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THE  HINDU

A three-day festival will celebrate the sound of this traditional instrument **p2**

Rishab Rikhiram Sharma uses his music to help people with mental health issues **p3**



THE MAKING OF A UNIQUE THEATRE GROUP

Bombay Gnanam has carved a niche with her plays and an all-woman team **p4**



Nirmal Chander's film on Annapurna Devi attempts to demystify the reclusive musician's life

Solitary

being convinced of her extraordinary talent), getting married to Pt Ravi Shankar in 1941, and the tumultuous marriage turning her into a recluse.

To add to it, the couple's son Shubhendra chose to leave his

notes

Shailaja Khanna

Annapurna Devi led a deeply reclusive life, and remained an enigma for many. But filmmaker Nirmal Chander who never had the opportunity to meet the legendary musician has made two films on her – *Guru Ma* in 2019 for the Sangeet Natak Akademi, and the more recent *6-A, Akash Ganga*, (refers to her address in Mumbai) for the Annapurna Devi Foundation.

The latest film has been screened so far in Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune and Delhi.

Much has been written about the life of Annapurna Devi or Ma (as she was known) – her birth in Maihar in 1927, learning music from her father Ustad Allaadin Khan (who agreed to teach only after being convinced of her extraordinary talent), getting married to Pt Ravi Shankar in 1941, and the tumultuous marriage turning her into a recluse.

To add to it, the couple's son Shubhendra chose to leave his

mother in 1970 and went to the U.S. with his father, where he died in 1992.

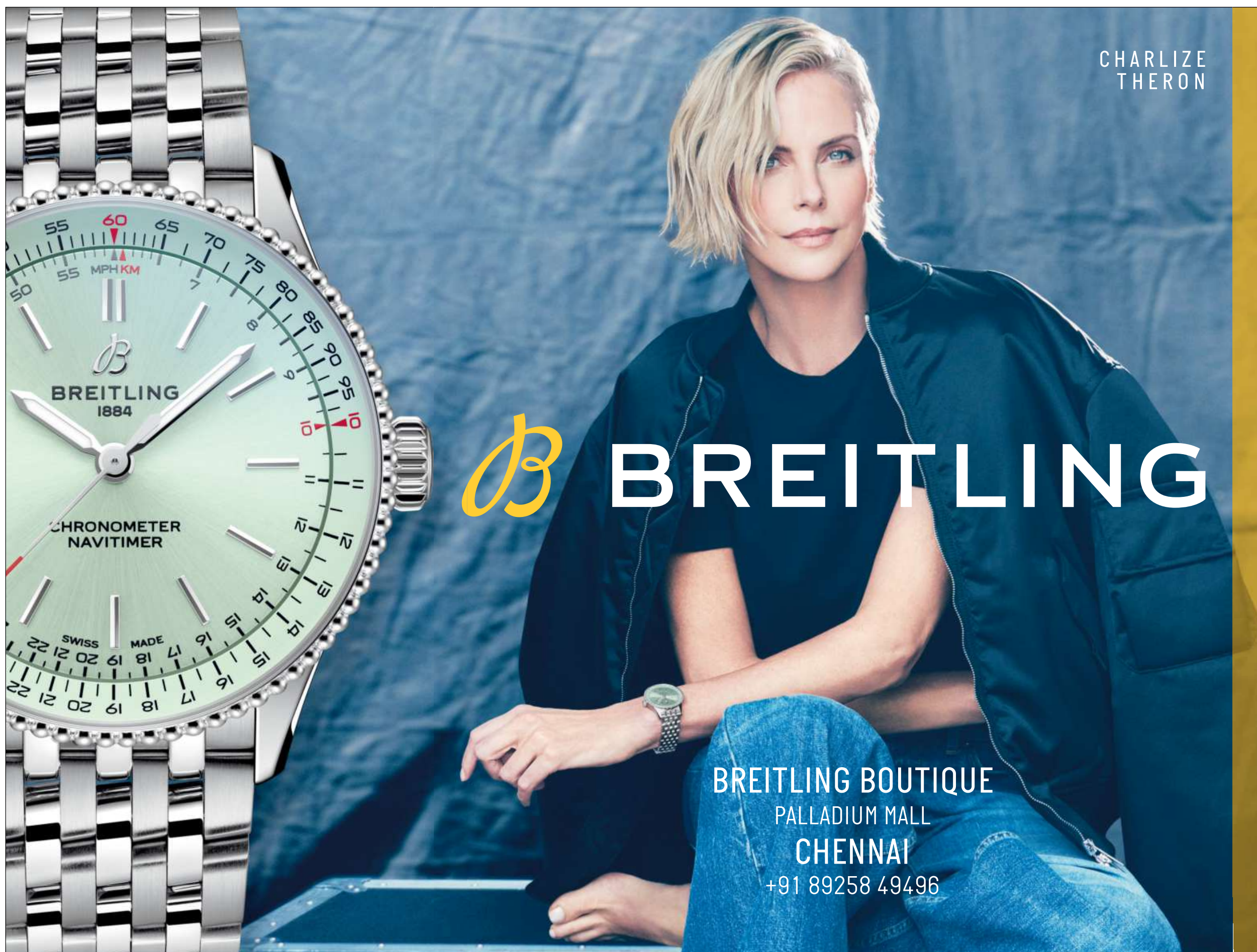
Towards the end of her life, Annapurna Devi wanted her story to be told. She had given an interview in Bengali to Tathagatha Ray Chaudhury, and had also spoken to Shekhar Sen, but that was on her father and his musical legacy.

