

# friday Review

THE HINDU

**High on aesthetics**'Kannappar Kuravanji' proved the timeless appeal of Kalakshetra's dance dramas **p2****Drawn by mystical verses**How Santhipriya from Kerala took to Bengal's Baul music **p3**
**SIR MARK ELDER AND HIS INSPIRING MUSICAL JOURNEY**

The veteran British conductor was in India to perform with SOI **p4**

R.K. Shriramkumar

**T**he late 18th and early 19th centuries mark a golden dateline in the history of Carnatic music. The period witnessed the precious contributions of the illustrious Trinity of Carnatic music - Tyagaraja, Syama Sastri and Muthuswami Dikshitar.

Dikshitar, the youngest of the Trinity, was born in 1775. This year marks his 250th birth anniversary. Born to Ramaswami Dikshitar and Subbamma in the temple town of Tiruvarur, he was named after Lord Muthukumaraswami of Vaiteeswaran temple.

At an early age, Muthuswami Dikshitar had mastered Vedic lore, treatises in Sanskrit, sangita shastra, astrology and medicine.

When Ramaswami Dikshitar and family stayed at Manali (near Chennai), under the patronage of Manali Venkatakrishna Mudaliar, Muthuswami had the opportunity to accompany his spiritual guru Chidambaranatha to Kashi. This facilitated his spiritual practice and acquaintance with the musical ambience of northern India.

**First creation**

Back from Kashi, Dikshitar visited the Subrahmanyam Swami temple at Tiruttani. It is said that the Lord appeared in the guise of an old man and put sugar candy into his mouth. It was then that he rendered his first musical creation in the raga Mayamalavagowla. Having considered Guha (Subrahmanyam) as his guru, he adopted the mudra of Guruguha in his compositions. His first composition 'Srinathadi Guruguho jayati' is a wondrous amalgam of exquisite sahitya and sangita. Musically, it incorporates, in a subtle manner, glimpses of sarali varisai, janta varisai, alankarams and palindromic swara patterns.

Following the first kriti, Dikshitar composed seven more in the vibhakti theme (the eight case endings of Sanskrit grammar). Known as the Guruguha Vibhakti kritis, he elucidates in them the characteristics of an ideal guru. Dikshitar was a staunch advocate of Adi Sankara's Advaita Vedanta. He also followed Adi Sankara's Shanmaya ideology, the worship of six prominent godheads – Ganapati, Kumara, Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, and Surya. Travelling extensively across the Dravida land, Dikshitar dedicated several compositions to these deities at many kshetras.

Dikshitar mainly composed in Sanskrit with the exception of a few kritis in Telugu and Manipravalam. His compositions stand out for their lyrical excellence and musical flair. They also carry significant details of each kshetra. Prasa (alliteration) structures, Yati patterns, the interlacing of raga names, the inspirational takeaways from works of yore, the references from the esoteric to the tangible, along with the blissful unison with sangita make his compositions incredibly special.

A large compendium of Dikshitar's compositions is dedicated to Tyagaraja, Nilotpalamba, Kamalamba, Valmikeswara, Achalesvara, Hatakesvara, Anandeshvara, Siddhishvara, the diverse forms of Ganapati and Sundaramurti Nayanan in the Tiruvarur temple. All these compositions are repositories of information about the temple and its hallowed heritage.

The magnum opus amongst his compositions is the collection of the Kamalamba Navavarana kritis. Dedicated to Kamalambika in Tiruvarur, these compositions are also in the vibhakti theme. They impart the quintessential philosophy of Navavarana puja, the worship of the goddess in the Sri Chakra. Dikshitar beautifully strings the salient features of this tradition in these compositions.

Commencing with a dhyana kriti in the raga Thodi, the nine kritis that

follow, are set in ragas Anandabhairavi, Kalyani, Sankarabharanam, Kamboji, Bhairavi, Punnagavarali, Sahana, Ghanta and Ahiri. These kritis are dedicated to each avarana of the Sri Chakra. The collection is noteworthy for the flood of information that it contains about the Srividya tradition. The series ends with a mangala kriti in Sri raga.

On his 250th birth anniversary, looking at the many facets of the master-composer's treasured creations

## The eternal appeal of Dikshitar



ILLUSTRATION: SOUMYADIP SINHA

given in the dhyana shloka matches perfectly with the description portrayed in the kriti. 'Hastivadanaya' in Navaroju, 'Panchamatanga mukha' in Malahari, and 'Ucchishta ganapatau' in Ramakriya are classic examples.

Word usages in Dikshitar's compositions seem most appropriate in the context that they appear in. For example, the word 'namostute' is used in the kriti on Surya, in line with the fact that Surya is one who is pleased with 'namaskara'. Similarly, in 'Jambupate', the kriti pertaining to the water element amongst the Pancha Bhutas, most words, including the raga name (Yamuna Kalyani) have a connection to the element.

'Hiranmayim Lakshmin' in Lalita and 'Chandram bhaja manasa' in Asaveri are inspired by the Sri Sukta and the Purusha Sukta, respectively. Quotes from the Bhavanopanishad, the Lalita Sahasranama, the Lalita Trishati and the Saundaryalahari are seen in many compositions of Dikshitar.

The madhyama kala passages in Dikshitar's kritis are an exclusive value addition. Sprightly in nature, these passages enhance the beauty of



Musical connect Sri Thyagarajaswamy Temple in Tiruvarur PHOTO : SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the composition. Many Dikshitar kritis have just the pallavi and the anupallavi. The charanam part does not exist in these short compositions. This is a rare construct of the kriti form.

