

friday Review

THE HINDU

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A LIFE DRIVEN BY RHYTHM

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Chitra Swaminathan

chitra.swaminathan@thehindu.co.in

Let social media have a melt down if it must — Arijit Singh couldn't have chosen a better time to call it quits as a playback singer. Yes, he was at the peak of his career and the voice of an entire generation. Yet, despite the thousands crying themselves hoarse over his decision, this is the right moment.

Since he entered the world of Hindi film music in 2011 with *Murder 2*'s 'Phir mohabbat', Arijit has evolved and proven he is not just a small-town boy with a voice that tugs at the heartstrings, but a thinking musician. His decision only proves he has understood the Hindi film industry's age-old stereotyping ways that has stifled many creative artistes.

Arijit, with a voice soaked in melancholy and earthiness, represented love, loss and longing for many youngsters. His hard work and their adoration shaped his success story. However, in recent years, one song began to sound much like another. With similar lines and emotions, ennui would have inevitably set in. To make matters worse, reality shows have been churning out endless Arijit clones, diluting the uniqueness of his artistry. Never one to settle into a comfort zone, Arijit seemed determined to step away before repetition dulled his edge.

Since the moment he posted on Instagram, "I am calling it off. It was a wonderful journey," bloggers, vloggers, industry insiders and colleagues have been speculating about the reasons.

How Arijit Singh timed it just right

But, true to his reclusive nature, Arijit has remained silent, not responding to the flood of posts on his retirement.

"An artiste of his calibre can't be boxed into a set formula. Time to soar higher, my dear Arijit," wrote Shreya Ghoshal commenting on Arijit's post. Singer-composer Vishal Dadlani's reflective note read "success doesn't guarantee peace and contentment." Director and composer Vishal Bhardwaj urged him to "take back his sanyas".

At just 38, and with a net worth of over ₹400 crore, Arijit Singh's announcement sets him apart as truly one of a kind. As of January 2026, he is the most-followed artiste on Spotify worldwide, with more than 171 million listeners — surpassing even Taylor Swift and holding the top-streamed position for seven consecutive years. On Instagram too, he commands a following of 13 million, a testament to the quiet power of his voice.

Arijit came to occupy the space once ruled by Udit Narayan and Kumar Sanu, who had become symbols of youthful aspiration in the late 1980s and 1990s. Songs such as 'Papa kehte hain' (*Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*) and 'Saanson ki zaroorat hai jaise' (*Aashiqui*) captured the innocence, romance and dreams of a new generation. Decades later, listeners once again discovered in Arijit a singer who could mirror the evolving emotions of youth, and he made the most of it by making his songs their closest companions.

Arijit has been fortunate in lending his voice to songs whose lyrics carry the whisper of a bygone era — be it 'Tum hi ho' from *Aashiqui 2*, the soulful 'Phir le aaya dil' from *Barfi!* or the folk-tinged 'Kabira' from *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani*.

Composers such as director Sanjay Leela Bhansali and Pritam sensed his strength early on and crafted modern melodies wrapped in nostalgia's warm haze. Sample these: 'Laal ishq', 'Ayat', 'Janam janam',

'Gerua', 'Agar tum saath ho', 'Kesariya', 'Tujhe kitna chahne lage' and 'O Maahi'.

In the rare interviews he granted, Arijit often spoke of how he sculpted his voice, patiently, bit-by-bit. He reflected on the unwritten rule of the industry — that to survive, one must keep everyone in good humour. He also spoke about the unfair payment structure that doesn't honour an artiste's worth. In doing so, he

