

friday Review

THE HINDU

A poignant love story

Kathak dancer Divya Goswami brought alive the Sohni-Mahiwal romance p2

Timeless compositions

Musicians rendered songs composed by Pt. C.R. Vyas at a tribute festival p3


THE MAHINDRA BLUES FESTIVAL IS BACK

Watch out for pedal street guitarist Robert Randolph p4

Rousing voice Nagore Hanifa, who began singing professionally from a young age, had a wide repertoire of songs. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



The minstrel from Nagore

Sung in a distinctive baritone, the devotional and political songs of Nagore Hanifa continue to draw in listeners. A birth centenary tribute

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Of the many singers in South India with a universal appeal, 'Isai Murasu' Esmai Mohamed Hanifa stands tall in the pantheon of greats with origins in Tamil Nadu's Cauvery delta region.

Hanifa, an iconic minstrel of Islamic devotional songs in Tamil had strong links with Nagore, the town in Nagapattinam that hosts the 16th century shrine to Sufi saint Syed Abdul Qadir. It eventually became the prefix to his name too.

Recently, the Tamil Nadu

government kickstarted the celebration of Hanifa's centenary year by naming a street and public children's park in Nagore after him.

It is a fitting tribute to a man who captured the hearts of fans with his distinctive baritone from the early 1930s.

Even posthumously, the Hanifa fan base continues to grow, as seen by the number of cover versions of his 'Iravanimadai Kiyenthungal' and his other songs that are available online.

The youngest of three children of Mohamed Ismail, a railway worker in Malaysia, and Mariam Biwi of Ramanathapuram, Hanifa began singing mainly to support his family.



The singer spent his early childhood in Ramanathapuram, and later went to work for his paternal uncle Abu Bakr Rowther in Tiruvarur. It was here that Hanifa's musical talent was noticed. His first professional concert at the age of 13 set him off on a trajectory no one imagined.

"My father's rousing voice owes much to the Ghousia Bait-us-Sabha at Nagore, for whom he used to sing," says his son Naushad Ali,

based out of Chennai.

"At the time, there was a practice of taking out a pre-wedding procession to introduce the bridegroom to the families in the neighbourhood. A team of young drummers beating 'thabs' would head the procession, followed by the groom in a car or on horseback. My father and his accompanists would be in the middle, with the hosts and guests making up the back of the crowd. He learned early on to beat

In his heyday, Hanifa used to be known as the 'voice' of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), because of his political anthems for the party. His warm friendship with DMK leader and former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi began in their adolescence and stayed strong through their lifetime. Some of the songs he sang for the party are still used by the DMK to raise the morale of party cadres.

Political anthem

'Hasbi rabbi jallalah', for instance, has just the first stanza in Arabic; the rest of the song in Tamil adds elements from Ramanathapuram's history. "It was first recorded in the 1970s for a school function, and I was among the children who sang the chorus," recalls Naushad.

'Maalaai soodum manamakkale', 'Vazhga, vazhga, vazhgvave' and

"We did not get to see our father much while growing up, because he would always be on tour. At the peak of his career, he would have at least 45 engagements in a month. He rarely declined any offer. Those were different times, with no marketing, public relations or copyright. Many songs were set to popular film tunes re-arranged by his small orchestra. I wonder how he managed his career all alone," says Naushad.

Hanifa's songs were known for their profound lyrics. He was helped in this by poets Abidin and Nagore Saleem, among others.

The self-taught maestro picked up tips on Carnatic music from S.M.A. Qadir at the Nagore dargah.

Naushad was tasked with the job of copying out the lyrics and taking care of his father's correspondence. "Much of what I know about Tamil literary expression and pronunciation is due to my father. He would rap me on my head if I got the spelling or grammar wrong," he laughs.

Though he had a prodigious memory for lyrics, Hanifa would always take his notebooks with him on stage. "If he noticed mistakes in the rendition, he would skillfully re-sing the portion in a way that the audience would not notice," shares Naushad.

Nagore Hanifa performed in all kinds of venues – from five star hotels and modest homes – with the same flair, and never let his celebrity status get in the way. He would also do any number of encores – he had no ego, says his son.

Hanifa occasionally lent his voice to Tamil films – in movies such as *Gulebakavali* (1955), *Paava manippu* (1965) and *Chembaruthi* (1992) – but consciously kept away from cinema because he was not open to adopting a ubiquitous name such as 'Kumar', which was what some composers demanded.

"My father used to say that it is more satisfying to sing four songs as Hanifa than a crore songs as Kumar. Having held the stage in live concerts that ran into hours, he did not appreciate his craft being adapted for light music," says Naushad.

When Hanifa passed away on April 8, 2015, at the age of 96, a veil fell forever on an era of homespun superstars produced in Tamil Nadu.



Mystic melodies

The TCS Ruhaniyat festival is back with its engaging line up. The 24th edition features a series of performances by artistes from across the globe and genres. Organised by Banyan Tree Events, the Chennai segment will take place on February 9, from 6.15 p.m., at the Madras Race Club, Guindy.

'Gorakhnath Come Alive' featuring Suchitra Balasubramaniam, Wakar Ali and Shafi Khan will open the evening. In 'Mystical Tunes From The Land of Rumi', Ahmed Baran's qanun will bring alive the sufi poet's verses.

'A Glimpse Into The World Of Bulleh Shah' will present Madan Gopal Singh and Chaar Yaar, who will explore history, spirituality, and storytelling. 'Ubuntu - The Spirit of Togetherness' with Dumza Maswana and Volley Nchabeleng from South Africa will weave a soulful mix of harmonies. Warsi Brothers, the torchbearers of the Delhi Gharana, closes the evening with their qawwali. Tickets at BookMyShow.com.