Weaving in raga names into the sahitya is an enjoyable trademark of Dikshitar's creations. Raga names such as Mahuri (tvamahurishadayah) in the kriti 'Mamava Raghuvir'a and Tanukirti (cintayamayanukirtim) in the kriti 'Cidambara Natarajamurtim' are spectacular illustrations.

**Distinct system**

The Ragamalikas 'Purnachandra bimba' a composition of six ragas and the monumental Chaturdasha Ragamalika, a composition of 14 ragas, are invaluable treasures.

It is important to know about the raga tradition that Dikshitar followed. After Venkatamakhin devised the formula for deriving the 72 parent scales, we find that two major systems of raga classifications, with their own prerequisites, emerged. One system charted out the 72 parent scales or melas, with the rule of the parent raga having all the seven swaras, but not necessarily in a linear order. In this system the melas were known as the Raganga ragas. In the other system, it was mandatory that the mela raga had all the seven notes in a linear fashion. The scales in this system are called the Melakarta ragas. Dikshitar, having belonged to the Raganga raga parampara, followed that system with diligence. Thus, his compositions display the flavours of raga as per the Raganga raga parampara.

Being a vainika, intricate gamakas, janta swaras, long drawn jarus, swift madhyama kala passages and chitta

swaras mark the character of Dikshitar's music.

An interesting collective is the Nottuswarams. Dikshitar had the opportunity to listen to the captivating Irish and English tunes of British bands. He composed charming Sanskrit sahityams based on these – 'Santatam pahi mam sangata shyamale' was set to the music of the British national anthem.

In his later years, when hit by penury, Dikshitar, in a fervent prayer to Goddess Lakshmi, rendered the evergreen 'Hiranmayim Lakshmin' in Lalita. When the difficulties phased out, he composed 'Mangaladevata' in Dhanyasi in gratitude.

**Raga of rain**

Enroute to Ettayapuram for his brother Baluswami's wedding, Dikshitar was distressed to see the crops withering due to drought. In an earnest imploration to Goddess Amrteshvari, he composed the kriti 'Anandamrtakarshini' in Amrtavarshini. When he was teaching it to his disciple Subrahmanyam Ayya, there was an instantaneous downpour.

Dikshitar's last moments came in the year 1835, during his stay in Ettayapuram. On the auspicious day of Tula Krishna Chaturdashi, the day of Deepavali, while immersed in the line 'Minalochni pashamochani' from his Gamakakriya kriti, 'Minaksi me mudam dehi', he passed into the ages, bequeathing to humanity a treasure trove of sangita and sahitya.

The writer is a well-known Carnatic violinist and scholar.

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# Setting new boundaries

An ensemble and its experiments with lyrics and music



**Refreshing approach** Sandeep Narayan with Lalit Talluri (flute), Akshay Yesodharan (acoustic guitar) and S. Krishna (ghatam).

PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Aishwarya Raghunathan

**C**an Carnatic music evolve while preserving its essence? 'Spirits of Margazhi' answered with a resounding 'yes' at its first live concert at Spaces in Besant Nagar recently. Founded by Priya Murle, the initiative bridges the old and the new, inviting listeners into a world where tradition is not rigid but fluid. The concert chose to move in the unhurried grace of chowka kala, letting every note unfurl in fullness. Tyagaraja's timeless compositions found kinship with the *dohas* of Kabir, the bhakti-laden verses of Tulsidas, the comforting rhythm of Arunagirinathar's Tiruppugazh

and the compositions by Muralidhara Swamigal. An ensemble with Sandeep Narayan's Carnatic-rooted vocals and Lalit Talluri's flute met Akshay Yesodharan's acoustic guitar and S. Krishna's ghatam.

**Explorative note**  
The evening opened with a fitting invocation, 'Nada tanumanisham' in Chittaranjani, a composition by Tyagaraja that extols the essence of sound. The piece began with a brief alapana on the flute, setting the tone for what would be a meditative yet explorative journey.

This was followed by 'Deera sameere yamuna teere' in Pahadi raga. In this Ashtapadi, Jayadeva weaves a lyrical

portrait of Radha and Krishna's love, imbued with deep devotion. The flute's opening set a serene, almost ethereal mood, transporting the rasikas to Vrindavan.

The next piece, 'Sri hariye endhan guru aavar', unfolded in Hindolam. Composed by Muralidhara Swamigal, the madhurageetham was replete with bhakti bhava. The acoustic guitar subtly enriched the composition, while the flute wove seamlessly through the phrases. The ghatam provided a steady, grounding presence, its rhythmic patterns blending effortlessly.

The fourth piece was the Kabir bhajan, 'Naihwawa humka na bhave', set in Misra Chapu tala. A song of longing and surrender, it speaks of the deep

yearning for the divine and the reverence for the guru who illuminates the path. The melody, rich yet unembellished, carried the raw intensity of devotion.

Next came a Madhurageetham in Darbari Kanada, 'Yugala narthanam', which depicted the celestial dance of Krishna and Radha in unison. The lyrics painted the scene with precision, using words such as *amogham*, *athisayam*, *adbhutham* and *anandam*.

This was followed by a tani avartanam featuring the ghatam. Krishna's rhythmic exploration brought an engaging percussive interlude to the evening's flow.

The Tulsidas bhajan 'Gopala gokula vallabhi' in raga Vallabh carried a quiet grace. Marking a shift in pace, the Tiruppugazh 'Nada vindu kaladhi' opened with a lively introduction on the guitar. A stark contrast to the evening's predominantly slow-tempo selections, this composition featured brisk phrasing and dynamic interplay between instruments.