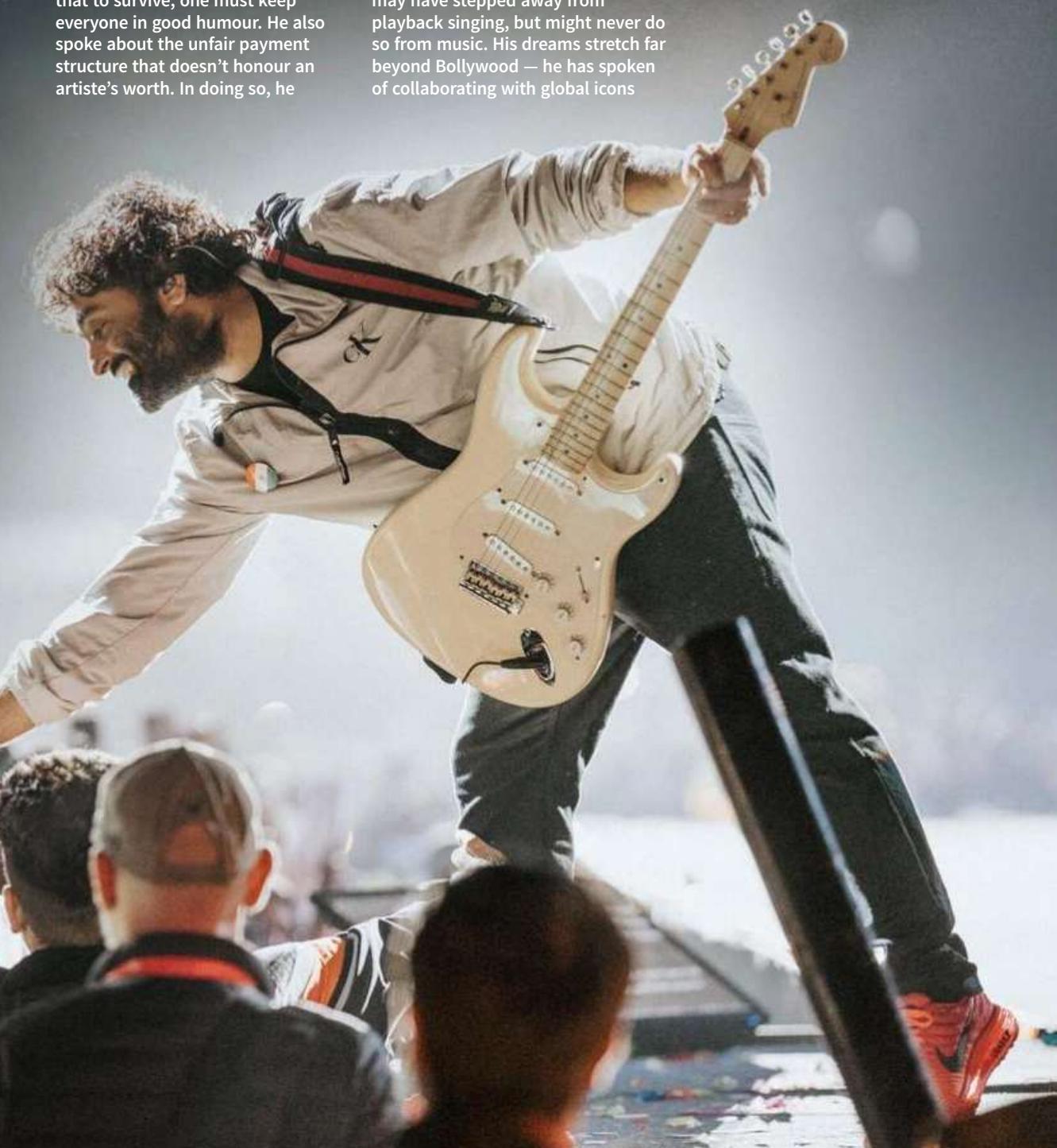
hinted at the systemic failures of an industry where he had once struggled to find a foothold. He seems to have grown disenchanted over time. Hierarchy and formulaic demands often stand in the way of an artiste's creative freedom.

So, what lies ahead for the boy who once travelled from Jiaganj in West Bengal to Mumbai with big dreams? In many ways, he has already come full circle — shifting back to his home-town, where he now records and operates from a well-equipped studio in his modest three-storied house, tucked into the lane where he grew up.

Born to a Bengali mother and a Sikh father, Arijit's musical roots run deep in the Hindustani classical tradition and Rabindra Sangeet. He may have stepped away from playback singing, but might never do so from music. His dreams stretch far beyond Bollywood — he has spoken of collaborating with global icons

such as Eric Clapton, Justin Timberlake, Hans Zimmer, Robbie Williams, Christina Aguilera and Coldplay. That ambition found expression last year in *Sapphire*, his popular single with Ed Sheeran, a glimpse of his desire to push the envelope and take on independent projects. And then there are his live shows, always sold out. It is here he has shown that as much as he is the audience's, he also expects boundaries to be respected.