Agreeing to this movie was a sign of her total trust and dependence on disciple Nityanand Haldipur, who looked after her like a son.

Annapurna Devi's superiority as a musician is traced in the film through the accounts of disciples Vinay Bharat Ram and Carnatic singer Shakuntala Narasimhan, who describes Ma's last concert with Pt. Ravi Shankar in 1955 at the Music Academy. Annapurna Devi broke her vow to never play in public again only once – for a performance in Calcutta in the mid-1960s.

According to Jyotin Bhattacharya's book on Allaudin Khan, the Ustad told his daughter that she need not play for people if she did not wish to, and should devote her music to the divine. However, Nityanand Haldipur says, Ma felt that the audience had got used to the diluted music of panditji and bhaiya (Ustad Ali Akbar Khan) that her music, which was what Baba taught her, won't satisfy them.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 3





H. Ramakrishnan

Swarathmika Srikant, daughter of vocalist G. Srikant and granddaughter of vidushi Leelavathi Gopalakrishnan, presented a vocal concert for Naada Inbam recently. Among the songs she sang, Tyagaraja's 'O Rangasayi' (Kamboji), rendered in a leisurely pace, needs special mention. Niraval and swaras were at the usual 'Bhuloka vaikuntam'.

After an elaborate elucidation of Hamsanandi, came Harikesanallur Muthaiah Bhagavata's 'Needu mahima pogada na tharama' on Rama, with appealing swaras at the

Of hopes and dreams

Swarathmika Srikant's concert was a display of her training and talent

pallavi. After an enjoyable Natakapriya alapana, she sang Mysore Vasudevachar's 'Iti samayamu brova' (Rupakam) on Krishna. The swaraprastara was at the

pallavi. Swarathmika commenced the recital with a varnam, 'Sri krishnam' in Kiravani, followed by Narayana Tirtha's Tarangam in Gambhira

Nattai, 'Jaya jaya rama kantha' (Khanta Chapu) on Venkatesa of Varahur. This song had chittaswaram too.

Swarathmika next sang 'Rama ninne nammitini' by Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar with chittaswaram in Saranga. In a devotional Bagesri, she sang 'Chakravarti tirumagan', composed by Sundaravalli Ammal and tuned by vidushi Seetha Narayanan. Swarathmika concluded with Kulasekhara Azhwar Pasuram 'Mannupugazh kosalai thann' in Ragamalika.

On the violin was another young artiste Shreelakshmi Bhat, who is presently being trained by Sriram Parasuram. She did well in following the main artiste and shined in the raga alapana and swaraprastaras. On the

Unique approach Swarathmika Srikant with Melakkaveri Balaji (mridangam), Shreelakshmi Bhat (violin) and Pravarthika Balaji (konnakkol). PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

mridangam was senior artiste Melakkaveri Balaji, who enriched the concert.

Another compelling aspect of this concert was the presence of a konnakkol artiste, Pravarthika Balaji, daughter and disciple of Melakkaveri Balaji. Earlier, konnakkol was part of most vocal concerts. The main quality of a konnakkol artiste is the ability to judge when to offer the humming support, when to keep quiet and when to take charge. To the credit of Pravarthika, she tried her best to live up to the task.



Seshampatti Sivalingam.
PHOTO: R. RAGU

Nagaswaram festival

Many stalwarts such as T.N. Rajarathnam Pillai, Namagiripettai Krishnan, Karukurichi Arunachalam, Semponnarkoil Brothers and Sheikh Chinnamoulana made the nagaswaram a significant part of the music world. Their distinct playing styles inspired many to take to playing the instrument.

