture. Vidwan R.K. Shriramkumar, along with Amritha Murali, Sandeep Ramachandran and K. Arunprakash, will present 'Rama Rasanubhava - A musical experience of Lord Rama by various composers' on April 12 (6 p.m.), Kasturi Srinivasan Hall, The Music Academy.



Rachel Rhine

It's not every evening that the vaulted interiors of the Museum Theatre hold within them the weight of an 18th-century European mass, performed in its entirety by a choir of voices and a young orchestra. This past weekend, the Madras Musical Association staged Johann Sebastian Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, not merely as a performance, but as a proposition.

What happens when a work, written by a devout Lutheran in Leipzig in the 1740s and never performed in his lifetime as a whole, finds its voice nearly 300 years later in a city shaped by altogether different rhythms and rituals? The answer unfolded unhurriedly across the evening – as a collective act of belief in music's power to bridge distances.

The *Mass in B Minor* is not designed for easy consumption. There is no narrative, no visual cue, no dramatic arc – only the architecture of the Latin Mass: *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy), *Credo in unum Deum* (I believe in one God), *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), and so on. The phrases were unfamiliar for some, but the MMA offered translations in the programme notes, and, more importantly, gave the music enough room to breathe its meanings into the room.

There was no rush, no attempt to dazzle with speed or scale. Conducted by Augustine Paul – who has led the MMA Choir since 2009 – the concert was attentive to the contours of the score, to the shifts between choral massiveness and solo intimacy, and to the acoustic possibilities of the hall itself. The Museum Theatre, with its stone walls and gently worn stage, held the sound carefully, letting the music rise and settle, rather than reverberate.

The MMA Choir, now in its 132nd year, includes singers from across ages and professions, some formally trained, many not. The



Madras Musical Association ensemble performing at Museum Theatre in Chennai
COURTESY: MMA

Bridging distances with Bach

The MMA presented *Mass in B Minor* at a pace that allowed it to breathe its meaning into Museum Theatre

orchestra – largely composed of musicians under 25 – approached the score with the kind of directness that comes from being unburdened by performance history. Their focus was just on connection: to the music, to one another, and to the audience. Bach's writing, which demands clarity of line and structure over flamboyance, benefitted from this unpretentious approach.

The *Mass* is an edifice. It was never intended for a single liturgical occasion – it's more a summation of Bach's sacred music than a service-ready work.

One of the most striking examples of this structure is in the *Credo* itself. At its heart lies a mirrored triptych: the *Et incarnatus est* (And was made flesh), followed by the *Crucifixus* (He was crucified), and then the *Et resurrexit* (And He



rose again). The *Crucifixus* – sung in low, measured phrases, was particularly affecting, its descending lines seeming to fall through the space rather than move across it. The *Et resurrexit* followed with a gentle expansion, as if the light were returning one windowpane at a time.

In Chennai, far from the liturgical spaces Bach wrote for, that vision took on a different kind of urgency at the Museum Theatre.

And yet, the work spoke. Many had never heard the *Mass* before. And still, they stayed with it.

For conductor Augustine Paul, the scale and complexity of the piece weren't fully visible until he was deep in its preparation. "I had not done an in-depth analysis of the work before choosing to perform. I had tried out the choral parts before the pandemic with an ensemble. So, I was confident that the choir could do it. Only when we

