

fridayReview

THE HINDU

Rooted in tradition

Melattur gears up for the ten-day annual Bhagavata Mela festival **p2**

Memory and music

The joy of drawing inspiration from past masters and experiences **p3**

A MONTAGE OF QUEER LOVE STORIES

Sapan Saran's play *Be-loved* explores the complexities of relationships **p4**



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On May 20, when students from across the country gather at IIT Madras for SPIC MACAY's (Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music And Culture Amongst Youth) seven-day international convention, the campus will turn into a space where art becomes personally meaningful, not only through passive observation, but through dynamic and transformative interactions. These conventions are not just an escape from the vicious cycle of deadlines, exams, and the constant quest for excellence; they weave deeper threads into the fabric of student life. Besides creating a bridge between heritage and youth, they are life skill labs.

It all began in 1977, when the founder of SPIC MACAY Kiran Seth, then an associate professor at IIT Delhi, engineered a cultural movement in the institution. He was keen to break the myth that the classical arts could not strike a chord with uninitiated youngsters. Through his non-profit voluntary youth movement, which now has nationwide

Campus notes

SPIC MACAY is back in Chennai with its flagship event — the international convention. To be held from May 20 to 26, it will give students a peek into India's art and heritage

and overseas chapters, musicians are invited to perform, present lec-dems and conduct workshops in colleges and schools. "We have to erase the divide between art and academics. It was while doing my doctorate at Columbia University that I discovered how calming classical music can be. I wanted more students to experience it. They need not lose touch with the past to secure their future," emphasises Kiran Seth.

From the first concert of Dagar Bandhu in IIT Delhi's convocation hall with just five students in attendance to becoming a popular movement with year-round performances by stalwart artistes and several teams of student volunteers helping to sustain the momentum, SPIC MACAY's 47-year journey symbolises the spirit of youth.

At a time when influences are diverse and choices unlimited, it has not been easy for Kiran Seth to keep the



movement going. "When we started, many of my colleagues, friends and relatives often asked me why I was wasting my time on *gaana bajaana*. SPIC MACAY has had to survive the challenges that keeps presenting themselves differently with the changing times. Initially many colleges and schools rejected the idea of having concerts on campuses. Some agreed, but on the condition that it be held during

the extra curricular class. We still have a long way to go. We need more volunteers to carry out our activities and be in constant touch with student communities," he says.

For the past two years, Kiran Seth has been on a pan-India cycle expedition. One of the purposes behind this yatra is to create awareness about SPIC MACAY and recruit volunteers for this

cultural mission.

Senior violinist GJR Krishnan refers to Kiran Seth as a 'yogi'. "His dedication to the cause is unimaginable. I can never say 'no' to a SPIC MACAY performance. Though I am supposed to be travelling to Australia, I ensured that I don't miss my concert on May 22 at the convention. I have imbibed the love for this movement from my father Lalgudi Jayaraman. He enjoyed performing for students and would often start with some fun tunes before launching into ragas," says Krishnan.

From promoting classical arts, SPIC MACAY has, over the years, widened its curriculum to include folk arts, yoga, crafts, intensives by writers, painters, social activists and environmentalists, heritage walks, theatre, screening of classics and holistic food.

"Artistes, institutions, sponsors and volunteers are the four pillars of the movement," says Suman Doonga, vice-chairperson of SPIC MACAY. "The annual convention is our flagship event. We are expecting 1,300 students and volunteers to attend the event at IITM, which has hosted the convention twice earlier (1996 and 2014). TCS is the main sponsor."

"We keep talking about catching them young to initiate the next generation into arts. But nobody has done it as successfully as SPIC MACAY," says veteran Bharatanatyam dancer and scholar Padma Subrahmanyam. She will be performing on the inaugural day (May 20) of the convention. "I am always excited to perform for the young. The interactive

sessions are more enjoyable because there is a curiosity to know. The sincerity and innocence with which youngsters ask questions make you go to any length to explain in a way they understand. They may not choose to pursue arts, but when they step out into the world equipped with the knowledge of our culture, they will be able to navigate life's path better."

SPIC MACAY conventions are learning beyond classrooms. Apart from being exposed to different art forms, which enhances students' cultural perspective, it also improves their social and organisational skills. They learn to bond, adjust and express.

"Youngsters make you think of ways in which classical music can be made more accessible," says violin exponent A. Kanyakumari, who will be performing at this convention. "Kiran Seth is doing an amazing service to art. The teams of volunteers go out of the way to make artistes comfortable. This movement is not about money, it is purely about music. And thanks to SPIC MACAY, I have interacted with students in places where Carnatic music has hardly any presence. For instance, I was recently in Nagaland and was surprised by the response to my music. Every time I have performed for SPIC MACAY, I have returned energised and hopeful of a better tomorrow," says the violinist.

