

# friday Review

THE HINDU

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**A KOODIYATTAM EXPONENT'S LAST ACT**

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**Kausalya Santhanam**

**T**he third segment of the Edict Project 'Ashoka and Ecology' will be held today at the Ashoka University's campus. Nayanjot Lahiri, professor of History at the University, has been deeply involved with the project as a consequence of the University's partnership with Carnatic vocalist T.M. Krishna.

Krishna, and artistes such as M.K. Raina, Kapila Venu and Justin McCarthy (Ashoka University), have teamed up to musically and artistically re-imagine the emperor's edicts. Nayanjot, along with Naresh Keerthi of Ashoka University, has had conversations with the artistes and has helped them understand and interpret the words of the edicts.

Nayanjot is the award-winning author of two deeply researched books on the Mauryan emperor who ruled Magadha from 268 BCE till his death in 232 BCE: *Ashoka in Ancient India* and *Searching for Ashoka: Questing for a Buddhist king from India to Thailand*. Her books are the result of numerous extensive trips to the various sites where Ashoka's imprint is seen.

In rugged landscapes across the country, immutable, stand these edicts, literally writ in stone. The persona of the emperor in Nayanjot's books and in the Edict Project is close to what Ashoka himself put out – from being compassionate towards living beings to unique ideas of governance as well as personal fears and limitations.

These are the messages of a king who forswore war and thought of humanity at large after waging the most sanguinary war. Ashoka lives on, and his words speak with the same immediacy and effectiveness today as they did nearly 2,300 years ago when they were first chiselled on boulders, rock crops, pillars, in caves and near what were once urban sites. These are found in 50 sites all over India and beyond – in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka as well as in Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan. The majority of the edicts are in the Prakrit language, while some are in Greek and Aramaic as also Kharosthi; the common script is Brahmi.

"Ashoka has fascinated

## On the edict trail

**H**istorian Nayanjot Lahiri focuses on 'Ashoka and ecology' in the third segment of the Edict Project, which will be launched today at Ashoka University



generations of Indians. There are many reasons for this. He not only ruled the largest empire of ancient India but also wrote himself permanently into Asian religious history by moving towards Buddhism. He had fought a great war and won it, but he believed that the human toll of his conquests was a moral defeat. This is how he presents himself in his Kalinga edict and it is a striking message," says Nayanjot.

His relevance to contemporary times is also because he was a master communicator. "Today we have television and the social media. But millennia ago he communicated

his messages to be heard – for millennia."

"In the early edicts, he talks about Buddhism, but in the later ones, his focus is on speaking about novel modes of governance that he introduced, and what he believed should be the norms of public and personal conduct," she points out.

However, Nayanjot contests the interpretation of Ashoka as an exemplar of non-violence. "If you look at the Kalinga edict in its total context, you realise that there is violence there. And not just in relation to Kalinga, which he regrets and repents. Ashoka's message of his moral defeat and his metamorphosis

into a man of peace gets muddled because he is threatening forest dwellers in the same Kalinga edict. This really comes back to the fact that the state cannot control all its land, it cannot control all its people. In such instances, non-violence is inevitably situated within the practice of violence."

What makes him most interesting to Nayanjot is that Ashoka was an all-India figure, she says. "This has to do with the ways in which the emperor made himself visible through his edicts in large parts of the Indian subcontinent. Uniquely among world rulers of his time, Ashoka appears to us not through



**Writing on the stone** (From far left) Sanchi Stupa in Madhya Pradesh; and Sannati edicts of Ashoka. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND COURTESY NAYANJOT LAHIRI



the chronicle of a courtier, or a visitor to his kingdom, or by religious hagiography but by speaking carefully and deliberately in his own voice. There were many kings and emperors before him but they didn't speak to their subjects and thus, to us."

Among the edicts, Nayanjot's favourites are the Queen's edict in Allahabad and the edicts in the Deccan. In the former, Ashoka's queen Karuvaki says all the donations that have been made by her have to be registered as the mother of Tivala (her son). The king says this is what the queen wants and instructs his officials to do so. "It shows Ashoka gave space and agency to women".