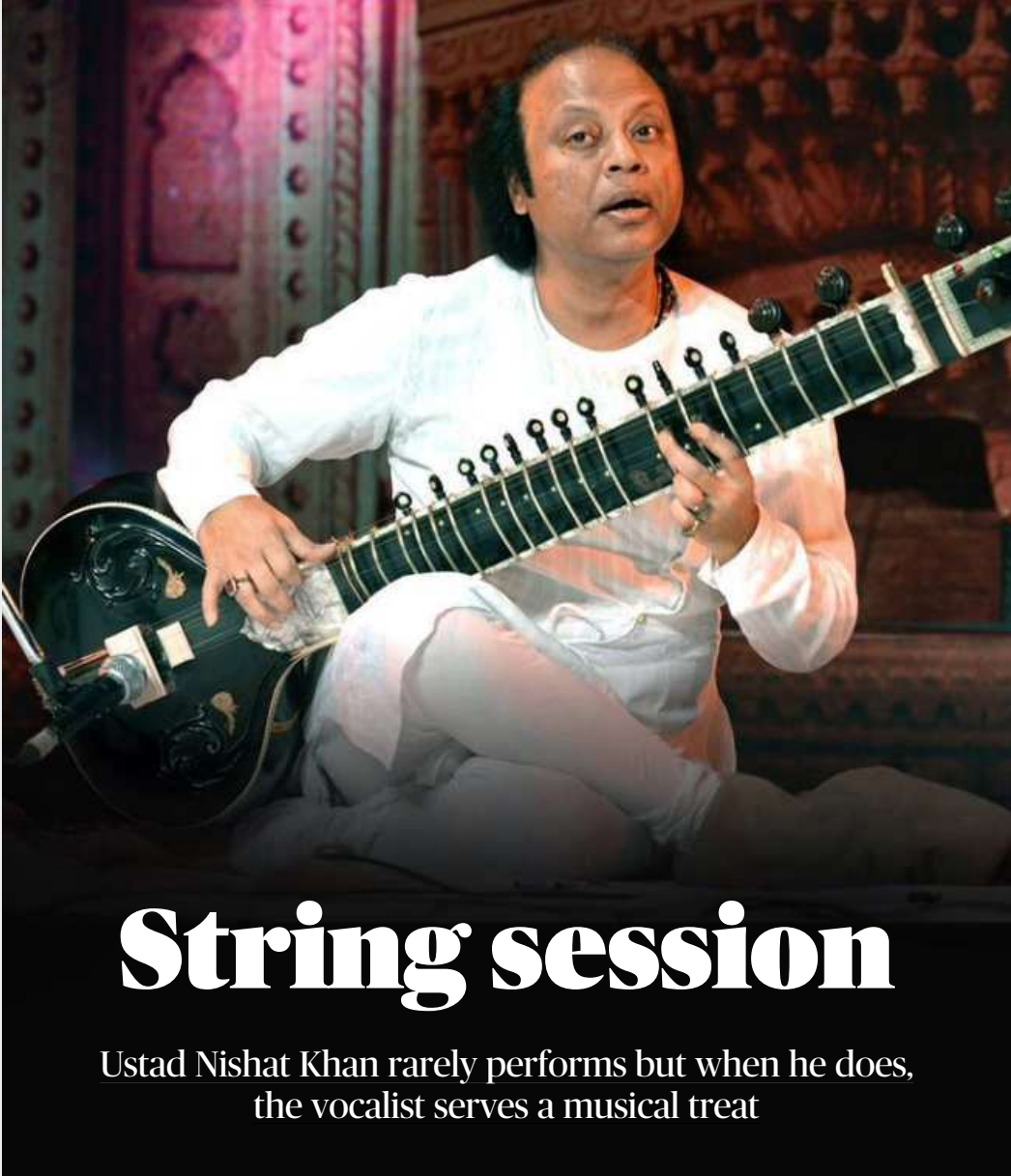
decided to perform the *Mass*, did I start working on the full score. It was then that I really got to see the depth. Though I was sure the quality of music would impress the listener, the length was a bit of a concern from the viewpoint of the audience. But the applause and feedback at the end showed that people loved it."

There's something quietly radical about this too: an ensemble of amateurs mounting a performance of one of the most technically and spiritually demanding works in the choral canon, in a city where Western classical music is still a minority language. It wasn't perfect, and it didn't need to be. The power lay in the choice – to perform the whole, not just the familiar parts. To offer it live and not trimmed. To trust that the audience would stay with the music's long arcs.

"Both the choir and orchestra coped with the technical demand very well. The orchestra managed five to six rehearsals, two with the choir, and the growth during that time was impressive. The real coming together happened just about two hours before the concert," said Paul.

Perhaps, it's this – the fragility of preparation and the impossibility of perfect control – that gave the evening its resonance. It reminded listeners that great music isn't a fixed monument. It's something you step into, with whatever resources you have, and build again from within. It's a living structure, as vulnerable as it is vast.

Bach closes his *Mass* not with fanfare, but with a reprise: *Dona nobis pacem* (Grant us peace). In this performance, the movement was sung softly – almost privately – after more than 90 minutes of unfolding sound. That final chord did not feel like an ending, but like a breath held in the air, a note suspended.



