



Strings and steps

Dancer Urmila Satyanarayanan and musician Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi came together for Natyarangam's 'Vaggeyakara Bharatham'

V.V. Ramani

The third edition of 'Vaggeyakara Bharatham', presented by Nrithyopasana Trust and Natyarangam, featured a collaborative attempt between Urmila Satyanarayanan and Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi. The well-known dancer and the

violinist selected some compositions, including a few rare ones, suited for dance, which were performed by Urmila and her students.

The auspicious sounds of the nagaswaram, by Pazhayaseevaram G Kalidas and thavil by Adyar G Silambarasan, were majestic in tone and tenor, and the mallari in panchaganam ragamalika composed by Kulithalai Pichaiyappillai and



Fine blend
(Left) Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi and (top) Urmila Satyanarayanan with students.
PHOTOS: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

Valangaiman Shanmugasundaram Pillai, set to Sankeerna Ata talam, was danced by a group of young girls. After initial hiccups, they presented it with coordination and clarity, but their entry and exit needed to be streamlined better.

Next was the prayer, a kriti composed by Vijayalakshmi, in praise of Narthana Ganapathy in Nattakurinji.

The varnam, 'En manam niraindavar', composed by

Lalgudi G. Jayaraman in Kiravani for the production 'Jayanthi jaya devi' in the 1990s, was danced as a group with four characters – Uma, Sakhi, Shiva and Shiva in the guise of an old man. This varnam is about Uma speaking to her sakhi about her love for Thillai Nataraja, when Shiva appears to thwart her penance and dissuade her from marrying.

The strength of a varnam in a traditional margam lies in

the immense possibility it offers in detailing and expressing the emotions of a besotted nayika. By adapting it to a group presentation, the impact of the emotions of love got diluted, with attention getting divided among each character on stage. The latter half, which was visualised as a dialogue between Uma and Shiva in disguise with a peppy line 'Shivan en manalan', was akin to a natya nadakam (dance drama) – where swaras and sahitya, and rhythm and dramatics combined judiciously.

A Purandaradasar devarnama 'Mella mella bandane' in Mohana, speaking about with gopikas complaining to Krishna's mother Yashoda about the pranks played by Krishna, was portrayed as a costume drama with two Krishnas – the obedient son and a mischievous boy in conversation mode with the complaining gopis.

Urmila's portrayal of the emotions in the song 'Nidhi chala sukham' by Tyagaraja in raga Kalyani, where he stresses the importance of devotion over worldly pleasures, was noteworthy for the sensitivity with which she expressed the thoughts.

Identifying and choreographing rare compositions suited for dance is a fine step forward, but it needs to move beyond the level of a routine margam presentation. The varied facets of each discipline could have been woven more seamlessly had there been greater creative engagement between the musician and the dancer.

Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi's concise explanation of the musicality and salient features of each composition helped the audience understand their intrinsic value. As for the dance aspect, the focus was group choreography.

Sai Kripa Prasanna, besides choreographing the pieces with Urmila, wielded the cymbals. Bhavya Hari and Prithvi Harish's vocal rendition was soulful and melodic. Guru Bharadwaj on the mridangam and Sujith Naik on the flute were the accompanying artistes.

Gaurav Indaura enhanced the visual appeal of the concert.

The playlist included some Carnatic music too – 'Saraswati' was sung by Soumya Gurucharan, accompanied by the talented Abhay Nayampally on the Carnatic guitar. Bhagvesh Marathe, the talented vocalist representing Gwalior and Agra gayaki, was a guest singer at the concert. He sang 'Raga Rageshwari', accompanied by Anirudh on the keyboard, Soumitra Thakur, the talented Maihar gharana sitarist, and Punjab gharana's Yashwant Vaibhav and Ajrara gharana's Saptak Sharma on the tabla. On the ghatam was Varun Rajasekharan. This song lent a different dimension to the concert.

Folk songs, thumri and bhajan broadened the appeal of the band.

One admired the musical context of the pieces as well as the seamless mingling of genres and sounds. To create something novel that also kindles nostalgia is laudable; as is Anirudh's ability to present a diverse set of musicians on the same stage. "I was fortunate to find a group of artistes who were willing to contribute to this project," says Anirudh.

The Collective sound

Backed by a formidable line-up of musicians, the album *Sabr* is a celebration of music's diversity



Seamless synergy Singers performing at the launch of *Sabr* in New Delhi.
PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Shailaja Khanna

The Anirudh Varma Collective recently launched its third album *Sabr* at a packed Kamani auditorium in New Delhi. The more than two-hour concert featured 12 tracks from the album, and two old favourites 'Megh' and 'Tala Bop'.