Referred to as the mangala vadyam due to its association with temple festivals and social events, the nagaswaram has over the years often occupied centre stage at cultural festivals.

The Music Academy for the first time is organising an exclusive three-day nagaswaram festival to promote the instrument and support its practitioners. Titled 'Nadostavam', it will be held from March 27 to 29 at Kasturi Srinivasan Hall. Two concerts (5.15 p.m. and 7 p.m.) will be held daily.

It will feature both established and up-and-coming nagaswaram artistes. The following is the schedule: March 27, 5.15 p.m.: Mambalam M.K.S. Siva, N. Manikandan and S. Nandeesh. They will be accompanied by Adyar G. Silambarasan and Gummidipoondi R. Jeevanantham on the thavil. At 7 p.m.: Seshampatti T. Sivalingam and Mylai Selvam with Kongampattu A.V. Murugaiyan and Veliambakkam V.M. Palanivel (thavil). March 28: Tirumeignanam Brothers with Thirukadaiyur T.G. Babu and Panapakkam G. Tamizhselvan (thavil) followed by Kasim and Babu (nagaswaram) with Mannargudi Vasudevan and Madurai Vijaykumar (thavil).

The festival concludes with the performances of Bengaluru S.P. Palanivel - Prabhavathi with Velliambakkam V.M. Ganapathi and Bikkampatti B.R. Venkatesh on the thavil followed by that of Vyasrapadi G. Kothandaraman-Tirupati B. Kesanna and Chittoor R. Devarajulu with Tirupungur Muthukumaraswamy and Adyar Senthil Kumar (thavil).

Guruguhamrta's next

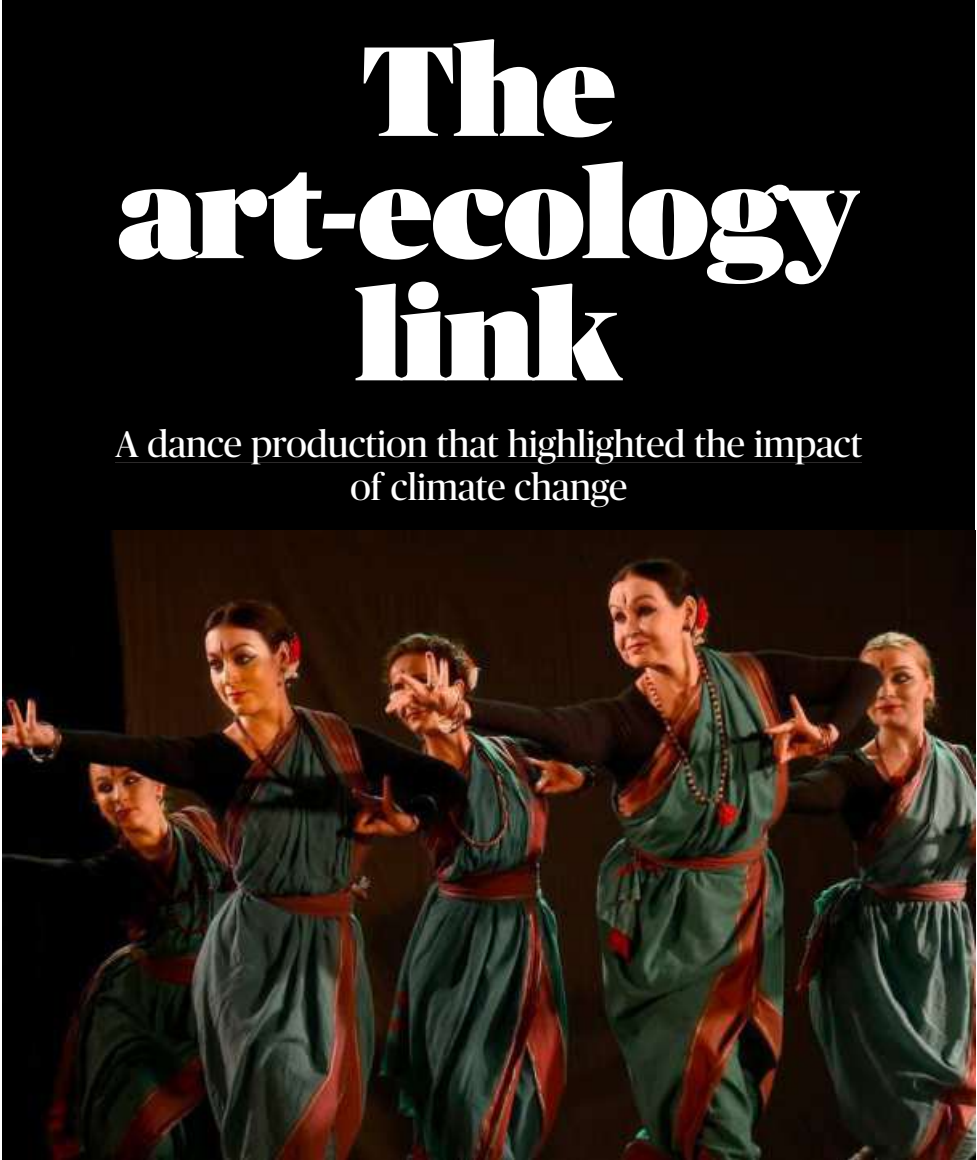
The second edition of 'Dikshita Kshetra Darshanam', curated by Carnatic vocalist G. Ravikiran, will be launched by well-known filmmaker Rajiv Menon on March 24, 6.15 p.m., at Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Mylapore. The first episode will focus on Tiruvarur kshetram. The inaugural concert will be by Vignesh Krishnamurthy at 7 p.m. He will be accompanied by Madan Mohan and Aduthurai Guruprasad.