Ashoka's presence (epigraphic imprint) in the Deccan is far larger than in any other region. "This highlights that Ashoka is as much an emperor of the Deccan as he is of north."

The Edict Project seeded by Krishna is about "reimagining Ashoka's words in musical and artistic forms as also create vibrant academic, socio-political and aesthetic conversations around them," elaborates Nayanjot.

"Krishna's interest and curiosity are remarkable; I feel I have been enriched working with him."

## From Mozart to Tamil folk

The Poland-based Concerto Glacensis and Chennai-based MMA came together recently at Museum Theatre to celebrate cross-cultural music

**Rachel Rhine**

**W**estern classical music has always occupied an unusual space in Chennai. In a city, where the December Season dominates headlines and Carnatic music shapes its identity, the strains of Bach, Bernstein or Whitacre have often been heard only in small circles – school choirs, church halls or the occasional orchestra appearances. Yet, over the past decade, there has been a quiet but discernible growth of Western choral and orchestral culture in the city. More youngsters are being trained, many schools are investing in choirs and international ensembles are now making Chennai a stop on their tours.

What stood out at a recent concert was not only the scale – over 120 voices filling the arches of the Museum Theatre – but also the ease with which the audience embraced it. Sacred music from Europe, Tamil folk melodies, Polish

village songs and Broadway classics followed one after the other without any sense of rupture. For listeners, who may have first encountered Western classical music through a school hymn or a film soundtrack, here was a chance to experience it in full-bodied choral form.

The programme itself moved between a solemn prayer and playful rhythms, between the quiet lyricism of European hymns and the theatrical sweep of Andrew Lloyd Webber's 'Amigos para siempre'. But what mattered more than individual 'Przeszliczna panno' was sung, and delighted recognition when the Tamil 'Punnai marathu' entered the air. Applause broke out during the Broadway medley, reminding one that Western music is no longer an imported curiosity but something Chennai audiences feel comfortable claiming as part of their listening.

As Augustine Paul, music director and conductor of MMA, remarked, "This was a treat for our



**Musical bridge** The two choirs at their collaborative performance in Chennai. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



music-loving audience, young and old alike." His words capture the widening demographic of listeners. Once confined to a small Anglo-Indian and Christian community, Western choral music now draws a more diverse public.

For the Polish visitors, the experience was equally transformative. "The MMA Choir is friends first, and collaborators second," said conductor Katarzyna Małka, who has worked closely with MMA. She spoke of the emotional weight certain songs carried for her singers, and of how the Chennai audience's response reaffirmed the idea that music transcends borders. "Even if the words are not understood, the message is felt with

the heart," she reflected.

Her words pointed to another dimension of such concerts: their ability to create a space of empathy. In an age where cultural diplomacy often takes the form of summits and trade deals, here was a demonstration that harmony can be literal as well as symbolic. Katarzyna went further, suggesting that collaborations such as these can open doors for broader exchanges in education and social life, not just in music.

For the MMA Choir, the concert was another chapter in its century-long history of holding up Western choral traditions. For Concerto Glacensis, it was the fulfilment of a dream.

## Srividyaa

**I**n the second day of the Natyarangam festival, K.P. Rakesh, Girish Madhu and Vidya Girish Madhu gave a presentation on the life and teachings of Ramanujacharya.

The performance began with Ramanuja Chatusloki, a set of verses which highlight Ramanuja's role in dispelling ignorance and his mastery over the scriptures. This is recited to seek his grace and blessings. A nritta piece, it stood out for the dancers' clear and firm footwork.

As the production unfolded, the dancers took up different roles to effectively convey the essence of the philosophy.

Once Yamunacharya, a Visishtadvaita philosopher, saw Ramanuja in Kanchipuram and was impressed by his appearance. He was certain that this was the disciple he was looking for. He asked his disciple Mahapoorna to bring Ramanuja to Srirangam. When Ramanuja reached the banks of the river Cauvery, they got to know that Yamunacharya had passed. They hurriedly went to his house and found that three of his fingers were folded, symbolising three unfulfilled tasks. When Ramanuja vowed to fulfill Yamunacharya's wishes, his fingers automatically opened.