Weaving together traditional pieces with a contemporary soundscape is the Collective's speciality. As Anirudh Varma put it: "Our intent has always been to not take away the classical essence but to present it in a contemporary format."

Trained in both Western classical music (piano) and Hindustani music, Anirudh gives equal space to both genres in the songs his group presents.

A melange of musicians, including Sidharth on the saxophone and Aman Sharma on the trumpet, dominated by Suyash Gabriel on the drums, set the mood, before vocalist Prateek Narasimha sang the opening number 'Saade naal', accompanied by a full set of musicians, including a 12-member choir, flute, sarod, sitar and guitars. The lighting was excellent – designer

Echoes of tradition Students and faculty of the school; students playing at an utsavam of Then Tirupati Srinivasa temple; and K.G. Baalakrishnan, founder of the school.
PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Catching them young

The Then Tirupati Nagaswara and Thavil school near Mettupalayam, which offers free training and accommodation, draws students from across Tamil Nadu

Govindaraja Pillai and Thiruvalaputhur Kaliyamurthy. I picked up a lot from Thirunageswaram T.R Subramania Pillai as well," says Subhash. He was in Singapore and Canada before moving to this school.

Currently, 32 thavil and 14 nagaswaram students learnt at the school. They begin the day practising in the Srinivasa temple from 4 a.m. to 6.30 a.m. They attend classes from 9.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., with a short break for lunch. From 6 p.m., they resume *sadhakam* at the temple.

Both courses are of four years' duration. In the first year, they are taught *Pillayar paadam*, *talas*,

otha kai paadam, *rettai kai paadam*, and so on. In the second year, they begin the *silambu palagi*. In the third year, they begin playing the

thavil. External examiners Swamimalai Manimaran, Aduthurai Perumal Kovil D. Sankaran, Swamimalai Sethuraman and Kottaiyur Chakrapani evaluate both nagaswaram and thavil students.

Paganeri Pillappan, a recipient of the Muthamizh Perarignar award from Tamil Isai Sangam, Madurai, is the nagaswaram teacher at the school. He used to run a gurukulam in his house in Madurai for 35 years, and trained over 200 students. When his wife passed, he moved to this school.

Pillappan learnt from his father Kottachami Pillai, who had been a student of

Vedaranyam Vedamurthy. Pillappan later was part of Thirupparankundram A.P. Raja's set, and has played in Singapore, Malaysia, Rangoon and Mauritius.

A video of Pillappan playing Malayamarutham in the Paganeri Neelakanteswarar temple caught the attention of actor Kamal Haasan, who shared the video on X, and composed a poem praising the artiste.

Nagaswaram syllabus
So, what is the syllabus for nagaswaram in the school? "In the first year, there is only vocal training. I teach students geethams,

alankarams and talas. In the second year, they play the nagaswaram, and in the second and third year, they are taught varnams and kirtanas. In the fourth year, they are given pointers on raga alapana," says Pillappan.

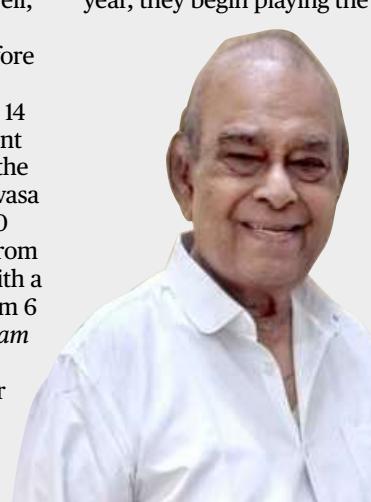
Seventeen-year-old Arulchelvan is a second-year student of nagaswaram, who heard about the facilities at the school, and joined classes.

The students play during utsavams at the Then Tirupati Srinivasa temple. During the Purattasi Brahmotsavam, three well-known nagaswaram and thavil vidwan play in the temple, in addition to the two resident teachers. Senior students take turns to play along with them. "This helps hone their skills," says Subash. Students get a certificate at the end of the course. "Some of them want further training and we put them in touch with teachers of their choice," says Subash.

N. Sabari, a thavil student, whose parents and sister are nagaswaram players, says, "After I finish the course here, I want to go for advanced training under Dharapuram Ganesan sir. The school draws students from across Tamil Nadu. "One of our students, Srikanth, from Ulundurpet, received the National Bal Shree Honour, an award presented to creative children by the National Bal Bhavan. It is one of the highest national honours for children," elaborates Subash.

