

# fridayReview

THE HINDU

## The opening note

Presenting a slice of the Chennai Music Season-2025 concerts **p2**

## A pioneer in Tamil theatre

Kumbakonam Balamani Ammal rode the stage like a colossus **p3**

## RAGA AT THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL

Carnatic duo Ranjani and Gayatri unfold the soul of ragas on a global stage **p4**



V. Sriram

During the height of the Tamil Isai movement, when Sabhas, musicians and patrons were daggers drawn and hurling imprecations at each other, the Madras Music Academy invited Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar to deliver a speech under the title ‘Sangita and Sahitya.’ This was during the 1941 annual conference and the talk was delivered on December 29.

Ramanuja Iyengar, who had probably done more than any other musician for Tamil songs on the Carnatic platform, was of the view that “the language controversy had no place at all in the field of aesthetic music and would do it no good”. In this, he and the Madras Music Academy were of one mind. He then went on to highlight the inadequate repertoire then existing in Tamil, which forced most musicians to sing the pieces in the post Ragam Tanam Pallavi phase of a concert.

“Compositions such as the *Tevaram*, the *Tiruvachakam*, the *Tiruttandagam* and *Tiruppugazh* were in the form of Kannigal and not kirtanas with pallavi, anupallavi and charanam,” he said.

It was interesting that Ramanuja Iyengar, of all people, had made this statement, for he had popularised the compositions of Arunachala Kavi’s *Rama Natakam*. Others of his generation were singing the works of composers such as Marimutha Pillai, Muthu Thandavar and Gopalakrishna Bharati, all of which were in the kirtana format. And so, at least from the 18th century, Tamil too had adapted to suit the three-part structure that had come to define Carnatic music from the 16th century or so. For, prior to this, we seem to have only compositions with pallavi and charanam-s, a format that seems to have existed across South India.

For a language that had almost a continuous association with music since the *Silappadikaram*, Tamil seems to have been a victim of more format than form. And there were historic reasons for it. The language ceased being that of the administration from the time of the Vijayanagar empire, and more so with the Nayaks, who, with a view to reinforcing their claim to kingship, commissioned compositions in Telugu. The Marathas who followed, simply stuck to the trend, and so, between the 15th and 19th centuries, Telugu, with Sanskrit as a distant second, was the language of choice for music. It was only the composers in these languages who attracted

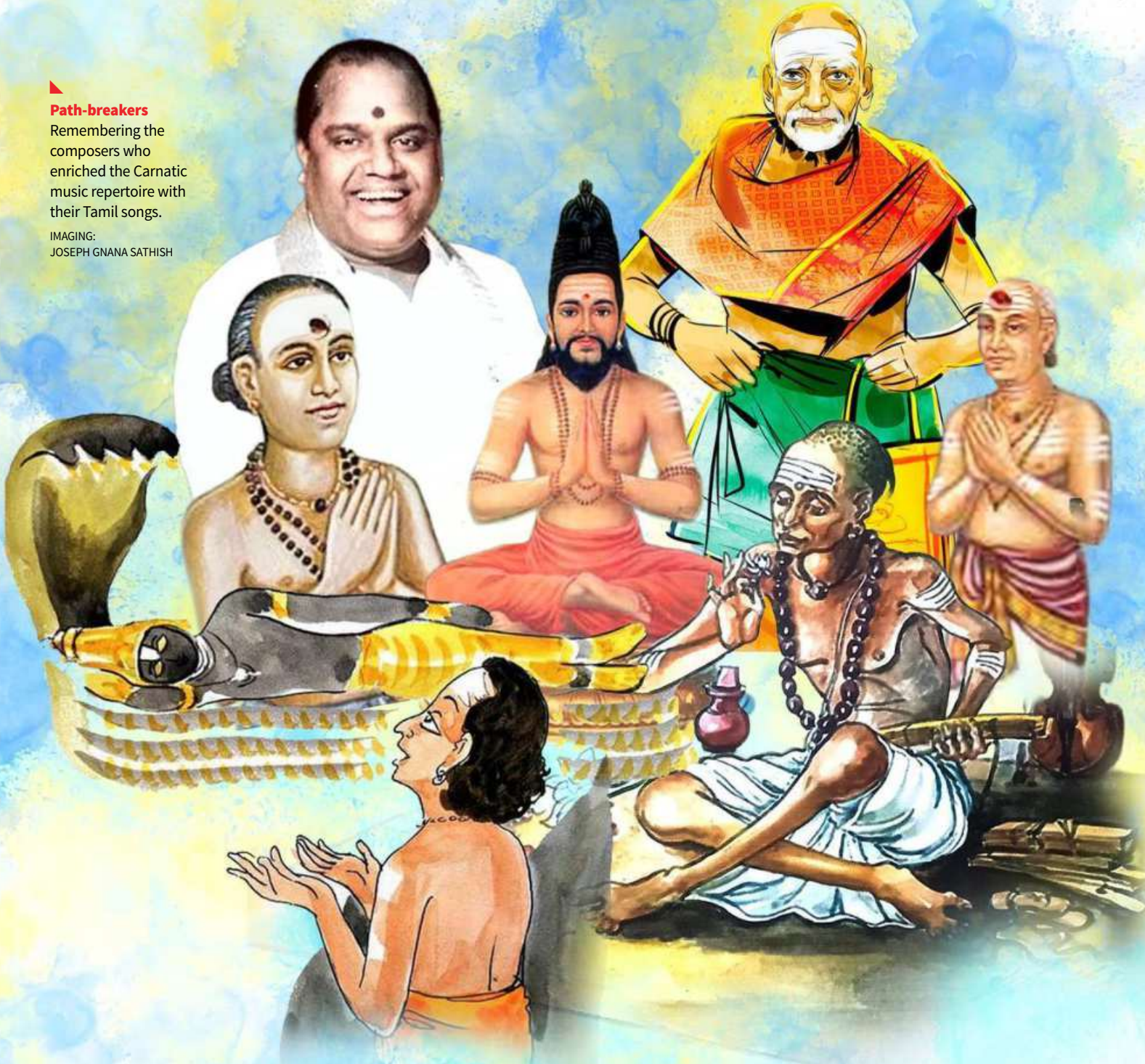
# Tamil’s long road back to the concert stage

From *Silappadikaram* to the Tamil Isai Movement, how a language with deep musical roots reclaimed its place in Carnatic music

### Path-breakers

Remembering the composers who enriched the Carnatic music repertoire with their Tamil songs.

IMAGING: JOSEPH GNANA SATHISH



students as well, for, singing these works in the courts of patrons was a sure path to success. Tyagaraja eschewed patronage but not so most of his students and their disciples.

