

# friday Review

THE HINDU

**When Melattur comes alive**The annual Bhagavata Mela Utsavam is a celebration of a tradition **p2****A slice of Shakti**Violinist L. Shankar is back in India for a musical reunion **p3**
**A MUSICIAN'S WALK THROUGH DARK AND DEEP WOODS**
Sanjeev Venkataraman's film *Lost in Harmony* captures the sounds and visuals of the forest **p4****Parshathy J. Nath**

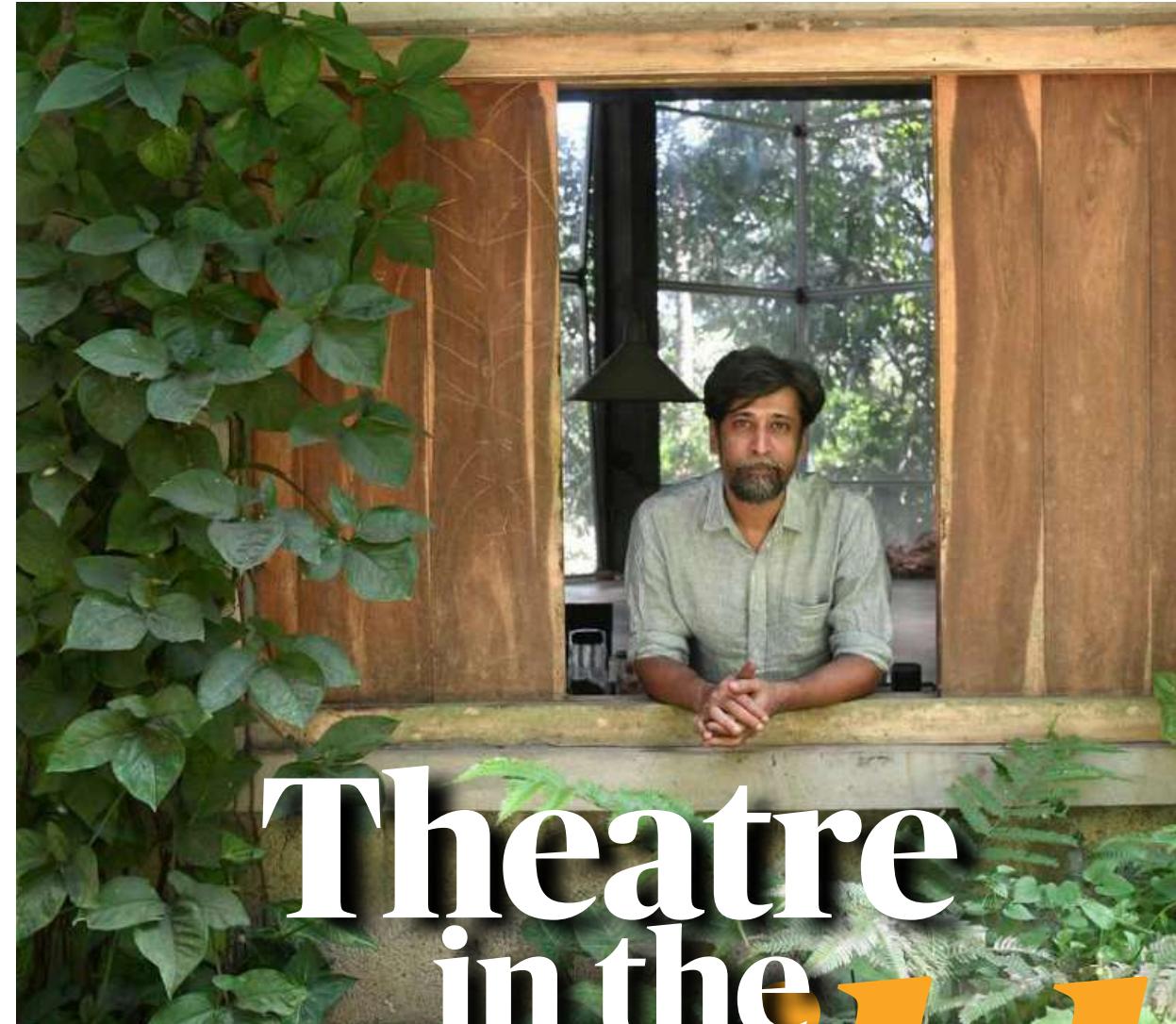
**E**xperience the strong emotion in silence. It can convey as much as movement or mime," says theatremaker Sankar Venkateswaran. These words resonate in the quiet evening at Attappadi in Kerala. We are at his space – Sahyande Theatre – perched on a hilltop, with a river flowing below, to witness Sankar's latest work, *IM TOD-In My Time of Dying*.

The play, a collaboration with German theatremaker Leon Pfaffenmüller, facilitated by Goethe-Institut through a co-production fund, has already run 20 shows in Europe and three shows in India.

From diary entries and postcards to a steel rod that was part of a leg, the play fiddles with fiction but is based on lived experiences. German dramaturg Maria Rossler helped them structure the text. Sankar believes finding words in theatre is the most difficult, especially after the explosion of the visual media. "I am trying to go to the deepest point of the text to understand what words mean today and how do you find words that can be convincing through real life, yet embracing the fictional world of theatre."

**Nature-friendly**  
Shaped like a Japanese fan, taking inspiration from Noh Theatre, a form in which Sankar is trained in and informs some of his work as well, Sahyande Theatre aspires to be the first carbon neutral theatre in the world. The design of the building ensures you don't need to switch on lights during the day, the green roof makes fans or AC irrelevant. "And, we have our own source of water, which will see us through eight months in a year, and then for the next four months we have to pump up water from a well, which is 100 metres below. In the coming years, we hope to transform the entire lighting requirements using a combination of solar and windmill," says Sankar.