String session

Ustad Nishat Khan rarely performs but when he does, the vocalist serves a musical treat

clarity of stroke or speed that makes for a satisfying jhala. Nishat then moved on to the compositions, of course, in Teen taal, the most used taal of his gharana. Unusually, he was accompanied by two tabla players – both young representatives of old traditions. Shariq Mustapha hails from Ustad Ahmed Jan Thirakwa's house and Zuheb Ahmed is the grandson of Ustad Hashmat Ali Khan of the Ajrada gharana.

Enjoyable pace
The madhya laya gat was Nishat's composition, with an unusual pick up of the mukhra from the 14th beat. Proceeding in an unhurried manner as is his style, Nishat created an enjoyable ambience. The two tabla players interspersed his sitar with subtle and short crisp solo pieces.

Wisely not finishing the first piece with an ultra fast jhala, Nishat gracefully moved onto raag Bahar. Choosing this as it is a raag of the season, Nishat also displayed his *taalim* and mastery of raags as he also played flashes of jor raags of Bahar – Hameer Bahar and Basant Bahar.

Like his uncle Ustad Vilayat Khan, Nishat also sang the lyrics of the iconic 'Sakal ban phool rahi sarson'. Nishat then moved onto raag Shahana, in which he played a racy 'drut' gat popularised by his uncle. Keeping the audience hooked with his double speed taans, Nishat ended in an exhilarating jhala. Nishat concluded the two-hour concert with a chaiti in Mishra Pahari. As he explained, in Chaitra *maas*, chaitis are a must.

The concert reminded one why the current trend of compressing music into an hour-long format, with two raags being quickly showcased, is not the best way to enjoy classical music. Of course, one needs the vastness of Nishat Khan's musicality to engage the audience for an hour with just one raag.

Shailaja Khanna

Ustad Nishat Khan is choosy about where he performs, and so his concerts are eagerly awaited. His recent Strings of Melody show in Delhi – he played there after seven years – organised by HCL Concerts drew a full house.

Nishat is the eldest son of Ustad Imrat Khan, younger brother of Ustad Vilayat Khan, and the torchbearer of a six-generation legacy. He left school to continue sitar practise, and began performing concerts when in his mid-teens. Incidentally, he recorded his first All India

Radio (AIR) concert at the age of 15.

Nishat's music is satisfying as it has a nostalgic, familiar feel. Though highly creative, he builds on tradition, extensively using different sitar 'baaj' to present a full picture of his artistry.

Thus, in a Nishat Khan concert there will not be only meends, fast taans, layakari and a usual jhala, but also bolkari, gamaks, krintan and full-fledged jor. He does not just present one or two dimensions of the raag, as is the norm these days.

Nishat rarely plays new compositions or new taals; understanding that unless it enhances the music, there is

no need for overtly expressed novelty.

At 'Strings of Melody', Nishat played raag Aiman or Yaman, for an hour. He would have played this over 300 times in concerts and many many more times in 'riyaaz', but his Aiman still sounded fresh. Of course, the secret is in feeling the notes, not just rendering them mechanically. Occasionally using the shudha madhyam delicately, but without turning the raag into Aiman Kalyan, Nishat showed his mastery.

After aalap and a wonderful sequential jor, he played an expansive eight-bol jhala. The *lau* he created was magnificent – one understood it is not only

On Desika's trail

Sri Noopurlaya's 'Sri Desika Vaibhavam' seamlessly wove the saint-philosopher's works into its narrative



Treasure trove of songs From Sri Desika Vaibhavam at Narada Gana Sabha PHOTO: M. SRINATH

Manasa Vijaylakhshme C

Haratanatyam, with its intricate expressions and deep-rooted storytelling, has long served as a medium to celebrate history and spirituality. Sri Noopurlaya, under the guidance of guru Lalitha Ganapathi, a senior disciple of veteran dancer-scholar Padma Subrahmanyam, presented 'Sri Desika Vaibhavam', on saint-philosopher, Vedanta Desika. The programme was held under the auspices of Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha.

The dance drama traced the life of Vedanta Desika, born in Kanchipuram in 1268, and revered for his contribution to Tamil and Sanskrit literature. The performance highlighted his role in elevating Tamil as a divine language, and granting the Azhwars, the saint-poets of the Vaishnavite tradition, their due status in temple worship. The production opened with Desika seeking the blessings of Vishnu before embarking on his life's mission.