A child's request brought a twist to the evening. The ensemble presented Tyagaraja's 'Nannu vedachi' in Ritigowla. The concert neared its conclusion with 'Ondrendiru brahman', a Madhurageetham in Sindhu Bhairavi.

The final piece was the much-loved 'Ramanai bhajithal' by Papanasam Sivan in Maand followed by the ensemble's 'Hare Rama Hare Krishna' chant. The entire audience joined in, reiterating music's ability to bring people together in shared reverence.

# The lasting impact

'Kannappar Kuravanji' celebrated the high aesthetics of Rukmini Devi's creations

## V.V. Ramani

**I**n a scenario where artistes have to contend with sparse attendance for dance programmes, what draws art-loving audiences across age groups and tastes to return repeatedly to watch the same dance-dramas in the aesthetic ambience of Kalakshetra? This, when each of them lasts two-and-a-half hours?

The holistic vision of a woman that inspired a brilliant team of artistes and scholars who created something that would have popular appeal while maintaining aesthetics in presentation.

The dancers and musicians have changed over the years, but the productions, especially the Ramayana series, continues to hold sway.

Prof. Janardhanan, who has been a vital part of these productions, has played a major role in their revival by training a new generation of artistes.

Every year, a festival is held in February to commemorate the birthday of the visionary Rukmini Devi Arundale, the founder of Kalakshetra.

Two episodes of the Ramayana - 'Paduka' Patabishekam' and 'Sabari Moksham' - were featured this year, along with 'Kannappar Kuravanji'.

The storyline of the latter was simple. Kurava prince Thinnappar is sent on a mission to protect his people from the attacks of wild boars. Reaching the valley, he is drawn to the sound of the temple bells from Kailayagiri mountain. Going up the hill, he is besotted by a Shivalinga he sees, and surrenders himself to the lord. The priest is not convinced, and to make everyone realise the



**Timeless** Kalakshetra's 'Kannappar Kuravanji' depicts the tale of devotion and sacrifice. PHOTOS COURTESY: KALAKSHETRA



premiered in 1962, with music by Papanasam Sivan. During its latest show, it was still delightful, and sustained interest. From the character introduction, every scene was packed with detail. The choreographic shifts in the group for the Malayala Bhagavati puja sequence, the demonstration of handling various armaments for hunting, a touch of humour in the hunting scenes, and Kannappar's ritual of offering meat and carrying water in his mouth for the abishekam, were all done with finesse.

The impact of the story depends on the dancer playing the main role, and Kailasanathan immersed himself into the role, bringing out different facets and emotions of Kannappar commendably. Jayakrishnan supported him in equal measure, playing Naanan, the friend. The choreographic pattern of each scene, colour of the costumes and detailing of

ornamentation were an aesthetic fit.

It was a rich tapestry of music where classical ragas such as Kamboji, Kalyani, Saveri and Surutti were used so beautifully that one didn't realise where the folk and classical streams blended.

The singular use of the flute, violin and percussion instruments in certain places added great impact.

The musical ensemble needs to be lauded for the manner in which they brought to life Papanasam Sivan's score. The ease with which singer Hariprasad moved from one phrase to another, evoking the necessary bhava, was exemplary. Sasidhar's fine nuances on the flute and MV Srinivas' violin embellished the flow.

Mridangam by Srikanth Pai and maddalam by Karthik Balaji were impactful. Lokesh Raj conducted the recital.



**Inspired** Pavithra Lingendra and Lekha Prasad. (Below) Lakshmi Viswanathan

PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Revisiting her repertoire

**At a tribute event, dancers performed Lakshmi Viswanathan's favourite pieces**

### V.V. Ramani

**F**ew artistes have the ability to bring that extra spark to conversations. Lakshmi Viswanathan was one. The dancer, scholar and writer's tongue-in-cheek repartee and sense of humour endeared her to many off the stage too.

To commemorate her memory, Lakshmi's sister Sujaya Menon recently organised 'Woven Words', an evening of conversations and abhinaya sessions. The show was anchored and presented by Priya Kakkar and Madhumati.

From the garlanded portrait at the entrance to a simple floral setting on stage by Kiran Rao, the aesthetics were in tune with Lakshmi's tastes.

The programme began with a prayer by Samanvita, followed by three speakers sharing their insights into Lakshmi's art and life. Jeetendra Hirschfeld, a long-time associate and a collaborator on her research work in later years, spoke about Lakshmi's scholarship and artistic journey. A small video clipping of her teaching methodology was shown.

Dancer Sharadha Narayanan shared her personal experiences with Lakshmi, both as a friend and an artiste. Lakshmi was known for her abhinaya prowess, and Nityakalyani Vaidyanathan gave a beautiful talk on the nuances of abhinaya. She then demonstrated the four ways in which a dancer could approach a single line.

The dance session began appropriately with the Huseni



Swarajathi 'Emayaladira' that Lakshmi had taught two young dancers Vaishnavi Srinivasan and Nivedhita Harish, disciples of Roja Kannan. The edited version gave a glimpse of the natyam of yore that Lakshmi was so fond of – she had even designed the costumes to reflect that period.

Vaishnavi and Nivedhita were impressive, both in the nritta and abhinaya segments.

'Theruvil varano', a padam composed by Muthu Thandavar bringing out the emotions of a lovelorn nayika, was rendered by Pranathi Ramadurai. Lekha Prasad's depiction, in myriad ways, of a bird in flight and then cajoling and conversing with it in 'Paingili vanarn' in Tillang was endearing.