Kavita Srinivasan, an MIT-trained architect and theatremaker, wove together



## Theatre in the wild

**June 5 is World Environment Day.**  
Director Sankar Venkateswaran on how he aspires to make Sahyande Theatre on the Attapadi hills a carbon-neutral space

multiple ideas of life, work and Nature to create this space. It features a studio theatre, amphitheatre and five rooms to stay.

The idea to start this space came about when Sankar and his Japanese partner Satoko were working from Delhi, and later from Thrissur on Sankar's *Sahyande Makan - The Elephant Project*, a much-acclaimed production like his other works - *Ohta Shogo's Water Station* (2011), *101 Lullabies* (2012) and Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*. The space in Thrissur would get overbooked for government programmes. And they would be forced to cancel their rehearsals without receiving any compensation. This created problems for the artistes.

"I need immense concentration for the kind of work that I do. Many of my artistes come from across the world. We work in a residential kind of set up," says Sankar, a recipient of the Shankar Nag award and Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar. Many of his works have found international stage, and he is also a recipient of International Ibsen Scholarship (2013).

Attappadi offered them a piece of

land where they could plant their dreams and see their ideas of theatre bloom. Once they set up the organisation, Theatre Roots and Wings, the interculturality of the place struck strongly. With the settler community speaking Tamil and Malayalam, and three of the indigenous communities speaking diverse languages, this space too turned multicultural. "All of this seemed suitable to further my cultural practice, which was at that time connected to Japan, Germany and Singapore," recalls Sankar.

His training in myriad art forms at the Intercultural Theatre

Institute (ITI) in Singapore broadened his vision. "ITI taught me how to work with artistes with whom you have nothing in common. But if you have the will, you can still create work and make it meaningful."

**Art-life connect**

Sankar has been working with the local singers in Attappadi to revive Madurai Veeran Koothu, a folk performance. But he says his work with them is not for the market. "They sing to make their day enjoyable, and the labour more pleasurable. The art-life connect

holds a different meaning to people here."

The resilience shown by theatremakers such as Sankar during pandemic helped the fraternity sustain since artistes didn't know where to seek support from to keep theatre spaces alive. It also turned Satoko and Sankar into beekeepers. "We learnt beekeeping through YouTube tutorials. We produced honey. Hopefully in the coming years, this would become a resource, which could independently run Sahyande Theatre. Bee brings in honey, honey brings in money and money

runs the theatre. It also contributes to the ecology."

One still vividly recalls Sankar's absence from digital theatre experimentation that caught a lot of attention during the lockdown. "Even at that time, I had strong reservations and questions about the online explosion. I put one of my pieces online, but as soon as the pandemic was over, we quit the digital medium. Performance in itself is a human tendency. It is human to gather and tell stories, talk and socialise."

Sahyande Theatre stands testimony to this.

**Sylvan setting** (Clockwise from left) Sankar Venkateswaran; Sahyande Theatre, which is shaped like a Japanese fan; audience at the amphitheatre; and rehearsal session in progress.  
PHOTOS: THULASI KAKKAT AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**Afrah Pandikkadan and Parvathy K. Pillai**

**J**uite like Mowgli of *The Jungle Book*, who discovers the charm of the wild through his animal friends, *Jungle Jugalbandi* will help children discover the beauty of classical music through the story of a forest and its inhabitants.

Brought out jointly by Ashim Shah's Peek-a-Boo and Kamakshi and Vishala Khurana's The Sound Space, *Jungle Jugalbandi* narrates a koyal's adventurous journey through the jungle in search of partners to join her music band.

"We came up with this project because we felt not much is being done to reach out to children as far as art and culture are concerned. We wanted to introduce Indian instruments through a story and thought this was one of the best ways to do it," say Kamakshi and Vishala.

The book is colourfully illustrated by Aayushi Shah to



## Rhythm safari

*Jungle Jugalbandi*, a colourfully illustrated book, introduces children to Hindustani music in a fun way



instruments and animals is something that would appeal to children. So we arrived upon this format.

In the digital age, when most children are addicted to gadgets, *Jungle Jugalbandi* attempts to take them closer to the world of words, colours, sounds and Nature.

'kuhu kuhu' sings the koyal making music as she flies, 'tirakita dhin' plays the elephant tapping away on the tabla and the bear plays the long and round sitar. The three set out on a quest to find more members for their band. Later, a monkey and a tiger join the team. Finally, the five come together for a baithak.

The book also serves as a resource for parents and teachers to create an engaging atmosphere that ignites a child's curiosity.

From the gentle pluck of a harp to the resonant melody of a trumpet, such books introduce children to the kaleidoscope of sounds produced by different Indian instruments. It will not only cultivate music appreciation in the young but can also spark an interest to pursue the art.

**Artistes and people come together at Melattur to keep alive the Bhagavata Mela tradition**

**N.C. Srinivasaraghavan**

**E**very year, during the month of May, a village not too far from the Chola heartland of Thanjavur lights up with much pomp and grandeur. Narasimha Jayanthi holds great significance here. It is marked by a fortnight-long Nritya Nataka Utsavam.

In the truest sense, Melattur is an art village because it has produced some outstanding artistes and composers. Even today, the plays composed by eminent playwright Melattur Venkatarama Sastry are enacted to honour the artistic legacy of this village. The heartwarming hospitality offered by villagers to their guests needs no elaboration. Members of every household guide visitors to the Varadaraja temple, where a stage is put up on the street, facing the deity.