SCHEDULE ON PAGE 4

Beyond the classroom

Students watching Kavita Dwivedi's Odissi performance at Shikshantar School, Gurugram. (Top) Chhau artistes from Purulia at Kendriya Vidyalaya, Bhopal. PHOTOS: SPIC MACAY AND A.M. FARUQUI

Hema Iyer Ramani

“What is the use of a book “, thought Alice “without pictures or conversations.” (Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*).

Recently, *The Hindu* Friday Review decided to do what John Tenniel did to Lewis Carroll's much-loved tales .If John's charming illustrations brought to life the words of Carroll, the TH Fridays' event, organised recently at *The Hindu* premises, brought forth a new dimension of the art and culture supplement.

The second edition (first one featured Sikkil Gurucharan and Madhan Karky) had the well-known vocalist-duo Ranjani and Gayatri in conversation with Akhila Krishnamurthy, founder, Aalaap. It was punctuated with the sisters' melodious singing.

Tracing their journey, Akhila highlighted how Providence transformed the sisters from violinists to

At the TH Fridays' interactive session, Ranjani and Gayatri shared what it means to learn, sing and ideate together

vocalists. This happened when they stepped in for a vocalist who had not turned up for a concert – from accompanying artistes they became main performers.

During the course of the conversation, the sisters spoke about why tradition is not just a set of rules. "It is more about adapting to and incorporating new ideas. This ensures a constant creative growth."

Thematic concerts
Apart from regular kutchesis, Ranjani and Gayatri have been working on thematic



Swara, tala and RaGa

concerts. The idea behind their 'Raaja by RaGa' and 'Rasa by RaGa', was to take Carnatic music to a wider audience. The sisters elaborated with example of how when one listens to a film song, one is captured by the mood. "But when you are

listening to classical music, you will be looking into the nuances and technicalities." According to the duo, the aim was not just to reproduce Ilaiyaraaja's music, but to recreate it by lending a third dimension.

Their growing up in

Mumbai and exposure to diverse musical influences have played a significant role in their journey. Apart from training in classical music, they were also familiar with both Hindi and Tamil film music. "We heard them all on radio, which opened up the

Siblings in sync Ranjani and Gayatri. PHOTO: R. RAVINDRAN

world of music for us," said Ranjani.

Gayatri shared how Raja sir's music used violin to the maximum effect and as violinists that appealed to them. "At college fests, I would reproduce his amazing tracks on the strings of my violin. We had never imagined that one day we would get to work with the inimitable composer," said Gayatri.

The sisters spoke about how thematic concerts have widened their repertoire and reach. "You get the opportunity to venture into new terrains. "There's so much of learning and sharing that happens when curating such performances," said Gayatri.

Referring to family support, they recalled how their father constantly pushed them to learn, practise and

find their niche. "Mridangam exponent guru Karaikudi R. Mani, who was our father's friend, gave us our first performance in Chennai under the aegis of his Sruthilaya," said Ranjani.

When on stage, the two are always seen smiling, exchanging notes and complimenting each other. Do they have disagreements and arguments? "Yes, of course, like any other siblings. We do have differences, especially, when ideating. But finally we come around, since we know we are on this journey together working towards a common goal," said Ranjani.

For over two decades, Ranjani and Gayatri have been exploring Carnatic music to find their own distinct expression. On or off stage, their life revolves around ra-ga.



Scan the QR code to subscribe to TH Fridays YouTube channel and watch the event once it is uploaded

Slice of a tradition (Below) Vijay Madhavan performing at Kapaliswarar temple, Mylapore. (Right) From *Prahlada Charitam* staged as part of the Bhagavata Mela in Melattur. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



N.C. Srinivasaraghavan

The Bhagavata Mela theatre form is a tradition rooted in Puranas or Hindu epics. The Bhagavata Mela Utsavam that takes place in Melattur today uses the dance dramas composed by Melattur Venkatrama Shastri for the last 200 years. Vijay Madhavan who formally learnt Bharatanatyam from guru Chitra Visweswaran trained to become a Bhagavata Mela artiste from a very young age and has been a part of this hallowed tradition for the last 34 years. Vijay took over a set of roles like Bhumi Devi in *Prahlada Charitam* and Mathanga Kanya in *Harischandra Natakam* from the renowned Melattur Natarajan’s cousin Ganesan. Mainly mastering the nuances through observation and advice from the elders who portrayed such roles, Vijay also studied several texts to grasp the intricacies behind the tradition as well as the profiles of the characters to be portrayed.

Bhagavata Mela dramas in Melattur are usually performed overnight and stretch for at least eight hours, integrating several small segments that need to be contextualised to understand the plot. Hence, shortening them for performances outside the village proves to be a formidable task. Vijay Madhavan instead aimed to represent the theatre tradition by working on compositions that are not a part of the dramas but are more of a reflection or a shadow of some popular pieces from the Bhagavata Mela repertoire. Naming his solo production ‘Chaya’, Vijay explored the paatra praveshas or self-introductory entrances of four main characters in the *Prahlada Charitam* drama by employing allied



One-man show

Vijay Madhavan’s ‘Chaya’ reflected his grasp of the Bhagavata Mela repertoire

compositions composed by Mysore Sadashiva Rao. One of the main pupils of Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavata, Sadashiva Rao was a famed musician at the court of Mysore.