Even as we speak, students line up after their day's classes to head for regular practice at the temple – from where the idea of the school began.

The initiative will not only help promote nagaswaram and thavil but also equip young learners of the instruments with the necessary confidence and skill to make their own space in the world of music.





East meets West The Budapest Symphony Orchestra; (below) Ganesh Kumar at the premiere of RISE at the Ceremonial Hall of the Pesti Vigadó in Budapest PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Rachel Rhine

In a moment suspended between worlds – ancient China and 19th-century Vienna – a quiet spark leapt across centuries to ignite the imagination of a composer in Chennai. It was 2018, and Ganesh B Kumar, city-bred musician, stumbled upon a quote by Confucius: 'Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.'

In that moment, Beethoven's spirit seemed to stand before him, breathing through the words of the Chinese philosopher. Thus began RISE: Symphony No.1 in D minor – a work that had its world premiere last Sunday at the Ceremonial Hall of the Pesti Vigadó in Budapest, performed by the Budapest Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Viennese conductor Anthony Armore.

The evening marked a rare

Uplifting symphony

Confucius and Beethoven inspired Chennai-based musician Ganesh B Kumar to compose RISE

meeting of the past and present: a composer from Chennai offering a musical reflection on Beethoven's struggles, in a hall that has long borne witness to the enduring conversation between music and history.

"At first glance, Confucius and Beethoven seem far apart," says Ganesh. "But that day, something told me otherwise. Beethoven's life was the embodiment of those

words – enduring deafness, despair and illness, yet continually rising to create music that would outlast his time."

Structured in three movements, RISE navigates Beethoven's emotional landscape with deliberate design. The first movement, Arrival of the Legend, moves in Allegro con brio, capturing Beethoven's commanding arrival in the world of music

with an energy that feels urgent but controlled. The second, Introspection, unfolds at an Andante pace – slower, reflective, allowing space to absorb the magnitude of Beethoven's inner struggles. The third, Undisputed Numero Uno, set at Allegro con moto, drives forward with momentum, tracing the resilient climb toward lasting triumph.

At the heart of RISE lies a

quiet reimagining of one of music's most recognisable themes: the 'ta-ta-ta-taa' motif from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Traditionally, it is built on a falling third, suggesting fate or struggle. Ganesh turned it upward – into a rising fifth – a choice that changes its character without losing its identity.

"Beethoven saw destiny knocking at his door with that motif," says Ganesh. "But when we look at his life in full, it speaks more of rising, not falling. I wanted to keep the rhythm and pulse but lift the energy."

The symphony's own journey to the stage has reflected the ideas it holds. Ganesh recorded RISE in Germany in 2019, preparing for a scheduled premiere in Poland, a country closely tied to his earlier work, The Journey. Dates were set; rehearsals planned. Then came 2020 – and with it, the closures that silenced concert halls around the world. "It felt

like waiting inside a storm," Ganesh recalls.

Rather than waiting indefinitely, Ganesh and his collaborators chose another path. His label, Navona Records, released the recordings of RISE and The Journey together under the title 'Spirit of Humanity'. It was a fitting moment. That year marked the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth and the 75th year since the end of World War II – two milestones tied deeply to the spirit of both compositions.

When RISE finally reached a live audience in Budapest last Sunday, it carried the imprint of that long preparation. The Pesti Vigadó, standing by the Danube, provided a setting layered with history. As the music rose through the hall, it offered a reflection not only of

"The thought behind the music comes from my Indian upbringing," says Ganesh. "But the structure I chose to express them is Western classical."

In RISE, the descending phrases capture the pull of Beethoven's challenges, while the ascending ones embody his refusal to yield.

"I hope people see themselves in the music," he says. "That they feel, in their own way, what it means to fall and to rise again."

For Ganesh B Kumar, music has always been more than sound. It is the act of remembering, and also of moving forward. It is the story of rising – one quiet step at a time.



The thoughts and emotions behind the music come from my Indian upbringing.

GANESH B KUMAR

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Distinct oeuvre (Clockwise from right) Mohanlal in *Vanaprastham*; Shaji N Karun; from *Piravi*; and Mammootty in *Kutty Srank*. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & GETTY IMAGES



Saraswathy Nagarajan

Apall of gloom hangs over 'Piravi', Shaji N Karun's residence in Thiruvananthapuram. This was where the ace auteur and cinematographer met admirers from all walks of life. This is where he had conceptualised all his works, including documentaries and short films. This is where I met Shaji more than three decades ago as a student of journalism. He had shared that it was his wife Anusuya Warrior's idea to name their house 'Piravi'.