Sustaining a tradition like Bhagavata Mela is a monumental task and the festival thrives due to the efforts of several artistes and art-lovers. The family of the renowned dance guru and Bhagavata Mela exponent Melattur S. Natarajan continues to organise the Utsavam even after his passing. Natarajan's brother Kumar took over the baton and has taken several steps to ensure a large audience attends and, most importantly, appreciates the worth of the tradition.

#### For global audience

The entire fest is live-streamed for the benefit of global audiences. In addition, Kumar has released several videos on the group's official YouTube channel, demystifying the nuances of the tradition by featuring every member involved to highlight their individual contributions as well. Performance slots are also offered to budding dancers and reputed dance schools.

Bhagavata Mela dramas are invariably a musical treat and needs to be examined separately to understand the appeal of these natakams. The



## It takes a village to save an artform

12 Telugu dramas written by Venkatarama Sastry are full of traditional daruvus of different contexts – pravesha daruvus, uttara prayuttara daruvus, samvaada daruvus, svatata daruvus, pralaaba daruvus, etc. Every daruvu stands out for the literary and musical devices that have been incorporated by Venkatarama Sastry. Employing the choicest poetic expressions both in the dialogues as well as the lyrics of songs, Venkatarama Sastry has ensured that lovers of the Telugu language rejoice every phrase.

Each character has a unique personality and every Paatra Pravesha daruvu (self-introductory entrance) attempts to highlight the qualities of the character, requiring musicians and dancers to be aware of both the musical as well as contextual aspects. The

daruvus are set in difficult ragas such as Ahiri, Ghanta and Maanji apart from ghana ragas such as Shankarabharanam and Arabhi. It is to be noted that Venkatarama Sastry's musical expertise is evident from how he entirely disproves the belief of using a particular raga only for a certain rasa or a personality type. For instance, one can hear a Paatra Pravesha in Atana, a raga representing Veera rasa, for a graceful female character. A strong and fearsome male character surprisingly uses Kalyani, a raga that is typically thought of to represent grace and beauty.

**Specialised approach**  
Carrying forward the guru parampara, which traces itself back to Saint Tyagaraja. Tiruvaiyaru Brothers (S. Narasimhan and S. Venkatesan) lead the orchestra

that is an integral part of these dramas, along with L. Prabhakaran. Songs of a nritya-nataka demand a specialised approach. Musicians have to adhere to the composer's artistic vision in terms of ragas and overall bhava, in addition to working closely with the dancers on stage. The children of singers N. Venkatasubramanian and V. Venkatakrishnan are helping to preserve the family heritage. Instrumentalists, who for long have been part of the orchestra include, Lalgudi K. Ramaprasad on the violin and B. Gokulakrishnan on the flute. Apart from accompanying the vocalists, they provide calculative musical interludes and aesthetic raga insertions.

Mridangam is of paramount importance in these natakams. Nagai P. Sriram single-handedly provides percussion support, offering



**Legacy** From Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natya Nataka Sangam's play *Harischandra* part 1 and 2. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND N.C. SRINIVASARAGHAVAN



much-needed rhythmic diversity for every line that is musically repeated several times with different lyrics in a typical Bhagavata Mela daruvu.

The play *Harischandra* narrates the life-story of Raja Harischandra. It focusses on his travails as he struggles to fulfil his promises to sage Vishwamitra, who demands his entire wealth and even his kingdom. Playing the titular character, senior Bhagavata Mela performer Kumar retains a distinct style of presentation associated with lead male characters. Quite like the Yakshagana tradition, Kumar's unique portrayal of Harischandra with extensive usage of footwork aligned to the music along with syncing of the lips to the song being sung with appropriate expression is to be appreciated as a rare skill. Kumar mastered the basics of this style under the guidance of his father G. Swaminathan. Kumar's performing skills shines when his character is forced by circumstances to work in a cremation ground. His energy and enthusiasm on stage elevate the plays.

Senior dancer Srikanth Natarajan, who is a part of Bhagavata Mela for the last 45 years, plays Chandramathi, a role that was portrayed by Melattur Natarajan. Srikanth, who is known for his mature saatvikaabhinaya has aced this role. A daruvu reserved for Chandramathi in raga Ghanta is one of the play's highlights.