The first composition that Vijay took up was ‘Dorakenu nedu’ in Devagandhari, which was performed to mirror Hiranyakashipu’s pravesham in the same raga. This kriti

was sung by Sadashiva Rao on Krishna, describing how the king of Mysore does all sorts of upacharas or sevas to the deity seated on a throne in the raja durbar. Hiranyakashipu is welcomed in the same way in the Bhagavata Mela natakam. Vijay demonstrated the arrival of the fearsome character through a distinctive style of footwork that is characteristic of prominent male characters

in Bhagavata Mela dramas. Hiranyakashipu’s distinct walk where he brandishes various weapons like the sword and mace was also incorporated by Vijay from the natakam. He also made use of a traditional Bhagavata Mela sorkattu, musically rendered in the dance drama. It was included in the form of a jathi with kuraippu.

History tells us that Sadashiva Rao is credited with

commencing the Ramotsava celebrations in Mysore. He also worshipped Rama and has composed kritis on the lord. The second piece ‘Endu daachukonnavu’ in Atana was an allegorical depiction of Leelavati’s pravesham in Bhagavata Mela which is also in the same raga. The dancer who plays Leelavati, the wife of Hiranyakashipu, walks across the stage behind a curtain that is held aloft by

two other dancers. Since the character is invisible to the audience despite being on stage, this composition of Sadashiva Rao, where he wonders where Rama is, was chosen by Vijay. Sadashiva Rao wonders why Rama is missing and pleads the deity to grant him darshan, despite the murti being visible to him in his puja chamber.

Sadashiva Rao was in the habit of going on pilgrimages across South India. On one such tour, he composed a song in raga Bhairavi on Parthasarathy of Tiruvallikeni. ‘Shri parthasarathe karuna jalanidhe’ is unique for many reasons. Parthasarathy in this temple is depicted as the aged charioteer, who taught the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna on the battlefield. Even though Krishna is old in this temple, Sadashiva Rao prefers to address him as a child using words like ‘Vasueva bala’ and ‘Gopala’! Thus, this composition is comparable to Prahlada’s Patra Pravesha in Bhairavi. Vijay depicted Parthasarathy in many ways –

Narasimha Jayanti festival

As part of Sri Narasimha Jayanti, Sri Lakshmi Narasimha Bhagavata Mela Bhakta Samajam, Saliyamangalam, Papanasam Taluk, Thanjavur district, will be hosting a three-day festival. Beginning with Mangala isai on May 21 at 4.30 p.m. the evening will include installation ceremony of Lakshmi Narasimha (6 p.m.); the procession of Srinivasa perumal (7 p.m.) and the staging of the Bhagavatha Mela Natya Natakam ‘Sri Prahalada Charithram’ at 10 p.m.

Day two (May 22) will feature Carnatic music concerts by young artistes of Saliyamangalam (5.30 p.m.) followed by procession (7 p.m.) and the staging of *Sri Rukmini Parinayam* (10 p.m.). Performance of Rukmini Kalyanam (7 a.m.) on the final day (May 23) of the festival will culminate in Anjaneya vidayatri utsavam at 7 p.m.



Interesting insights Sambandamurthy Achari; (Left) The song ‘Singaravelane Deva’, from Konjum Salangai, was based on a tune composed by him. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

An unsung scholar

T.A. Sambandamurthy Achari set the 51 verses of *Kandar Anubhuti* to tune in 51 different ragas. He has also composed varnams and more than 100 songs

Suganthi Krishnamachari

Music scholar T.A. Sambandamurthy Achari’s (1913-1977) father Appadurai Achari was an authority on Tiruppugazh, and sang at Naina Pillai’s annual Thiruppugazh festival. “My father acquired a lot of knowledge by listening to my grandfather and through research,” says Sambandamurthy’s son Sahasranamam.

Whenever T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai (TNR) visited Madras, he met Sambandamurthy to discuss apoorva ragas. When Sambandamurthy gave a concert in TNR’s house, the latter asked him to expatiate on some rare ragas. He even once requested Sambandamurthy to compose a song in Karaharapriya, with a Sampoorana arohana, but using only sa pa ma in the descent. Sambandamurthy tuned the

Tiruppugazh ‘Semakomala’, according to TNR’s specifications. TNR and later Kuzhikkurai Pichaiyappa Pillai included it in many concerts. In Trichy All India Radio, TNR and his brother-in-law Thiruvengadu Subramania Pillai played the Tiruppugazh ‘Amudamooru’, which Sambandamurthy had set to tune in Sindhubhairavi.

Sambandamurthy even composed a varnam in praise of TNR. Sambandamurthy argued that there were only 32 melakarta ragas, and that vivadi melas should be excluded. He said that vidwans should take into consideration the inherent rhythm of Tiruppugazh.

Sambandamurthy explained that ‘Kaithala nirai kani’ was in misram. But vidwans sang it in Adi talam, which was against the metre of the verse. He pointed out that there were many verses in Tiruppugazh in which the five jatis of talas could be identified. For instance, “Thimira



udati’ – Tisram; Kadalai Poriyavarai - Chatusram; niraamaya puraataana - Khanda; and Sinathavar Mudikkum - Sankeernam. D.K.Pattammal learnt Tiruppugazh from Sambandamurthy and his father. TNR suggested that if anyone had any questions about sruti bheda, they should consult Sambandamurthy, who had done extensive research on the subject.

Popular tune

In 1927, when Sambandamurthy visited Thoothukkudi, he set some Thevaram verses to tune. He set Thirugnanasambandar’s ‘Mandiramaavadu neeru’ in raga Abheri. It became very popular in Thoothukkudi Siva temple, and was sung by Thevaram singers in

Pazhani, Madurai, Tiruvarur, Tiruchendur and other temples.

In 1947, nagaswara vidwan Karukurichi Arunachalam learnt the mettu from Sambandamurthy and began playing it in his concerts. The verse was included in Sambandamurthy’s book *Isai Varidhi*, published in 1956.

Naturally, Sambandamurthy was dismayed when the tune was used for the song ‘Singaravelane’ (film *Konjum Salangai*, 1962), without acknowledging him. He contemplated going to court. But his friends persuaded him to let the matter rest. He wrote that since Karukurichi Arunachalam, Ponnuthayi, Kripandanavarai, Madurai Mariappa Swamigal, T.K. Shanmugam and many others had acknowledged it as his tune, he was not going to look for further recognition.

Sambandamurthy set the 51 verses of Kandar Anubhuti to tune

in 51 different ragas. He composed varnams and more than 100 songs.

Music director T.R. Pappa appreciated his Revathi varnam and his Subhapanthavari song ‘Natanamadidum nayaka’, which had sollukattus instead of chittaswaras.

Love for language

Sambandamurthy wrote a song for the film *Paithiyakkaran* (1947). He was the music teacher for many in the film industry such as actors S.V. Sahasranamam, N.S. Krishnan and Chandrakantha and editor/director B. Lenin. Music directors P.S. Diwakar and T.K. Ramamurthy consulted him on apoorva ragas. T.K.S. Kalavanan, son of actor T.K. Shanmugam, who did gurukulavasam under Sambandamurthy, says, “My teacher never began teaching with sarali. Instead, he taught us songs, and with his guidance, we soon

acquired swara gnana. He gave me grades for my singing, and I had to get my father’s signature in the report card. He refused to teach songs in any language except Tamil.” Sambandamurthy’s love for Tamil earned for him the title ‘Aaikkonaa isai tamizh arignar’ (unshakeable scholar of Tamizh music) from poet Bharatidasan.

“*Isai varidhi, Thiruppugazh, Tala Eri, Raga Marabu, Eliyamurai Isaipayirchi Nool, Sruti Bheda Isai Nool, Apoorva Ragamalika, Kartha Ragangal, Enadhu Kalathu Isai Ulagam, Innisai Pozhil, Thevaram, Bharatanatya Iyal* are some of the books grandfather wrote,” says Bilahari, grandson of Sambandamurthy.

“When I was doing my BA music, the prescribed textbook said that for musical aspects of Thevaram and other Tamil works, students should refer to grandfather’s books,” says granddaughter Sripranjani.

Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer described Sambandamurthy as a “musical genius.” Kripandanavarai built a house for him in Chennai.

When Sambandamurthy was on his deathbed, he dictated a song in Rishabapriya raga to his son Takkesi.

The song begins with the word ‘udavuvarilla’ (there is no one to help). It records the anguish of a musician, who spent his entire life exploring the many facets of music, but has not got due recognition. This was Sambandamurthy’s swan song.



The stage is set

The 10-day Bhagavata Mela utsavam at Melattur will be held from May 21

Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam is back with its 84th edition of Bhagavata Mela Nataka Mahotsavam, organised annually on the occasion of Narasimha Jayanti. Supported by Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, and Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram, Government of Tamil Nadu, this year’s festival will be held from May 21 to 30 at Sri Varadaraja Perumal temple, Melattur. The inaugural day’s programme will begin with special abhishekam and aradhanai. Sandhya Purecha, chairperson, Sangeet Natak Akademi will be the chief guest who will formally inaugurate the festival on May 22. This will be followed by the play *Prahlada Charitam* to be staged at 9.30 p.m. The ten-day festival will feature the following plays: May 24: *Harischandra- Part I*; May 25: *Harischandra Part 2*; May 27: *Rukmini Kalyanam*; and May 28: *Sati Savitri*. Time: 9.30 p.m.

The line-up also includes Bharatanatyam performances by the students of ABHAI followed by Kuchipudi recital by Himansee Katragadda and Bharatanrityam by Anuradha Vikranth on May 23 (8 p.m.-10 p.m.). Parvathi Ravi Ghantasala’s ‘Nara Narayan Upasmahe’, a thematic production, will be presented on May 26 at 8.50 p.m.

Nritya Aradhana by the students of Bharathanjali on May 28 8 p.m.; Tamil Opera *Valli Thirumanam* on May 29, 9.30 p.m. and Anjaneya aradhana on May 30, 6.30 p.m. will complete the schedule. The event will be streamed live by MDnD Entertainment, and will be available for viewing till July 15.



Aravind and Srikanth in *Prahlada Charitam*. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Among the myriad Kathakali plays perhaps the only solo performance of three vesham (female character) is *Poothana Moksham*. But 'Chintna Vishtayaya Sita', one of the famous poems by poet Kumaranasan choreographed by Kalamandalam Rajasekharan, is the second one, which was staged recently.

at the Regional Theatre of Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi, as part of the 59th anniversary celebrations of Thrissur Kathakali Club, and as a gesture of gratitude for the gold medal presented to him as an outstanding artiste. The gesture appeared relevant as 2024 is being observed as the 100th death anniversary of the great poet.

Ramayana. The play is an exploration of womanhood, and further a synopsis of the Ramayana itself.

When the curtains went up the character was seen in a brooding posture. It spoke volumes of her disenchantment with life's

circumstances. Her thoughts were manifested into numerous anecdotes providing the artiste ample opportunities to exhibit his histrionics.

The first padam after the shloka beginning with "Oru nischayamilloninnum/ varumoro dasa vannapole pom..." composed in Anandabhairavi and Chembada tala, epitomised her mood. In the elakiyattam, the artiste enacted her marriage to Rama and peaceful life in the palace. All the ensuing anecdotes portrayed through shlokas and padams were arranged systematically to convey the intrinsic message of the lyrics. Agile and nimble were the mudras that interpreted the padams.

The striking feature of Rajasekhara's vesham is his portrayal of the female characters. And in this play especially, his depiction of Sita, wearing a saffron sari and rudraksha around her neck, stood out. The costume indicated that she was in the ashram of sage Valmiki after being abandoned by Rama.

Another noteworthy segment was the *agni pareeksha*, where he took care not to overdo any of the bhavas, be it veera or rowdra. The libretto, being the poet's own verses, was easily comprehensible to the audience.

Commendable was the vocal support by Kalamandalam Vinod assisted by Kalamandalam Yaswant. The percussion side included Kalamandalam Raj Narayanan (maddalam) and Kalamandalam Nidhin Krishna (edakka).

Singing Pancharatna kritis in Paris

The Indian Conservatory hosted Tyagaraja Aradhana to celebrate the timelessness of Indian music

Siddham Myriam Irene Anie

In a serene Sunday morning at the annual Tyagaraja aradhana, organised by the Indian Conservatory of Paris (ICParis), the Paris Town Hall transformed into a vibrant microcosm of Chennai. A beautiful blend of Indian and French cultures, the event had attendees donning vibrant silk sarees and crisp kurtas.

The day began with the young talents of the ICParis singing the Geete, setting the tone for a spirit of togetherness. That the chief guests – Indian Ambassador to France and Monaco, Jawed Ashraf, and the Deputy Mayor of Paris 16, Samia Badat Karam – were visibly moved by the performances is a testament to the universal appeal of Indian classical music.

The Indian Conservatory of Paris was founded in 2015 by Bhavana Pradyumna and Pradyumna Kandakai to promote Indian classical arts in France. Since then, the organisation has been bringing together artistes, teaching classical music as well as collaborating with agencies and governments to promote Indian classical arts.

The highlight of the event was the performance by senior Carnatic vocalist S. Sowmya, who is also the Vice Chancellor of the Tamil Nadu Dr. J. Jayalalithaa Music and Fine Arts University. She was accompanied by Embarr Kannan on the violin and Neyveli Narayanan on the mridangam.

The kritis rendered included Purandaradasa's 'Sharanu siddhivinayaka', Tyagaraja's 'Marugelara' and Dikshitar's 'Meenakshi Memudam'. But it was the 'Tyagaraja Pancharatna kriti 'Jagadananda karaka' that struck a chord with the audience.

The singing of the Pancharatna kritis



Artistic exchange S. Sowmya and Bhavana Pradyumna with the MoU; (below) the aradhana concert PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

by the students, led by Sowmya and Bhavana, were enjoyable.

The event marked a significant milestone in the journey of artistic exchange. This was formalised by the signing of an MoU between the Indian Conservatory of Paris and the Tamil Nadu Dr. J. Jayalalithaa Music and Fine Arts University. The MoU authorises the conservatory, affiliated with Tamil Nadu University, to offer diploma courses and certificates in Carnatic music, Bharatanatyam and tabla.

MoU to strengthen ties

Speaking about the significance of Tyagaraja Aradhana, Jawed Ashraf, said, "Both India and France attach a high level of importance to cultural traditions, and both are conscious about preserving and nurturing their heritage."