Rakesh as Ramanuja brought out the character's emotional turmoil with amazing restraint.

Ramanuja desired to learn the maha mantra from Yamunacharya's disciple, Goshtipurna, who possessed the essence of Visishtadvaitam. After being denied on 17 occasions, Ramanuja finally managed to convince Goshtipurna on his 18th visit, when the



## Glimpses of a Sacred life

Dancers blend verses, nritta and abhinaya to bring alive Ramanujacharya's life

latter extracted the

promise of secrecy from

Ramanuja and gave the

upadesha. However,

Ramanuja decided to

share the mantra with

everyone. So he climbed

the gopuram of

Sowmyanarayana Perumal

temple in Thirukoshtiyur

and taught the maha

mantra to the people

gathered there.

Once in Srirangam,

Ramanuja noticed a young

man walking with a

beautiful woman.

Unmindful of the public

gaze, he held an ornate

umbrella for her in one

hand and fanned her with

the other. Girish Madhu

and Vidya Girish Madhu as

the couple aptly brought

out the sringara rasa in the

scene.

Ramanuja sends for

him and asks what had

made him so brazen. The

man, Dhanurdasa, replies

that he was completely

captivated by the woman's

eyes. Ramanuja tells him

that he will show him a

pair of eyes more

captivating than hers, and

takes him to the

Ranganatha temple. As the

lamp illuminates the

Lord's lotus-like eyes, the

young man becomes

ecstatic, and all worldly

attractions fade into

insignificance. He pledges

lifetime service,

renouncing material

entanglements. This scene

could have been portrayed

more engagingly.

The profound impact of Andal on Ramanuja was shown in the incident where Ramanuja sees his acharya's daughter and takes her to be Andal and goes into a trance. It is believed that he liked to be called Thiruppavai Jeer.

Ramanuja retrieves the idol of Ramapriya, whom he considers his *chella pillai*, from the sultan and reinstalls it as Sampathkumar. Ramanuja's staunch devotion to Narayana was well-portrayed by Rakesh. Girish Madhu exhibited well the royal demeanour of the sultan while Vidya Girish was impressive as the sultan's daughter.

Ramanuja ensured continuity of his mission by appointing acharyas, creating a spiritual network that safeguarded the sampradaya.

The production concluded with the Charamashloka from the Bhagavad Gita to convey the concept of *saranagati*. This was a fitting finale to a well-researched production.

Dushyant Sridhar was the resource person and choreography was done by the dancers themselves.

The music ensemble was led by Sudarshini Devnath, who not only did the nattuvangam but also explained each scene. Parur M.S. Ananthashree, who had composed the music for the presentation, lent vocal support. Guru Bharadwaj (mridangam), N. Ananthanarayanan (veena), Shreya (violin) and Adhvaitha Banu (flute) enhanced the appeal of the presentation.

## Whispers of wisdom

Praveen Kumar conveyed complex philosophical ideas in his performance

### Manasa Vijaylakshme C

**P**raveen Kumar, who performed on Day three of the Natyarangam's Acharya Bharatham festival, paid a rich, meditative homage to Madhvacharya. With a performance that was both intellectually charged and viscerally moving, Praveen Kumar, who portrayed the Acharya, seamlessly brought together philosophy, narrative and aesthetic.

The evening opened with a soulful composition, which showcased Madhvacharya's familial devotion and how it shaped his early life. Against a silhouette poster and under a calm blue spotlight, the dancer emerged in a simple white dhoti, striking a contemplative pose that set the tone for the evening. Throughout the performance, visual minimalism was balanced by emotional and physical dynamism.

The highlight of the performance was the narration, interwoven between the pieces, an evocative script that reflected

Madhvacharya's philosophical lineage as the third avatar of Vayu, and tracing his descent from Hanuman and Bhima to Madhvacharya. The dancer's flexibility, particularly in portraying animal forms and divine energies, were engaging.

Switching into a kurta and turban while holding a tambura, Praveen Kumar assumed the role of

the wandering sage, becoming both the seeker and the knower. Using a refined vocabulary of karanas and bhedas, he delineated complex search for the divine, the dualistic clarity of Dvaita Vedanta – and portrayed Hari not as a god, but as a friend who walks with us, protects us, and even laughs with us.