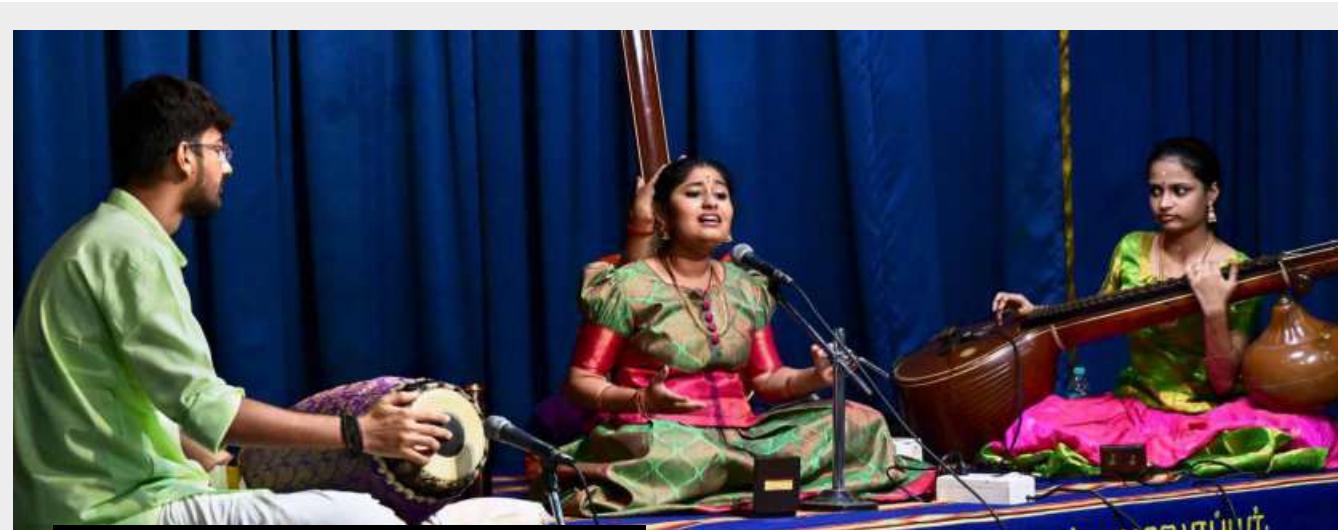
It talks about Chandramathi recollecting the privileged life that she led before being forced to work for an elderly man. Srikanth's lokadharmi, where he shows Chandramathi performing daily chores, is convincing. Nagai Sriram's mridangam enhances the musical quality of this daruvu. Srikanth takes utmost care to regulate his facial expressions even when he stands on the stage as other characters speak. The character of Chandramathi is an integral part of the play and no one could have done it better.

Mathanga Kanya is a seductress sent by Vishwamitra to entice Harischandra. The character is feisty, flirtatious, and provocative. Over the years, senior dancer Vijay

Madhavan has developed a rasika base for his portrayal of this character. Vijay explores the multi-hued traits of Mathanga Kanya in a layered manner every year. This time, he chose to utilise the staircase leading up to the stage to position himself as he plays the veena in the Nadanamakriya daruvu. The tense situation that prevails between Mathanga Kanya and Chandramathi as they throw shade on each other is a scene to behold. Vijay must be appreciated for his expert handling of the overt sringara in these pieces.

**Wider appeal**  
Bhagavata Mela brings together people of various age groups. This augurs well for the artform. Children such as Rakshit A and Sudarsan S sincerely portray Lohitaksha. Octogenarian R. Varadarajan astonish viewers with his authentic portrayal of the king of Kashi. Special mention must be made of Venkatasubramaniam, who plays Nakshatriyan, a comical character. Young dancer Sundaresan Pandurangan is an apt choice for the character Madanavathi. It is encouraging to note that the children of the present actors and dancers take up roles in these dramas. It is important to pass on the art to younger dancers gradually to ensure continuity and this is something that Kumar has been working on consciously.

To make the natakams more audience-friendly, copies of books that contain the lyrics and Tamil/English translations of the Telugu daruvus and dialogues, should be made available.



## Musical stopovers

A concert with songs on Tiruvarur, Mayiladuthurai and Mannargudi was a delight for both pilgrims and music-lovers

named by his parents because Tyagesa, the presiding deity of Tiruvarur, appeared in their dream and blessed them with a son who will embody the spiritual essence of saint Narada.

The Tyagaraja Swamy

temple in Tiruvarur also helps understand and admire the South Indian architectural marvel. The temple has nine rajagopurams, 80 vimanas, 12 tall walls, 13 mandapams, 365 Shivalingams, 15 teertams, over a hundred

shrines, and 86 Vinayaka idols.

Shakthi commenced her concert with a rare Telugu kriti by Dikshitar, 'Nee saati devamendu', (Rupakam) in raga Siranjani. This daru is set in the Nayaki bhava. And, the muktai swara and swara sahitya add to the appeal of the kriti.

Shakthi is the student of Sathur Lalitha Santhanam and Amritha Murali. Blessed with a sweet voice, her music brims with energy and bhava.

Through 'Tyagaraja palayashumam', another Dikshitar composition on the deity of Tiruvarur, the artiste brought out the devotional hue of raga Gowla. It was then the turn of a Kamalamba Navavarana kriti. In the raga alapana, Shakthi could

effortlessly interweave the patterns of Anandabhairavi and bring out its essence.

'Kamalamba samrakshatu', the first of the Navavarana kritis, is considered a magnum opus of Dikshitar. It is in the Triloaka Mohana Chakra, the enchanter of all the three worlds.

#### Steeped in devotion

Shakthi then went on to render Sundarar's Thevaram hymn 'Pathimayum adimayum', of the seventh Thirumurai on Tiruvarur in Sankarabharanam, and the first of the Tiruvarur Panchalinga kritis, 'Sadachaleswaram' in Bhupalam. The Tamil padam by Papavinasa Mudaliyar, 'Mukhatthai kaattiye' (Misra Chapu) on Tiruvarur in Vibhakti. Shakthi's raga

**Confident** Shakthi Muralidharan with C. Charulatha (veena) and Kaushik Sridhar (mridangam). PHOTO: M. SRINATH

Bhairavi was steeped in devotion.

She rendered two more kritis on Tiruvarur – 'Muchukunda tyagaraja varada', a Nottuswara sahityam, which refers to the episode of Muchukunda, a Chola king, who is supposed to have brought Lord Tyagaraja from heaven to Tiruvarur. The Navavarana Mangala kriti, 'Sri kamalambike', in Sri raga was proved by a shloka penned by violin virtuoso R.K. Shriramkumar.