Showcasing her ability to communicate a range of emotions through mukhabinaya was Jayanthi Subramanian in the Kshetrayya padam 'Valapudasa'. It was a mature portrayal as she danced with finesse at a leisurely pace, a fitting dedication to Lakshmi.

The emotional turbulence that Radha experiences is the essence of the Ashtapadi 'Nindati chandana' and Pavithra Lingendra brought it out well.

The evening concluded on a vibrant note with a Kuchipudi rendition of Sarangapani's Kalyani raga composition 'Chittile vesithe' by Avijit Das, the only male dancer of the evening. The flourish with which the plaited hair was tossed back, the nonchalance of Krishna and the lilt in the body movements made his presentation engrossing.

## Celebratory note

**'Echoes of Colour' showed how ragas can capture the spirit of a festival**

### Renuka Suryanarayanan

**C**hennai-based *Sruti* magazine recently organised an event to capture the spirit of Holi through art.

Chaitra Sairam, a disciple of Bombay Jayashri, apart from working with children with autism, teaches music in rural areas in Tamil Nadu.

Chaitra chose appropriate ragas to create a visual imagery of different colours. She presented Muthuswami Dikshitar's nottuwaram to denote white. Her young students Shakti and Priya sang along with Chaitra. She next depicted the colour yellow with 'Tunga tarange' (Hamsadhwani, Sadashiva Brahmandral). The sheen in her voice came to the fore in this song.

The highlight of Chaitra's session, an attempt at grahabhedam (shifting the tonic note to another in the raga and arriving at a different raga), won her appreciation from the audience. Starting with Mohanam, she shifted the base note to rishabam (ri to ri) to reach Madhyamavati. Shifting the base to Gandham (ga to ga), she sang raga Hindolam, and later shifting the base note to dhaivatam (dha to dha), she landed at Shuddha Dhanyasi.

In this colourful array of ragas, Chaitra came up with a string of melodies: 'Swagatam Krishna' (Mohanam), 'Govardhana Girisham' (Hindolam), 'Narayana Ninna' (Shuddha Dhanyasi) and 'Karpagame' (Madhyamavati).

The penultimate piece was 'Kaakkai siraginile nandalala', where Mahakavi Bharati sees Nature's colours in the dark-skinned Krishna. Her students sang along too. Chaitra concluded with a



Meera bhajan, 'Holi khelata hain giridhari'.

Srivatsan on the keyboard, and Ayushmaan Sairam on the mridangam offered good support to the performance.

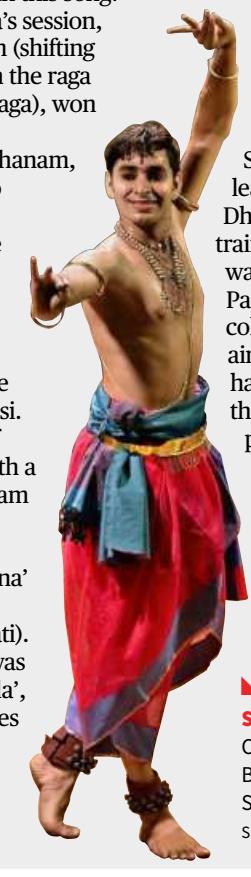
### Sundaresan's artistry

The next 30 minutes saw Bharatanatyam dancer P. Sundaresan showcase his versatility. He trains in abhinaya under eminent dancer Bragha Bessell. He is a trained Kalaripayattu artiste too. With a Master's in Bharatanatyam, Sundaresan teaches dance and choreography.

His first presentation 'Holi aye re' described Krishna playing Holi in Brij with Radha and the gopis. Sundaresan effused confidence and good technique.

He next presented Sant Chokhamela's popular abhang 'Abhir gulaal udhalita rang', taking us on a journey to Pandharpur to show how Holi is celebrated in the town. Sundaresan, who began learning dance under Dhanalakshmi Shankar and later trained under V. Balagurunathan, was able to evoke the joy as Panduranga dances amid colourful powder strewn in the air. However, the artiste would have done well by evoking more the bhakti bhava in this presentation. The dancer concluded with a Kuntalavarali thillana.

After the performances, the artistes and the audience played with colours.



**Song and steps** (From top) Chaitra Sairam and Bharatanatyam dancer P. Sundaresan. PHOTOS: R. RAVINDRAN AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# The Baul way of life



Meet  
Santhipriya,  
the lone  
Baul singer  
from  
Kerala

#### Parshathy J. Nath

**P**oozhiyil kalikkente kunje (play in the mud, child)...plavinte chuttum nee aadu kunje (dance around the jackfruit tree, child), plavu chirichal chakkapazham (if the tree smiles, you get jackfruit). As Santhipriya sings this song, there is a smile on the faces of the audience at the Sangeetha Nataka Akademi, the venue of

the recently held International Theatre Festival of Kerala.

The song strikes an instant rapport with the audience, taking them back to their childhood days. She comes up with more songs about children and the environment. These have been taught to her by her father, theatre stalwart KJ Baby.

Santhipriya, the lone Baul singer from Kerala, draws inspiration from many traditions, but the one common thread is love and

harmony. Santhipriya's repertoire also includes the vachanas of Sree Narayana Guru, Kabir's dohas, songs of Meera and the folk songs of Kerala. All these resonate with the spirit of Baul.