Bala Shankar

Cricket test matches were once without time limit. Then came timed tests and now we play international games within about four hours. Carnatic music saw similar trends in the shrinkage of time. However, not many would have reckoned that it would also mean short-changing of kritis. The penchant for music known as 'manodharma' has now reduced concerts to very few songs or kritis. That's a big change of fortunes for our venerated compositions.

Rasikas always treated manodharma with a sense of awe and musical greatness. That respect continues. However, concerts in recent years have triggered a few questions – what constitutes genuinely creative manodharma? How much manodharma is too much? Is there a herd mentality in pursuing more manodharma, which also means less time for kritis and ragas.

The basic definition of manodharma is the basket that includes raga alapana, niraval, swaras, tanam and pallavi. Enlightened listeners would agree that much of this manodharma is also Kalpita Sangita or rehearsed. Swaras have long been algorithm-led for many musicians. The korvais are more certainly of that variety. Raga alapana can be very

innovative as some musicians show. But many have a cut and paste approach to it. So, you may hear a 15-minute Kamboji alapana that has clichés, repetitions and meander for 12 minutes and a few spots that invoke nods and chuckles.

Similarly, one can sing or play a first speed niraval (similar or different) for up to 15 avarthanams of an Adi tala structure and then the rapid strokes. The clock would have moved 15 or 20 minutes just during the niraval. Many

musicians think that the length of time for each manodharma exhibition tantamounts to more musical wizardry. It is reinforced by manufactured moments that invite grand applause. The end always justifies the means, as they say.

This pattern needs some discussion and musicians' reflection. What this means is that we do not have concerts with more than seven or eight pieces in about two-and-a-half hours – the lower bookend is three or four.

Concerts by yesteryear masters

typically had 15 to 20 pieces and manodharma was never in short supply. Even some like GNB, who is considered a pantheon of manodharma, packed in many songs amidst elaborate creative alapanas. The range of flavours that listeners look for via different ragas, compositions, tempos, talas and lyrical values are now in danger of being sacrificed at the altar of manodharma.

In private conversations with some present-day musicians, a few things emerged. The competitive spirit has taken over.

'If X can do it, I can do it too' is an argument one hears. It is a race in the name of manodharma. There is also a FOMO (fear of missing out) syndrome that has resulted in contrived swara patterns that Hungarian mathematicians would be proud of; or singing or playing a non-mainstream raga for 20 minutes. Audiences are also now conditioned to deliver a thunderous applause after every long exercise. It thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The stretched manodharma is great for practice and training, but diminishes the allure in performance context. How does one cut to the chase? An efficiency audit will help. Take out the 15-20 minutes of repetition or non-value-addition in manodharma in a concert and supplant it with kritis of good standing – this is very doable.

This is not to belittle manodharma. It certainly is the highest form of skill, knowledge and innate talent. The concern is about its overuse. Lest one misunderstands the point, this is not to demand more tukkadas, but more mainstream kritis. Gurus could have a guiding role in this, but many take a *laissez-faire* attitude to shaping concert styles. One, however, sees some green shoots with a few young singers trying to reverse the trend, perhaps to showcase their repertoire.

The shrinking Carnatic concerts

Musicians' growing penchant for manodharma has resulted in kutcheris with fewer kritis and ragas

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Concerts by yesteryear masters

Graceful lines
Divya Goswami.
PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI



Love in a spin

Divya Goswami brought alive the Sohni-Mahiwal romance in her Kathak performance

Rupa Srikanth

Kathak dancer Divya Goswami's themed show 'Aqeedat' (meaning faith) was a tribute to love through the 18th century Punjabi poet Fazal Shah's *kissas*. It was a poetic coming together of beautiful music by Praveen D. Rao and poignant Kathak. At her performance for The Music Academy dance festival, Divya combined the precision of Kathak beats, its grace and lyrical fluidity in the retelling of the age-old romance between Sohni and Mahiwal (the popular Punjabi love story).

The curtain opened to Divya seated on stage, 'Love..love..love.. What is love? Some say love is a river that drowns the need ..Love is a storm that

uproots you from your core... A bit of you, a bit of me.... until we transcend beyond...', she said.

She followed it up with an invocation to divine love with the Punjabi song 'Aval amad suna khuda tain', in Stuti style in Yaman Kalyan and Addha taal. It was sung by Keerthi Kumar. There was no hurry as the dancer set the tone in stillness, with her back to the audience, and the melodious alap (Siddhartha Belmannu) captured the magic of love.

Divya followed the abstraction with a nritta piece in teen taal (16 beats), alternating tihaais in 3s and 4s, some known, some upaj-impromptu and some parans. Graceful wrists and precise timing marked them, as she ended with a chakkari and a sharp stop.

She did not leave the stage for one-and-a-half hours. Seated again, she spoke of this 19th century tragic love story between the beautiful maiden and

the rich trader-turned-buffalo herder.

Dressed up, Sohni dances her way to the Chenab, picking up her baked pot on the way. 'Tang tang' she taps the top, and 'dhan dhan' below, showing the nature of the pot. As she fills it with water, she sees the reflection of a handsome man. She looks up and their eyes meet. Thus begins their *saccha ishq*. The music and the lighting (Keerthi Kumar and Yonita) enhanced this brewing romance.

Longing to meet him, she creeps out of her home, takes her pot bravely, taps it to check, and jumps into the river. Once she's reached the opposite shore, the lovers unite in a cascade of nritta – they alternated with pretty tihaais, stronger parans, with interesting permel animal-bols such as 'Dha ri ri kukku'. There was an arresting 30-chakkari sequence as well.

Divya is not the fiery, dramatic-nritta kind of dancer. She prefers to stick to the pleasant, well-timed style - the story always bigger than the rhythm.