New moves

Prakriti Foundation, which has been supporting the contemporary dance movement in the country, presents the sixth edition of Prakriti Excellence in Contemporary Dance Awards (PECDA) from March 27 to 30 in Bengaluru. Supported by Institut français India and Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Bengaluru, this edition of PECDA will showcase contemporary dance talent from across the country.

Event Details:
Full-Length Showcases - March 27 and 28:
Venue: Goethe-Institut Max Mueller Bhavan
Day 1: March 27; Time: 2 p.m. - 5 p.m.
Performing artistes: Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy - 'Weight of Time' (duet) and Diya Naidu - 'In the Light' (group).
Day 2: March 28; Time: 10 a.m.-12.30 p.m.
Performing artistes: Anoushka Kurien - 'What Talk of Body' (duet) and Papia Chakraborty - 'Metamorphosis' (duet)
Competition - 28 March: 6.30 p.m.: Bangalore International Centre
12 Shortlisted work-in-progress performances
Discussion: Expanding the contemporary dance practice - Present and future
March 29: 6.30 p.m. - 7.30 p.m. - Bangalore International Centre.
The panel includes Preethi Athreya, Vikram Iyengar, Mandeep Raikhy, Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy, Surjit Nongmeikapam with other contemporary dance practitioners in Bengaluru.
Awards Ceremony
March 30, 7 p.m. - 9.30 p.m.
• Performance of 'Unsaid' by Parth Bhardwaj (Runner-up PECDA 2022)
• Performance of 'Bindadevi' by Pradeep Gupta (Winner of PECDA 2022)



Concert with an emotive appeal

Pattibhiram Pandit struck a rapport with the audience with his nuanced rendition

B. Ramadevi

T.S. Pattabhiram Pandit, disciple of Palghat K.V. Narayanaswamy, regaled the audience with his impressive choice of kritis at the valedictory function of the Mangaluru-based Sangeetha Parishad's 'Thrimshath Sambhrama' (30th year celebrations). The Parishad had organised it in association with Karnataka Government's Department of Kannada and Culture, the local chapters of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and Ramakrishna Math. Pattabhiram exhibited a spirit of camaraderie with co-artists and a good rapport with the audience throughout his concert. He began well with Pallavi Gopala Iyer's Ata tala varnam 'Vanajakshi' in Kalyani. Sustaining the momentum, he continued with Tyagaraja's 'Bala

kanakamayachela' in Atana. In this kriti the composer enlists the numerous attributes of Rama and extols his greatness. As Pattabhiram went on with the niraval and swara session, one could experience the KVN style.

Next, Pattabhiram delineated Nattakurinji, and as the audience kept guessing the kriti, he sang the rarely-heard 'Pahi janani santatam' by Swati Tirunal. In this exquisite composition, the composer describes the Devi residing in Kanyakubjam, (now known as Kannauj), using the choicest of phrases. The niraval for the line 'Kamaneeyatama roope, kanyaakubjavarasinee' and the swara session with the refrain 'ma ga ma ni da ni pa da ni sa' were delightful.

Leisurely alapana
After discussing with the audience, Pattabhiram decided to present his main



kriti in Vagadheeswari. As he went on with the alapana, the myriad shades of the raga slowly unfolded itself. As expected, he rendered

'Paramathmudu veligae', in which Tyagaraja looks at Rama not as the son of Dasaratha or the consort of Sita, but as Paramatma, the

formless lord who pervades every object. He rendered the kriti with emotion and embellished it with sprightly swaraprastaras.