To be wounded by sound – that's how a young Santhipriya from Wayanad felt when she heard Baul music for the first time about two decades ago, as Baul singer Anusheh Anadil from Bangladesh sang away into the night in her open-throated voice at the

University of Calicut. Santhipriya had already heard stories of the Baul from her mother, Shirlly Joseph, a revolutionary educationist and professor of English, and when she heard Anusheh sing the songs of Lalon Shah, struck her that "this is what I want to do, how I want to sing".

Santhipriya is a disciple of Parvathy Baul, and learnt the music in the traditional guru shishya parampara. Many years ago, when she approached Parvathy to learn from her, she said she could not take any more students. But, Santhipriya persisted and travelled to Nedumangad, where Parvathy lives with her husband Ravi Gopalan Nair.

Parvathy "Didi", had a spontaneity that touched Santhipriya. "There is an inner joy she holds in whatever she does, be it cooking, drawing, playing with the dogs or teaching me songs. She would wake up in the middle of the night to draw. I am thankful I got to witness that as a young person."

The unique motorbike-bullock cart rides to the villages of Bengal to meet Parvathy's guru Sanatan Das, are still fresh in Santhipriya's memory. "He used to be silent, When her father passed away, there was a video of Santhipriya singing before he was consigned to the flames. The wail of her song moved all. "Baul is a way to communicate with a vaster being. In this intimate conversation, there is no place for the beauty of the voice or perfection of technique. It is about singing with your heart. Baul music is about being who you really are on this earth," says Santhi.

but his presence was vibrant. She used to sing for him." Santhipriya has also travelled with Parvathy to Baul festivals. "In some festivals, she would spontaneously ask me to sing with her; sometimes, while singing, she would ask me to dance with her. That is the core of Baul, to be in that flow."

Nupur, ekta and duggi are the three instruments Santhipriya carries to her performances. These instruments have a meaning beyond offering a rich soundscape. "When you use three instruments, your attention is not on any of them, you come to an in-between field without thoughts. That's the Baul ground, where one stands and sings."

Being someone from outside the community comes with its test of spirit. "In each phase, one has to be honest," says the artiste who has been moulded in the Krishnamurti school of thought as part of her studies in Sita school in Bengaluru.

Santhipriya grew up watching her father's iconic plays such as *Naatugaddika*, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi-award winning work *Mavelimantram*, and *Bespurkana* that speaks of the exploitation of tribal communities. As a child, Santhipriya was a part of his collective singing troupes featuring tribal children.

Canavu, the alternative school and commune for educating tribal children, which her parents co-founded in Wayanad, also influenced her.

When her father passed away, there was a video of Santhipriya singing before he was consigned to the flames. The wail of her song moved all. "Baul is a way to communicate with a vaster being. In this intimate conversation, there is no place for the beauty of the voice or perfection of technique. It is about singing with your heart. Baul music is about being who you really are on this earth," says Santhi.



Performers at the festival

## Formidable line-up

The much-awaited Shriram Shankarla Music Festival is back

#### Shailaja Khanna

**D**elhi's oldest classical music festival returns this weekend as a three-day event from March 21 to 23. Over the years, the festival has featured many legendary Hindustani musicians.

Shobha Deepak Singh, chairperson of Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, who has been the driving force behind the festival for the past 50 years, says, "This will be my first festival without my husband, Deepak, who was a strong support. But, as he always said, 'The show must go on.'"

The festival opens with Rahul Sharma's santon recital, followed by Ashwini Bhide Deshpande's vocal recital. The next day begins with flute sisters Debopriya and Suchismita Chatterjee, disciples of Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia. The second concert of the evening features Prabhakar and Diwakar Kashyap of the Benares gharana, disciples of Pt. Rajan and Sajan Mishra, followed by Pt. Budhaditya Mukherjee's sitar recital.

The concluding evening will showcase veteran vocalist Pt. Vinayak Torvi of the Kirana Gharana, followed by Ustad Amjad Ali Khan on the sarod.

When asked about his performance this year, the veteran sarodist says, "Our classical music is always fresh. The Yaman or Darbari I played yesterday will be different from what I play today. I believe each raga has an atma (soul). Notes connect hearts, no matter where you live. Music transcends religion; it is a means to connect with the divine."

At Open Air Theatre, Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, March 21 to 23; 6 p.m. onwards

The Pickle Factory Dance Foundation's fifth season held space for experimental works

## Spice up the movement

#### Joshua Muviva

**S**ince 2018, the Pickle Factory Dance Foundation has been a 'holding space' for the "practice, discourse and presentation of dance and movement work" within unusual spaces in Kolkata. In their just-concluded fifth season, they invited audiences to join them in 'holding space' for movement practitioners presenting work that does not subscribe to the modern-day metrics of "faster, higher, stronger".

The event, spread over three weeks, opened with Luxemburg's As We Are, a dance company that works at the crossroads between movement and media. They presented *Shoot the Cameraman*, which blended contemporary dance with live camera-work (choreographed camerapersons) to offer viewers a double-rendering of the work – on stage and projected on screen. This juxtaposing turned on its head the concept of 'seeing is believing'.

Auroville-based Adishakti bracketed the first weekend of performances, workshops and public engagements with Nimmy Raphael's *Urmila*. Through the character of Urmila, the wife of Lakshmana, the play unravels the price women pay for obedience.

The second week focussed on three performing units. Chennai-based choreographer Padmini Chettur's work was presented through video installations along with solo and group showings; Glasgow-based choreographer-dancer Solene

CYMK



Weinacher's solo *After All*, and Swiss duo Marcel Schwald and choreographer Chris Leuenberger's devised work *Ef\_feminity*.