The narrative was seamlessly woven using compositions from Desika's *Bhagavad Dhyana Sopanam* along with select works of the illustrious Carnatic composer Papanasam Sivan. The dancers, dressed in meticulously coordinated green-and-red costumes, brought these verses to life through their precise movements and evocative abhinaya.

One of the standout moments was the depiction of Desika's description of Vishnu's beauty. The choreography captured the essence of the saint's poetic vision, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the divinity of his verses.

Interwoven within the larger narrative

were several engaging episodes from Desika's life. A particularly charming sequence depicted an incident where a tortoise disrupted Desika's daily prayers. Annoyed, he dismisses the creature, only to later realise it was none other than Vishnu. This scene was portrayed with light-hearted charm, featuring a young dancer crawling across the stage in a tortoise shell, eliciting smiles from the audience.

The production also showcased Desika's *Abheethi Stavam*, a hymn invoking protection from Vishnu. This segment seamlessly transitioned into a series of mythological episodes, including Narasimha rescuing Prahlada, the dramatic enactment of *Gajendra Moksham* (where Vishnu saves the elephant king from a crocodile), Draupadi's unwavering faith in Krishna in her moment of distress, and the Kalinga Narthanan. Each character was adorned in elaborate costumes, staying true to traditional iconography, enhancing the visual appeal of the performance.

The powerful finale emphasised Desika's unwavering devotion and his contribution to the Vaishnavite tradition. The dancers, embodying various divine and historical figures, came together in a tableau that radiated spiritual energy.

The orchestra for the evening included nattuvangam by Lalitha Ganapathi, music composed by Murali Parthasarathy, vocals by Kaushik Champakesan, mridangam by Sakthivel (who also composed the jathis), violin by M.S. Kannan and flute by Sunil Kumar.

'Sri Desika Vaibhavam' was a heartfelt tribute to a spiritual luminary whose works continue to inspire.



An unfinished *marvel*

V. Guhan

It is an unfinished structure, yet seems complete, featuring a unique architectural style.

This is the Bhojeswara temple, located in Bhojpur village in Madhya Pradesh's Raisen district. This 11th century red sandstone edifice has a sanctum sanctorum dedicated to Shiva. Situated on the banks of river Betwa, the temple was built by King Bhoj of the Paramara dynasty.

The temple is a short drive from the capital city of Bhopal. The access to the sanctum is through a towering 10-metre-high doorway and the doorjambes are embellished with exquisite sculptures of river goddesses and dwarapalakas, standing as silent sentinels to an architectural marvel that never reached its final form.

As you climb an iron ladder and reach the garbhagriha, you stand in

front of a colossal monolith Shivaling – according to the UNESCO, it is 2.3 metres in height and 5.4 metres in circumference and sits on a pedestal of approximately 8 metres height. It is an imposing sight that reminds one of its counterpart at the Brihadeeswara temple in Thanjavur.

The sanctum is supported by four pillars. The shikara, originally open to the sky, is now covered with fibre-glass, after a stone from the centre fell. Carved Hindu deities adorn the pillars and ceiling inside the temple. Outside, line drawings of the temple stand as proof of what it would have been like, had work not abruptly stopped, due to reasons unknown. The three sides of the temple remain unadorned, with some blind projecting balconies breaking the monotony.

Even in an incomplete state, the Bhojeswara temple remains a marvel, continuing to draw visitors.



Tracking voices

Vidya Shah's 'Women on record' spoke of bold voices that democratised music through the gramophone technology



Charumathi Supraja

When Thomas Alva Edison wrapped tin foil around a metal cylinder to create the phonograph (a crude recording device), in 1877, he sang 'Mary had a little lamb' to test it. He couldn't possibly have imagined that in just 25 years, his 'favourite invention' would travel to India in its evolved version as the gramophone and record raag Jogiya rendered by Gauhar Jaan, an Indian courtesan of Armenian descent.

The career choices that Gauhar Jaan and her colleagues – all highly skilled musicians and divas in their own right – made in that period would forever alter who could hear music, where and when. Stories about how these artistes pioneered the Indian music industry were shared by musician and researcher Vidya Shah in ‘Women on Record’, which was part of Bangalore International Centre’s commemoration of Women’s Day.

‘Women on Record’ highlighted how the first voices to inhabit gramophone technology in India belonged to women – courageous, talented and far-sighted enough to know that this enterprise would be worth the risks. Unfiltered, bold voices, superb artistry and musicianship and also flamboyant

advertisements and jokes in its name.