The Prahlada-Hiranyakashipu episode was rendered with emotional clarity – the stillness of devotion against the turbulence of tyranny. Likewise, Lakshmana's silent strength, his shadowing of Rama through exile and war, became a metaphor for unwavering service without expectation. These vignettes emphasised Madhvacharya's core values: dharma, duty, and bhakti in its most disciplined form.

The performance asked: Who is God? Where do we find Him? Through dance, Praveen showed that divinity lives in all. Echoing Krishna at Govardhan, he reminded us that God is not distant, but present in nature and in the people around us. To honour the divine, we must protect and cherish both.

The production closed on a powerful note, with the dancer reminding us of the timeless relevance of devotion rooted in wisdom. The orchestra for the evening featured vocalist Pradeesh Achar, nattuvangam by Navyashree K N, mridangam and tabla by Anoop Vinod Shyam, flute by Mahesh Swamy, and lighting by T M Nagaraj.

### Insightful

Praveen Kumar.

PHOTO: M. SRINATH



## Traditional repertoire

Jayaprada Ramamurthy chose to perform well-known compositions

### H. Ramakrishnan

**A**mong instruments, the flute is one that is rooted in the most fundamental sign of life – breath. Jayaprada Ramamurthy performed recently at Mudhra's Venuganam series. She is the daughter of vocalist Prema Ramamurthy, and was mentored by flute virtuoso N. Ramani.

Her profound Bhairavi alapana was followed by Dikshitar's 'Balagopala' on Mannargudi Rajagopalaswami. This kriti is in the eighth (Sambodhana Prathama) Vibhakti. She made full use of the infinite scope to improvise, which the kriti offers, and captured the bhakti rasa embedded in the lyrics. She embellished it with gamakas and



swaraprastaras. Chidambaram Badrinath, on the violin, responded impeccably during alapanas and kalpanaswaras.

On the percussion side, Melakaveri K. Balaji (mridangam) and Adambakkam K. Sankar

(ghatam) enriched the swaraprastaras. Their tani with deft transitions was enjoyable.

Jayaprada's handling of both long (with a deeper base) and short flutes enhanced the melody in the songs. Another extensive raga enunciation

that stood out for its manodharma was Pantuvarali. She chose a lovely Oothukadu kriti, 'Ati nirupama sundarakara', which has both tisra gati and chatusra gati patterns. The transition from tisra (pallavi and anupallavi) to chatusra (charanam) was

seamless. The percussionists lived up to the task.

Earlier, Jayaprada commenced the concert with 'Vandeham jagat vallabham' in Hamsadhwani (khanda chapu) by Annamacharya. Again, swaras at the pallavam were replete with rhythmic patterns. Chidambaram Badrinath embellished the kriti with his soft bowing technique. Tyagaraja's 'Chinna naade na' in Kalanidi bore the stamp of Raman's style.

After a short sketch of Kapi, she played 'Enna thavam seythanai', a popular kriti by Papanasam Sivan. Jayaprada concluded her recital with 'Bhaja bhaja manasa' (Sindhubhairavi) by Swati Tirunal and a Revathi thillana (Misra Chapu) by Lalgudi Jayaraman.

### CALENDAR

#### Song and string

Madhuradhwani has organised the following programmes at Arkay Convention Center, Mylapore. Today, 6.15 p.m.: The ninth episode of Dr. Sudha Seshayyan's lecture series on Thirumoolar. Hamzini Vyetheshwaran will lend vocal support. Tomorrow, 6.15 p.m.: Tirucherai Karthik (violin). Sunday, 6.15 p.m.: N.C. Rangacharyulu. September 2, 6.15 p.m.: Pt. Shailesh Bhagawat (Shehnai). September 3, 6.15 p.m.: Jayakrishnan Unni.



#### Onam special

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's Chennai Kendra has organised a five-day festival to celebrate onam. Beginning from September 1, it will feature dance performances by artistes from Kerala. Details: September 1, 6 p.m.: Sopana Sangeetham followed by Kalamandalam Sreeja R Krishnan's Mohiniyattam at 7.45 p.m. Sept. 2, 6.30 p.m.: Tholpavakoothu; 7.30 p.m.: Onapattukal. Sept. 3, 6.30 p.m.: Chakyar Koothu; 7.30 p.m.: Kerala Natanam and 8.05 p.m.: Thiruvathirakali. Sept. 4, 6 p.m.: Chenda Melam and 7 p.m.: Anuragakkadavil. Sept. 5, 6.30 p.m.: Mahishi Charitham, a kathakali performance by Madhu Varansi and Prasanth Kalakshetra and team will bring the five-day celebration to a close. The five-day festival is open to all.

#### Music festival

Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha's gokulashtami music festival draws to a close tomorrow. The last two days will feature the following programmes. Today, 4.30 p.m.: Namaskirtanam by Nungabbakkam Suresh and 6.30 p.m.: Prasanna Venkatraman. Tomorrow, 4.30 p.m.: Namaskirtanam by Haridwaramangalam T. Ramgopal and 6.30 p.m.: T.N.S. Krishna. Venue: Vani Mahal, T. Nagar.



## Retold with a twist

The play *Karaikkal Ammayar* strayed far from the original story

### Suganthy Krishnamachari

**S**RMG Creations recently staged a play on Karaikkal Ammayar at Bharat Kalachar. Karaikkal Ammayar is one of only three women Nayans, and her story is recorded in Sekkizhar's *Periya Puranam*.

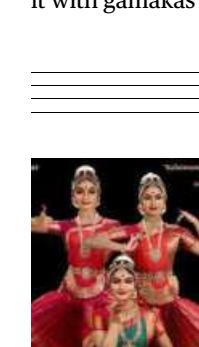
The play (story and script: Poovai Dhaya; direction: V.S. Sridharan) differed from *Periya Puranam* in some respects. In *Periya Puranam*, Nidipathi, a rich merchant of Nagapattinam, proposes a marriage between his son Paramadattan and Punithavathi, daughter of Dhanadattan, a wealthy merchant of Karaikkal. But in the play, the hero and heroine meet, before the engagement takes place. They argue about whether God exists, with Punithavathi, an ardent devotee of Shiva, vowing to prove God's existence to the agnostic Paramadattan. The arguments between Parvathi and Shiva were thought provoking. Parvathi wonders why the marriage of Punithavathi should end tragically. She says that men find themselves a new wife at whim, but what is to happen to poor Punithavathi?

The lively exchanges between Paramadattan and Punithavathi and the sparring between Shiva

and Parvathi were welcome additions, enhancing the dramatic appeal of the play. Punithavathi does finally prove to Paramadattan that God exists. But Paramadattan is now filled with awe for his wife, because he sees her as divine. He leaves for Pandya Nadu, remarries, and has a daughter, whom he names Punithavathi.

In Sekkizhar's story, Paramadattan, his second wife and child seek the blessings of Punithavathi. When Paramadattan says he can no longer look upon her as his wife, Punithavathi prays to Shiva for a *pey uruvam* (a skeletal form). Punithavathi, who came to be known as Karaikkal Ammayar, is in fact, depicted as a skeletal figure in bronzes. In the play, however, she asks not only for a *pey uruvam*, but also for *mudhumai* (old age). Also, the name of Nidipathi was changed to Sivagnanam in the play. Such liberties should not have been taken with the original story. The comic interludes were pathetic.

Gopalakrishnan as



### Debut

Mahathi, Soumya and Sriyaiakshaya, disciples of Anitha Guha, will present their Bharatanatyam arangetram on September 4, 6.30 p.m. at R.R. Sabha, Mylapore.

Remembering Devarajan master, who composed music for more than 2,000 songs in Tamil and Malayalam

Suganthy Krishnamachari

This is the 50th year of the iconic Ayyappan song 'Harivarasanam', which is played every night in Sabarimala temple, as the final ritual of the day, at closing time. Sung by K.J. Yesudas, the song was tuned by G. Devarajan, respectfully addressed as Devarajan master.

Devarajan gravitated to music naturally. His father Paravur N. Kochu Govindan Asan, a renowned mridangist and singer of his time, had trained under the laya wizard Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai. Govindan Asan ensured that Devarajan learnt vocal, veena and mridangam. His first Carnatic concert was at the age of 17 and he soon became a sought-after musician busy with stage and radio concerts.

Devarajan wanted classical music to reach everyone. So, he set to tune works of well-known poets such as Ulloor Parameswaran Iyer, Kumaranasan, Changampuzha G. Kumarapillai, O.N.V. Kurup, and P. Bhaskaran, and included them in his concerts. He joined the well-known drama troupe of Kerala, the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC). 'Ponnarvali', a song that Devarajan tuned and sang for KPAC, also found a place in his concerts.

He forayed into cinema with the 1955 film *Kaalam Maarunnu*. His songs remain



## A musical odyssey

popular, even years after he composed them. 'Lehari lehari' (from the film *Bharya*, 1962) and 'Parakum thaligaiyil' (from the film *Manavatti*, 1964) are irresistible jaunty tunes. 'Manavatti' has the distinction of being the first Malayalam film with a woman scriptwriter – Aswathy Mathen.

**Myriad styles**  
The background music of 'Chummathiri Ende Ponnalya' (by singer A.L. Raghavan) suggests the staggering of a tipsy reveller. 'Kuttanadan Punjaiyle'

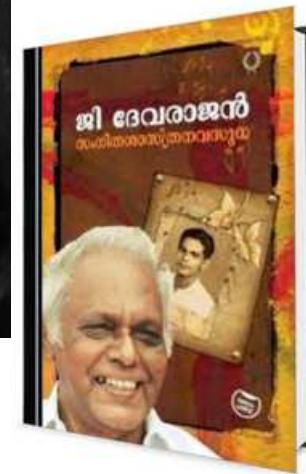
brings before your eyes the frenzied rowing of the Champakkulam vallam kali (snake boat races) and of boats knifing through the backwaters of Alleppey. 'Ayiram padasarangal' in Darbari Kanada (film Nadhi; 1969) is an aching melody, which shows how powerful the emotional language of music can be.

'Thiruppakkadalil' (from the Tamil film *Swami Ayyappan*) is a classic Bhairavi. 'Chethi mandaram thulasi' (in raga Anandabhairavi) is a prayer to Guruvayurappan. It is an example of why sometimes

less is more. Devarajan has used minimum musical instruments here, with the flute being prominent, endowing the song with an ethereal quality. 'Sangam valartham Tamizh' (from the Tamil film *Tulabharam*) in Chenjurutti, Punnagavarali and Kavadihindu mettu is a blend of classical and folk music. 'Chandrakalabham' (film *Kottaram Vilkkunundu*) is a salutation to the earth. And as Yesudas sings, "Is there any other place like this earth, with such divine music?" one cannot help think that it is a song written



Scoring excellence  
(Clockwise from far left) G. Devarajan; K.J. Yesudas; the composer with T.M. Soundararajan and R.K. Shekar; and his book *Sangeetha Sastra Nava Sudha*.  
PHOTOS: K. BHAGYA  
PRAKASH AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



for Devarajan master, who composed music for 343 Malayalam films and 12 Tamil films.

### Using ragas

Navaneeth Unnikrishnan, a student of Hindustani and Carnatic music, maintains a website on Devarajan, with the help of P.J. Sebastian (who worked as a chief conductor for Devarajan) and Rex Isaacs (chief violinist in his orchestra). "Master learnt Hindustani from Pt. Krishnamandir before he used Hindustani ragas in film songs," says Navaneeth. "I am amazed at the way he used Kedar raga in the song 'Chakravarthini', without a trace of Hamirkalyani. 'Swargaputhri

navarathri' (Mohanam); 'Charumukhi usha' (Saurashtra); 'Himaisala saikatha' (Sankarabharanam), 'Premasarvaswame' (Karahrapiya) and 'Innenikkil pottukuthan' (Miya ki Malhar) are some of the raga-based songs. Through my own research and discussions with classical and non-classical musicians who worked with master, I've identified more than 120 Hindustani and Carnatic ragas, which he used in his music for cinema and theatre. There could be more. His tabla patterns were innovative, as, for example, in the song 'Sree nagarathile'."

Speaking about how many classical musicians have played for master's film songs, Navaneeth mentions a few names including mridangists Guruvar Dorai and Madurai T. Srinivasan, flautists N. Ramani and Prapancham Seetharam, violinists L. Subramaniam and L. Shankar, veena artiste Chittibabu, sitarist Janardhan Mitta, ghatam artiste Vikkui Vinayakram and sarod player K. Sridhar.

"R.K. Shekar (A.R. Rahman's father) was a conductor in his orchestra and Ilaiyaraaja has played guitar and combo organ for some of his songs.

Devarajan Master composed music for about 2,221 (film and non-film) songs and wrote the book *Sangeetha Sastra Nava Sudha*, which is a study of all forms of classical music across the world," says Navaneeth.

Devarajan's daughter, Sharmila, says, "If asked to give a tune before the lyrics were ready, my father would refuse. He felt it was unfair to the lyricist." This, perhaps, explains the chemistry he shared with lyricist Vayalar Ramavarma. Some of Devarajan's best tunes were for his lyrics.

"He would compose music between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m., come up with three or more tunes and then go to sleep. Whichever tune he remembered when he woke up would be the one to make its way into the film," says Sharmila. "His argument was that if he himself could not remember a tune, then listeners wouldn't find it appealing," she adds.

Devarajan left indelible imprints in all genres of music. He established the Shaktigadha Choir, translated major Indian ragas to chord progressions and composed 162 shatkalas, some of them in apoovra ragas.

At his 75th birthday celebrations in Kochi, his Shatkala pallavi 'Sarvana bhava guhane' in Shamukhapriya, was performed by Mavelikkara Prabhakara Varma and his disciple Mavelikkara Subramaniam. Later, vocalist Krishnakumar also sang his pallavis. "I can sing all his pallavis. His Shatkala pallavi, 'Prapanchodbhava kaaranam' (raga Vinodini), in Sankeerna jati atala, expresses his gratitude for his life," says Krishnakumar.

"Master had set to tune some of Narayana Guru's songs, and 10 singers, including me, have rendered them," he adds.

Fine Arts Society in Paravur, Kollam, is setting up the Devarajan Master Museum and Study-Research Centre. The museum will house his musical instruments, besides his awards, song notations, gramophone, 78 rpm records and books on music.



Perfect harmony Choir members with Neil Nongkynrih. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Notes from the heart

Shillong Chamber Choir releases a new track as a tribute to founder Neil Nongkynrih

Neha Kirpal

The internationally acclaimed Shillong Chamber Choir (SCC) has released a new track, 'You came into our lives', a heartfelt reflection on love, friendship and the transformative power of music. Written by the choir's founder and mentor, Neil Nongkynrih, along with his friend, Deelip Kumar Sahu, the song is a moving tribute to Uncle Neil's friends and family.

Released on the occasion of his 55th birth anniversary (July 9), the song reflects the profound impact that he had on the lives of the choir members.

"I had almost forgotten this song until one day a choir member reminded us.

Listening to it again, we felt it was meant to be shared with all our listeners. It is a thank you note. It is also a celebration of love, gratitude and the steadfast bonds that hold us together," said Banlam Lyndem of the group.

The accompanying video is a beautiful visualisation of Uncle Neil's enduring presence.

Founded in 2001 by composer, conductor and pianist Neil Nongkynrih, the SCC began as a small group of dedicated singers and dreamers under his mentorship. The ensemble gradually evolved into one of India's celebrated musical groups, blending rich harmonies, emotional depth and technical brilliance. Winners of India's Got Talent, 2010, the choir's journey since then has been marked by a string of national and international accolades.

**An eclectic mix**  
Renowned for their unique blend, the choir's repertoire includes songs in 40 different languages and in diverse genres including opera, rock, folk, jazz, and Hindustani classical.