Shakthi's next was on Mayiladuthurai. Lord Mayuranathaswamy, an incarnation of Shiva, is the presiding deity of the Mayavaram temple. Goddess Abhayambika is His consort.

The temple has a nine-tiered gopuram of 165 ft in height.

Saints Gnanasambandar, Thirunavukkarsar and Arunagiri have sung hymns on this temple. Dikshitar has composed Abhayamba Vibhakti kritis on the goddess.

The highlight of the concert was the Kedara Gowla kriti, 'Abhayaambikaiyaa', one of the Vibhakti kritis by Dikshitar. It is in Panchami Vibhakti. Shakthi's raga

elucidation was well-crafted and carried the emotional depth that perfectly suited the structure of the kriti. Swaraprastara was at the pallavi.

#### Leisurely niraval

The next stopover was at Mannargudi (Tiruvarur district), which houses the Rajagopalaswamy temple. It is one of the oldest Vaishnava temples in India, built by the Chola king Kulottunga I. Like in the case of Mayiladuthurai, Shakthi rendered only one song on the Mannargudi temple. But, the Dikshitar song 'Sri rajagopala' (Saveri) proved to be the highlight of the concert. Shakthi's raga alapana showcased her creativity. She handled the kriti in an appropriate kalapramana. A leisurely niraval and swaras at 'Dhiragraganya' had deft touches.

This concert was unique in a way that instead of the usual violin accompaniment, Shakthi had a vainika accompany her. The veena accompaniment was by C. Charulatha, student and granddaughter of veteran vainika R.S. Jayalakshmi.

On the mridangam was young Kaushik Sridhar, a disciple of Trichur Mohan. His thani after the Saveri piece, especially the rhythmic flourishes in Tirsa nadai, displayed his grasp of the nuances.

Narendra Kusnur

Violin virtuoso L. Shankar and ghatam maestro Vikku Vinayakram were associated with the 1970s Indo-jazz band Shakti, but their partnership goes back many decades, when they used to perform Carnatic concerts. "In 1973, when I was in New York, I launched the band 'Turiyananda Sangeet' featuring legendary jazz guitarist John McLaughlin. Initially, Rammad Raghavan played the mridangam, since he was not quite comfortable with the band's music, Vikku Vinayakram, who had performed a lot with me, stepped in. The combination of Zakir Hussain's tabla and Vikku's ghatam was perfect," says Shankar, who also uses the stage name 'Shenkar'.

After more than five decades, 74-year-old Shankar has formed a collective featuring Vikku Vinayakram, his son Selvaganesh on the kanjira, grandson Swaminathan Selvaganesh on assorted percussion, and Fazal Qureshi on the tabla.

On June 16 (8 p.m.), the quintet will perform at NCPA in Mumbai for the 'Aditya Birla Masters of Music' show.

Says Shankar, who now shuttles between south Goa and Los Angeles, "We shall be doing a mix of Shakti songs, covering all three albums we released in the 1970s, besides Carnatic kritis and a ragam-tanam-pallavi."

New collective

The collective has played in Chennai and Goa under different banners. The shows come a year after the new Shakti line-up comprising McLaughlin, Zakir, Selvaganesh, singer Shankar Mahadevan and violinist Ganesh Rajagopalan did an extensive golden jubilee tour of India, Europe and the U.S.



## Different strings

L. Shankar's concert in Mumbai with his new collective will be a musical reunion

With the group also winning a Grammy this year for the album 'This Moment', did Shankar feel left out?

"I was never asked to be part of the celebration. It's their decision. The truth is that Shakti means as much to me as it does to anybody else in the group," says Shankar.

The son of violin maestro V. Lakshminarayana, and brother of renowned musicians L.

Vaidyanathan and L. Subramaniam, Shankar was trained in Carnatic music from an early age. He recalls, "My father was open-minded and exposed us to different genres. So besides Carnatic music, we also followed Hindustani, western classical and jazz."

The original Shakti line-up released three albums in 1976 and 1977 – 'Shakti With John McLaughlin', 'A Handful Of



Beauty' and 'Natural Elements'. The band became known for its eclectic mix of Carnatic and Hindustani music and jazz.

"John and I would discuss the broad framework of the compositions, and then write our parts. John would change some portions to suit the

guitar, and I would do some with my violin in mind. Zakir and Vikku stayed a block away in New York, and they would bring us the rhythm arrangements."

While 'Shakti' toured extensively in the mid-1970s, its individual members got involved in different projects.

Multi-faceted (From far left) The original Shakti group; L. Shankar at the WOMAD festival; with Selvaganesh, Vikku Vinayakram and Fazal Qureshi; and with John McLaughlin. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

In 1978, Shankar signed up with rock musician Frank Zappa's label, and was required to play different string instruments such as violin, cello, viola and double bass. That's when he decided to create a two-necked violin, which came to be known as the L. Shankar Double Violin.

"It was difficult to carry four instruments on an aircraft. So I decided to combine all in one. I created a cardboard version with the double bass and cello on the lower neck, and the violin and viola on the upper. I approached a few guitar-makers such as Gibson, who said it was not possible. But I insisted it was possible."

The violinist then went to Stuyvesant Sound in New York, where the owner Steve Stuyvesant introduced him to their best worker Ken Parker. "I drove him nuts till I was satisfied," laughs Shankar. But even after the instrument was developed, it took him at least two months to manage without discomfort, and two years to play it professionally. He explains, "I was dealing with a larger instrument. While playing the lower neck, the bow would touch the upper neck, so I had to adapt my technique. I started getting chest pain but slowly it went away. Over the years, there have been further upgrades of the double violin. I will be playing the new one in Mumbai."