Padmini's video installations displayed at Experimenter were distillations of her on-going choreographic enquiries. In the installation *Stilling*, several disembodied limbs set off at the same time to create movement engineered by consciously unlocking and locking muscle groups to create rotations. In the live performance version, re-staged across two jail cells and an open courtyard at the Alipore Museum, a former prison, Padmini built on these alphabets. She choreographed phrases and complete sentences of these rotational movements through the permutation of eight dancers' moving bodies that drew the viewer to pay attention to the smallest movements that domino-ed into larger actions before coiling back into the starting position.

Pickle Factory's Fifth Season concluded with Tanzbar Bremen's 'Can You Read My Body' and Kapila Venu's *Saiva Koothu*.

In curating this set of work, the Pickle Factory Dance Foundation has proved it isn't a gatekeeper but rather respects success and mis-steps equally, but platforms more than simply effort.



**Myriad themes** Solène Weinacher's *After All*. (Below) Padmini Chettur's *Stilling*. PHOTOS: GODHULI ROY AND DANA ROY

Weinacher's clever solo *After All* brought together heartfelt story-telling; fluid, exquisite dance moves and laughter as companions to unravel the concept of grieving.

Swiss artistes Schwald and Leuenberger worked with contemporary choreographer Diya Naidu, radio personality and actor Shilok Mukkati and theatre practitioner Living Smile Vidya to devise *Ef\_feminity*. This work turned the spotlight on each of the performer's relationships with notions of being effeminate.

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In curating this set of work, the Pickle Factory Dance Foundation has proved it isn't a gatekeeper but rather respects success and mis-steps equally, but platforms more than simply effort.

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A-CHE

**Narendra Kusnur**

**G**erman legend Ludwig van Beethoven's Third Symphony, composed in 1803-04 and popularly known as *Eroica*, is considered a landmark in the transition between the Classical and Romantic eras. When renowned British conductor Sir Mark Elder heard that the Mumbai-based NCPA's (National Centre for the Performing Arts) Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI) was keen to perform it, he chose to turn it into his debut show in Mumbai.

"I believe they hadn't played it for a long time, and they said they didn't want the orchestra to be any larger than the one that played with Zubin Mehta just a week earlier. So, given that size, I had to prepare them," said Elder.

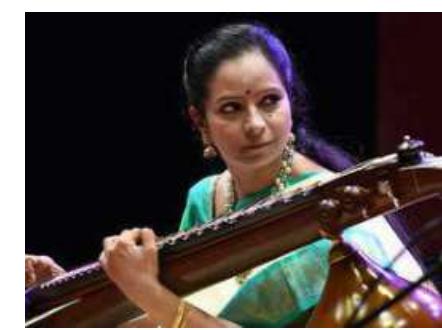
Performing at the Jamshed Bhabha Theatre in the final show of the SOI Spring 2025 Season, Elder and the musicians left the audience spellbound by the slow second movement, which is a funeral march, and by the wonderfully constructed and sprightly third movement. This was after the Overture to Carl Maria von Weber's romantic opera *Oberon* and Robert Schumann's *Overture, Scherzo & Finale*. Said the 77-year-old musician, "I had to find pieces that I thought would prepare for the *Eroica*, but not overshadow it."

The conductor described *Oberon* as a beautiful piece of music with a terrible story. "The Overture remains one of my favourite pieces, and it suited the programme. I learnt it as a student in Cambridge, and thought it would not only be fun, but also something the orchestra would enjoy."

Elder shared Schumann's piece is actually not played at all. "Schumann wasn't too experienced when he wrote it. It's an experiment, and it's like a symphony without a slow movement. I've known it since I was 20, because I had to study it



**Calling the tune** Sir Mark Elder (left and below) leading the NCPA's Symphony Orchestra of India.  
PHOTOS COURTESY: NCPA



Jayanthi Kumaresh.

**Musical ode**

A series of special events has been organised to mark Muthuswami Dikshitar's 250th birth anniversary.

Guruguhamta presents a six-day special line-up from March 24 to 29, at Ragasudha Hall, Luzz, Mylapore.

To be inaugurated at 5.30 p.m. by Justice Prabha Sridevan, former judge, The Madras High Court, the opening concert will be by T.M. Krishna at 6.45 p.m.

The events taking place on other days are:

**March 25**, 5.30 p.m.: Madhusudan Kalaichelvan's talk on 'Shaivism in Dikshitar' followed by Jayanthi Kumaresh's veena recital at 6.45 p.m.

**March 26**, 5.30 p.m.: 'Archaic Ragas revived by Dikshitar', a talk by Ravi Rajagopalan with Gayathri Girish (vocals), followed by Sumithra Vasudev's lec-dem 'Compositions of Muthuswami Dikshitar in raga Kamboji recorded in the Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini' at 6.45 p.m.

**March 27**, 5.30 p.m.: A talk by Naresh Keerthi on 'Sarasa-Sangita-Sahitya; Understanding invention and convention in Muthuswami Dikshitar's language', followed by R.K. Shriramkumar's lec-dem 'The myriad contours of Sankarabharanam as seen in the compositions of Dikshitar recorded in the Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini' at 6.45 p.m.

**March 28**, 5.30 p.m.: V. Sriram's 'Sishya parampara of Dikshitar', followed by Amritra Murali's vocal concert themed on the compositions by Sishya Parampara of Dikshitar at 6.45 p.m.

**March 29**, 5.30 p.m.: 'Dikshitar kirtanam repertoire on the concert platform as seen in concerts from the 1950s', a presentation by Aishwarya Vidya Raghunath and Rithvik Raja. This will be followed by N. Vijay Siva's concert based on Dikshitar's compositions in the D.K. Jayaraman and D.K. Pattammal bani at 6.45 p.m.