According to Bhavana, president, ICParis, "The conservatory would help students pursue advanced levels in Carnatic music and dance, and receive grades, diplomas and certifications upon completion."

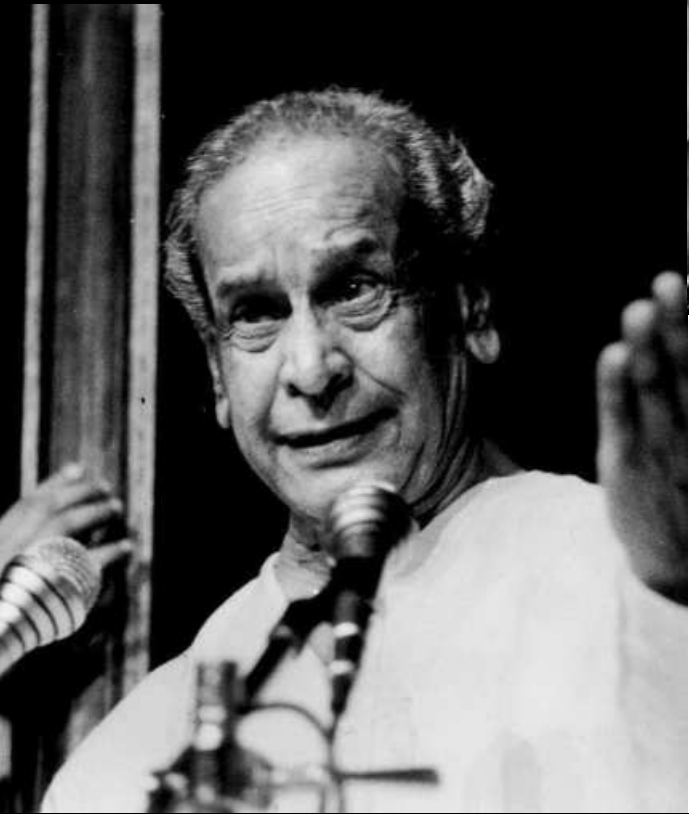


Is Indian classical music a living recollection of raga rather than a constrained construction of art? What is the connect between memory and music? How much does past define the present in art? These were some of the questions that speakers at Raza Foundation's 'Art Matters' dealt with.

Changing nature of music

According to Raza Foundation's Ashok Vajpayi, though Indian classical music has its foundation laid on memory, it is characterised by impermanence. Raga cannot be frozen in time. The earlier generation of performers saw music as a living reality. Hence, they desisted from documenting or recording their work. But in this era,

Speakers at 'Art Matters' highlighted the connect between music and memory



when recordings have become the new normal, classical music has become a coded language, changing its very nature.

Irfan Zuberi referring to the aural-oral tradition of transmission of music highlighted the non-linearity of our music tradition. Music as memory includes rote learning and memory of the music heard. Irfan shared how certain compositions are remembered for their



(From left) Ustad Faiyaz Khan; Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande; Pt. Bhimsen Joshi; and Ustad Rahim Fahimuddin Dagar.

PHOTOS: THE HINDU ARCHIVES



generations. His father, a Sanskrit scholar, wanted to hear a recording of his favourite Ustad Faiyyaz Khan in his last moments rather than shlokas of Bhagavat Gita. In an age when musicians opt for political neutrality, Sudhir spoke of a bolder era when Pt. Bhimsen Joshi concluded his concerts with thought-provoking songs such as 'Soch samajh naadan, iss nagari mein daya dharam nahi'.

According to Meeta Pandit, her 'sina ba sina' (one-on-one) training is the most effective way of teaching music. "Every nuance has to be imbibed and stored in mind. Her great grandfather Pt. Shankar Pandit has written eight books on music, belying assumptions that practitioners of music in the early part of the last century were unlettered and ignorant.

Meeta further emphasised the importance of learning through memorising rather than relying on notations. It is important to learn how to improvise rather than learn what to improvise.

The interesting takeaway from this discussion was that, in the Indian musical tradition, oral communication takes precedence over texts. Our musical memories play a crucial role in preserving and carrying forward the art.

Charumathi Supraja

Let's start at the end. When *Be-loved* (a play that threw together a montage of queer love stories set firmly in the Indian context) ended on the fifth day of the Remembering Veenapani Festival at Adishakti Theatre, Auroville, the applause would not stop. It was a while before the cast and crew could be introduced. The mostly Hindi play was well-received by the audience though it did not carry a single subtitle in any language.

Be-loved was much loved. It's difficult to pinpoint which elements worked more towards the play's effectiveness. The right on cue, live music held together the many narrative strands running through the play, like the spine of a book.

The cohesive, sprightly energy of the actors made the characters come alive and feel familiar. Well-composed scenes, movement choreographies that flowed and excellently rendered songs (by the actors and two musicians who played crucial roles in the storytelling) – all added to the play's success.

Be-loved began on a heart-winning note as the actors paid a musical tribute to all the writers and poets whose works have been used in the play. The way it portrayed coming out stories and the attempts to make it to happily ever after (even after many heartbreaks) made for a warm, vibrant patch-work quilt of love stories.

The play skillfully employed song, dance and humour to explore the question – why is love so heartbreaking? It depicted the complexity and willfulness of love, besides its ability to shake up relationships – inside and out. It showed how desire plays out, or would play out, if it weren't given such bad press in society, while keeping the audience emotionally in tune and mostly laughing with it.

A Tamasha Theatre production, *Be-loved* "has been built in a hugely collaborative

Unmasking queerness

Be-loved employed song, dance and humour to depict the complexities of love



way," says Sapan Saran, the director. Having come across an abundance of stories of "courage, hope, belonging, passion, love and loss," at the research stage, she particularly sought to delve into "the experience of Indian queerness." Aspiring to depict its many shades in all fullness – where "vulnerability and desire could sit next to loss, wit and satire," she put together an ensemble of "multi-skilled performers." She says, "We knew we had to celebrate queerness by embracing it in its entirety with all its joys, confusions, contradictions and strengths. We had to share these stories not as victims but as human beings – flawed yet complete - like everyone else."



The playmaking process involved "reading, sharing, open discussions, language training, movement training, ensemble work, object theatre training, listening to personal stories, a

whole lot of text analysis and deconstruction, music making and learning, and hours spent on the floor ideating, mulling, thinking, dreaming and hoping together," says Sapan. Much

importance was given to creating "a space that was open and safe for everyone, where we could unabashedly be ourselves, a space that did not ever ask – "are you queer?" but silently understood and respected boundaries" she adds.

The intent was to make a play that "created its own framework of queerness," she says, adding that, "the process had to put to practice what it hoped to achieve through the production: ask for a world that respects individual freedom and collective diversity."

Music is almost a character in this play. Describing its making, Sapan says that the selected and written text of the play seemed to choose the musical genres and forms that would best present their nuances. "Mohit Agarwal transformed Josh Malihabadi's ghazal into a throbbing qawwali. Amod Bhatt has composed the Nandi dedicated to writers, which combines traditional elements of folk performances with a unique contemporary touch. Rohit Das brings with him years of theatre music experience and has composed (and played) music for several pieces in the play. He was accompanied by Ritesh Malaney on percussion," Sapan says.

Speaking about the response to the play in different venues and cities, she says that though the experience of viewing is subjective, there have been several moving responses. "To many, *Be-loved* has become a kind of a coming-out-to-the-family play. They hope their parents will watch the play and understand them better." A girl sent her parents to watch the play without her. This opened up space for the family to have their first ever "warm, open conversation about queerness," says Sapan. "In Baroda, we performed to an audience that comprised allies and queer communities. Several trans people from nearby villages attended the show and there was a fabulous post show interaction between them and the team," shares Sapan. While she believes that theatre can create activists, she hopes that a play like *Be-loved* can make "shifts in a collective space".

Cultural fiesta



Here are the main events of the seven-day convention.
May 20 - 8 a.m.: inauguration; 8.05 a.m.: vidwan Seshmpatti Sivalingam's nagaswaram, 9 a.m.: Screening of Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* followed by a discussion with A. Annamalai, director, National Gandhi Museum, New Delhi; 6 p.m.: formal inauguration ceremony; 7 p.m. to 9.30 p.m.: Padma Subrahmanyam's Bharatanatyam followed by Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia's flute recital.
May 21 - 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.: Kabir gayan by Kaluram Bamaniya; Pung Cholon by Khumukcham Romendra Singh and Purulia Chhau by Tarapada Rajak; 6 p.m. to 9.30 p.m.: Kathak by Sunayana hazarilal followed by A. Kanyakumari's violin recital.
May 22 - 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.: Puppetry by Sudip Gupta and Habib Tanvir's play *Charandas Chor*; 6 p.m. to 9.30 p.m.: Lalgudi GJR Krishnan (violin) followed by Neyveli Santhanagopalan's vocal recital.
May 23 - 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.: Ratan Thiyam's play *Kanupriya*, Purulia Chhau by Tarapada Rajak and Baul sangeet by Parvathy Baul; 6 p.m. to 9.30 p.m.: Jayanthi Kumaresh (veena) and Pt. Ulhas Kaskhalkar (Hindustani vocal).
May 24 - 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.: Qawwali by Warsi Brothers; gurbani by Alankar Singh; 6 p.m. to 9.30 p.m.: Ustad Shahid Parvez (sitar) and Pt. Venkatesh Kumar (Hindustani vocal).
May 25 - 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. presentations at six different venues; 8.30 p.m. to 6 a.m.: Ustad Amjad Ali Khan (sarov), Sudha Ragunathan (Carnatic vocal), Ashwini Bhide Deshpande (Hindustani vocal), Margi Madhu Chakravar (Koodiyattam) and Ustad Wasifuddin Dagar (dhrupad).
May 26 - 9 a.m. onwards heritage tours There will be intensives, workshops and yoga from May 21 to 25. For details visit www.spicmacay.org

A reformer's life

The play *Mahan Narayana Guru* was loaded with social messages



Suganthy Krishnamachari

Mali's stage recently presented the play *Mahan Narayana Guru* (written and directed by Kudanthai Mali), at Narada Gana Sabha. Mali is known for his scripts with a social message. A play on the social reformer Narayana guru, is, therefore, right up his street. Mali gave everyone in the audience a pamphlet with quotes about Narayana guru. This gave one an idea not just about the guru's geographical reach, but the impression he made on many eminent persons, including Tagore and Gandhi.