Besides recording with Zappa's label, Shankar played in Phil Collins' 1981 solo album *Face Value*. In 1982, Shakti decided to tour India, but since McLaughlin suffered a hand injury, fusion guitarist Larry Coryell filled in. "I am a huge admirer of Larry, but these pieces required time to

prepare, and he unfortunately didn't have that advantage. Given the constraint, he did a great job." Shakti returned with McLaughlin in 1984 for a successful tour.

Shankar says the musicians just got busy with other work after that. "I did many albums with ECM, a label from Munich. Drummer Trilok Gurtu worked a lot with me those days, and Brazilian percussionist Nana Vasconcelos joined us in some sessions. The ECM chief Manfred Eicher introduced me to Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek, and we did some great work together."

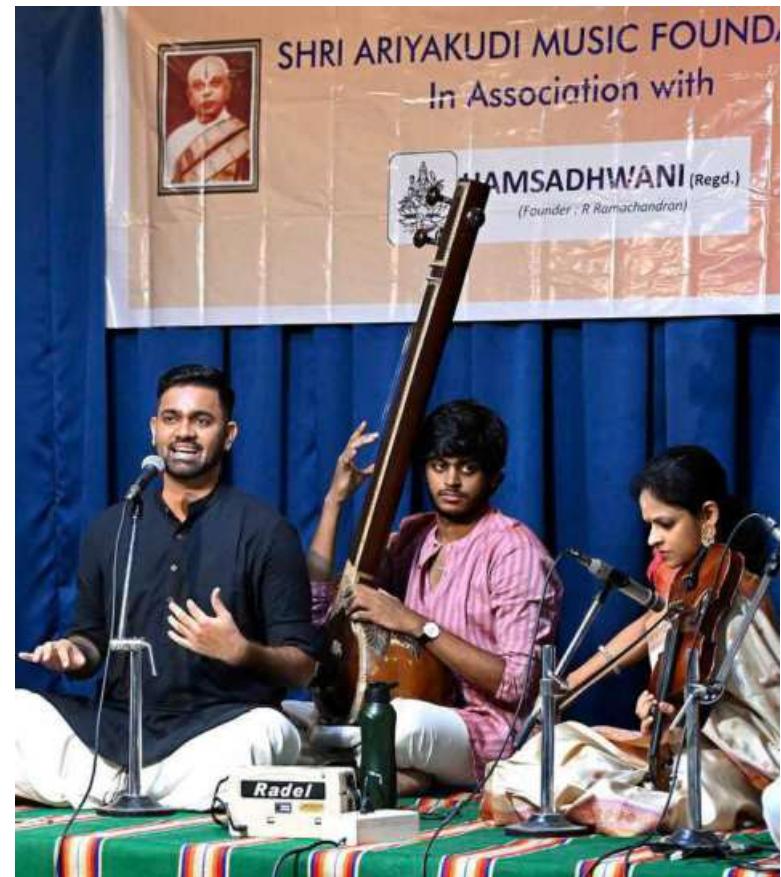
Multiple albums

Projects with composer Peter Gabriel, producer Bill Laswell and the pop-rock group The Epidemics helped Shankar reach out to new audiences. In the 1990s, he recorded many Carnatic albums, often featuring Zakir and Vikku. The album 'Raga Aberi' was nominated for a Grammy in the Best World Music Album category in 1995. His last album was 'Christmas From India', specially commissioned by US-based Cleopatra Records. Says Shankar, "I did two albums with them. The first was a progressive rock album 'Chepleeri Dream'. Then they wanted a Christmas album with world music elements, so I used some sitar and santoor besides my violin. I even composed two songs."

The violinist is now looking forward to his Mumbai show, even as plans are being drawn to perform in other cities. "I approach every show as though it's my first. Whether I am playing in front of 10 or 10,000 people, the energy is the same." Shankar says a musician is like an Olympic athlete who has to be fit before every show. Considering that he still spends most of his day with music and conducts intense masterclasses in south Goa, there seems to be no stopping him.

## Hues of Thodi

Ashwath Narayanan displayed Ariyakudi school's stylistic features



Musical ode R. Ashwath Narayanan with Akkarai Sornalatha (violin).  
PHOTO: B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

zest and energy and vied with each other to showcase their talent.

A popular vocalist, Ashwath Narayanan's raga alapana techniques, swara matrices, and time management need to be lauded.

Ashwath opened his recital with the Kanada Atala varnam 'Nera namithi (Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar) and moved on to 'Gnanamosaga rada' (Tyagaraja) in Purvikalyani. He chose to go for a brief niraval and swaras at 'Paripoorna nishkalanga'. To balance the tempo, he outlined a sedate Yadukulakambaji preface to render 'Hecharika ra ra' (Tyagaraja) in a sober tenor.

His next choice, 'Sri satyanarayananam' in Subhapantuvarai (Dikshitar) had an emotional appeal. It was followed by Arunachala Kavi's 'Ramanukku mannan' in Hindolam. The concert picked up momentum with 'Telisirama chintanatho' (Tyagaraja), a pacy kriti in raga Poornachandrika, and the stage was set for the main piece to be rendered in raga Thodi. Ashwath unveiled the myriad shades of the raga and its richness through his elaborate essay and creativity following it up with Tyagaraja's 'Dasarathi'.

The niraval on the anupallavi line 'Prakasimpa jesina rasika siromani' showcased the vocalist's innovative skills and musical wisdom. The swarakalpana, which followed, carried several interesting permutations and combinations leading to the finale with shadjam-centric swaras.