**Veenavaadhini Sampradaya Sangit Trust**, Chennai, in association with Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam Carnatic Sangeetha Seva Trust, Tiruvarur, presents a musical homage on March 24 at Dikshitar Mantapam in Tiruvarur. **9 a.m.:** Rendition of Kamalamba Navavarana kritis by Jeyaraaj Krishnan and Jaysri Jeyaraaj Krishnan and their students, **4 p.m.:** The students of Veenavaadhini Sampradaya Sangit Trust will present 'Sangeetha Seva' followed by Jeyaraaj and Jaysri Jeyaraaj's veena duet.

# A way with the baton

**British conductor Sir Mark Elder shares the experience of his debut show in India**

for a competition. And it went well with the SOI." Though Elder has had a long association with conducting, he actually began by singing in a cathedral as a boy, and then learnt the piano. Later, his parents bought him a bassoon which was "taller than I was". The switch to conducting happened at Cambridge, where he sang, played the bassoon and piano and acted in plays. From 1979 to 1993, Elder was the music director of the English National Orchestra. He also held prominent positions as principal guest conductor at the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the London Mozart Players and the City of Birmingham Symphony

Orchestra in the UK, besides being music director of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra in the U.S.

Most classical followers know Elder best for his association with The Halle, a symphony orchestra based in Manchester. "I first conducted The Halle in the beginning of the 1980s. They were not too happy. When I took over as their music director in 2000, things were not good, artistically and commercially. My focus was thus to give them confidence, and build a rapport. We re-did the contract, began to record much more, and things

became good." Elder quit as music director last year, but continues as the orchestra's conductor laureate.

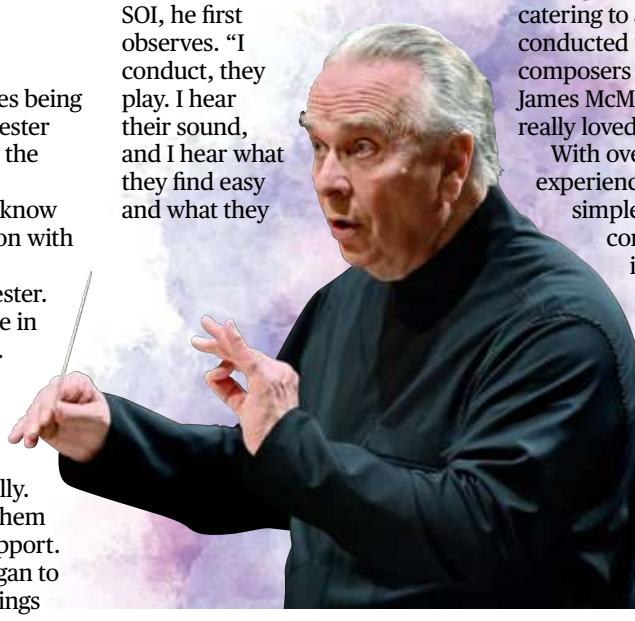
The conductor explained that his approach changes from orchestra to orchestra. "Earlier this year, I was in San Francisco, and then in Pittsburgh. Lately, I've been a lot in Bergen, Norway. Now I am in Mumbai. Each orchestra is different. The personalities are different. So, you have to adjust, be ready to change."

When he's conducting an orchestra for the first time, as he did with SOI, he first observes. "I conduct, they play. I hear their sound, and I hear what they find easy and what they

find difficult. After 15 minutes or so in rehearsals, I start working with them to match what they give me musically with what I have in my imagination. I continue this till I get the right balance."

Speaking about today's audiences, Elder said he is happy to see more youngsters at concerts. It augurs well for the future of classical music. He added that unlike in the 1960s and 1970s, when he was young and new music was harder to absorb, more people are now keen to listen to new composers. "People are writing different kinds of music, catering to all tastes. I have conducted pieces by new composers Huw Watkins and James McMillan. The audience really loved them."

With over 55 years of experience, Elder has some simple advice for aspiring conductors. "It's important to be patient, hard working and humble. One has to study music, develop an ear, learn to adjust and study more. Don't expect a career to land in your lap," he said, with the stamp of authority he displays while wielding the baton.



# Taking ragas to Russia

**Vivek Venugopal ropes in musicians from the Bolshoi Theatre and Russian National Orchestra for his new album**

**S B Vijaya Mary**

**C**omposer Vivek Venugopal's latest album 'Raga Poems, Op. 22 & Liberation, Op. 18' is a blend of Indian and Western classical elements. It has been recorded in Moscow with musicians from the Bolshoi Theatre and the Russian National Orchestra.

"The music was recorded at the historic GDRZ Studio – The State House of Broadcasting and Sound Recording," says Vivek.

Vivek considers it a great experience working with musicians in Russia. "They understood the Indian classical influences in my pieces. Flautist Stanislas Yaroshevskiy amazed me with the way he adjusted his flute's sound to mimic the soft, breathy tone of the Indian bansuri, especially in the first movement of Raga Poems. Cellist Dmitry Fastunov and violinist Dmitry Novikov added subtle slides and microtonal touches that gave a feel of Indian music."

Op 22 was written for Flute, String Quartet and Piano, and Vivek selected each instrument to achieve a specific sound. Orchestration is an art form," he says, "and each section brings its own unique texture and sonic balance".