During this phase, composing in Tamil did not cease. But the musicians who did so had no lineage to pass their works to posterity. We do not read of disciples for Marimutha Pillai or Muthu Thandavar. Arunachala Kavi’s *Rama Natakam* was tuned essentially by his two disciples, but they do not seem to have had anybody carrying on the tradition. Ghanam Krishna Iyer and the Anai Ayya brothers did create songs in Tamil but that their tunes survived was more an exception. Even more surprising is that the *Nandanar Charitram* by Gopalakrishna Bharathi, though such a success in its time, lost all its music by the early 20th century and had to be reset. The same fate befell others such as Mazhavai Chidambara Bharathi and Kavi Kunjara Bharathi.

It is in this context that we need to laud the visionaries who launched the Tamil Isai (more correctly the Tamil Song) Movement, spurred by the writings of Kalki Krishnamurthy and bankrolled essentially by Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar. On the one hand, there was a serious exercise in setting to music works of the past and publishing them in notation. On the other, there was encouragement to compose, by way of competitions and the establishment of a college at Chidambaram, which would be the core of the Annamalai University. It was here that musicians such as Sangita Kalanidhis Tiger Varadachariar and K. Ponniah Pillai, and other stalwarts such as M.M. Dhandapani Desigar would create their own songs. The lyrics of others such as Periyasami Thooran too were set to music.

There were some who were outside this ecosystem. Nilakanta Sivan, Papanasam Sivan and Koteeswara Iyer are names that spring to mind. In the case of Papanasam Sivan, cinema was a reason for a few of his songs, but the majority were more out of a love for the language, which incidentally, he mastered a little late in life! Taken all in all, the 20th century has been kinder to Tamil in Carnatic Music, and the language has come to stay. That said, very few musicians whose mother tongue is not Tamil sing in the language while the opposite is not true.

The politics surrounding it apart, what emerged from the Tamil Song Movement was for the greater good. And in saying it would do no good, Ramanuja Iyengar was way off the mark.

## CULTUREBRIEFS

### Echoes of eternity



A commemorative concert, on the occasion of the 21st year of M.S. Subbulakshmi’s passing will be held on December 11, 6.30 p.m.

Presented by M.S. Subbulakshmi Arangam, ‘SOULFEST 2025 – Hari Tum Haro’ will feature bhajans tuned for M.S. by R. Vaidyanathan (Remaji). The event — designed, directed and narrated by Gowri Ramnarayan — will be performed by Nisha Rajagopalan (vocal), Shreya Devnath (violin), Sujith Naik (flute) and Praveen Sparsh (mridangam) at M.S. Subbulakshmi Auditorium, Asian College of Journalism campus, Taramani.

M.S. became famous for her bhajans when she portrayed the role of Meerabai and sang the songs of the poet in the film *Meera* (1947). When Mahatma Gandhi asked her to record his favourite Meera bhajan, it was Vaidyanathan who set ‘Hari Tum Haro’ to music overnight to fulfil his request. He also tuned several other bhajans for M.S., who went on to acquire an eclectic repertoire of bhakti verses from veteran musicians such as Dilip Kumar Roy, A. Kanan, M.R. Goutam and Siddheshwari Devi. Gowri, also M.S.’s grand-niece, brings together the songs that Vaidyanathan tuned.

Entry to the concert is free. Visit [theticket9.com](http://theticket9.com) to register.

### Dance of cultures

The British Council, in collaboration with ArtSpire, presents Stella Subbiah’s dance films. It will be an immersive morning of screenings and conversation, featuring U.K.-based choreographer and creative practitioner Stella Subbiah, today, 11 a.m. at British Council, Chennai.

Two of Stella’s acclaimed dance films — *Indar Sabha* and *Krishna: Knave of Hearts* will be screened. This will be followed by a discussion with Vignesh Ishwar, a musician who has conceptualised the original music for the films.

Through her films, Stella reinterprets Indian cultural narratives by bringing together movement, myth and memory. Rooted in Bharatanatyam, yet shaped by influences from theatre, literature, music, yoga and visual storytelling, her practice bridges tradition and modern imagination, creating work that honours heritage while embracing contemporary expression. “I wanted to explore how dance can hold space for both memory and imagination, and how movement allows us to revisit what we inherit and reshape it in the present through these films,” says Stella.

Visit [britishcouncil.in](http://britishcouncil.in) for registrations and details.



### Workshops by a mridangam maestro

To commemorate the 80-year-journey of mridangam exponent Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman in Carnatic music, a special presentation ‘Splendour in the Dynamics of the Mrudangam’, will be featured on December 6 and 7. It is a four-part lecture demonstration series, curated and led by the mridangam maestro. Organised as part of Srothovaham, the 10-day classical arts festival, the series will take place at Srinivasa Sastri Hall, Myslapore.

Psiog Digital, an IT consulting firm, in collaboration with UKS E-School, founded by mridangam exponent Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman, has organised the event.

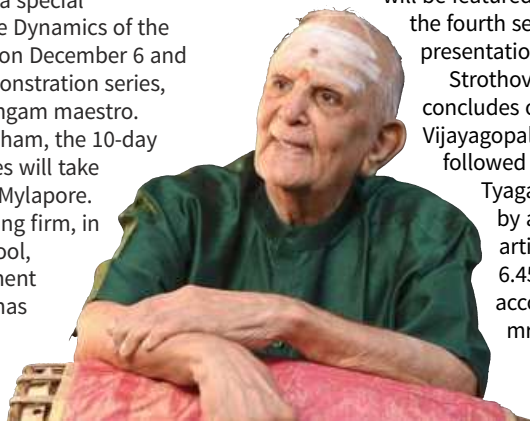
The first session will be

held on December 6 at 10.30 a.m. The evening programme will feature Nithyashree’s veena recital at 4 p.m., followed by the second session of the presentation by Umayalpuram Sivaraman at 6.15 p.m.

The third session will take place on December 7, 10.30 a.m. In the evening, M. Shrikanth’s violin recital will be featured at 4 p.m., followed by the fourth session of the presentation at 6.15 p.m.

Srothovaham festival concludes on December 8 with Vijayagopal’s flute recital at 4 p.m., followed by the rendition of

Tyagaraja Pancharatna kritis by all the participating artists of the festival at 6.45 p.m. They will be accompanied by the mridangam exponent.



### Lecture series

Sruti and The Music Forum will jointly present ‘Lecdem Mela 2025’ with the theme ‘Sangeetha Kathamrutham’ at Arkay Convention Centre, Myslapore. The event begins on December 6, 9 a.m. with the presentation of Music Forum’s annual awards — ‘Sangeetha Lakshana Praveen’ award to Ritha Rajan, and ‘Sangeetha Seva Ratna’ award to Aruna Prabha Ranganathan. This will be followed by lecture demonstrations by Gayathri Venkataraghavan (9.30 a.m.), ‘Ramayana’ by Dr. Sudha Seshayyan (11 a.m.) and ‘Skanda Puranam’ by Madhusudhanan Kalaichelvan and Brindha Manickavasakan (6 p.m.).

December 7 begins with ‘Devi Mahatmiyam’ by R.K. Shriramkumar at 9.30 a.m. followed by ‘Siva Puranam’ by Dr. S. Sunder at 11 a.m. and ‘Bhagavatam’ by Sriram Parasuram at 6 p.m.





# Strings in harmony

Lalgudi siblings G.J.R. Krishnan and Vijayalakshmi's concert was a journey from structured kritis to experimental horizons

Aishwarya Raghunathan

The rain pattered softly outside, setting a prelude to the concert. Inside, the Lalgudi siblings – G.J.R. Krishnan and Vijayalakshmi – took the stage with their signature poise, supported by Tiruvaarur Bakthavathsalam on the mridangam and K.V. Gopalakrishnan on the kanjira. The concert opened with ‘Sri mahaganapathi’ in Gowla, a timeless composition by Muthuswami Dikshitar. The mridangam set off with a crisp and confident start, and the kanjira’s entry from the anupallavi added depth to the rhythmic structure. The evening moved forward with the Nagaswarali kriti ‘Sri shankara guruvaram’, a composition by Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer. Brisk and engaging, the piece showcased tonal diversity between two violins, each

articulating the raga’s character in its own hue. The concert was impacted by unsatisfactory audio output, with excessive high-end frequencies dominating the mix. The third piece, ‘Kaa vaa vaa’ in Varali by Papanasam Sivan was layered with energetic *sollus* and *kuraippus* from the percussion. While technically impressive, the rhythmic density slightly overshadowed the innate emotional depth of the composition. Vijayalakshmi took the lead for the Bilahari alapana, which preceded Tyagaraja’s ‘Naa jeevadhara’ set to Adi tala. The medium-fast tempo once again placed rhythm at the forefront. Krishnan handled the lower-octave phrases with commendable control, and the presentation overall felt engaging. ‘Gaanamurthe’ in raga Ganamurthi, another Tyagaraja composition, followed. The violin duo

KARTIK FINE ARTS



maintained musical balance and grace. The main piece featured Hindolam, where Krishnan began with a bold exploration utilising vaadi and vivadi swaras. This lent a distinct western-leaning contour enhanced by agile playing techniques and rapid gamakas, while holding creativity strong. Krishnan’s style emerged assertive and sharp, while Vijayalakshmi’s contribution felt gentler and more deeply rooted. After an elaborate alapana, the duo unfolded ‘Neerajakshi kamakshi’ by Muthuswami Dikshitar in Rupakam. The accompaniment interchange at the kalpanaswara – Krishnan with the kanjira and Vijayalakshmi with the mridangam – added variety. The duo’s expressive rhythmic interplay, mirrored by the percussion team, was

**Teamwork** Lalgudi GJR Krishnan and Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi accompanied by Tiruvaarur Bakthavathsalam (mridangam) and K.V. Gopalakrishnan (kanjira). PHOTO: R. RAVINDRAN

ambitious. The final kalpanaswara section, with double-string techniques, enhanced the energy. The tani avartanam began on a powerful tone, leaning towards thavil-style aggression. The softer, controlled kanjira by Gopalakrishnan stood out in contrast, clean and measured with elegant patterns. In the combined section, mismatches again appeared, particularly when a three-beat stroke by Bakthavathsalam went unanswered by the kanjira. A beautifully slow mohra followed by a complex korvai by Bakthavathsalam closed the thani. A delightful change of atmosphere arrived with Papanasam Sivan’s ‘Idathu padam thooki aadum’ in Khamas, bringing devotional sweetness brimming with bhakti. This was followed by a deeply moving Sindhu Bhairavi, as the duo gave a different dimension to the raga. ‘Chandrashekara’ was meditative. The concert approached its finale with a Mohana Kalyani thillana composed by Lalgudi Jayaraman (the duo’s guru and father), performed on the special request of Bakthavathsalam. The duo’s bowing radiated joy and camaraderie on the stage.

# Within classical tenets

Following patantaram, Vijay Siva presented a concert that celebrated the grammar of music

Ranganathan Iyer

Vijay Siva is known for following the D.K. Pattamal and D.K. Jayaraman style of singing, and this concert was no exception. The concert was a beautiful blend of bhava-laden sancharas with brisk singing at the neraval and kalpanaswaras, the former merging well with the gamaka-laden Dikshitar kritis. Vijay Siva began the concert with a composition in Nattai ‘Jaya jaya swamin’, followed by Tyagaraja’s ‘Sugunamule’ in Chakravakam, with a brisk niraval and kalpanaswaras at ‘Srinayaka’ in the charanam segment. This

was followed by a brief alapana of Sree raga commencing on the tara shadja, essaying the grandeur of the raga in five minutes. The emphasis on the classic phrase ‘Pa ma ri ga ri sa’ was perceptible throughout the raga essay.

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN



‘Sree varalakshmi’, a popular Dikshitar kriti was chosen with kalpanaswaras at ‘Bahavana bedachature’. Next came the Varali raga alapana, a brief but impressive sketch, followed by the composition ‘Nee vandidaivamugana nannu’ in Adi tala with another

brisk niraval in the charanam line. ‘Saragunga palimpa samayamu’ in two kalai Adi tala, a composition by Ramanathapuram Srinivasa Iyengar in Kedaragowla, followed. This paved the way for a majestic Karaharapriya. The alapana was complete with a mixture of briga-and-bhava-laden phrases in all the octaves, a small glimpse of swarabedham to Kurinji in the madhyasthayi. In ‘Pakkala nilabadi’ in Misra Chapu, a popular composition by Tyagaraja, the niraval in ‘Manasuna’ in the charanam, was taken up in detail in all three octaves. A shloka in Ragamalika was rendered in praise of Lord Nataraja of Chidambaram, followed by a lighter piece on Muruga. ‘Thullu matha vetkai’, a Thiruppuzagh in Hamsanandi was the concluding piece. Vijay Siva was ably accompanied by Sanjeev Venkataramanan on the violin and Manoj Siva on the mridangam. The dialogue between the mridangam and kanjira (S. Sunil Kumar) during the tani avartanam was exemplary.



Rich in bhava Vijay Siva. PHOTO COURTESY: BVB

## CATCH UP



**SRI THYAGA BRAHMA GANA SABHA**  
Vani Mahal, T. Nagar.  
December 10, 6.30 p.m.: Sriranjani Tapasya Santhanagopalan.  
December 11, 6.30 p.m.:N. Vijay Siva.

**MADHURADHWANI**  
At Arkay Convention Centre, Mylapore.  
December 5, 4.30 p.m.:Shruthi S. Bhat and 6.30 p.m.: Sangeetha Bhakthi Samarpanam.  
December 8, 4.30 p.m.:Jayashri Aravind and 6.30 p.m.: Amritha Murali.  
December 9, 4.30 p.m.:Sangeetha Swaminathan and 6.30 p.m.: K.S. Vishnudev.  
December 10, 4.30 p.m.:Jayalakshmi Sekar and 6.30 p.m.: Baby Sreeram.  
December 11, 4.30 p.m.:B.U. Ganesh Prasad and 6.30 p.m.: M. Chandrasekaran.