Akkarai Sornalatha matched Ashwath's ingenuity at every step – be it alapana, niraval or swaras.

Praveen Sparsh was full of beans. He made his presence felt at every juncture in the company of S. Krishna on the ghatam, who was a bit sober. Their tani avartanam was brief yet powerful.

Ashwath Narayanan concluded his performance with Purandaradasa's 'Kaliyuga dalli' in Chenchurutti and Andal's Tiruppavai verse 'Oruthi maganai' in Behag.

professional association with his master. He spoke about his guru's immense devotion towards the Trinity, particularly Tyagaraja. Venkatesan also pointed out how his guru believed in preserving the legacy of Carnatic music but at the same time strived to democratise the art form. Venkatesan shared interesting aspects about the doyen's wide repertoire, vocal technique, skilful modulation, the use of gamakas at the right juncture, and his favourite raga Thodi.

Energetic rendition

This was followed by Ashwath's concert to the accompaniment of Akkarai Sornalatha on the violin, Praveen Sparsh on the mridangam and S. Krishna on the ghatam.

The young brigade was full of

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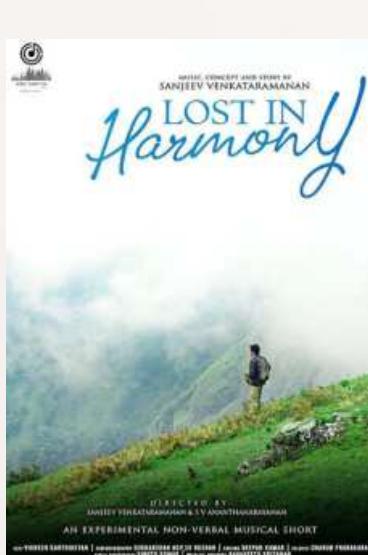
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Charumathi Supraja

**L**ost in Harmony is about losing oneself in Nature and all the feelings that it brings. Described as an "experimental, non-verbal, musical short," the film is soaked in greens, browns and all shades between that only the earth can cook up. Many of those earthly tints have been captured in the film not only through the eyes of its protagonist (whose trek has unexpectedly turned into a solo adventure) but also through music that underscores the magic and mystery of the forest.

Produced by Sonic Sanctum Studios, the film's concept, story and musical score are by Sanjeev Venkataraman, a violinist, who identifies himself more as a composer and producer than as a Carnatic music performer. The film shot in forests across south India maps many contrasts – sound and silence, light and darkness, safety and risk, drenched leaves and dry rocks – to name a few.

## Earthy notes

Sanjeev Venkataraman walked along rivers and forests to shoot his film *Lost in Harmony*, which will be launched on World Environment Day

The film depicts the myriad emotions that Nature can evoke. Fear, wonder, curiosity, peace, love and ecstasy are just some of them. A six-member team including two cinematographers, a wildlife advisor, producer, actor and director travelled about 3,000 kms over 15 days to get most of the footage.

After covering forests around Thekkady, Bhadra, Dandeli, Bandipur, Hogenakkal and other places, the team realised they needed more shots for which they travelled to the interiors of Puducherry, Senji and Pulicat. The shoot demanded trekking, camping and surrendering to the rhythm of the forest. It sometimes involved walking deep into the woods carrying equipment and supplies, or camping on sites surrounded by

Violinist Sanjeev Venkataraman.  
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

deep pits to keep away elephants. They spent some nights listening to stories from forest rangers or simply immersed in the symphony of sounds of the forest.

"*Lost in Harmony* is informed by all these experiences," says Sanjeev, adding that he had to tweak the story during the shoot based on what the forests offered. Sanjeev's musical journey always ran parallel to his relationship with Nature and love for wildlife photography. The inspiration for this film came from a single movement of music that he wrote. "Music can be used to convey a lot of emotions. Even without visuals, music lends itself to a story. The first image that came to me was of a young man seeking peace," he says. Keeping that in mind, he wrote the music, which then became the foundation for the film, not the other way round where music is composed for visuals.

**Exploring musical vocabulary**  
A senior Carnatic violinist and a long-time student of violin virtuoso A. Kanyakumari, Sanjeev found that one had always to "respond or answer someone" (mostly the main artiste) as an accompanying artiste in a classical concert. Being more interested in instrumental music and curious about the emphasis on harmony in Western music, Sanjeev sought to explore his own

musical vocabulary.

"Western music has not explored gamakas and we have not explored harmony," he says. Wanting to bring a confluence of both, he set about learning to write music using staff notation, for which he says, having a basic understanding of swaras helps. He veered towards orchestral music in his compositions, inspired by his musical icon Ilaiyaraaja, whose ability to make music in the most measured way, he admires. "There's never an excess of music in Ilaiyaraaja sir's compositions. Every note sits just right with the visuals," says Sanjeev.

Having been a musician for whom "lyrics took a backseat," Sanjeev worked towards creating music that is not fusion (because that would mean that there are two separate parts) but music that is one whole.

### Main inspiration

His main inspiration, Sanjeev says, is his guru A. Kanyakumari, whose classes he has fond memories of. "Being a busy artiste, she could conduct classes only after 10 p.m. We learnt in a small group and the healthy competition strengthened our musical skills." Possibly from her musical practice, he developed a deep love for instrumental music, which, he says, allows for a raga to be presented far more grandly.

It is no wonder that Sanjeev's orchestral music melds seamlessly with the stunning forest visuals in *Lost in Harmony*, which has won 14 awards in the festival circuits so far, of which four are international. The film's big screen premiere is scheduled for World Environment Day (June 5) at Tagore Film Centre, Chennai. Composer Vidyasagar will preside over the event.