Though women who chose to record were commercially successful, their social standing was diminished over time by Victorian morality and British politics. The erasure of information about their role and contribution to Indian history and culture is remedied by 'Women on Record' (that also exists as a film that Vidya co-created with Parthiv Shah, and in a book called *Jalsa* (Tulika Books)).

“Two artistes, other than Gauhar Jaan, who touched me deeply in terms of their music and entrepreneurship were Janaki Bai Ilahabadi and Sundera Bai Punekar,” says Vidya. “As a musician today, I am aware of the need to be savvy and entrepreneurial. These women did that at a time when resources were really limited. Janaki Bai Ilahabadi managed to not be caught up in tight contracts by negotiating with labels. She taught us by example that the artiste should matter. Sundera Bai Punekar went on to make enough money to buy properties in places such as VT in Mumbai, and, at one point, even owned a film theatre.”

The stories behind the music fascinated her more than the music, shares Vidya. Fifteen years ago, when an audience member shared a cassette of songs by artistes from this era, it was their names and location that got her curious. "I became interested in the gender-technology connect. If you look at technology as a thing, it tends to be more male oriented, but here I observed the opposite," she says. Grants and fellowships facilitated research that would lead to the film, book, exhibitions and concerts.

Vidya's intent was to understand "how knowledge gets transferred through the record by women who are not acknowledged through that mainstream tradition", she points out. 'Women on Record' attempts to address that. The challenge was not about "actually getting the records but to get to the stories behind the names and to find people to share stories. Some of the songs were collected from friends' grandmothers. That has been the nice part of the project," she adds.

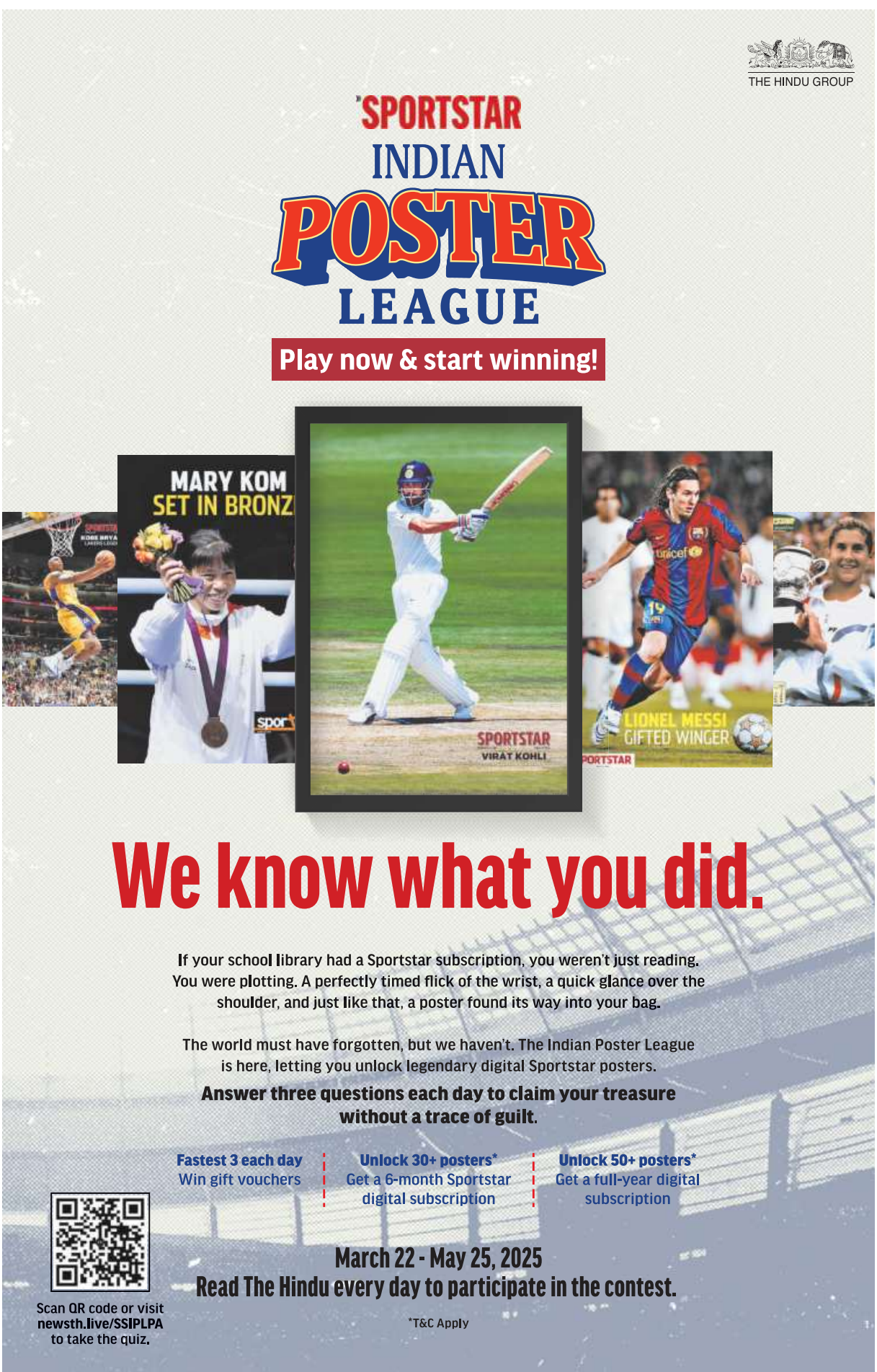
personalities shone through the songs and stories about these trailblazers, known variously as tawaifs, baijis, gaanewaalīs, courtesans and devadāsīs. They played a crucial role in democratising music, because male maestros of the time steered clear of the gramophone – fearing loss of voice and the sully of classical music if it were to be made widely available.