The play begins with the birth of Narayanan, Nanu to his family. The signs of greatness are evident even when Nanu is a child. He does not blindly accept rules, simply because they have been followed for centuries. And as he grows older, his reformist zeal becomes stronger. His mother thinks

marriage will help him settle down. But he walks out of the marriage, and takes to penance. When lower castes are denied entry into temples, he establishes a linga for them to worship. He knows that education is a tool of empowerment, and his gurukulam includes children from all castes. When they recite a Sanskrit shloka with perfect diction, Rajagopalachariar, Diwan of Cochin and later Travancore, is convinced that the guru is on the right track. Narayana guru believed that it was the dead wood of tradition that had to be discarded and not Hindu philosophy. Nor was he against any caste. In a scene in the play, he points out that many reformers were themselves

The major events in the life of Narayana Guru were captured by Mali, with a voice-over briefly mentioning the ones that could not be accommodated in the play

Brahmins. His encounter with Ramana Maharshi, depicted in the play, is a meeting of two enlightened souls. They exchange no words, but communicate in silence. All the major events in the life of Narayana guru were captured by Mali, with a voice-over briefly mentioning the ones that could not be accommodated in the play. Mali's *Mahan Narayana Guru* was more like a documentary than a play, which was understandable. Although Narayana guru's ideas were revolutionary, his methods were peaceful. So, obviously, one could not expect much action on stage. Mali had encapsulated the guru's teachings as much as he could in a two-hour play. Except for K.R.S. Kumar, who played the role of the aged Narayana guru, the other actors had minor roles. Kicha had come up with some good tunes for the play. Padma stage Kannan's props were minimal, but appropriate.

CALENDAR

Concert series



Under the auspices of Madhuradhwani, the following programmes are taking place at Arkay Convention Center from May 18 to 23. Schedule: As part of the Single Mike kutcheri series, Keerthana Sriram will present her vocal concert on May 18 at 6.15 p.m. She will be accompanied by Gsp Sivani Gayathri on the violin and Poongulam Subramaniam on the mridangam. May 19, 6.15 p.m.: Allam Durgaprasad (Gottuvadyam) with V.L. Kumar (voilin), Shertalai R. Aanthakrishnan (mridangam) and Mysore M. Gururaj (morsing). May 20, 6.30 p.m.: Isai Kavi Ramanan's monthly series 'Maadham Thorum Maha Kavi', May 22, 5 p.m.: Snigdha Desiraju (vocal) followed by Abhilash Venkitachalam (6.30 p.m.). The line-up concludes on May 23 with a music ensemble featuring Sunil Gargyan (vocal) with Mylai Karthikeyan (nagaswaram), G. Badrinath (violin), Delhi Sairam (mridangam) and Anirudh Athreya (kanjira), Time:6.15 p.m.

Bharatanatyam recitals

Natyarangam, the dance wing of Narada Gana Sabha, will feature the following Bharatanatyam performances on May 18. Details: Gautam Marathe, disciple of Vaibhav Arekar, at 6 p.m. followed by Varsha Rajkumar, disciple of Anitha Guha, at 7.30 p.m. Venue: Swami Haridhos Giri Hall.

Tribute to Ariyakudi

Shri Ariyakudi Music Foundation in association with Hamsadhwani will celebrate the 134th birth anniversary of the legendary Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar on May 19, 6 p.m. with a tribute concert by Ashwath Narayanan. The accompanists are Akkarai Sornalatha (violin), Praveen Sparsh (mridangam) and S. Krishna (ghatam). Alleppey Venkatesan will be the chief guest. Venue: Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Myslapore.



Tamil play

Under the auspices of Narada Gana Sabha, Dummies Drama will stage the Tamil play *Thottra Mayakkangala*, written and directed by Sridhar Ramaswamy, on May 19, 6.45 p.m. at Sathguru Nnanananda Hall.

Thematic concert

The Music Academy has organised Brindha Manickavasakan's vocal concert themed on Gopalakrishna Bharathi's compositions today at 6 p.m. Shraddha Ravindran on the violin and Kishore Ramesh on the mridangam will accompany her. The concert, to take place at Kasturi Srinivasan Hall, is organised under the endowment instituted by Malathi Rangaswami in memory of T.T. Rangaswami.

Hastakalaa

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