**KARTIK FINE ARTS**  
At Narada Gana Sabha Main Hall.  
December 5, 4.30 p.m.:S. Saketharaman and 6.45 p.m.: Trichur Brothers.  
December 6, 4 p.m.:Ramakrishnan Murthy and 6.45 p.m.: Sandeep Narayan.  
December 7, 4 p.m.:Ranjani and Gayathri and 6.45 p.m.: Anitha Guha’s ‘Mahadevam Mahasenam Bhaje’  
December 8, 4.30 p.m.:Sikkil Gurucharan and 6.45 p.m.: Kunnakudi M. Balamuralikrishna.  
December 9, 4.30 p.m.: K. Bharat Sundar and 6.45 p.m.: Abhishek Raghuram.  
December 10, 4.30 p.m.:Vignesh Iswar and 6.45 p.m.: Malladi Brothers.  
December 11, 4.30 p.m.:Rajhesh Vaidhya (veena) and 6.45 p.m.: Sudha Raghunathan.

# Wide repertoire

Chinmaya sisters impressed with their range and rendition



In sync Chinmaya Sisters with Shraddha Ravindran (violin), B. Ganapathiraman (mridangam) and Mysore Gururaj (morsing). Photo: Special Arrangement

H. Ramakrishnan

The well-trained Chinmaya Sisters – Uma and Radhika – presented a vibrant concert. The ragas, Rasikapriya (‘Arul seyya vendumayya’ by Koteeswara Iyer) and Madhyamavati (‘Palinchu kamakshi pavani’ by Syama

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN



Sastri), formed the mainstay of the concert. Both alapanas and kritis were rendered with sincerity by the sisters and their svanubhava accentuated the intended emotion of the kritis. The Rasikapriya alapana by Radhika was concise and brought out the vaggeyakara’s vision in full. On the violin, Shraddha Ravindran, who has carved a niche for herself, created an equally wide-ranging elucidation. At the pallavi, the duo indulged in interesting kalpanaswaras. The highlight was ‘Palinchu kamakshi pavani’. Uma’s Madhyamavati raga exposition was serene and Shraddha’s response came in the sanchara lines. The sisters had excellent percussion support in B. Ganapathiraman

(mridangam) and Mysore Gururaj (morsing). The pleasing tani had a tisra-element too and was rich in sarvalaghu. The list of songs the sisters chose revealed their musical acumen. The recital commenced with ‘Namami vighna vinayaka’ (Hamsadhwani) by Krishnaswamy Ayya (Adi tala, tisra nadai), which has a lovely chittaswaram. They rendered kalpanaswaras at the pallavi. This was followed by Tyagaraja’s ‘Chaalakallalaadu’ in Arabhi, again with a lilting chittaswaram. Oothukkadu Venkatasubba Iyer’s ‘Neelamalar kola’, in a sweet Vasantha, was a neat rendition. The sisters wound up with a thillana in Hamsanandi by Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavata. The concert was held in association with South Zone Cultural Centre.

## The ‘Isai Perarignar’ title goes to...

Tamil Isai Sangam will host its 83rd annual Tamil music festival at Rajah Annamalai Hall. Justice Anand Venkatesh, Judge, the Madras High Court, will inaugurate the series on December 21. On the occasion, Bharatanatyam exponent Chitra Visweswaran will be honoured with the ‘Isai Perarignar’ title. She is the 69th recipient of the award presented by the Sangam. Kudandhai V. Lakshmanan will be awarded the ‘Pann Isai Peraingnar’ title. He is the 16th recipient of the title. The awards carry gold medallion, a silver trophy and a purse.



## Recognition for scholars

Integrated Academy for Performing Arts, Krishna Gana Sabha and Bhagavatha Seva Trust jointly inaugurated the 25th year of their Namasankirtana festival on November 28 at Dr. Nalli Gana Vihar, T. Nagar. R.N. Ravi, Governor of Tamil Nadu, inaugurated the festival and conferred the title ‘Sankirtana Kalanidhi’ upon Yagnarama Sarma, and ‘Sankirtana Choodamani’ on Gopi Bhagavata. Among those present were art patron Nalli Kuppuswami Chetti, City Union Bank managing director and CEO, N. Kamakodi, religious scholar Udayalur Kalyanaraman and Y. Prabhu of Krishna Gana Sabha.