With 10 albums behind him and a new one set to release, how does Vivek feel his music has evolved? Vivek shares that 'Raga Poems, Op. 22' began as an experiment – a way to explore whether he could take

on a major project rooted in Indian music.

**The native link**

Vivek draws a parallel to Toru Takemitsu, the Japanese composer who also distanced himself from his native music before eventually embracing it. "My journey has been quite similar, and the results show in this piece." He also sees a connection to what Béla Bartók did with Hungarian and Romanian folk music – adapting its essence into his unique style – something Vivek says he unconsciously mirrored with Indian music.

Interestingly, 'Liberation, Op. 18' seems, at first glance, entirely Western in its harmony and melody. "But the Indian link lies in the rhythm," he points out. The piece uses additive rhythms, shaped by konnakol and bol – the Indian oral traditions of rhythm. It also experiments with hexachords (six-note chords), a technique Vivek says has continued to influence his musical thinking.

Though Vivek grew up in Hyderabad, he feels the city's direct impact on his work has been minimal. "Contemporary classical music is nearly non-existent here. I'm self-taught. My teachers are the 20th-century greats Igor Stravinsky, Alban Berg, Bela Bartok, Claude Debussy, and John Coltrane." He credits one Indian mentor – 'Ghatam' Karthick. "He reshaped my understanding of rhythm, and that has subtly found its way into my compositions."



**Unique soundscape** Vivek Venugopal (third from left) with Russian musicians.  
PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## CALENDAR



### Vocal concerts

The following programmes will be held at Arkay Convention Centre, under the auspices of **Madhuradhwani**. Schedule: **March 22, 6.15 p.m.:** Thirumalai brothers. **March 23, 4.30 p.m.:** Supriya Raja and **6.30 p.m.:** Hemmige S. Prashanth.

**Hamsadhwani** has organised the following vocal concerts at Youth Hostel, Adyar. **March 21, 6.15 p.m.:** Archana and Aarathi; **March 22, 6.15 p.m.:** Gayathri Girish's thematic concert 'Hariyam Haranum'; and **March 23, 4.15 p.m.:** Sandeep Narayan.

### Discourse

As part of the Sri Ramanavami celebrations, Arulmigu Amirthavalli Thayar Udanurai Sri Sowmya Damodara Perumal temple, Konnur, Villivakkam, has organised Kidambi Narayanan's Ramayana discourse series till March 28 at 7 p.m.

### Nostalgia act

Witness Tamil theatre's finest talents on one stage as the Federation of City Sabhas celebrates World Theatre Day on March 27 at Narada Gana Sabha. This event will bring together legendary theatre artistes such as Y.Gee. Mahendra, Kathadi Ramamurthy, Maali, Madhu Balaji and S.Ve. Shekher, who will present short performances from their super hit plays. A few video clips from the plays of yesteryear icons Cho, M.R. Radha, R.S. Manohar and others will also be played. The event, open to all, is coordinated by Dharini Komal, who will share interesting theatre anecdotes between performances. For details call 94444 44767.

# United voice of rappers

**KR\$NA's 'Asian State of Mind' brings together artistes from across the continent**



**Neha Kipal**

**R**apper KR\$NA's new song, 'Asian State of Mind', which was released recently, is a collaborative effort that brings together leading rappers from Cambodia, India, Korea, China and Japan. The project aims to showcase the unity within the Asian rap and hip-hop scene, highlighting its potential to become the next global phenomenon similar to K-Pop. For KR\$NA, the experience was unparalleled, because it is something that has never happened before. "Individually, all of these

markets have evolved and have a great hip-hop scene of their own. Korea is huge and China has a big scene as well. I think it's an opportunity for us to be integrated in an ecosystem where we all can thrive and show some Asian unity," explains KR\$NA, one of the earliest rappers to emerge in the Indian hip-hop scene in the mid-2000s.

**Message of solidarity** Each artiste represents a unique background, contributing to a powerful message of solidarity and collective strength. Of the other artistes, KR\$NA knew only Awich from Japan. "I had met her a few times in Japan, and that is how we started

the conversation about this collaboration," says KR\$NA, who also briefly featured in the 2019 Bollywood film *Gully Boy*.

Jay Park, a Korean rapper and pop-star, is extremely popular not only in Korea but also in America. Masiwei is part of a Chinese group called Higher Brothers, one of the most popular hip-hop groups in that country. And VannDa has a cult following in Cambodia.

Having started rapping more than two decades ago at the age of 14, KR\$NA's inspirations were mostly Western hip-hop, predominantly American. "I was also listening to a lot of West Coast and East Coast rappers, such as Tupac Shakur, The Notorious B.I.G., Nas and Jay-Z," he adds.

A genre that can fit any theme, hip-hop gives one the flexibility to speak about anything – ranging from personal and political to cultural themes.

At one time, KR\$NA was an active socio-political rapper where he addressed everything around him. "Hip-hop provides us with the opportunity to really express ourselves beyond any one topic. My music comes from a deeply personal space. I feel like hip-hop and my music is a reflection of what's going on around us," he says.

According to KR\$NA, the world's attention is being increasingly directed to the East. KR\$NA, however, feels that India has been somewhat missing out of the Asian equation as far as hip-hop is concerned. "Hence, it's a great opportunity for us to showcase that we are just as capable, and also prove that we can fit into the scene as well. The fact that we already have a huge fan base in India for hip-hop will show that this is a market that needs to be taken more seriously. I think this Asian unity along with this opportunity and track is a brilliant step forward," he says.

**Unique soundscape** Vivek Venugopal (third from left) with Russian musicians.  
PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT