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Friday Review, THE HINDU

First bioplay on M.S. Subbulakshmi

Tracing the legendary musician's journey through her songs p2

Spirited flute recital

Hariprasad Subramanian exuded energy throughout his performance p2

CREATIVE EXPERIMENTS ON THE STAGE

Kaivalya Plays bring multimedia experience to the world of theatre p4

Vedaranyam Vedamurthy, whose centenary is being celebrated this year, improved the nagaswaram's tonal quality by bringing about significant modifications

Winds of Charles Charl

Lalitha Ram

f one were to make a list of all-time great nagaswaram artistes, centenarian Vedaranyam Vedamurthy's name is certain to make it to that list. Born on September 10, 1924, and having lived only 38 years, Vedamurthy etched his name permanently through his significantly modified instrument and its unique tone. He adopted a style, which was based on serenity and subtlety.

Vedamurthy's life is well-documented in works such as B.M. Sundaram's monumental Mangala Isai Mannargal. His maternal grandfather was the multifaceted genius Ammachatram Kannusami Pillai, under whom nagaswaram exponent T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai honed his skill. Vedamurthy had his training, both in vocal and nagaswaram, under Kannusami's son A.K. Ganesa Pillai.

As a youngster, Vedamurthy had acted and sung in a few films including *Thayumanavar*, which had M.M. Dandapani Desikar in the lead role.

Interestingly, Vedamurthy is one of the first names that come to mind when talking about sweetness in the nagaswaram's tonal quality. Yet, all accounts point out that he was not naturally gifted with a sweet tone, and in his initial days, his style was more focused on displaying mastery over complex arithmetic patterns. It

is also mentioned that he inserted a metallic extension in the nagaswaram, between the Ulavu (the pipe with seven holes to play the notes) and the Anasu (the conical section at the end), which resulted in getting a rich, ringing tone.

While it is true that Vedamurthy did modify the instrument, his efforts in doing so have been grossly undermined. Fortunately, the modified instrument is still preserved by his brother thavil maestro Vedaranyam Balasubramaniam. Upon examining it, a few key nuances have come to light

Distinct style

According to Balasubramaniam, the original instrument was a gift from the nagaswaram legend Thiruvengadu Subramania Pillai, and its original pitch was in three *kattai* (scale). While the metallic extension did bring the pitch down, it must be noted that the natural tonal pitch of the modified instrument was much higher than the one that we hear in the recordings (about 1.5 kattai). The pitch of the double reeds (Seevali), attached to the nagaswaram for blowing, is neither the natural pitch of the modified instrument nor the pitch at which Vedamurthy used to play in his concerts. It is clear that the modifications that he made were not a 'plug and play' kind. Rather he had to compensate for the asynchrony with his blowing. It is with this insight that Vedamurthy's

choices were in total contrast.
Unlike playing long drawn-out
phrases and extensive elaborations
on the higher octave, that projected
the majesty of the instrument,
Vedamurthy chose to paint his raga
canvas with precise yet delicate
notes. The meaningful pauses
between his phrasings gave a mystic
charm to his renderings. His
elaborations were mostly in the
middle register, only occasionally
touching higher register notes
without lingering on them. The

recordings and song lists we have, though limited, indicate that his choice of ragas (e.g., Surutti, Nattaikurunji, Sahana, and Dhanyasi) fits his chosen style of playing.

Handling jaarusIn veena, handling of jaarus - a

type of gamakas produced through seamless sliding from a note to a relatively far note, result in the rounded effect as it enables the artistes to slide over the strings smoothly. But to produce the jaarus with the same effect on the nagaswaram can be quite challenging. Vedamurthy's handling of such slides (for example the slide for Pa to Ri in Sahana) has led many to define his style as 'playing veena on the nagaswaram'.

During his time, it was perhaps the norm that raga alapana took the centre stage. And even when played before a kriti, the focus was on exploring the raga and not really keeping the chosen kriti as a central theme for the raga exposition. Vedamurthy differed in this aspect too. His approach was unique and there was a sense of balance and connection in the duration of the raga alapana as well as the content of the exposition with respect to the kriti that followed. His adherence to an unhurried approach was also seen in the choice of slower than usual kalapramanam (tempo) for several pieces not just in kritis, but in javalis and Tiruppugazh as well.

Vedamurthy introduced his modified instrument in 1952 at the Arunagirinathar festival in Tiruchi. His career, with this instrument, lasted for slightly less than a decade. Probably, less than 20 hours of his recorded music is in circulation. But, there is more than enough sparkle in those recordings to keep his name afloat among the greatest even after six decades of his passing away.



CULTUREBRIEFS

Dedicated to Sivan



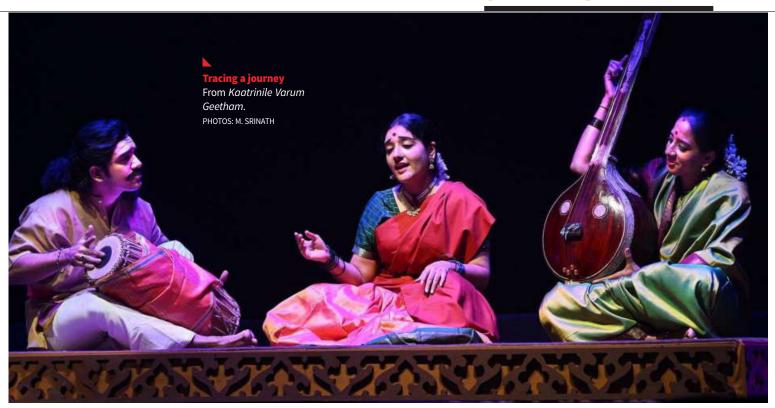
Papanasam Sivan
Rasikar Sangam in
association with
Narada Gana Sabha
will commemorate
the 134th birth
anniversary of
Papanasam Sivan
on September 26 at
Sathguru
Gnanananda Hall.
Musicologist Ritha
Rajan will be the
chief guest and

Cleveland V.V. Sundaram, the guest of honour. The evening will begin with the rendition of Kapaleeswarar Pancharatnam by eminent artistes at 5 p.m. The evening also includes the conferment of 'Sivanisai Selvar' title upon vocalist Saketharaman (6.15 p.m.) followed by his concert at 7 p.m. H.N. Bhaskar (violin), N.C. Bharadwaj (mridangam) and S. Karthick (ghatam) are the accompanists.

Vocal concerts by K. Gayathri (Sept. 27, 6.30 p.m.) and Shertalai K.N. Renganatha Sharma (Sept. 28, 6.30 p.m.) will take place at the Sabha mini hall, as part of the celebrations.

The sangam in association with Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore, has organised special concert by Sriranjani Santhanagopalan on October 1, 6.30 p.m. as part of the 51st remembrance day of the composer.





V. V. Ramani

andling plays on iconic personalities, whose larger-than-life image is deeply entrenched in the collective imagination of people, could be a daunting task.

ThRee entertains' Kaatrinile Varum Geetham, based on the life and music of M.S. Subbulakshmi, directed by Bombay Gnanam, which premiered in Chennai to mark the legendary Carnatic musician's 108th birth anniversary, was one such endeavour, where the narrative straddled between the two worlds of fact and fiction.

Based on a book

The two-and-a-half-hour play, which began with M.S. and Sadasivam being introduced to each other at the Kanchi math, travels down memory lane to show how a young Kunjamma from Madurai transitioned into a world-renowned Carnatic musician. The play is based on author V.S.V. Ramanan's book of the same name. A few incidents from her personal life and some significant moments from her public life were strung together, interspersed with her popular songs.

The sequence of events flowed in a linear pattern,

Straddling between fact and fiction

When presenting a play on a real person, care should be taken to ensure authenticity. The play on M.S. Subbulakshmi left much to be desired on this count

with the storyline and characters familiar to most of us. A few melodramatic scenes, particularly the M.S.-Sadasivam train journey, seemed to have been incorporated for impact.

Actors Lavanya
Venugopal and Bhaskar,
who donned the roles of
M.S. and Sadasivam, were
saddled with a difficult task
of living up to the popular
image of the couple. They
attempted to recreate it
through their dressing and
mannerisms, but the
portrayal left a lot to be
desired.

A few portions raised serious questions that need to be addressed. Theatre is defined as 'a collaborative form of fine arts that uses live performers to present the experience of a real or imagined event in front of a live audience at a specific place'. Can this play, which had the actors lip-syncing (often the sync was missing) to a pre-recorded



dialogue track (similar to dubsmash) be called a theatrical presentation? The restraint that this method brings on the actors was evident in every scene. Their stilted performances robbed the joy of watching a play.

Worse was the caricaturish portrayal of personalities such as

comical was the Meera song sequence. When presenting a play on a real person, care

from the other. Equally

when presenting a play on a real person, care should be taken to ensure authenticity. Sadly, the play did not focus on her musical experiences, her hunger to expand her creative horizons, and the challenges she faced as a woman to establish herself.

Moving from original recordings of M.S. at certain places to the voice of Gayathri Venkataraghavan (though well-rendered) was a disturbing element. The sets did not establish the milieu of the places depicted. Lighting by Mohan Babu was below par.

If the play drew in the audience, credit goes to the aura of M.S. and the timeless appeal of her music. *Kaatrinile Varum Geetham* didn't do much to celebrate the life and works of this Bharat Ratna awardee.

Lively from start to finish

Flautist Hariprasad Subramanian's raga essays were both sprightly and melodic



Zestful Hariprasad Subramanian (flute); M.R. Gopinath (violin); Sherthalai Ananthakrishnan (mridangam); and Madipakkam Murali (ghatam).
PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Sreevalsan Thiyyadi

brief sketch Hariprasad Subramanian delivered in Surutti at the beginning reinforced the raga's sober nature, but the young flautist followed the alapana with a varnam that brought to the fore its ebullient character. Tiruvottiyur Thyagayyar's 'Ento premato' in Adi tala displayed how dynamic forays, more so along the swara sequences towards the culmination of the speedy second half, can set the tone for an energetic concert.

Effervescence turned out to be the overall feature of Hariprasad's two-hour performance at the Venuganam festival that Mudhra organised across six evenings last month. For instance, Nattai was the Kerala instrumentalist's choice as the second piece. The inherent sprightliness in this asymmetric raga resounded further in 'Jaya jaya (Purandaradasa), with the five-beat khanda chapu adding to the momentum.

Good teamwork

By now Hariprasad's grip over the woodwind was obvious: no shrill towards the top registers, never a slip down the rhythmic path. Both features not only encouraged his much-senior accompanists, but made their job easier - a hint of smile would light up the responses from M.R. Gopinath on the violin, while Sherthalai Ananthakrishnan (mridangar and Madipakkam Murali (ghatam) were always cheerful. Hariprasad, who hails from a family of musicians near Guruvayur, is the son of nagaswaram vidwan O.K. Subramanian.

Natakapriya was the first parent scale in the presentation of eight pieces. The seven-minute alapana threw light on the kaleidoscopic nature of the tenth melakarta, which also gave Gopinath his first opportunity to show his neat

IAGAR KASI I KASI TALKIES I IMOX LUX I PVR GRAND - VELACHERY I PVR GALADA - PAL

REDHILLS PVR I ECR - PVR I INOX NATIONAL I INOX MARINAI 52 THIYAGARAJA I MAYAJAAL I MAMANDUR - C3 CINEPOLISH I EVP CINEMAS I AMBATHUR - RAKI & MURUGAN I VILLIVAKAM - AGS I OMR AGS I MADURAVAYAL - AGS KOYAMBEDU -ROHINI I PORUR - GK I THAMBAM- VIDHYA & MR & NATIONAL I CHORMPET - VETRI I KOLATHUR - GANGA

artistry in response. The delineation of 'Karuna jesi' (of Mysore Vasudevachar's 'Idhi samayamu') hinted at an upcoming swaraprastara set to Rupakam. Barring a cursory jarring, this solfa stretch bloomed as an excellent instance of individual imagination and harmonious teamwork.

Nalinakanti ('Natajana palini' by Thanjavur Sankara Iyer) came next as just a bridge to the centrepiece.

Emotive rendering

Purvikalyani as the main highlighted Hariprasad's finesse in assuring tonal quality to the emotive core of a raga. The alapana was refreshing even while treading the customary path, though the cooling-down was somewhat abrupt. The seasoned violinist, though not very tidy in his solo reply, offset this drawback, and joined into 'Padmavati tamanan'. The mellowness of the melody graced each breath of the Oothukadu Venkata Subbaiyer kriti that had its final stanza branching out to niraval.

This elaborate corridor featured fair share of improvisations underscoring the happy results of any collaboration steeped in cooperation. Things progressed to the swaraprastara stage in a way that it reinforced the role of the uneven Misra chapu tala in lending the rallies a special charm. The increasing prominence of the mridangam and ghatam in the soundscape had its natural culmination in an 18-minute tani avartanam that adhered to the aesthetics of the principal composition.

The final lap comprised three pieces: Sadasiva Brahmendral's 'Manasa sancharare' in Sama, 'Bhavayami gopala balam' (Yamuna Kalyani, Annamacharya) and a Lalgudi Jayaraman thillana in Maund. Though they came in as tukkadas, they were unhurried even while sounding vivacious.

CULTUREBRIEFS

Art confluence

Saila Sudha, presents Nrityasangama, an art confluence, in memory of Yamini Krishnamurthy, on September 21 and 22, at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore. The line up begins with Bharathi Thirumagan's special thematic villupattu 'Villum Sollum Vellum' on Sept. 21, 5.30 p.m. The evening also features Bharatanatyam performance by the students of Sridevi Nrithyalaya (6.30 p.m.) and Kuchipudi performance by the students of Saila Sudha Dance Academy (7.30 p.m.). Programmes on September 22 are: Bharatanatyam by the students of Saila Sudha Dance Academy (5.30 p.m.), Kuchipudi solo by Sailaja (6.30 p.m.), and G. Narendra's Avigna Dance Ensemble (7.30 p.m.).

Viswaroopa yatra

Sri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswati, 70th head of Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Moolamnaya Sarvagnya Pitam, completed Chaturmasya Vratam, 2024 his 42nd since 1983, at the Orirukkai Mahaswami Manimantapam, where he commenced the penance with Vyasa puja on July 21. The penance period was marked by rituals and pujas under the guidance of the Acharya, who honoured Vedic scholars from across the country. Orirukkai was a hub of cultural activities too and the Sankaracharya bestowed rewards on several artistes, folk and classical. On September 18, after performing the four-hour trikala Chandramouleeswara puja, the Acharya left Orirukkai on foot, to the accompaniment of Veda Gosham and Mangala Vadyam, with hundreds of devotees following. He later mounted a motorised open vehicle and the procession wound its way to the Kamakshi temple in Kanchipuram. At the Kamakshi temple, the Acharya and his entourage proceeded to the Vasantha Mantapam, where the 12th chapter of the Bhagavad Gita was read and puja performed marking an auspicious end to yet another Chatur Masya Vrata Sankalpam observed in the unbroken lineage of the Kamakoti Pita Parampara. The camp has moved to Shankara College of Nursing New Building, Nallur, Near Kanchi University, Kanchipuram.

Honour for scholars

Rukmini Arts and Music Trust's 27th annual awards function will be held on September 21, 5.30 p.m., at Rasika Ranjani Sabha, Mylapore. Details of the awards to be presented on the occasion are: Rukmini and Viswanathan Memorial Life Time Achievement Award to Dr. J.S. Sathya Narayana Murthy, in recognition of his service to the field of medicine; Rukmini and Viswanathan Memorial award to R. Krishnamurthy Sastrigal, Principal, Sanskrit College, and Haridwaramangalam A.K. Palanivel (thavil). This will be followed by Sengottai Hari Bhagavatar's namasankirtanam themed on Badrachala Ramadasar kritis. Malini Shankar, IAS (Retd), vice chancellor, Indian Maritime University, will be the chief guest.



Kathakali festival

Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajaji,

Dhanammal, Semmangudi

Srinivasa Iyer, and Kalki.

Though they were part of

the narrative, effort was not

taken to show how they are

integral to the M.S. story. In

Semmangudi and Rajaji

couldn't differentiate one

appear together, one

the scene, where

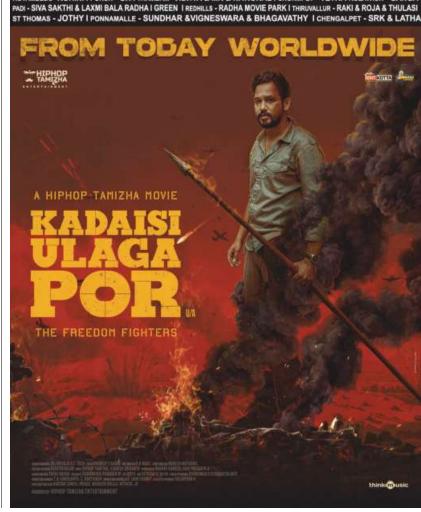
Sarojini Naidu, Veena

Kalakshetra Foundation will host the 15th Kathakali festival 'Bhaava Bhavanam - Bhaava Pushkalam' from September 21 to 25, at Bharata Kalakshetra Auditorium, Tiruvanmiyur. Time: 6 p.m.

The curtains go up with Ambareesha Charitham (Sept. 21). Productions to be staged on the

following days are: Don Quixote by Margi Kathakali school (Sept. 22); Raajasooyam (Sept. 23); Utharaswayamvaram Part 2 (Sept. 24); and Lavanaasuravadham (Sept. 25). The event is non-ticketed.





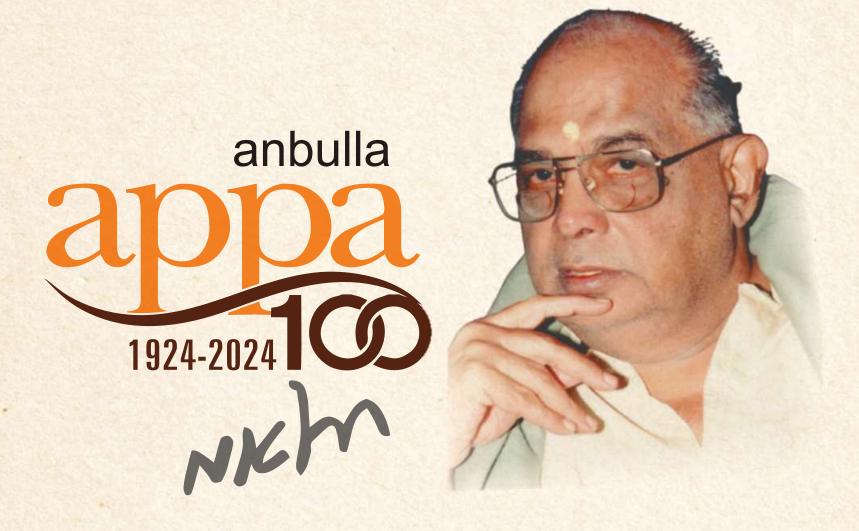
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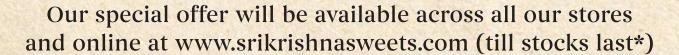
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A CH-CHE

Neha Kirpal

itting in a dark room, a three-dimensional soundscape gets you to enter Josef K's world. Armed with high-quality wireless headphones, you experience sounds as if they're all around you – footsteps from behind, whispers from the side and the bustle of a courtroom.

Welcome to I, Josef, a 45-minute deeply immersive and thought-provoking multimedia experience that invites audiences to slip into the shoes of Franz Kafka's most well-known character, who gets unexpectedly arrested and put on trial for an unspecified crime. This adaptation of Kafka's Der Prozess (The Trial) is re-imagined through a unique first-person perspective that immerses the listener into K's world through binaural audio. Presented by Kaivalya Plays in collaboration with the Goethe Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi, to celebrate #100YearsKafka, it was staged recently in slots with only 30 audience members in attendance at a time.

Relevant script

Despite being written over a century ago, The Trial remains strikingly relevant in today's world, particularly in India. According to Kaivalya Plays' general manager Gaurav Singh Nijjer, who directed and designed the play, themes of bureaucratic complexity, the struggle for justice and individual freedom in the face of authority are more pertinent than ever. *I, Josef* aims to bring these themes to life in a visceral way, encouraging audiences to reflect on their own experiences with societal structures and personal freedoms. "The narrative of an individual suddenly arrested without explanation and entangled in an opaque, unyielding legal system resonates strongly with contemporary experiences. Moreover, the

+ ≡ CALENDAR ≡

The Music Academy will feature Himaja Samraj's vocal recital on September 26, 6 p.m., at the Kasturi Srinivasa Hall. The accompanists are Saket Pantula (violin) and Nandan Kashyap

(mridangam). The programme is organised as part of HCL Concert

Memorial concert

Kedaram has organised a concert in memory of N.V. Subramaniam

HCL concert

Kaivalya Plays recently staged *I, Josef*, based on Franz Kafka's well-known character, in an innovative theatre format

novel's exploration of isolation and loneliness speaks to our modern condition, where digital connectivity often paradoxically leads to human disconnection," elaborated Nijjer.

I, Josef is a natural evolution of Kaivalya Plays' long-standing interest in audio-based theatrical experiences, including radio play adaptations and immersive audio experiences, such as Lifeline 99 99. "We wanted to transform the third-person narrative into a direct, first-person encounter that challenges the audience to experience Josef K's world from within. Throughout the

performance, listeners are challenged to engage with Kafka's themes on a personal level, feeling Josef's confusion, despair and search for meaning as if they were their own experiences," said Kaivalya Plays' artistic director Varoon P. Anand, who scripted and adapted the play.

Sound technique

Adapting The Trial for binaural audio was a multi-step process. The team first rewrote the narrative to focus on auditory elements, ensuring that characters identify themselves and that actions are described

For an immersive experience From the plays Pillowman and I, Josef. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



through recognisable sounds. They then created a 3D soundscape using binaural recording techniques, which captured sound as it would be heard by human ears. "This allows for a fully immersive audio experience where sounds can be perceived as coming from different directions and distances," explained Anand. Next, the team carefully selected and rehearsed with actors to find the right voices for each character, recording in both English and German. They procured state-of-the-art wireless headphones and other materials for the installation. Finally, they incorporated subtle projection mapping to enhance the overall immersive experience without detracting from the audio

narrative. Last month, Kaivalya Plays staged Martin McDonagh's The *Pillowman* in the capital. An edge-of-the-seat dark comedy set in an unnamed totalitarian state, it tells the chilling story of a writer whose macabre tales of child murders blur the line between fiction and reality. The visually stimulating performance, which was performed under license from Concord Theatricals, blended different ideas of storytelling, including projection mapping, live

transmissions and audio-video interactions with actors in real-time. Kaivalya Plays plans to continue exploring innovative theatrical formats.

Next month, they will present their two-vear research on safety in the performing arts and artificial intelligence at the India Foundation for the Arts Research Conference in Bengaluru. In November, they will help a group of young artistes to debut as directors on the Delhi stage with a new self-written production The Golden Commode. They will also stage Mining *Hate*, an improvised interactive play about the disinformation attacks on Indian journalists that uses AI tools in real time. Further, their new improv team will stage Conspiracy Theory, a long-form improv comedy show about conspiracy theories. Apart from this, they will host workshops by artistes from Australia and Germany this month, bringing more opportunities for Indian artistes to learn from global performers, especially in the area of technology for theatre. "We envision creating performances that can travel beyond traditional arts spaces, entering classrooms, offices, courtrooms and even the Internet," concluded Nijjer.