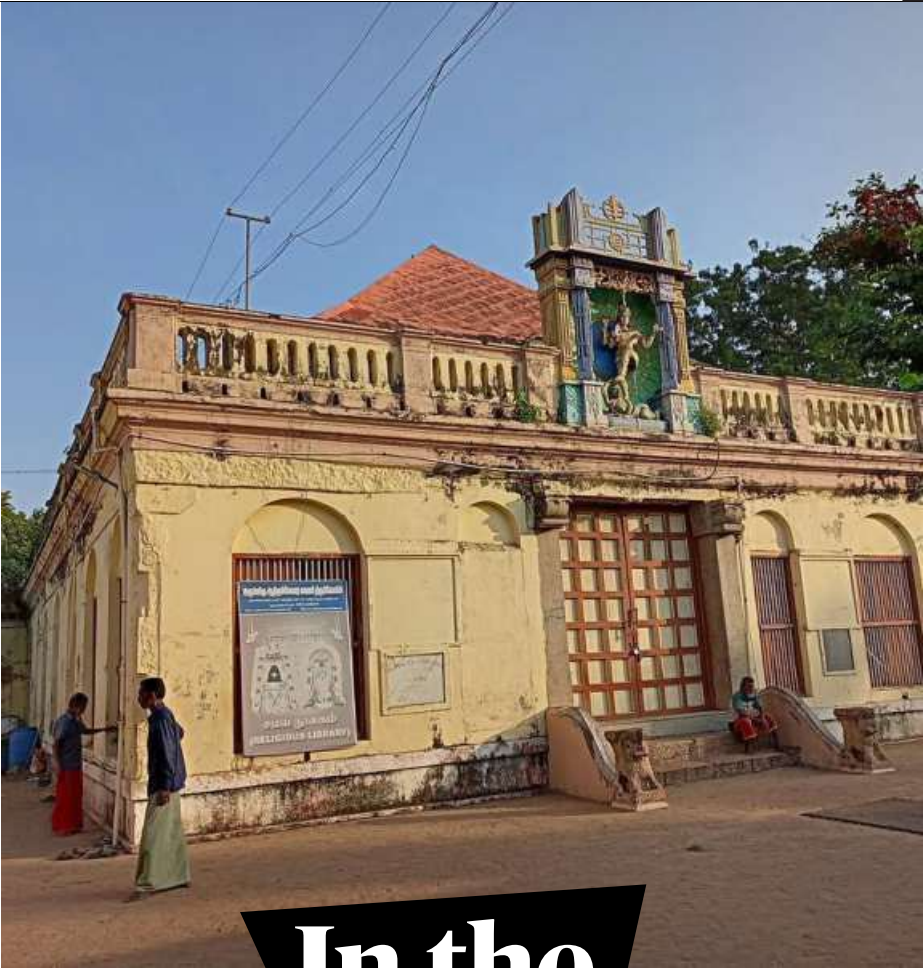
## CALENDAR



### Consecration

The kumbabishekam of Sri **Adi Kumbheswarar temple** at Kumbakonam was performed on December 1 in the presence of Sri Shankara Vijayendra Saraswathi, the 70th Shankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam. The consecration took place after 16 years. Special homams and pujas formed part of the preliminary rituals. The mahakumbabishekam of **Sri Sivakamasundari Ambal Samedha Sri Kaleeswarar Swami temple**, Villiyannallur village, Kuthalam, Mayiladuthurai district, will be performed on December 7 between 10 a.m. and 11.30 a.m. Rituals preceding the event are taking place from today. Mandalabishekam will begin from December 8.





▲ Kumbakonam Balamani Ammal (below) funded the construction of the Thirukalyana Mandapam inside the Adikumbeshwarar temple (left). PHOTOS: KARTHIK BHATT & SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Karthik Bhatt

Among the many forgotten Tamil theatre pioneers is Kumbakonam Balamani Ammal, who shattered the glass ceiling and was one of its earliest superstars. She remains an intriguing personality, with most details of her life and times being scant. Born into a devadasi family sometime around 1870, Balamani Ammal learnt to sing and dance at an early age. It is not known how she took to theatre (though TK Shanmugam mentions her to be a student of Sankaradas Swamigal). Sometime in the 1890s, she, along with her sister Rajambal, began a theatre group called the Edward Theatrical Company, popularly known as the Balamani Drama Company. It was an all-women theatre group, the first of its kind, and comprised disenfranchised and economically underprivileged girls. Balamani Ammal took them under her wing. The troupe staged mostly mythological plays, though Balamani Ammal is credited with being the earliest to take up social themes in Tamil theatre. She performed the first social drama – Kasi Viswanatha Mudaliar’s *Dambachari Vilasam*. Noted drama teacher and playwright M Kandaswamy

# In the spotlight

Once a reigning queen on stage, Balamani Ammal is now a forgotten footnote in the annals of Tamil theatre history

Mudaliar (father of actor MK Radha) was associated with Balamani Ammal’s theatre group as a writer and director for a long time. He adapted novelist JR Rangaraju’s work *Rajambal* into a play by the same name; it became one of the troupe’s major successes. Balamani Ammal is also credited with having introduced petromax lighting on stage, and being the first to reserve separate seating for ladies at her performances. Her fan following spanned a wide cross-section of society, including several zamindars, merchants and even royalty. A report in *The Hindu* from 1903 during her visit to Trivandrum for performances notes that “a carriage and pair had been placed at her special disposal by kind permission by His Highness the Maharajah”. That her shows drew huge crowds is borne by the now-off-recounted legend of



special trains known as Balamani Specials being run to cater to her audience. Balamani Ammal lived a life of luxury. Her residence at Kumbakonam had a large retinue of more than 50 helpers and is believed to have had a swimming pool, marble fountains and gardens. Her beauty attracted admirers

from far and wide. Quoting his father in an article on Balamani Ammal, MK Radha writes that a huge crowd used to gather just to watch her dry her hair, as she walked up and down the balcony. Famous composer Dharmapuri Subbaraya Ayyar even composed a *javali* in her praise. Balamani Ammal was generous when it came to charitable causes. A report from 1910 in this paper speaks of her numerous gestures during her stay at Kanchipuram during that period, and her donating the proceeds of a performance to the building fund of the Big Conjeevaram Hindu Girls High School. She promised to dedicate at least one performance every month for the school. The French writer Julian Viaude, who met her in 1899, writes of her charitable disposition, mentioning her contribution of thousand rupees to a group of European ladies for a Hindu orphanage. She is also said to have donated liberally to several temples across South India. One of her contributions, which still stands, is the *Thirukalyana Mandapam* inside the Adikumbeshwarar temple in her hometown, Kumbakonam (the kumbabishekam of the temple was held on December 1). According to the *Census of India 1961* (Volume 9) publication, this elegant single-storied structure is said to have cost around Rs. 40,000 in those days. Balamani Ammal’s last days were, unfortunately, a far cry from her glory-filled days. Moving from her palatial residence in Kumbakonam to a modest dwelling in Madurai, she passed away in relative obscurity around 1935. According to MK Radha, she was 65 at the time of her death. Balamani’s trailblazing journey and success against all odds is remarkable for its sheer tenacity and worthy of commemoration. Regrettably, more than nine decades after her death, she remains a forgotten footnote in the annals of Tamil theatre history.

# Epic inspiration

Navia Natarajan’s new work depicts the lives of women through Draupadi’s story

Srividya

Navia Natarajan’s thematic production – ‘Draupadi Unbound’ – recently premiered at the Trinity Arts Festival in R.R. Sabha, Mylapore. Conceived, choreographed and performed by Navia, the dance was based on the enigmatic heroine of the *Mahabharata* – Draupadi. The dancer also drew a parallel with the lives of several women, who, for generations, have been silenced – told how to behave and how much to endure. Whenever a woman asserts herself, questions norms, or demands justice, her dignity is attacked. She is shamed or suppressed, yet, she rises unscathed. ‘Draupadi Unbound’ is about reclaiming the voice of a woman who breaks free and charts her own path toward freedom. The show began with a *nritta* piece that depicted the routine course of life, before a

challenge arises and the woman is forced to choose a path less travelled. Here, the dancer captured the subtle shades of emotion. Alarippu, which means blossoming of a flower, is normally presented at the beginning of a performance. Navia chose a non-linear narrative using the alarippu to depict how Draupadi blossomed into a woman of quiet confidence and courage. ‘Panchali Sabadam’ was a fitting finale to the performance. Lyrics by Prof. S. Raghuraman and music composed by M.S. Sukhi (mridangam), along with Sumesh Murali on the chenda, complemented the dancer’s narrative. Nattuvangam by N. Sri Sudarsini and vocals by Gopika Harindranath added beauty to the entire production. Effective lighting by Surya Rao aptly highlighted the mood of the production.