The gramophone, thanks to these women who went on record, became a household object (at that time, in the homes of the rich), later spawning street corner soirees, riddles,



Rewind (Clockwise from top left) Gauhar Jaan; Janaki Bai Ilahabadi, and musician-narrator Vidya Shah.

PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND PARTHIV SHAH





Reality check

Actor Kumud Mishra on the shrinking space for theatre of protest

Anuj Kumar
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“Theatre is like my comfort food, *dal chawal*, something I want to return to as often as I can.” Kumud Mishra is conscious of the similes he uses to describe his first love. “Theatre offers me challenges that I get only once in five years in films.”

The latest is *Saanp Seedhi*, a thriller in the guise of a love triangle where Kumud plays a showman, vastly different from his understated turns on screen. Staged as part of Aadyam Theatre’s bouquet of plays this year in Mumbai and Delhi, *Saanp Seedhi* is

a *desi* adaptation of Anthony Shaffer’s popular two-character play *Sleuth*, written in 1970.

Akarsh Khurana has adapted *Sleuth*, and director Shubhrajyoti Barat generates thrills, and along the way tells us that *Saanp Seedhi* is more than a board game – it teaches us the cost of sins and the value of virtuous deeds.

Kumud plays Anil Wadhwa, an ageing actor-director-producer of crime thrillers who cooks up a plot in his personal space by inviting the young lover of his wife (played by Sumit Vyas) home. What starts as a unique, friendly chat leads to a twisted clash of egos that turns sinister.

“There is a lot of scope for performance in *Sleuth*. Over the

Desi Adaptation Saanp Seedhi based on Anthony Shaffer’s *Sleuth*.
PHOTOS: NEVILLE SUKHIA

years, some top actors have played the part. I didn’t watch any of the performances or cinematic adaptations available on the Internet. Now, I might catch up. Every actor thinks that after playing a big part, he will become big. It doesn’t happen that way, though,” Kumud remains pragmatic like some of his popular on-screen characters.

While many of his contemporaries at the National School of Drama have no time for the stage, Kumud says that if you have the desire and intent, time cannot become a handicap. “My training in theatre helped me perform better in mainstream films. And, my experience in cinema helped me internalise the characters better. With technology making its way into theatre, you don’t have to take the effort to be heard till the last row.”

Quoting Naseeruddin Shah, Kumud says the thespian told him that the character’s contours are there in a good script. “We just have to find them.” He credits directors such as Anubhav Sinha, Nitin Kakkar and Vijay Krishna Acharya with tapping his potential. For example, in *My Great Indian Family*, Kumud plays a priest who is secular, and he says Vijay helped him explore the character’s internal conflict.

Recently, Kumud’s friend was not permitted to stage a play on Hitler set in Nazi Germany. “Art is a medium of protest, but in the current atmosphere, when two people can threaten you and three can burn the venue, showcasing your art has become a risk. It leaves us vulnerable. In cinema, the stakes are higher. Theatre still finds a way. We are



asked whether our play is political, religious, satirical...with so many ifs and buts, one has to camouflage the thought to find a stage.”