The lighter session had a few shlokas, 'Chinnanajiru kiliyae' by Bharathiya, 'Thaarakka bindige' (Purandaradasa) and 'Kandu dhanyanadhe udupi krishnana' (Kamalesha Dasa). After 'Varugalamo Aiya' in Manji, he burst into the scintillating thillana in Paraju, before concluding his concert.

Trivandrum Sampath's violin playing was imaginative and supportive. Veteran mridangist Bengaluru V. Praveen lent able support. The audience enjoyed the tani avartanam during which the mridangist encouraged young Kanjira artiste Sumukha Karanth to bring out his best.

Earlier, Dhanashree Shabaraya, Gowtham Bhat P G and Mahathee K presented an enjoyable violin trio.

V.V. Ramani

The reach of Bharatanatyam has grown over the years. Artists from across the globe have been looking for newer ways to express themselves through thematic productions. This was evident in the performance by Austria-based Bharatanatyam dancer Radha Anjali, who along with the students of her Natya Mandir school, presented a dance production at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, recently.

In commemoration of 75 years of diplomatic relations between India and Austria, the thematic presentation, 'Vriksha -TheTree', was organised by Rama Rajagopalan, Consular Officer, Austrian Honorary Consulate in Chennai.

Radha Anjali, who had her training under two gurus - Kalanidhi Narayanan and Adyar K. Lakshman in Chennai, established her school of dance in Austria.

Radha's performance focused on the Rudraksha tree, which in

Thematic Radha Anjali and her students presenting 'Vriksha - The Tree' at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan
PHOTO: M. SRINATH

Indian mythology symbolises compassion and hope. The production also highlighted the impact of climate change and the need for environmental awareness.

The sounds of flowing water, beauty of the rainfall, visuals of a green landscape and the aroma of the wet earth evoked a mood of serenity before the focus shifted to the tussle between devas and asuras and the emergence of the Rudraksha tree from the ocean. Different compositions were used to depict them all.

Radha Anjali's production showed how dancers are staging ideas that connect with the contemporary audience

Though the concept was interesting, the presentation turned out to be a mix of too many ideas. The projection of visuals on the background screen looked amateurish. The shift from one song to another didn't seem organic. The shift from recorded sounds to live orchestra was disturbing too.

The description of a tree on the verge of extinction, and how it gets a new lease of life because of a bird was depicted well by Radha Anjali through her nuanced abhinaya.

Healing strings

Rishab Rikhiram Sharma is touring India with his ‘Sitar for mental health’ concert series

S B Vijaya Marv
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Hailing from a lineage of luthiers and mentored by the legendary Pt Ravi Shankar, Rishab Rikhiram Sharma plays the sitar with effortless ease. His journey took a unique turn when he began integrating mental health advocacy into his performances. After touring the U.S. and Canada, this New York-based youngster is in India to perform his ‘Sitar for mental health’ concerts in different cities.

“I’ve found that music has a unique power to connect people emotionally and spark important conversations, so I’m using my identity as a musician to facilitate those discussions. My goal is to create a space where people feel comfortable opening up about their struggles and seeking support if needed, while experiencing the healing power of music,” says Rishab, who drew upon his own experience with mental health issues.

Music matters
How do music and mind synchronise? Rishab explains: “I’ve been incorporating elements of mindfulness



and introspection into my sitar performances. As I play, I focus on resilience, healing, and inner peace.”

Rishab agrees that having expertise in both music and instrument-making can indeed provide a unique advantage in mastering an instrument.

“Understanding the intricacies of how an instrument is crafted and how its components interact can deepen one’s comprehension of its capabilities and limitations. This knowledge can directly translate into producing the best possible sound for various musical applications.”

The audience at his concerts cannot miss the beautiful and intricate pattern of mehendi adorning his hands. It adds beauty to the show while also challenging gender norms.

Recalling his association with Pt. Ravi Shankar, who was close to his family, Rishab says, “I began learning from him at the age of 11 and spent two years under his tutelage. Guruji was warm and humorous. He helped me gain deep insights into art and life.”

Rishab, who will be performing in Chandigarh on March 24, Bengaluru (March 31), Delhi (April 7) and Hyderabad (April 14), says he aims to create an immersive experience for the audience.



Charumathi Supraja

There were many memorable moments at this year’s Sacred Spirit Festival , held recently at multiple venues around the Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur. Audiences, mostly from far off locations, witnessed a musical treat that was often more than an auditory experience.

From shehnai players, who have had the instrument’s celebratory sound in their family for 350 years (Shankar Brothers), to the synchronised voices of Kelam and Dariya, two sisters who sing the songs of saint-poets such as Kabir and Ravi Das in the Rajasthani bhajan tradition; from folk music by the Manganiyar and Langa communities, whose songs inhabit more than one country, to flamenco rhythms from Spain; from men in swirling red skirts doing the rhythmic Gair dance to the luminous Sufi whirling dance of the Nile, the festival was a multi-course musical spread. The early morning concerts brought warmth and relief from low temperatures that added a punch to the musical - and occasionally - movement-based offerings.

Set against the marble backdrop of Jaswant Thada - a 19th century cenotaph architecturally influenced by both Rajputana and Mughalai styles, these concerts brought tunes from Tibet, Barmer and Varanasi. India born, France-based Tibetan artiste Lobsang Chonzor presented endearing song and dance sequences, switching with ease between multiple instruments. He managed to get a slightly

groggy audience up on their feet and happily dancing to his soothing chant.

The early morning concert by Kelam and Dariya from Barmer (Rajasthan) on the last day of the festival was special. Still in their teens, the sisters held the stage with ease and skill. Accompanied by instrumentalists including their father and teacher Shera Ram Leelawat, they sang fakiri songs, as well as those by well-known and lesser-known nirguni composers.

Their father shared that he decided to train them in music because he noticed their flair for picking up songs. After they won a music scholarship, which paved the way for a music video that went viral, the sisters have been training with their father. As they live in a remote village near the border, there are few opportunities for them to train in classical music. Hence, he decided to teach them all the spiritual songs he had learnt from his father.

“People do say things about me letting my daughters sing in public but I am a teacher and I know how rare this is. Looking at them, other girls are inspired to learn too, and they want to know how to get a tanpura ,” he said. Kelam and Dariya are looking forward to their first concert in south India (Calicut) soon.

Chokelao Bagh, a restored 200-year-old garden lined with fruits trees and heritage

The festival is a celebration of history, heritage, and musical traditions. It is also a space for forging new collaborations



structures within the Mehrangarh Fort premises, was another choice location for some of the events. The performances that stood outwere by Madan Gopal Singh and Chaar Yaar Ensemble; the poetic sharing by Parvathy Baul; the vibrant Pabuji ki phad presentation by Ravanahattha exponent Sugna Ram Bhopa and Manvari Devi (whose voice rung out from under her ghunghat), the impossibly nimble-fingered music made from the nomadic lute by Eleman Kanybekov and Kamuz Aibek Kanybekov

Art confluence Artists from different countries perform together. (Below) Parvathy Baul. PHOTOS COURTESY: MEHRANGARH MUSEUM TRUST

from Kyrgyzstan with Ilyas Arabov from Uzbekistan playing the dutar, and the syncretic songs by Pape Khan, Delawar Khan and troupe.

A grouse one felt was that some of the performances by local artistes were given late afternoon or late night slots and had a thin showing from the audience, possibly because of the packed schedule. And though the emphasis on musical traditions passed on from “father to sons” (as per the Festival’s artistic director Alain Weber) brought rich rewards (like in the Bansuri concert by Pt. Rajendra Prasanna and the excellent concert by Pt. Vishwa Mohan Bhatt), one wishes to see practitioners from other genders, including seasoned women artistes (both local and international), holding centre stage in such a festival.

Myriad genres
Speaking of which, the concert by Shubha Mudgal on the festival main stage - the Zenana Deodi Courtyard (terrace of the Mehrangarh Fort that afforded a stellar view of the moonlit night sky and of Jodhpur city) – was riveting. It was fascinating how her relationship with each composition that she rendered, unfailingly shone through. The other performances that left a deep imprint included Mukhtiyar Ali and team’s sharing of popular songs like ‘Bhala hua meri ghagri phooti’ , ‘Dum-A-dum mast kalandar’ and ‘Chaap tilak’ among others; his collaboration with Cherif Mbaw from Senegal who sang in the Wolof traditions while playing characteristic guitar rhythms; and the effortlessly charming sarod concert by Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash with Pedro Javier Gonzalez adding delicious layers with Flamenco styled guitar melodies.

The culmination of the festival was spectacular with almost all the artistes appearing again and performing collaboratively across countries and cultures. The take home images were too many to list though the beat-boxing by Ilyas Khan, the intermingling of the dutar (by Ilyas Arabov) with songs from Anwar Khan Manganiyar and troupe and the Kanybekovs’ skilled playfulness on the nomadic lute - merit mention.

The festival ended on a wondrous note as the Sufi whirling dancers from Egypt held the audience in thrall for over 15 minutes, their human forms seemingly transforming with every whirl into orbs of light.

Keya Acharya

The Prestige Srihari Khoday Centre for Performing Arts had an unusual trio performing at the Italian-Indo evening of contemporary jazz music, ‘India Jazz Up’, hosted by the Italian Consulate in Bengaluru.

The music was elegant in its rendition and original in its composition. Conventionally speaking, contemporary jazz may not sit easy with the lay music lover, but the music by internationally known Paolo Fresu on the trumpet, Rita Marcotulli on the piano and Trilok Gurtu on a wide-range of percussion instruments was unique. Their jazz had tones of World Music, with notes of Soul, Rock, African beats, and at times overtly Indian with Trilok on the tabla or other instruments.

Paolo’s ‘O que tinha de ser’, might remind you of a lost love, with its tones of Blues and Soul (listen to him on Youtube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6diy4iNIQs) and yet its jazz is unmistakable. Indeed, his ability on both the trumpet and the flugelhorn (he switches sometimes in the middle of a piece) was remarkable.

Infusing new styles
At one point, the drumming by Trilok, with Rita Marcotulli’s and Paolo’s long repartees, which felt like listening to ‘shayaris’ that were longer than the usual Urdu couplets. Trilok sat on a Cajon, a stool-like percussion instrument, which a musician plays by tapping it with his hands. For his composition ‘Water Song’, Trilok used,



amongst a host of hybridised percussion items, an aluminium bucket with water into which he immersed what seemed like a steel frying pan being struck with a cymbal (Zildjian). Trilok’s percussion repertoire combines western drums, Indian tabla, African djembe and sometimes congas.

“All three musicians took just one day to practice and tune the instruments that were

Tapestry of sound Paolo Fresu on the trumpet, Rita Marcotulli on the piano and Trilok Gurtu on percussion at the Prestige Srihari Khoday Centre for Performing Arts. PHOTOS: FERDINANDO IANNONE

sourced by Prestige Srihari Centre ten days prior to the show,” said Manoj Singh of the Centre.

Trilok Gurtu is the son of thumri exponent Shobha Gurtu. Unable to find appreciation for his unconventional percussion beats, Trilok moved to Europe to collaborate with legendary artistes such as John McLaughlin.

Rita fell in love with the piano when her mother introduced her to it at the age of five. She was drawn to jazz when she heard pianist Thelonius Monk. Rita has composed and performed with well-known jazz musicians such as Chet Baker and Richard Galliano.

Both Rita Marcotulli and Paolo Fresu have known each other for long, but began performing together recently. Professor of music and director of various international cultural institutions, Paolo has been playing the trumpet since the age of 11.

For the last 30 years, he has been performing with the most important names in Afro-American music. He has also to his credit more than 350 recordings in jazz, ethnic, contemporary and ancient music.

Describing the evening, Alfonso Tagliaferri, the Italian Consul General in Bengaluru, said, “Music is the easiest way to form cultural links”.



CONTINUED FROM
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Nirmal Chander shares that the Annapurna Devi Foundation gave him total freedom in the making of the film. “Nityanand did not even see the rough cut. It is a blessing to get such trusting producers,” he says. The film, however, narrates Annapurna’s life through Nityanand’s eyes – he is present in almost every frame, interviewing even Oliver Craske, who, as Ravi Shankar’s biographer, attempts to present the other side of an incident in their marriage.

The 80-minute film covers several aspects of Annapurna’s life, including her stormy marriage (which ended in divorce in 1982), teaching techniques, extracts from her diary in Bengali, and excerpts from an audio interview. But there is a lot that remains untold.



Nirmal Chander says she did not set out to make a biographical film. “For me, the film is about her legacy of teaching.” Yet it sticks mostly to her personal life and does not engage significantly with any disciple other

than Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia, Basant Kabra, Vinay Bharat Ram, Hemant Desai and Nityanand Haldipuri. This could be because Nirmal’s earlier film *Guru Ma* had focussed on her disciples and music.

Work on 6-A, *Akash Ganga* began 10 days before Annapurna’s death in 2018. There is not a single shot of the musician as Nirmal was not granted access. But there are shots of her room, which were taken after her death. One wonders why her wish for privacy was not respected.

The film dwells on the untold story of Annapurna Devi, as narrated by her disciples. Her diary might reveal more, but Nityanand, as chief trustee of the Annapurna Devi Foundation, has decided to not make it public for now. So, even after watching 6-A, *Akash Ganga*, Annapurna Devi remains an enigma.

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Varied themes (Clockwise from left) Mahatmavin Mahatma; Ramanar; and Saswatham. PHOTOS: THE HINDU ARCHIVES



How Bombay Gnanam broke the glass ceiling by launching an all-woman theatre group



Ladies special

N.C. Srinivasaraghavan

In the late 1980s, when theatre groups in the country were mostly led by men, Bombay Gnanam broke the glass ceiling to lead an all-woman theatre group. She launched the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group (MLDG), which redefined Tamil theatre. Its plays, especially on social themes, received an overwhelming response from the audience.

In 2014, during the 25th anniversary of MLDG, Gnanam got to know about the remarkable life story of Bodhendral, a 17th century saint, during a discourse by Hariji, son and disciple of Krishna Premi Swamigal. This led her to explore religious themes. Thus began her tryst with plays on saints and gurus.

Gnanam feels that every great spiritual personality in India represents high values that are universal and beyond one's faith. "The younger generation asks questions and that is most welcome as many of these saints also asked questions and obtained clear answers on their journey," she says.

Authentic portrayal
Thorough research is Gnanam's greatest strength. She consults multiple sources to make the characters authentic. "For the play *Bhaja Govindam*, which depicts the life of Adi Shankaracharya, we referred books written by Ra Ganapathy and Nochur Swami. We also regularly seek the guidance of learned scholars," says the veteran



actor-director. Supporting weavers and artisans across India is also one of Gnanam's missions. Nativity in terms of costumes, set design and music is given prominence in her plays. For instance, in *Shirdi Sai Baba* every piece of jewellery worn by the Marathi women characters such as the nath, haar and chinchpeti were sourced directly from Maharashtra. For *Ramakrishna Paramahansa*, Gnanam procured Bengal cotton sarees. For recreating Kolkata's famous Dakshineswar Kali temple on stage, Gnanam and her team of set designers visited the temple. Music is an integral part of her presentation and Gnanam and her music team leave no stone unturned to make it a worthwhile experience for the audience. For *Bhakta Jayadevar*, the play's music

composers faithfully reproduced the *Gita Govinda*, composed specifically for the worship of Jagannatha at the Puri temple, by using appropriate instrumental interludes.

When asked about the challenges she faced as a woman in the male-dominated field, she explains that her cast comprises women of all ages and from different walks of life. Also, not all of them come from a theatre background but are trained rigorously by Gnanam. Auditions take place to select those who express their interest to join the troupe. For all her dramas, Gnanam uses audio tracks where the dialogue, music and background sound are pre-recorded. Several rounds of rehearsals take place where the cast is taught to mime to the audio recordings. "In a live play when the actors deliver dialogue, the control rests with them. However, miming to pre-recorded audio tracks can go wrong easily and that is why I ask my cast to repeatedly listen to their portion until they perfect the pauses."

Being a veteran theatre artiste, Gnanam's thoughts on the issues ailing Tamil theatre today are extremely relevant. "There are many important elements such as Story selection, screenplay, dialogue delivery and scene settings make a play successful. However, many groups face financial constraints due to lack of funding and sponsorship. Sabhas in the city need to provide more support to theatre groups," she feels.

Audiences for theatre have declined sharply in the last two decades due to the advent of television and OTT platforms. "It is hard to generate enough revenue to cover even the production costs as the constraints are plenty. Audiences do not patronise live art due to easy availability of content on their mobile phones. Shows that are held on weekdays are poorly attended," says Gnanam.

Despite the challenges, Gnanam's plays draw a big crowd, including youngsters. She also travels with her troupe to small towns and villages across India to reach out to people who generally do not have access to theatre. Her plays are never ticketed. At the end of each performance, donation boxes are brought by volunteers for the audience to contribute. Thus, Gnanam funds her projects through sponsorship and voluntary donations. What if she runs out of funds some day? "The show will still go on," she smiles.

Mysore art on show

Charumathi Ramachandran

Vishnu Kala Arts of Mysuru has organised an exhibition of old and new Mysore paintings at C.P. Arts Center, Eldams Road. A visual treat, the show has on display images of Ranganatha, Rama, Krishna, Lakshmi, Raja Rajeswari and more. Also on display are Ganjifa cards used by royals as playing cards. They carry exquisite miniature work.

The Mysore style originated in the erstwhile Vijayanagar kingdom. It later became popular in Mysuru region and was patronised by several dynasties, especially the Wodeyars.



Knowing its heritage value, artists have kept the tradition alive. The difference between Mysore and Tanjore styles is the base used in the paintings. The former is done on thick paper while the latter on cloth-covered wood. Precious



Art works on display at the exhibition.

and semi-precious stones are used only in Tanjore paintings. But both use water colour and gold leaf embossing work. The embossing is thicker in the Tanjore style.

The exhibition is on till March 27 (10 a.m. to 9 p.m.).

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