# In a self-made space

Ustad Shahid Parvez’s timeless lesson: Even decades of *riyaaz* demands fresh depth to conquer every stage

Shailaja Khanna

At a recent outdoor concert under a monlit winter night in Delhi, Ustad Shahid Parvez Khan played magnificently, commanding attention despite the late hour, falling temperature, and rising AQI levels. The sitarist does not always fully satisfy the discerning listener. Often, he offers only glimpses of his technique, relying at times on the dramatic to impress, or repeating set, crowd-pleasing phrases that win over a lay audience but leave the connoisseur wanting more. This concert was different. Among those listening was Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, his senior by a decade. Nothing was withheld: from exquisitely controlled five-note meends to dazzling taans, from elegant gamaks to a jhala rendered in the beencar ang, all laced with intricate layakari. And through it all, there was an emotional depth that elevated the performance. One only wishes he would always play like this – unreserved, generous and revealing the full range of his artistry. He once told me, “The audience should always leave wanting more.” Over the decades, his audiences



have indeed been left wanting more. Yet it was not always so for this seventh-generation scion of the famed sitar lineage. As Ustad Shahid Parvez Khan often points out, he prefers the term Etawah gharana to the commonly used Imdadkhani, since the family’s musical roots predate his great-grandfather Ustad Imdad Khan and trace back to their home in Etawah, Uttar Pradesh. Shahid Parvez was initiated into music by his father and guru Ustad Aziz Khan, who himself never quite established a prominent performing career. His grandfather, Ustad Wahid Khan, was a respected musician, but remained in the shadow of his more celebrated elder brother, Ustad Inayat Khan. In an interview some

years ago, Shahid Parvez recalled being told as a boy that he would have to play for both himself and his father, a burden that weighed heavily on his young shoulders. When he first appeared on stage in the early 1970s as a lanky teenager, the sitar world was dominated by giants from within and beyond his own clan: uncles Ustad

**His teaching, both in person and through his academy, has helped carry the Etawah lineage far beyond its ancestral circles.**

Vilayat Khan and Ustad Imrat Khan, older cousin Ustad Rais Khan, and other towering figures such as Pt. Ravi Shankar, Pt. Nikhil Banerjee and Ustad Abdul Halim Jaffer Khan. From the same gharana, Pt. Buddhaditya Mukherjee, a year younger, was already being hailed as a prodigy. Cousins Ustad Shujaat Khan, Nishat Khan and Irshad Khan, though younger, were being promoted by their fathers, receiving concert opportunities. Shahid Parvez had no such backing. Slowly, steadily, through relentless *riyaaz*, he carved out his place. Growing up in Maharashtra, a region where vocal music has long overshadowed instrumental performance, only added to the odds. Lacking the flamboyance and commanding stage presence that others in his illustrious family seemed to possess so naturally, he had only one asset: the uncompromising depth and integrity of his music. I recall hearing about one of Ustad Shahid Parvez Khan’s earliest major concerts in Delhi in the early 1970s. His father shared the stage with him, and at a pivotal moment, subtly signalled his teenage son. Shahid unleashed a staggeringly fast, crystalline sapaat taan spanning three octaves, leaving the audience in awe – yet he never repeated it, a testament to his early mastery. This instinct for timing – knowing precisely what to play, when, and for how long – remains one of his most admirable traits. Equally deliberate was his strategy to forge a distinct path. He avoided reprising the family’s traditional bandishes. “Why repeat what has been done before?” he once told me. His innovations extended to rhythm. While Teentaal defined his gharana’s forte, Shahid Parvez introduced intricate layakari and favored rarer taals like Rupak and Jhaptaal for variety. By

thoughtfully expanding beyond inherited traditions, he evolved a personal style over decades – one now emulated by many sitarists. He has nurtured many students and is widely regarded as an open, empowering guru, generous with knowledge in a way that runs counter to the culture of closely guarded secrets that still persists in many traditional musical families. His teaching, both in person and through his academy, has helped carry the Etawah lineage far beyond its ancestral circles. His stylised approach, the thoughtful pauses that let an idea

sink in, and his unerring sense of timing all contribute to a distinctive *baaj*. These traits, combined with his mastery of *gayaki ang* and intricate *layakari*, have become hallmarks of his artistry. That balmy night’s concert underlined a vital truth: even an artiste of Ustad Shahid Parvez Khan’s stature must still, at times, prove himself anew; the complacency of mastery has no place on stage. He has to reach deep into his own music to shape a performance that feels artistically complete, even when he has traversed the same ragas and talas several times over decades.



Thravayee School of Bharatanatyam

Kalaimamani Dr Radhika Shurajit presents

Natya Production of

# KANDHA SASHTI KAVACHAM



On Friday, December 12 @ 6.45 pm  
at Narada Gana Sabha Main Auditorium, Chennai

At the Inauguration of Kartik Fine Arts -  
Natya Darshan Seminar at 5.30 pm

Convened by Padmashree Dr Narthaki Nataraj

ALL ARE WELCOME





Ranjani and Gayatri

In our 38 years of performing across the world, we've seen many memorable audiences. However, when was the last time we saw 5,000 people deeply immersed and emotionally tuned in for the entirety of an Indian classical concert? That too, outside of India? We witnessed it last week at the Royal Albert Hall, London. This was a crowd that

The Carnatic duo writes about the experience of performing at the iconic venue

came seeking the Indian classical experience. It was the 20th anniversary of the Darbar Festival, celebrated in the way they do best: by presenting pristine Indian classical music on one of the world's grandest stages. The evening featured a double bill: Carnatic concert followed by Hindustani recital with thumris by

Kaushiki Chakraborty. Ours was a full-fledged *madi kutcheri*, complete with Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Tamil kritis and an expansive Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi, much like what we would have presented in a Myslapore sabha or a Bengaluru pandal. The Royal Albert Hall is vast and imposing. But the moment we began to sing, it

**Musical synergy** The sisters performing at the festival and (below) with Vittal Rangan (violin), Sai Giridhar (mridangam) and S. Krishna (ghatam) PHOTOS COURTESY: DARBAR FESTIVAL.

transformed into something intimate, like the warmest of *baithaks*. It was heartwarming to see the audience tune into every nuance, respond at just the right moments, and stay connected in a beautiful loop of emotion. In the kalpanaswara section, we presented our innovation 'Swaradhuri', which is a parallel singing of three ragas connected through grahamedham. By the time we concluded with a Marathi *abhang*, the energy in the hall was palpable. With an excellent team – Vittal Rangan on the violin, Sai Giridhar on the mridangam and S. Krishna on the ghatam – singing felt effortless. The visual aesthetics, the sound design, the seamless backstage facilitation – all contributed to the experience. We've performed for Darbar many times – across venues in London and once

in Italy. And, each time, the bar is raised by Sandeep Virdee, the man behind Darbar. From lighting and backdrop to camera angles and the colour of the performers' attire, every detail carries intention. In our land, there is no shortage of great music or gifted performers. We need dreamers – those who can imagine big, curate with vision, draw audiences consistently irrespective of the artiste. We need more such spaces where classical music can reclaim its place in the imagination of a world addicted to 60-second reels.

It's a rare privilege to represent Indian classical music on this exalted stage. We stand here because of the countless contributors who have nurtured this art form with devotion, artistry and integrity, and this moment belongs to them too. We are reminded that when classical music is rendered with imagination, soul and sruti suddham, it reaches everyone – from a deeply-moved Philharmonic conductor who reached out to us to a quiet devotee in a Kerala temple.



**Multi-genre project** Shanker Krishnan and the album cover. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

classical music, using multiple independent Carnatic melodic lines and their gamakas, has not been similarly explored."

Geetha points out that the whole process of using counterpoint was new to her. She says, "I was thrilled when Shanker turned to composing."

Since this was a new concept and sound, Shanker used Geetha as a sounding board for the Carnatic portion of his ideas. "It was interesting to watch the evolution of his ideas," she adds.

The siblings grew up in a musically-inclined family. Both received training in Carnatic vocals under Bombay S. Ramachandran. Shanker also studied Hindustani music from Ustad Khadim Hussain Khan.

Shanker says he was deeply influenced by vocalist T. Brinda and elaborates, "With her emotional depth and subtle gamakas, she shaped my musical sensibilities more than anything else. My personal connection to Brindamma deepened that influence."

The music of M.D. Ramanathan helped him appreciate expansiveness and meditative depth, and from K.V. Narayanaswamy, he learnt about elegance and classical proportion.

Among western composers, while Bach's Baroque music was transformative, Shanker says, he is also influenced by Claude Debussy's sense of colour and atmosphere, Bela Bartok's

modern language drawn from Eastern European melodies, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's clarity and seemingly effortless balance. In the U.S., he took lessons from composer Nils

Vigeland and musicologist Prof. Justin Boyer.

Having studied both traditions, Shanker says he slowly began finding a deep emotional connection between them.

Shanker has been living in Washington since 1987, when he joined the World Bank group. "I've been fortunate to work and pursue western classical music composition study, before beginning this long-planned fusion project."

A brush with ragas

When singers perform on stage, Aarthi gets busy capturing the mood of a song on canvas

Deepa Venkatraman

Rasikas have long cherished Carnatic music as a living tradition. While most just enjoy listening, Aarthi R.R. transforms sound into visuals. As Chennai gears up for the Margazhi music season, Aarthi is all set to visit various concert halls with her sketchbook, brush and mini paint box. It was interesting to watch Aarthi paint as vainika Jayanthi Kumaresh played Syama Sastri's 'Ninnu vina' kriti, at her concert at The Music Academy last year. She captured the nuances of music through colours. What emerged was a painting of Parvati embracing the lingam at the Kamakshi temple in Kanchipuram.

Aarthi describes the process as meditative and creative. When asked how she manages to complete the painting



**Vibrant hues** Aarthi with her painting of a Dikshitar kriti. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

before a concert concludes, she says, "Initially it was challenging. Although illustrating on the iPad would be easy, watercolour is my favourite medium. Digital references of the deities on my phone and constant reading about temples come in handy." Aarthi usually gifts the paintings to artistes at the end of their concerts. Vocalists Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Ranjani and Gayatri, Sandeep Narayan, Trichur Brothers, Sikkil Gurucharan, Anahita and Apoorva, Sunil Gargyan and vainika Ramana Balachandran are among those who have received her works. Says Aarthi, "A memorable moment for me was when Jayanthi madam held up my painting at the Ustad Zakir Hussain tribute concert and showed it to the audience from the stage." Having created over 50 concert-illustrations last Margazhi, Aarthi wants her art to evolve naturally. "Sometimes, I just want to enjoy the music. However, seeing the years of sadhana artistes put in to create such soulful experiences, the artworks are my humble tribute to them," says Aarthi.



Narendra Kusnur

Having grown up on, and trained in Carnatic music in Mumbai, Shanker Krishnan discovered a new and a different world once he was at the University of California, Berkeley (for a course in applied mathematics). The 18th Century Baroque music, mainly German composer Johann Sebastian Bach, created "a deep impact".

A simultaneous passion for both forms led Shanker to question "if the emotional impact of Carnatic music's ragas and gamakas could meet the intricate structure of Baroque counterpoint". An elaborate exploration of the same led the Washington resident to compose and record his debut album *Confluence: Raga and Counterpoint*.

Released on IndianRaga and co-produced by Shanker's sister, Carnatic vocalist Geetha Raja, *Confluence...* has two compositions. 'Fugue-Kriti' is a three-movement piece that moves between ragas Hemavathi and Vachaspati. It features solo parts on the Carnatic violin, flute and veena, with string orchestra, gongs and timpani providing accompaniment. The three movements are pallavi, anupallavi and charanam, and it uses the fugue form, which uses multiple independent voices that are closely interwoven. Its emotional arc moves from tranquility and hope to chaos and foreboding.

The second composition is a four-movement Concerto-Kriti 'Field of Dharma', which explores the lyrical landscape of the *Bhagavad Gita*. It features Carnatic violin and veena, and uses multiple instruments in the orchestra. It moves between ragas Shanmukhapriya and Charukesi. The four movements are pallavi (Arjuna's Lament),

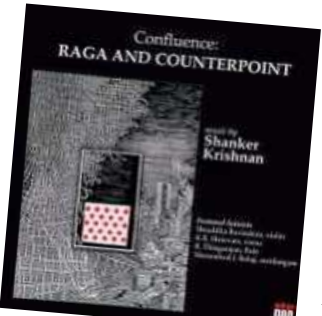
Carnatic meets Baroque...

...in Shanker Krishnan's *Confluence: Raga and Counterpoint*

Anupallavi (Field of Battle), Charanam (Dilemma) and Swaram (Realisation). However, it diverges from the traditional concerto by emphasising interaction between soloists within an orchestral context, rather than primarily between a soloist and the orchestra.

The album features soloists Shradha Ravindran on the violin, K.R. Shrivats on the veena, R. Thiagarajan on the flute and Mannarkoil J. Balaji on the mridangam. Says Shanker, "They are all accomplished concert performers, and were open to the creation of a new sound. My sister helped guide me to the right artistes through her own musical association with each of them."

Shanker says, one focus of his work is the use of counterpoint – the combination of multiple independent melodic lines – with Carnatic ragas. He adds, "Harmony has often been combined with raga-based melodies in Indian film music and in some classical experiments. But the combination of Baroque counterpoint with Indian



Verse and wisdom

The ninth edition of Mahindra Kabira Festival 2025 will bring alive the saint-poet's words



Shilpa Anandraj

The ancient city of Varanasi, lined with ghats and temples and alive with tradition, will echo with the verses of Kabir at the Mahindra Kabira Festival 2025. To be held from December 19 to 21, the event, in its ninth edition, is produced by Teamwork Arts.