There was a time, remembers Kumud, when he played Aurangzeb in a school production on Sambhaji and Alamgir. “I was 16, and my Marathi drama teacher inspired me to bring out the human side of him. In those days, we didn’t see things in black-and-white. Of course, Aurangzeb was cruel, even to his family. But why can’t we see him as a ruler, an individual? Why do we use his name to cast aspersions on an entire community?”

A student of history, Kumud doesn’t buy the argument that history books are not fair in representing the past. “I was very much aware of the Vijayanagar Empire, the Cholas and the Cheras, and have visited Hampi several times. We have to make people socially and politically aware and wait for society to get bored of hate-filled narratives.”

Hailing from a deeply religious family in Rewa, Madhya Pradesh, Kumud’s father was in the Army and was passionate about acting on stage. “My sister’s best friend was from another religion. My grandfather and father had no issue with it, but my mother didn’t find it right. But she couldn’t find any justification for her disapproval. These days, WhatsApp offers us that justification through a false narrative. We cannot depend on social media narratives to know each other, and express surprise by saying *aap waise wale musalman nahin hai* (you are not like that Muslim) when we cross others’ paths.”

Driving home a message

Dummies Drama’s recently staged its new play *Kapidhwaja*



Suganthi Krishnamachari

In Dummies Drama’s *Kapidhwaja* (written and directed by Sreevathson), businessman Parthiban (Baskar) is a man of principles. Because of his strong moral compass, he is at loggerheads with his family and his office staff. So he decides to keep away from everyone for a few days, and goes on a pilgrimage. But you soon begin to wonder if indeed he is as scrupulous as he claims to be. He tells the driver Sarathy (Gokulakrishnan) to park the

car right at the entrance to a temple, although there is a designated parking area.

He is very happy when fawning temple trustees welcome him. These are all privileges that he takes for granted because of his status. As Sarathy says, he only climbs down from his car, never from his status. In every temple that he visits, Parthiban finds an energetic old man in ochre-coloured dhoti, with a cloth bag slung over his shoulders. Parthiban is shocked when he discovers that the unassuming man Gururam is the owner of many companies across the

world. It turns out that Gururam (Sridhar) had once been poor and had travelled to temples by bus. He just wants to relive the experience.

The moment he is booted and suited, however, Gururam waits for the car door to be opened for him. Is his simplicity then just a pose? Or is it wrong to be judgmental? The play raises the question of what we mean by ethics, or to use a better word dharma.

Sarathy gives Parthiban a modern version of the Bhagavad Gita, without its Vedantic trappings. Sarathy’s is a practical philosophy, showing us that sometimes we must blink at the faults of those around us, even stretching the idea of dharma a bit for pragmatic purposes. Coming to the title. *Kapidhwaja* is the name of Arjuna’s chariot, which had a flag with a motif of Hanuman on it. (Kapi - monkey; dhwaja - flag).

The title is justified, considering that the Sarathy in Sreevathson’s play is not just a driver, but like the original Sarathy (Lord Krishna), he too gives clarity of thought and courage to the man being driven.

The car as the main prop was a clever idea, because *Kapidhwaja* shows Parthiban’s progress from smug self-centredness to self-critical analysis. Sreevathson deserves credit for his well-written lines and direction, which ensured that there was never a dull moment in the play. *Kapidhwaja* is not to be seen superficially. We have to read between the lines and enjoy it. Although all the actors played their roles well, Sridhar and Gokulakrishnan deserve special mention.



The healing touch

Still Dancing, a play that raises awareness about Parkinson’s

Neha Kirpal

April 11 is observed as World Parkinson’s Day, and Movement Mantra and Third Half Theatre’s play *Still Dancing – An Ode to Movement* aims to bring awareness about the neurodegenerative condition. The play was written to inspire hope and resilience among people with Parkinson’s and their families.

After performances in Dubai, Mumbai and Ahmedabad, it will be staged in Delhi today. Through drama and dance, the production – a deeply personal, real-life journey of a person with Parkinson’s – not only raises awareness but also serves as a crucial reminder of the condition.

An estimated 12 million people across the globe live with Parkinson’s, and cases are expected to double within the next two decades.