Driving home a message PMG Mayurapriya's *Big Boss*. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## And the award goes to...

Tamil play *Big Boss*' triumphant outing at the Kodai Nataka Vizha

Suganthy Krishnamachari

Is there only one route to success – a degree in Engineering at a premier institute? And even assuming the answer is yes, what is the price one pays for this? These are among the many questions PMG Mayurapriya's latest play *Big Boss* (story, dialogues, direction P. Muthukumaran) raises about the education scenario. The play was staged recently for Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha.

Centum Sethuraman (Ganapathy Shankar) runs an academy, where only bright students are admitted. He puts them through rigorous schedules and gloats when his students score centum in the board exams. His wife Sowmya (Anu Suresh) tries to din some sense into him, pointing out that the world operates based on the law of

averages. Superlative students are few in number, as are the ones who score very poorly. Most fall in between and can be helped to improve their scores. But Sethuraman refuses to get rid of his centum fixation. His teacher Shivasubramaniam (V.P.S. Shiraman) reminds Sethuraman that he himself had never been a great student, and that many mediocre students had found their niche. Moreover, helping a smart student score a centum was no big deal. Such students needed only a nudge. What was important was giving the average student a push, argues Shivasubramaniam. Initially, Sethuraman ignores Shivasubramaniam's advice. But the death of Shivasubramaniam brings about a change of heart in him, and he decides to teach the son of a labourer and an unruly boy who has played truant often.

Four students are told to stay in Sethuraman's house, and are cut

off from the outside world. The exam results are a credit to Sethuraman. Sethuraman is given the *Big Boss* title, because he had kept the students sequestered, like the participants in the popular TV show *Big Boss*. This portion seemed contrived, as if it had been introduced to justify the title.

While the dialogues were well-written, some pruning is needed to make the script taut. The set was just right without being fussy. S. Aditya, G. Shiva Shankar, Dhiraj C. Mohan and S. Ananth as the students, were full of beans.

This play won the Best Play award and four more awards at the Kodai Nataka Vizha of Kartik Fine Arts this year. The rolling trophy newly instituted by Ramkumar Ganesan, son of Sivaji Ganesan, is going to be awarded to the Mayurapriya team for all round performance.

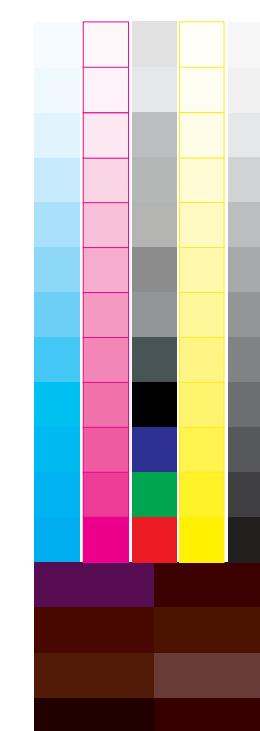
## Role of honour

Kartik Fine Arts will host the award function of their 33rd Kodai Nataka Vizha, on June 1, 5.30 p.m. at Narada Gana Sabha main hall. Senior dramatist C.V. Chandramohan will receive the Kartik Ramanujam Award of Excellence for best theatre artiste, and PMG Mayurapriya theatre group will receive the maiden 'Nadigar Thilagam Sivaji Ganesan' award for all-round excellence.

Awards will be presented under various categories including Best actor, play, story writer, dialogue writer, director, child artiste, and best comedian. Besides the artistes, the awards will also be given to the best lighting company, make-up man, supporting artiste, background music and best scenes. Among the 18 award categories, PMG Mayurapriya's play *Big Boss* gets the award for best play, best storywriter, best dialogue writer (P. Muthukumaran) and best character actor (V.P.S. Shiraman); and thRee's *Thotra Mayakkangal* is chosen for awards under seven categories.

Girish Venkat will receive the best actor award for *Ambi Mama*; best direction award will go to debutant director Sridhar Ramaswamy (*Thotra Mayakkangal*). JC Creations's *Meendum Thankudithanam* has been adjudged the best comedy play, while Ambi Raghavan has been chosen for the best comedian award (*Ambi Mama*).

The award function will be followed by the staging of Theatre Marina's six short plays at 7 p.m.: *Puratchi Onguga; Ulaga Vazhakkam; Kai Kalappu; Akkara Adisil; Mudhumai and Kizhakku Aamabalattu*.



## CALENDAR

### Special concert

The Music Academy has organised Kolkata Padmavathi Saranathan's vocal concert as part of Mysore Vasudeva Chaturthi celebrations, today, 6 p.m. at Kasturi Srinivasa Hall. Pavani Mallajosyula (violin) and Palayamkottai B. Guru Raghavendra (mridangam) are the accompanists. The programme is organised under the endowment, instituted by Gomathi Visvanathan through Kala Mandir Trust.

### Carnatic vocal

Madhuradhwani has organised a concert series between May 31 and June 6 at Arkay Convention Centre, Mylapore. Details: Today, 6.15 p.m.: Palakkad Seeram (flute) in memory of Flute Mali. June 2, 6.15 p.m.: Sriram Parasuram (vocal) as part of Thanjavur S. Kalyanaraman's 94th Jayanthi. June 3, 6.30 p.m.: Ritwik Raja (vocal) as part of Chingleput Ranganathan's Jayanthi. June 6, 6.15 p.m.: Radhika Kannan (vocal).

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