The festival promises to be a celebration of the enduring legacy of 15th-Century mystic saint-poet Kabir, and will be held against the backdrop of the Ganga. It will bring together musicians, thinkers and cultural voices.

Says Sanjoy K. Roy, managing director, Teamwork Arts: "The idea behind the Festival was to continue to celebrate the traditions of India through music. Kabir became the choice as his philosophy and works are still relevant."

And, Varanasi remains the venue for the festival as the "city brims with an energy that we wanted visitors to the Festival to experience".

The event will promote local musicians, along with those from across the country, and includes heritage walks and talks. It will also showcase traditional local cuisine such as chaats and malaiyo.

As always, this year too, the festival will include morning, afternoon and evening sessions. The

inaugural evening will feature a qawwali 'Kabiriyat' by Rehmat-e-Nusrat, a Kumaon-based ensemble inspired by Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.

On December 20, the morning session at Guleria Kothi will commence with a vocal recital by Swati Tiwari, followed by a sitar performance by Hidayat Husain Khan (son of Ustad Vilayat Khan). The afternoon session will feature 'Kabir the Julaha: Verses from the Loom', a storytelling and musical performance by Shivangini Yeashu Yuvraj with Isha Priya Singh.

Shivala Ghat will be the venue for the evening sessions, and will feature 'Kabir Baani' by folk musician Mahesha Ram, followed by a vocal recital by Rahul Deshpande.

The concluding day begins with a Hindustani recital by Tejaswini Vernekar and a sarod recital by Debasmita Bhattacharya and concludes at Shivala Ghat with the Aditya Prakash Ensemble (fusion music of Carnatic and jazz) and a performance by Agam, the Carnatic progressive rock band.

Adds Sanjoy: "The artistes are commissioned to create a work based on Kabir's philosophy. Varanasi is a place where everything – life, death, music and spirituality – co-exist. That is the spirit the Festival also celebrates."

KRISHNA GANA SABHA		KAMAKOTI HALL CONCERTS	
KAMAKOTI HALL, Ph:28140806			
17.12.25 6.00 P.M	MALA RAMADORAI & PARTY (HINDUSTANI MUSIC)		
18.12.25 3.00 P.M	ANIRUDH RAJA (VOCALS)-Chetana Shekar (Violin)-Suriya Nambisan (Mridangam)		
6.00 P.M	NIRMALA RAJASEKAR ( VEENA)-Tivandrum Sampath (Violin)-Melakaveri Balaji (Mridangam)- N.Rajaraman (Ghatam)		
19.12.25 3.00 P.M	PAJNA ADIGA (VOCALS)-Haritha Narayanan (Violin)-Vinod Shyam Anoor (Mridangam)		
6.00 P.M	MADURAI N.SIVAGANESH (VOCALS)-Tirucherali karthik (Violin)-Sherthalai Ananthakrishnan (Mridangam)- Giridara Prasad (Kanjiira)		
20.12.25 3.00 P.M	VIKRAM IYER (VOCALS)-Saketha Pantula (Violin) Adarsh Devarajan (Mridangam)		
6.00 P.M	AGA GNANASUNDARAM & MADURAI M.VIJAYAGANESH (VIOLIN DUET )-Madipakkam Suresh (Mridangam)-S.HariharaSubramanian (Ghatam)		
21.12.25 3.00 P.M	C.S.CHINMAYI (SOLO VIOLIN) -S.Haritharan (Mridangam)-Sumukh Karanthi (Kanjiira)		
6.00 P.M	M.K.SANKARAN NAMBOOTHIRI (VOCALS)- B.V.Raghavendra Rao (Violin)-Neyyveli Skandasubramanian (Mridangam)-Haribabu (Ghatam)		
22.12.25 3.00 P.M	MALINI IYER (VOCALS) - Pranavi.G (Violin)- Sai Vamshi (Mridangam)		
6.00 P.M	B.V.BALASAI & U.P.RAJU (FLUTE & MANDOLIN DUET)-Aravind Ranganathan (Mridangam)- Sunaad Anoor (Kanjiira)		
23.12.25 3.00 P.M	PALGHAT SISTERS SOWMYA & SHWETHA (VOCAL DUET) -Bargava Vignesh (Violin) - Anirudh Raj (Mridangam)		
6.00 P.M	SANKARI KRISHNAN (VOCALS)-Anayampatti Venkatasubramanian (Violin) -Nellai Balaji (Mridangam)-Nerkunam Dr.S.Sankar (Kanjiira)		
24.12.25 3.00 P.M	RAGASUDHA BALASUBRAMANIAN (VOCALS)- Amogh Nadadur (Violin)-Kaushik Srihar (Mridangam)		
6.00 P.M	JAYASHREE VAIDYANATHAN (VOCALS)- Meera Sivaramakrishnan (Violin)-Manikkudai Chandrasekar (Mridangam)-Madipakkam Murali (Ghatam)		
25.12.25 3.00 P.M	ARCHANA & SAMANVI (VOCAL DUET)- M.Vijay (Violin)-Kundurthi Aravind (Mridangam)		
6.00 P.M	VITTAL RAMAMURTHY & SRIHARI VITTAL (VIOLIN DUET)-Tiruvur Vaidyanathan (Mridangam)-G.Guruprasanna (Kanjiira)		
26.12.25 3.00 P.M	ANISH & ARJUN NEERVANNAN (VIOLIN DUET) - A.Rohith (Mridangam)- Sri Sainath (Ghatam)		
6.00 P.M	SANGEETHA SWAMINATHAN (VOCALS)- Dr.Usha Rajagopalan (Violin)-R.Sankaranarayanan (Mridangam)-Madipakkam Murali (Ghatam)		
27.12.25 3.00 P.M	PATHANGI BROTHERS DATHRE & DHURV (VOCAL DUET)-Udipi Srijithi (Violin)- Sai Sarangan Ravichandra (Mridangam)		
6.00 P.M	SHANTALA SUBRAMANIAM (FLUTE) - Nishanth Chandran (Violin)-Vignesh Venkatraman (Mridangam)- D.V.Venkatasubramaniyam (Ghatam)		
28.12.25 3.00 P.M	S.SWAMINATHAN (VOCALS) - Kritihik Kaushik (Violin)-Sikar Chittari (Mridangam)		
6.00 P.M	Dr.M.NARMADHA (SOLO VIOLIN)-Poongulam Subramanyam (Mridangam)-S.Harihara Subramanian (Ghatam)		
29.12.25 3.00 P.M	VIVEK MOOZHILKAM (VOCALS) - Alankode V.S.Gokul (Violin)-Aduthurai Guruprasad (Mridangam)		
6.00 P.M	SHANKAR RAMAN (VOCALS) - Dr.Usha Rajagopalan (Violin)-Kalakkad Srinivasan (Mridangam)- Adambakkam K.Sankar (Ghatam)		
ALL ARE WELCOME		POWERED BY Nalli CHINNASAMI CHETTY	