Dubai-based classical dancer and founder of Movement Mantra Vonita Singh has been a dedicated advocate of Parkinson’s awareness in West Asia and India for over 12 years.

“While *Still Dancing* highlights Parkinson’s, it is ultimately a story about family

– one that feels familiar to us all. It follows their lives, joys, and, of course, their hardships,” says Dubai-based award-winning writer and director Sanjeev Dixit, who is the founder of Third Half Theatre.

The production is based on the real-life story of Vonita’s family – she lost her father to Parkinson’s in 2009 and founded Movement Mantra, a platform that taps into the therapeutic potential of mindful movement. “The play is about a family next door that is swept in a tsunami of events only to find deeper purpose at the other shore. Through dance, drama, laughter and tears, it sensitises the audience,” adds Vonita.

While the basic script is the same as the one written originally in 2019, director Sanjeev added a pivotal scene during its India premiere last year – this delves into the



While *Still Dancing* highlights Parkinson’s, it is ultimately a story about family – one that feels familiar to us all

SANJEEV DIXIT

emotional upheaval of the family.

The play boasts a stellar cast. Bringing the production to life is Kumar Sharma and the dance troupe Kathak Rockers, who blend Indian classical and contemporary dance to illustrate the challenges of living with Parkinson’s. “Interpreting dance as a medium for healing has been a privilege, and I’m excited to use this art form to raise awareness within the community,” shares Kumar.

In fact, the main character in the play is a trained Kathak dancer. “Even though the play’s themes are not related to that aspect of her life, dance forms and informs a lot of her thought process. We have used it as a motif to express the emotions of the characters,” says Sanjeev. Further, a thumri has been sung especially for the show, and poems performed to music form key moments in the play. “People with Parkinson’s benefit immensely from physical activity, mental stimulation and social engagement – three elements that dance naturally provides. Dance requires mindful movement, which is exactly what someone with Parkinson’s needs when their automatic motor functions are compromised,” says Vonita.

CALENDAR

Endowment concert

The Music Academy presents a nagaswaram concert by Desur Brothers (S. Shanmugasundharam and S. Sethuraman) accompanied by Velliambakkam V.M. Palanivel and Adyar G. Silambarasan on the thavil. It will be held on April 17 (6 p.m.) at Kasturi Srinivasan Hall under the endowment instituted by families of Narayanan Nadadhur and Srinivasan Nadadhur in the name of their parents, Rajamma and N. Gopalaswami (former CEC).

Instrumental ensemble

As part of its silver jubilee celebration, Saradhi Academy presents ‘Vaadhya Manjari’, an instrumental ensemble featuring the Academy’s teachers and students with other accompanying artistes. It will be held on April 12 (5.30 p.m.) at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan mini hall. Violin vidwan V.V. Ravi will be the chief guest and K.N. Ramaswami (director, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chennai Kendra), the guest of honour.

Spotlight on Tiruppugazh

Kumaran Kundram Tiruppugazh Mandram and Murugukavi Arappani Tiruppugazh Araichi Maiyam, Kumaran Kundram, has organised a day-long programme (5.30 a.m. - 8.30 p.m.) on Tamil New Year’s day at Arulmigu Balasubramania Swami Temple, Chromepet. In another event to take place at Sri Arunagirinathar Arangam, Kumaran Kundram, *Tiruppugazh Thenamudham*, a book comprising 145 verses with explanation, will be released.

Dance performance

Bharata Kalanjali presents a group performance by its students on April 13, 6 p.m., and Kalamandalam M. Jayalakshmi’s Nangiarkoothu performance on April 18, 6.45 p.m. Venue: SPASTN TEACH Auditorium, Taramani.

Recognition for Koothu artistes

Koothu-p-Pattarai Trust, Chennai, and Bharata Ilango Foundation for Asian Culture (BIFAC) in association with Dr MGR Janaki College for Women will felicitate two folk artistes – Purisai Kannappa Sambandan (Koothu Aasan) and Velu Aasan (Parai Isai artiste) on April 14, 6 p.m., at MGR Janaki College for Women. The feliciation function will be followed by a therukoothu performance ‘Vali Moksham’ by Kannappa Sambandan troupe at 7 p.m.

Consecration

The mahakumbabishekam of Madipakkam Sri Ayyappan Temple is taking place today from 8.27 a.m. to 9.57 a.m. The event includes a 100-member ensemble by Chenda Melam percussionists.