Shaji spent considerable time speaking to a rookie reporter, discussing his maiden film *Piravi* (1988), his second film *Swaham* (1994) and his student days in Pune. *Piravi*, a huge success, was about the story of a father's futile search for his son who had been picked up by the police. The film brought alive the excesses during the Emergency in a poignant way. It won Shaji the Camera d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1989 and the National award for best director along with several other honours from across the world. *Swaham* (1994) was also screened at Cannes.

It was Shaji's fascination for the images painted by light that made



him take to cinematography. After graduating in Physics from University College, Thiruvananthapuram, he chose to join the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune. He passed out with a gold medal in cinematography. Shaji always spoke passionately about the magic and moods of the tropical sun. He would excitedly capture its constantly changing hues and direction. His attention to detail was amazing. His simplicity was in stark contrast to the world he saw through the lens. Since he lived in the neighbourhood as ours, I often saw him walk quietly along the road. He was then the chairman of the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy. He was also the executive chairman of the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK). He was able to get the best of filmmakers and technicians



Lights, Camera and Shaji

The ace auteur and cinematographer, who passed away recently, elevated Malayalam cinema to global standards

to these festivals because of his personal equation with them.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to speak to him several times. Each time, I was left with a sense of wonder at the filmmaker's ability to delve into varied themes set in different periods of times. Shaji was not a prolific director. He took time to shape a story or a

theme and then spent some more time visualising it in a language and idiom that was all his.

Cannes recognition

Among the many awards that Shaji had won, he particularly treasured the Sir Charlie Chaplin Award instituted to commemorate the birth centenary of the legendary comic

actor (1989) at the Edinburgh Film Festival. "After I boarded my flight to India, the flight attendants announced that I had won this prestigious award and the passengers gave me a standing ovation," he had recounted during an interview to *The Hindu*.

Shaji's deep affinity for music and painting was evident in all his films. His bond with artist Namboothiri resulted in the documentary *Neruvvara* on the latter's life. *Moving Focus - A Voyage* captured the artist KG Subramanyam's journey. The free-flowing lines and strokes were beautifully translated onto the screen by Shaji.

The auteur stepped into the world of cinema by cranking the camera for KP Kumaran's *Lakshmi Vijayam* (1976). But it was his long association with G. Aravindan that marked his cinematographic oeuvre. *Kanchana Sita* (1977), *Thampu* (1978), *Kummaty* (1979), *Eshappan* (1979), *Pokkuvayil* (1981), *Chidambaram*, *Oridathu* and *Unni* were all filmed by him. He had an uncanny ability to understand what Aravindan had in mind. Shaji was able to transform Aravindan's abstract ideas into perfectly composed frames. "Aravindan's screenplay was often very brief. *Thampu*, for instance,

had only four pages," he had recalled.

Shaji had also worked with other great directors such as P. Padmarajan, M.T. Vasudevan Nair, K.G. George and Lenin Rajendran. He was the cinematographer of writer-director Padmarajan's *Koodevide*, which marked actor Suhasini's debut in Malayalam films.

Paying tribute to Shaji, Suhasini had shared on Instagram: "Remembering Shaji Karun. Some people we meet are evergreen and eternal. He was the cinematographer for my debut film Koodevide. I was his Subhadra in Vanaprastham. A true artiste and a great human. People like him made our industry safe and marvellous for newcomers. Will miss him..."

In *Vanaprastham* (1999), Shaji's third feature film, Mohanlal came up with an award-winning performance as a poverty-stricken Kathakali performer and his inner struggle as an artiste and man.

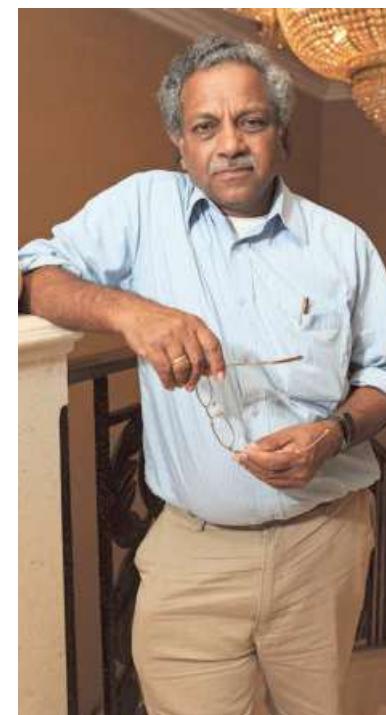
Kutty Srank (2010) remains one of the most complex films of Shaji. It traced the past life of a dead Chavittunattakan artiste and the different memories he left behind in the places he had lived. Blurring reality and fiction, Shaji's story, in a sense, was also the story of certain regions of the State and the arrival of different faiths and belief systems.