Sohni is to visit another day. This time, there's lightning and heavy rain. She is indecisive. Finally she decides to cross the river. When she takes the pot, she instinctively knows it's not the same. Someone has replaced it with an unbaked one. Since she has given her word, she jumps into the choppy waters. Between the crocodile and the dissolving pot, she dies.

Mahiwal is looking for her from the other shore. Tearing, he realises her *qurbaan* (sacrifice) and jumps into the river, holding onto her tightly. 'Aqeedat' concludes with some agitated tatkars, while the commentator is speaking of the power of love and the high-pitched music keeps the tragedy fresh in our minds. The visualisation (Divya), lighting and music were spot on – the artistes brought out the high drama through the language of suggestion. The other artistes were Sameer Rao (flute) and Shruti Kamath (sitar).

The Ashtapadi's timeless appeal

K.P. Rakesh unravelled the beauty of Jayadeva's verses



Immersive K.P. Rakesh. PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

V.V. Ramani

The Ashtapadis of Jayadeva are preferred compositions for dancers across styles. How they attune themselves to it determines the impact of the piece. At The Music Academy Dance Festival, K.P. Rakesh's delineation of 'Kshanamadhuna' was an aesthetic delight.

From the delicacy and grace that marked his entry as Krishna in the bower to the melodic strains of the flute by Sujith Naik, Rakesh immersed himself into the character.

The intense love that this Ashtapadi in raga Dwijavanti brims with was portrayed with restraint and dignity. The gentle manner in which Krishna beseeches Radha to place her feet on his body, caressing it and her bashful response to his touch, and the transition from the portrayal of man to woman – Rakesh's rendition was poetic.

Rakesh's nritta was marked by clarity of movement, powerful footwork and pleasant demeanour, evident in the Saptha Talaragamalika composed by Ponniah Pillai with jathis by Packiriah Pillai.

Celebrations were also held at the Indian Embassy,

Washington DC, in association with Kuchipudi Kala Nilayam and the Kuchipudi Heritage Arts Society.

It featured North America-based artistes showcasing the beauty of the dance form, commencing with 'Vande vanda vaani bhavani', the Kuchipudi patriotic song written and tuned by Vedantam Parvateesam, followed by excerpts from the drama tradition, both Kuchipudi Yakshagana and Nrityarupakas.

'Ninaindodi vanden' is an interesting composition with ragas and swaras conceptualised for a musical rendition. Choosing this varnam, with limited scope for dance was a deterrent but Rakesh managed to explore a few ideas related to Shiva. He needs to move beyond the narrative mode and choose varnams that lend themselves to emotive expressions.

The musical ensemble consisted of Girish Madhu on the nattuvangam, G. Srikanth on vocals, Sivaprasad on the mridangam, Sujith Naik on the flute and N. Ananthanarayanan on the veena.

Holding it aloft

Commemorating 50 years of the Kuchipudi flag, which symbolises the continuation of a dance tradition



Kuchipudi Bhagavatulu (right) at Natyapathaka Swarnotsavulu held in Kuchipudi village

PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Ramalingeswara Swamy temple followed by a soulful Nagarasankeertanam.

Kuchipudi Yakshagana legend Pasumarthi Rattaiah

Sarma led a workshop focussed on bhavabhinaya and musicality of Kuchipudi Yakshagana.

There were also insightful

seminars by the Kuchipudi Bhagavatulu and other senior artistes.

Noteworthy performances included a Kuchipudi

Yakshagana by students of Pasumarthi Seshu Babu in Rama Natakam, 'Mohini Bhasmusura' by students of Chinta Ravi Balakrishna, and Vempati Chinna Satyam's 'Ksheera sagara madhanam' by students of Chavali Balatripurasundari.

The festival's finale was the unveiling of a 50-ft stupa and the hoisting of the Kuchipudi Natyapathaka.

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Well-etched raga contours

Vasudha Ravi's concert was an ode to the MLV bani and that of Lathangi Sisters was dedicated to Tyagaraja

Kalyan Gopalan

Vasudha Ravi, who is adept at singing abhangs and bhajans, guided the second half of her concert with a soulful rendition of 'Tulsidas nainan un mein siyaram' in raga Subhapantuvarali, followed by a virutham in Sindhubhairavi reminding us of the MLV bani, to which she belongs. This was followed by a poignant presentation of 'Karunai deeva karpaagame'.

Vasudha's 20-plus years of training came to the fore in the way she structured her two-hour concert for Kedaram Isai Vizha and sang kritis confidently with the correct diction and intonation.

The artiste's akaras were adorned with oscillations that sometimes stretched a bit, with an avoidable vibrato, especially in the higher octaves. Vasudha chose a less



sung Dikshitar kriti 'Gunjanathi nutha' in raga Gurjari.

J. Vaidyanathan's mridangam was measured and accompanied the tani avartanam featuring J. Vaidyanathan and H. Prasanna on the ghatam.

The tani avartanam featuring J. Vaidyanathan and H. Prasanna on the ghatam.

was simple and well-coordinated.

Vasudha started her concert with Kothavaasal Venkatrama Iyer's varnam in Saveri. The chowka kalam and the racy dhurita kalam were delivered with poise. This was followed by 'Rama nannu brovara' in Harikamboji. Vasudha's expressive singing shows how she internalises the lyrics. For instance, in 'Tappu panulu leka unde', where the composer pleads to Rama for protection, saying that he

didn't indulge in any unscrupulous acts, Vasudha captured the emotions in the lyrics.

Vasudha's exposition of Anandabhairavi was extensive. She sang 'Marivere gathi'. Her soulful rendition for the evening also included Tyagaraja's 'Ganamurthi' in raga Ganamurthi.

She concluded the concert with Lalgudi Jayaraman's thillana in Khamas. R. Raghu's violin was clear and crisp and in tune with the singer

throughout the concert.

In perfect sync Archana and Samanvi are popularly known as Lathangi sisters. While one has a powerful voice, the other has a melodic texture. Their presentation focussed on the compositions of Tyagaraja and avoided too much manodharma.

The artistes began with 'Sobillu' in raga Jaganmohini. The sisters complemented each other during the

Wide repertoire Vasudha and (right) Archana-Samanvi.

PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

kalpanaswaras.

They next sang 'Kolutuivunnade' in Devagandhari. They brought out the poignancy in 'Durmargachara' and were at their expressive best in the niraval at 'dharmatmaka dhanam dhaanyamu daivamu neevai undaga'. A brisk 'Vara raga laya' in

Chenchukamboji was marked by synchronised singing of the chittaswaras.

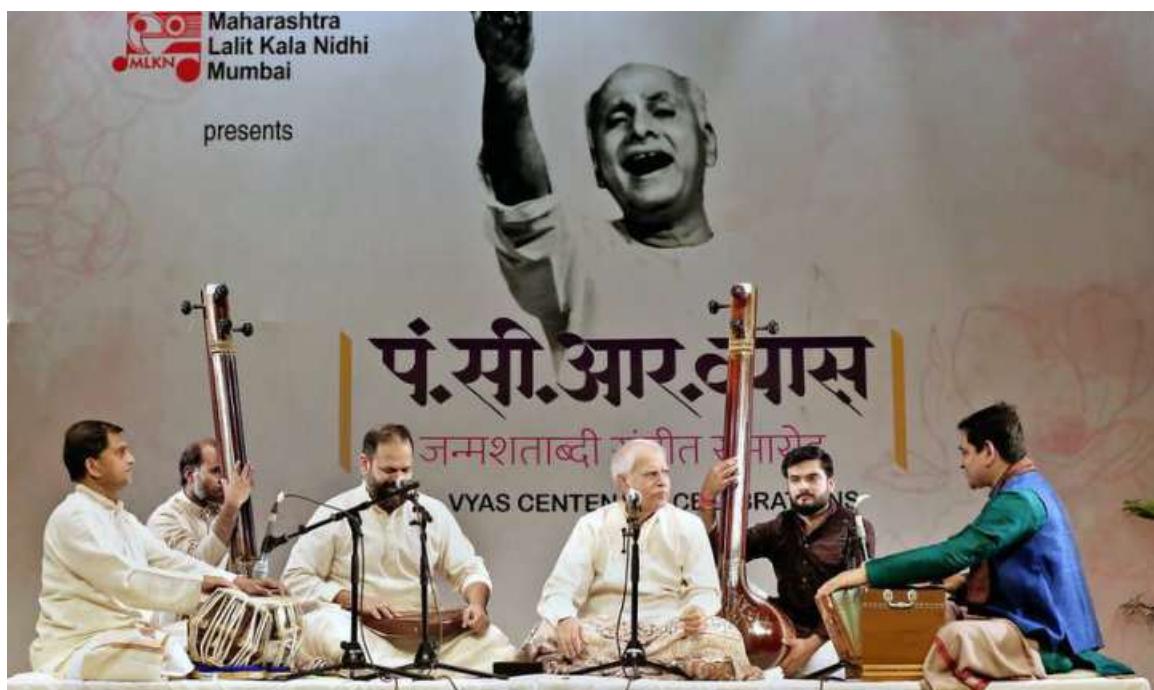
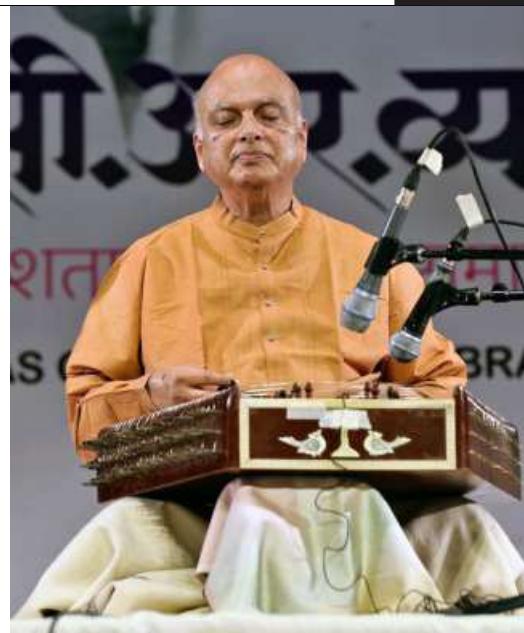
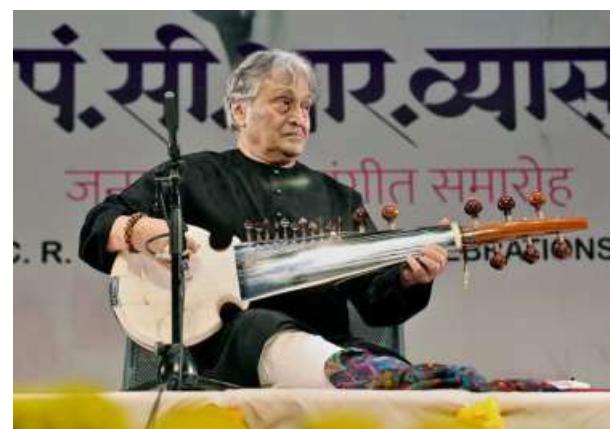
A detailed exposition of Bilahari followed, where the sisters sang 'Dorakuna ituvandi seva'. They adopted a kalapramana that allowed them to demonstrate the exquisite phrases of the raga. However, it was quite apparent that the sisters need more experience when it comes to manodharma.

The violin accompaniment by M. Vijay was neat, and he stuck to the grammar of ragas well.

The singers concluded the concert with another Tyagaraja kriti 'Sompaina manasutho' in Ahiri.

Senior artistes Poongulum Subramanian and A.S. Krishnan accompanied the sisters on the mridangam and morsing, respectively. Their sarvalaghush, farans, nadais and korvais reminded one of the traditional style of playing.

Ode to a master (Clockwise from right) Pt. Satish Vyas; Pt. Sajan Mishra with son Swaransh; and Ustad Amjad Ali Khan. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Notes from the past

Musicians drew from Pt. C.R. Vyঃ' treasure trove of compositions at a tribute festival

Manjari Sinha

Pt. Chintamani Raghunath Vyঃ (1924-2002) was a prolific performer, composer, scholar and a dedicated guru who trained many disciples.

To propagate Indian classical music, he founded the Maharashtra Lalit Kala Nidhi in 1973, and started the Gunidas Sangeet Sammelan in memory of his guru Pt. Jagannath Burohit (Gunidas). Recently, the Maharashtra Lalit Kala Nidhi organised the Pt. C.R. Vyঃ Janm-Shatabdi Sangeet Samaroh in Delhi's Kamani Auditorium. The two-day music festival's finale

featured Ustad Amjad Ali Khan's sarod recital.

Pt. C.R. Vyঃ held a full-time job with the ITC, but his passion for Hindustani classical music saw him train under renowned gurus of the Kirana, Gwalior and Agra Gharanas. Inspired by his guru Gunidas, Vyঃ also created new raags and compositions under the pseudonym 'Gunijaan'. Remembering his compositions, Amjad Ali Khan said: "Artists go away but what remains are their creations." He also paid tribute to Ustad Zakir Hussain by getting Aditya Kalyanpur and Amit Kaothekar, disciples of Ustad Alla Rakha (Zakir's father), to accompany him.

The Ustad eschewed the customary alap-jod-jhala and, with

just a short introductory auchar, played traditional compositions in raags Tilak Kamod and Bihari (an old raag with similar romantic fervour) in the slow and medium tempos of Teentaal, respectively.

Amjad Ali Khan chose raag Durga next and portrayed the predicament of women through the discordant notes in the alap, before playing compositions in the conventional swarup of the raag in

A two-day festival featuring performances by well-known musicians was organised to celebrate the musical genius of Pt. C.R. Vyঃ

six-and-a-half beats time cycle and drut Teentaal followed by a scintillating jhala. Concluding his recital with the Carnatic raga Charukesi, instead of the customary Bhairavi, he incorporated the Ram Dhun 'Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram' and followed it with shades of other Carnatic ragas such as Saraswati and Hamsadhwani. He provided ample scope to both the tabla players.

The evening opened with a vocal recital by Pt. Suhas Vyas, the son and disciple of Pt. C.R. Vyঃ. He was accompanied on the tabla by Pt. Vinod Lele and on the harmonium by Vinay Mishra. Kushal Sharma, a young disciple of Pt. Madhup Mudgal, provided vocal support. The two compositions in the timely raag Shree comprised a Bada Khayal set to Vilambit Jhumrataal and the Chhota Khayal in Teentaal and were composed by his guru Pt. C.R. Vyঃ.

Suhas' full-throated voice and meticulous performance brought alive the memory of his father. Bhupali was a comely contrast after the sombre raag Shree before he concluded with a Nirgun bhajan.

The main attraction of the inaugural evening was the vocal recital by Pt. Sajan Mishra along with his son Swaransh. Pt. Sajan Mishra thoughtfully chose raag Jog-Kauns, created by Gunidas, and presented two compositions of Bade Ramdas Ji, known for the melodic and philosophical content of his bandishes. He was accompanied on the tabla by Pt. Vinod Lele, who provided perfect theka, and Vinay Mishra, who mirrored the vocal nuances on the harmonium.

It was a delight to watch Sajan Mishra negotiate both the gandhars while elaborating the raag. Swaransh brought out the bhavas of the compositions 'Kahe guman kare Bavare' and 'Jagat hai sapana / Kou nahin apna' set to Vilambit and Drut Ektaal, respectively. The duo complemented each other, playing hide-and-seek with alap and a variety of taans. One only wished they had more time for another raag instead of concluding with a short Sohini.

Pt. Satish Vyঃ, Pt. C.R. Vyঃ' son and Suhas' brother opened the samorah with his santoor recital. He trained under Pt. Shiv Kumar Sharma. He played Dhankoni Kalyan, a raag created by his father. As the name suggests (Dha-na ie dhaiyat nahin and Ko-ni ie komal nishad) there was no dhaiyat, nishad komal and teevra madhyam of Kalyan.

He played a detailed alap-jod and jhala in this raag, followed by three compositions set to slow Jhaptal and medium and drut Teentaal. Pt. Ram Kumar Mishra supported him on the tabla. Since he was also the host, it would have been wonderful if guest artiste Sajan Mishra had been offered more time.



Rise of the evil

What inspired Kavalam Narayana Panikkar to pen *Kalivesham*?

V. Kaladharan

Amongst a plethora of Kathakali plays, Unnayi Warrier's four-part *Nalacharitam* brims with poetic intensity, theatrical subtlety and imagination. Possessed by the evil spirit Kali, King Nala loses everything in his life, including his kingdom and is driven to the forest along with his wife Damayanthi. Kali is a major character in *Nalacharitam* Part II.

Acclaimed playwright, director, poet and lyricist Kavalam Narayana Panikkar was fascinated by Kathakali actor Nelliode Vasudevan Namboodiri, who enacted the role of Kali time and again on stage, contrary to his desire to present only noble characters.

As a person, Vasudevan was gentle. On stage as Kali, he was the embodiment of vice. Narayana was in awe of this dichotomy and penned the play *Kalivesham*, which speaks of the irredeemable conflict between an actor and his character.

As a theatre-director, Narayana had taken various inputs from Kerala's traditional performing arts. Indigenous music too was integral to his directorial ventures, and *Kalivesham* was no exception.

It was recently staged at the T.D.M. Hall, Ernakulam, under the auspices of BEAME, a cultural organisation. The protagonist (Gireesan V.) of the play admirably portrayed the predicament of an innocent, righteous person/actor besieged by the evil spirit, Kali. His behaviour with his wife too turns bizarre. But, the very next moment, he realises this, and is filled with remorse. King Nala and Damayanthi too appear on stage



Veil of time From *Kalivesham*

PHOTOS: ABHIRAM

and the scene progresses with Nala being possessed by Kali. Kali and his mate Dwapara, appear in the forest in the guise of two birds, and fly away with the sole garment worn by Nala. Similarly, Nala rescuing the serpent Karkotaka from the fire, only to have the latter bite him was poignantly depicted. The acting techniques from Kathakali, Koodiyattam and Ottanthullal were sparingly employed.

Lines from the Kathakali play *Nalacharitam* were sung in *Sopana*-style. The mizhavu beats lent rhythmic support to the movements and expressions of the actors. The *thiraseela* (curtain) held by the two actors formed an effective theatrical device to transcend time and space.

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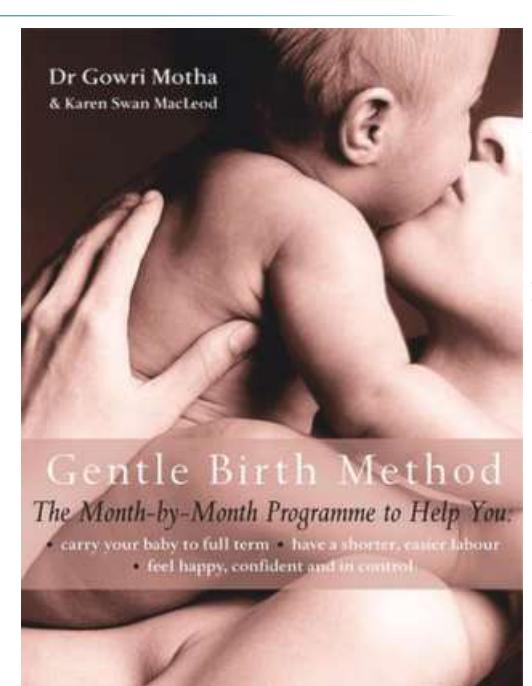
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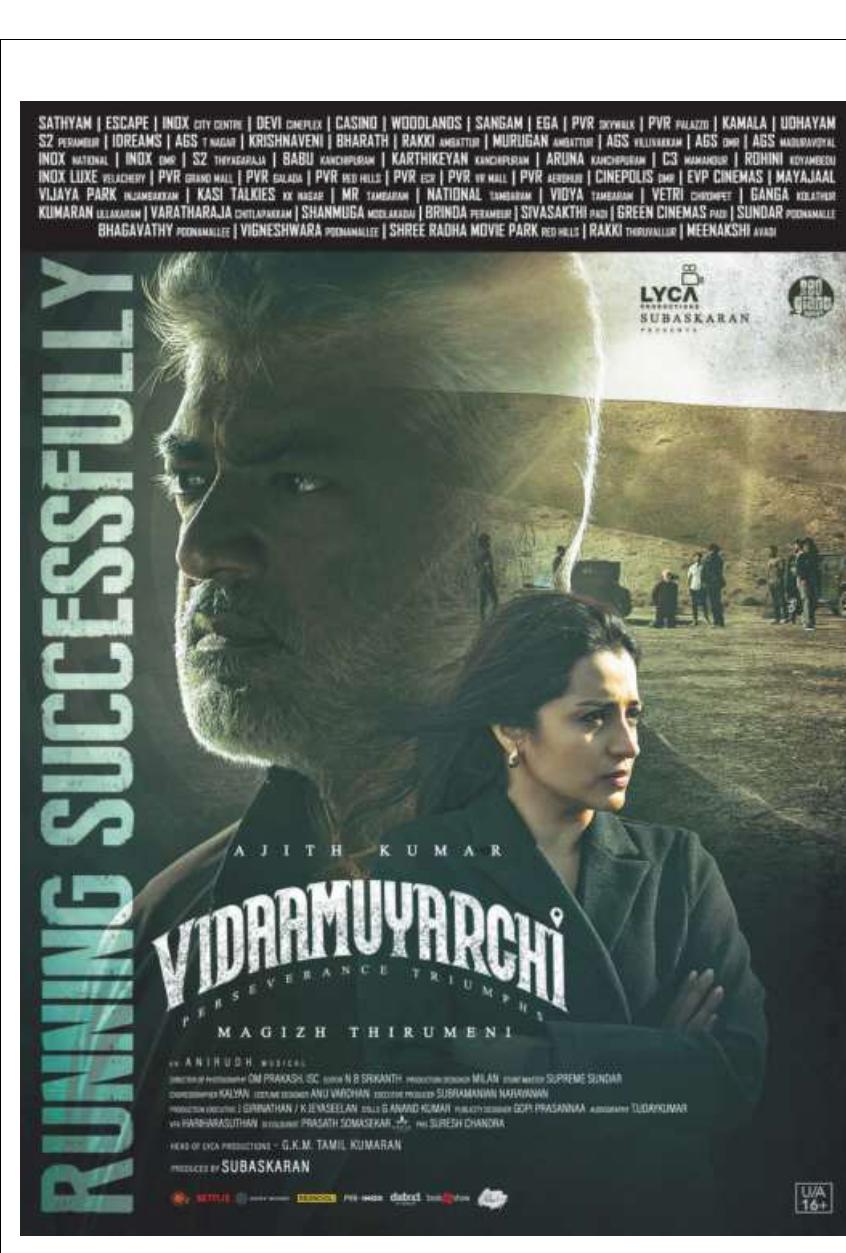
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Dedicated to Tyagaraja

Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha conducts the Tyagaraja aradhana at Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswathi Mahaswami Auditorium, endowed by Sri. P.Obul Reddy – Smt. P. Gnanamba Trust, T. Nagar, until February 11. The six-day festival was inaugurated February 6. On the occasion, the 'Thyaga Brahma Nadha Vibhushan' title was presented to senior Nagaswaram artiste Sembanarkoil S.R.G. Rajanna.

Concerts by senior musicians and lecture series will form part of the aradhana celebrations. Details: Feb. 7, 6.30 p.m.: Gayathri Girish. Feb. 8, 6.30 p.m.: Sheralai K.N. Ranganathan Sharma. Feb. 9, 10 a.m.: Rendering of Pancharatna kritis by eminent vidwans and vidhushis. From February 9 to 11, at 6.30 p.m. there will be a special series titled 'Sumati Tyagaraja' — an insight into the musical, lyrical and philosophical genius of the saint composer, to be presented by senior violinist R.K. Shriramkumar with Amritha Murali (vocal), Madan Mohan (violin) and K. Arun Prakash (mridangam).





Diverse styles Prasanna performing at Medai in Chennai. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

N.C. Srinivasaraghavan

Chennai may be hailed as the citadel of Carnatic Music but it is rare to hear 'Mahaganapati' and Pink Floyd's 'Money' in the same concert. However, Guitar Prasanna is known to take his audience on a musical exploration whenever he performs.

At his recent presentation at Medai in Chennai, titled 'Electric Prasanna Land', he exhibited the potential of the guitar as an instrument that is complete on its own.

Engaging in a lively interaction, Prasanna accommodated audience requests and improvised on the spot at times, much to the delight of his fans. Keeping in mind the musical heritage of Tamil Nadu that is home to 8th century bhakti poets such as Andal and modern-day maestros such as Ilaiyaraaja, Prasanna chose pieces that resonated with the sometimes hard-to-please Chennai music lovers.

R.D. Burman's evergreen number from Sholay 'Mehbooba Mehbooba' has been extensively anthologised, remixed and recreated. It was a prudent

Versatile strings

From Carnatic and film music to Bob Dylan, Guitar Prasanna showed how the instrument can fit into any genre

choice by Prasanna to create a feeling of nostalgia. Some of Prasanna's own compositions such as 'Bowling for Peace' from his hit 2006 album *Electric Ganesha Land* and 'Kalyani Connection' from the album *Be The Change*, which have garnered thousands of views on YouTube and are popular even today, were played by him at the show.

As a multi-genre musician, Prasanna excels in rock, metal, jazz and Carnatic. Take for instance, the track 'Smells like teen spirit' by the American rock band Nirvana. Prasanna took up this piece and made the audience guess what it

is, taking them along with much communication and involvement. His personal and emotional connect with music lovers add a special touch to his performances.

Prasanna's work with A.R. Rahman is extensive and the music composer has called him 'a living hope for quality music'. After taking up Rahman's 'Dil Se', Prasanna segued into 'Chaiyya'



Ilaiyaraaja was Prasanna's first big musical influence and he dedicated quite some time to some of the maestro's hit numbers

'Chaiyya' and finally landed at Led Zeppelin's iconic 'Black Dog'. Unexpected transitions like these added much zeal. Tamil compositions like 'Netru illatha maatram' and 'July maatham vandhaal' were also played, the latter being Prasanna's first professional work with Rahman, where he played the original guitar portions.

Ilaiyaraaja is Prasanna's first big musical influence and he dedicated quite some time to some of the maestro's hit numbers such as 'Kaatril enthan geetham' and 'Rasathi unna' (also a tribute to playback singer P. Jayachandran, who passed away recently). One of the best portions was an Ilaiyaraaja medley that Prasanna candidly referred to as the Vitamix blend of the evening. It included six to seven songs composed across decades. From 'Mandram vandha' to 'Senorita' to 'Putham puthu kaalai', it was a rollercoaster ride of emotions for Raja lovers.

Prasanna's wife Shalini Lakshmi is a singer and accompanies him often in his performances. That evening, she rendered two Carnatic compositions with Prasanna - 'Pullum silambina kaan', a 'Thiruppaavai', and 'Jaya jaya Durge' by Narayana Tirtha. The couple demonstrated its versatility by also taking up Bob Dylan's 'Blowing in the wind' and Prasanna's 'Ode to Kubla Khan', composed by him during his college days.

Overall, it was a pleasant experience for music lovers across age groups as the songs were diverse in terms of genre, language and period. Keeping the audience excited throughout the concert as a solo guitarist is a rare talent and Prasanna did this with aplomb.

Narendra Kusnur

Regulars at Mumbai's Mahindra Blues Festival (MBF) would remember pedal steel guitarist Robert Randolph for his appearances in the 2012 and 2013 editions of the festival. The first time, he accompanied blues legend Buddy Guy on the track 'Long distance call', and the following year, his performance with The Family Band received rave reviews. Robert returns to MBF this year with another line-up – The Robert Randolph Band.

The annual two-day festival to be held at Mehboob Studios, Bandra, on February 8 and 9, will also feature Australian acts Teskey Brothers and the prodigy Taj Farrant, American singer Ruthie Foster and Indian artistes Kanchan Daniel and Megan Murray. John Blue Ensemble, winner of the talent hunt competition, will play in the garden area.

"I am happy to be part of this collective of blues musicians to perform at this festival," says Robert. He adds that his earlier visits have inspired him to listen to a lot of Indian music and even observe how the Indian slide guitar or sitar are used in collaborations with other genres. "It's interesting how soulfully it's all connected together. All these skills help us learn new things."

Robert's exposure to music came through the church. He shares, "My church is a very blues, rock n' roll kind of organisation based along the East Coast of the U.S. and the

Time for the blues

Pedal steel guitarist Robert Randolph will be the main draw at the Mahindra Blues Festival

Midwest. We had three-four hour services, 90 per cent of which was musical. My mother's family grew up on funk artistes such as George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic, so I got into that too."

The pedal steel guitar was used prominently in his church and Robert was drawn to it. However, when he heard guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan around 1997, he wanted to use that approach in his playing. "That just kickstarted things, and I got more drawn to different kinds of blues," he says.

Stevie, along with jazz guitarist Norman Brown, inspired Robert to try out

new techniques. "Based on their style, I changed my sound," he says.

Robert considers himself fortunate to have worked with legendary artistes such as Buddy Guy and Eric Clapton. "Just sitting with them in the studio, you observe their mindset, how they write, create and record. They have both been inspired by the earliest of blues. They have also created songs and riffs

While Robert Randolph will be the main draw at this year's MBF, two Australian acts Teskey Brothers and Taj Farrant are part of the line-up too. Says V.G. Jairam of Hyperlink Brand Solutions,



that stand out. One just wants to follow them and create something that people will remember years later."

An interesting project was when Robert joined guitarist Carlos Santana and Metallica's Kirk Hammett on 'Trinity', a 2005 instrumental tune that paid tribute to Pakistani Sufi legend Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, based on the track 'Tere bin nahin lagda'.

Robert is now looking forward to his new album *Preacher Kids*, due for release in May. He says, "It's got a whole lot of styles, from rock and blues to funk, and there are songs that people can dance to. It's produced by the extremely talented Shooter Jennings." He is also happy many young musicians have taken up the pedal steel or lap steel guitars.

While Robert Randolph will be the main draw at this year's MBF, two Australian acts Teskey Brothers and Taj Farrant are part of the line-up too. Says V.G. Jairam of Hyperlink Brand Solutions,

which manages the festival, "We've always wanted to include acts from other parts of the world, and not just America."

MBF's influence

According to Jairam, MBF has grown tremendously since its launch in 2011, both in scale and influence. "What started as a niche festival for blues enthusiasts in India, has now become popular in Chicago and New York too, drawing a diverse audience that appreciates the blues and the rich history and storytelling that comes with it. MBF has become a platform for Indian blues musicians, allowing them to share the stage with global icons."

Jairam points out that while the blues has traditionally been a niche genre in India, there is a growing appetite for it, especially among younger audiences who are discovering it through modern interpretations, collaborations and digital platforms. "The festival has consistently curated artistes who push the boundaries of the blues while staying true to its roots. There's also been a noticeable rise in grassroots blues acts nationwide, which is a great sign for the genre's future here," he says.



The festival has consistently curated artistes who push the boundaries of the blues while staying true to its roots.

V.G. JAIRAM

CALENDAR



Into the world of Shakuntala

Madurai R. Muralidaran, under the auspices of Aalaap, presents his 25th dance musical *Sakuntalam* on February 8, 6.30 p.m. at Sir Mutha Venkatasubba Rao Concert Hall. Muralidaran has collaborated for the first time with the Budapest Live Orchestra, which consists of more than 65 musicians from

Hungary. The production also features 50 dancers of Muralidaran's Nrithyakshethra Dance Academy.

Sakuntalam written by Kalidasa, is a retelling of the timeless story of Shakuntala and Dushyant. Playing the role of Shakuntala is Priyadarshini Kishore Neelakandan, a senior disciple of Muralidaran.

Anand Kuchibhotla, president of University of Silicon Andhra, will be the chief guest.

Tickets available at <https://tikki.com/NrithyakshethraChennai/c/Sakuntalam/>



Vocal concert

Narada Gana Sabha will feature Abhishek Raguram's vocal concert on February 9, 6.30 p.m. and M.S. Martin and students' keyboard recital on February 10, 6.30 p.m. Venue: Satguru Gnanananda Hall.

Talk on sage Agastya

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, in association with Central Institute of Classical Tamil (CICT), presents 'The Legacy of Sage Agastya', a discussion and seminar on Agastiyar's works, wisdom and influence on Tamil language, culture, literature and spirituality. To be held on February 11, 6.45 p.m., at Pottipatti Gnananamboole Reddy Auditorium, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore, it will be moderated by K.V. S. Gopalakrishnan. The speakers are Tiruppur Krishnan and Isakkai Ramanan.

The evening will also feature 'Agastya Tamil Isai' (6 p.m.) by the students of Sastra University, Chennai, and Sandipani Vidyalaya, Chennai.

Book launch

Madhuradhwani has organised the following events at its Arkay Convention Centre, Mylapore. On February 8, 6 p.m., Kizhakkku Padippagam's book *Vyasa Bharatam* will be released. Dr. Sudha Seshayyan will release the first copy and present a special talk. On February 11, 6.15 p.m., a talk on 'Divine Beauty and Symbolism: The Peacock in Yazidis and Hindu Worship' will be presented by Kala Nagaswamy.

Tamil play

Under the auspices of Chromepet Cultural Academy, Dummies Drama will stage its Tamil play *Raghuramam* on February 8, 6.45 p.m. at the academy auditorium, Chromepet.



English theatre

NCPA, in collaboration with The Patchworks Ensemble presents an English play, *The Gentlemen's Club* on February 8, 6 p.m. and 8.30 p.m., at its Experimental Theatre. The show blends dance, music and projection to unfold an interesting narrative celebrating women and their exploration of masculinity.

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