Neil Nongkynrih passed away in 2022, but his vision and artistry remain at the heart of the choir's music. "More than just focusing on the voice, he worked on individual skills. That's perhaps why, nearly two decades later, we're still here – singing together," shared tenor William Basaiawmoit.

With the mentor's passing, the choir continues to work on various projects – from their usual medleys to originals, albums in Khasi (native language of Meghalaya) to the opera, 'Sohlyngngem' (composed by Neil).

"We also have many unreleased songs on the shelf. Three of our music videos of Bollywood medleys in different styles of arrangements are being released by Saregama on various social media platforms," said Kynsailor Lyndoh, manager of the choir.

## The last act

Known for his iconic portrayal of characters from the epics, Kalamandalam Sivan Namboodiri recently announced his retirement from the stage



G.S. Paul

Announcing a retirement from the stage by a Koodiyattam artiste, is perhaps, unheard of in the history of Sanskrit theatre. Kalamandalam Sivan Namboodiri made this announcement at Koothambalam of Kerala

Kalamandalam. He cited health problems as the reason for his departure from the art scene and added that he would be available for guidance and lecture-demonstrations.

The day also marked the 60th death anniversary of his guru, Painkulam Rama Chakyar. Besides his excellent artistry, Sivan became the first non-Chakyar to be trained in Koodiyattam – when Kalamandalam introduced the art form as a separate department in 1965 – breaking caste restrictions. The institution owes much to one of the most revolutionary among the

Chakyar community, Painkulam Rama Chakyar, who volunteered to head the new department, ignoring protests from the orthodox. Today, if there has been phenomenal increase in the number of Koodiyattam artistes, Sivan is the inspiration.

### Display of virtuosity

The evening was not just about Sivan's retirement, but he proved his virtuosity by presenting the popular piece *Parvathy Viraham* from the play *Toranayudham* in Act III, from Bhasha's *Abhisheka Nataka*.

*Parvathy Viraham* is usually preceded by *Kailasodharanam*, depicting the arrogance and might of Ravana. Its story goes thus: while returning home after a successful fight with Vaisravana, Ravana finds the path of his Pushpavakivama (flying chariot) obstructed by Mount Kailasa. He gets off his chariot, uproots the mountain and throws it in the air (a picturesque description of the mountain with its

valleys, rivers, rocks, caves etc., is enacted here). It is at this juncture that Shiva and Parvathy are engaged in an argument as Parvathy suspects the presence of Ganga in Shiva's dreadlocks. Shiva answers every query raised by Parvathy, yet, fails to convince her. Parvathy walks out, leaving behind an enraged Shiva. This is also the exact moment Ravana tosses Mount Kailasa in the air, leading a frightened Parvathy return to Shiva.

The two anecdotes, with ample opportunities for 'pakarnattam' (multiple character presentation), were laudably executed by Sivan. More than an exposition of his artistry, it was a demonstration of his guru bhakti. Sivan entered the stage after prostrating before the bust of his guru.

After the performance, Sivan recalled the day he was selected for Koodiyattam, though his ambition was to learn Kathakali. He also reminisced the conversation between Kalamandalam Ramankutty Nair and Painkulam Rama Chakyar during the interview. "I heard them saying 'He is going to be a promising artiste of Koodiyattam'." And Sivan has lived up to their expectations the last six decades.

Whether it was Ravana in *Toranayudham* (which he performed that evening) or *Jatayudham* or *Bali in Balividham* or any other major role, Sivan's presence had a galvanising effect on fellow actors and the stage as a whole.

Sivan also served his alma mater as a teacher for three decades, until his retirement in 2005.

Theatre experts in the West had a taste of his skill, when he portrayed the pivotal role in four major plays at a festival held in France in 1980. Rukmini Devi, after watching his depiction of Arjuna in a play at Kalakshetra, said, "I was impressed by his understanding of the exposition of the difficult techniques of abhinaya". Sivan also won a certificate of appreciation from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington for his contribution towards the dissemination of the art form.

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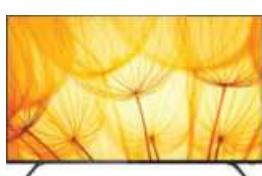
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