Mammootty effortlessly played the three avatars of Kutty Srank and his relationship with three women.

Shaji had once said that Mohanlal's large expressive eyes are his biggest advantage while Mammootty is so handsome that it is difficult to mask his good looks. "Even if one were to smear his face with mud, it would be difficult to hide his features."

After *Swaapanam* and *Olu*, Shaji's heartfelt desire was to direct a musical but it was not to be.

With Shaji's passing, Malayalam cinema has lost a director and technician who elevated it to global standards. I recently watched *Vanaprastham* on television and experienced the meditative pace at which Shaji's camera captured every nuance of emotion. It reflected Shaji's approach to life – observing and enjoying every moment in quietude.



CALENDAR

Vocal concert

Sarvani Sangeetha Sabha Trust presents a thematic concert 'Dwaithamu Sukham - Adwaithamu Sukham', by V.L.V. Sudarshan, Calcutta Shankar, Paramakudi S. Ravindran and Srihar Nilakantan, accompanied by V.L. Kumar (violin), Shertalai R. Anantakrishnan (mridangam) and D.V. Venkatasubramanian (ghatam). The concert, to take place on May 2, 6.15 p.m. at Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Mylapore, is dedicated to S. Vasanta, co-founder of the Sabha.

Madhuradhwani will feature the following concerts at Arkay Convention Centre, Mylapore. Details: May 4, 6.15 p.m.: Sumitra Vasudev. May 7, 6.15 p.m.: 'Sangeetha Gnanam', a musical discourse to be rendered by Erode Balaji.

Brahmotsavam

Special rituals will be performed as part of the 16-day brahmotsavam at Arulmigu Tirupurasundari Udanurai Adipuriswarar and Adikesava Perumal temple, Chindiatripet, from May 2 to 17. The presiding deities will be taken out in a procession on different vahanams in the evening.

Tirumurai rendition

Rukmini Arts and Music Trust and Gaanapriya Foundation jointly present 'Panniru Tirumuraiyal Pandiya Nattu Padhigal', to be rendered by Madurai Shanmughanathan Odhuvar and Tiruparkundram T. Sivaprasak Odhuvar, with Melakaveri K. Thiagarajan on the violin and Chennai S. Thyagarajan on the mridangam. The event is to be held on May 3, 6.15 p.m. at Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Mylapore.

Tyagaraja jayanthi

Sri Thiagaraja Sangeetha Vidhwan Samajam will inaugurate Tyagaraja jayanthi celebrations on May 4 at 5.30 p.m. at 10, Thiagarajapuram, Mylapore. The evening will also include the presentation of the 'Sangeetha Seva Nirata' title to B. Govindarajan and Mangalam Shankar (vocal), Vasanthi Krishnamurthy (vainika), M. Narmada (violin) and T. Shyam Sundar (mridangam). This will be followed by Durga Venkatesh's name sankirtanam based on Tyagaraja kritis.



Song for change

staging a dream sequence that constantly shifted between whimsical and unsettling. To make it a little more fun and collaborative, Mali featured her fans, handpicked through social media, most of whom are creatives themselves – musicians, designers and artistes – in the video.

Similar to 'Dr. Dust' are some of Mali's previous singles, including 'Mango Showers', 'Age of Limbo', 'Semi Automatic Butane' and 'Anniku Raathiri'. What connects them all are the darker lyrical elements.

In the past, Mali has worked with AR Rahman, Amit Trivedi, Indus Creed and Raghav Meattle, among others. "When collaborating with other artistes, what is most intriguing is to see each

person's style of working and way of interpreting the same emotions. We end up having so many in-depth conversations around it, and that sometimes becomes a bigger takeaway than the actual music we work on. But the music lives on as a souvenir of those thoughts," she explains.

A Forbes 30 Under 30 inductee, Mali won the award for Best Indian Act at

The song explores cult culture and younger generation's growing fascination for it. Music being my medium of expression, I chose to voice my concern through it



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