Perhaps Arijit's decision, dramatic as it seems, is part of a larger shift — that playback singing is no longer the sole measure of success, and it is giving way to something more personal, more expansive and far more liberating.

**CULTURE BRIEFS****Musical ode**

Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha will conduct the Tyagaraja aradhana from February 12 to 17 at Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswathi Mahaswami Auditorium. S. Ramadurai, chairman, Mission Karmayogi Bharat, will inaugurate the festival. On the occasion, the 'Thyaga Brahma Nadha Vibhushan' title will be conferred upon ghatam exponent Vikku T.H. Vinayakram. The award has been instituted by Vijaykumar Reddy and Preetha Reddy. Senior violinist R.K. Shriramkumar will offer felicitation.

The six-day event will feature an array of concerts and a discourse. Schedule: February 12, 7 p.m.: Delhi P. Sunder Rajan. February 13, 6.30 p.m.: Nithyasree Mahadevan. February 14, 6.30 p.m.: Papanasam Ashok Ramani. February 15, 10 a.m.: Rendition of Tyagaraja's Pancharatna kritis. Krithika Bharadwaj's musical discourse on the saint-composer will be held from February 15 to 17 at 6.30 p.m.

**Words and moves**

D. V. Raghavan Centre For Performing Arts, led by dancer-scholar Nandini Ramani, has organised two events — 'Sahiti Saurabha' and 'Natya Sangamam' on February 9 at Bharatiya Vidyabhavan mini hall. The first part of the event (10 a.m. to 12 noon), featuring lec-dems on different aspects of dance and music, is a tribute to scholar V. Raghavan. Rajshri Ramakrishna, Head, Department of Indian Music and Dance, Madras University, will preside. The speakers include P. Ramachandrasekhar, Sanskrit scholar and academician, Anuthama Murali, research scholar in music, S. Jayachandran, dancer and academician, and M.S. Ananthasri, a musician and dancer. The evening programme (6.20 p.m.-7.30 p.m.) will pay homage to T. Balasaraswati on her 42nd remembrance day and feature dance performances based on V. Raghavan's Sanskrit compositions.

S. Sowmya, Vice Chancellor, The Tamil Nadu Dr. J. Jayalalithaa Music and Fine Arts University, will preside. Babaji Rajah Bhonsle of the Thanjavur royal family will be the chief guest. Senior Bharatanatyam dancer Ananda Shankar Jayant is the guest of honour. The pieces have been choreographed by Nandini Ramani with assistance from Sushama Ranganathan and S. Divyasena.

**Tuneful strings**

Narada Gana Sabha, in association with Sunaada Trust, commemorates the 107th birth anniversary of the legendary S. Rajam on February 10, 6.30 p.m., at its mini hall. The evening features Rajshri Ramakrishna's veena recital with Guru Raghavendra on the mridangam.

**Of art and heritage**

Avalamba Foundation and Kala Sadhanaya will jointly present the first edition of 'Conversations on Culture' on February 7 at the Bharata Kalakshetra Auditorium, Kalakshetra Foundation.

The event features a series of talks. Jayanti S. Ravi, Additional Chief Secretary (Revenue), Government of Gujarat, will be the chief guest. The day begins at 10.30 a.m. with Nagaraj Paturi's talk 'Folk Art All Around Us'. At 11.15 a.m., S Jayakumar will speak on 'Archiving India's Living Culture'. This will be followed by Arun Menon's 'Engineering Across Time' at 12.15 p.m. Ramas Bharadvaj's 'Living Epics, Living Voices' at 1.35 p.m. will set the tone for the afternoon sessions. Anupam Sah and Ahalya Matthanwill talk on 'Beyond Display: Museums as Living Cultural Experiences' at 2.20 p.m. At 3.15 p.m., 'Preserving Heritage and Art: A Policy Perspective' will be presented by Raghava Krishna, A.K. Sriram and Ketu Ramachandrashekhar. Vikram Sampath's lecture 'Who Owns the Past?' (4.15 p.m.) will be followed by Ranjani-Gayatri's concert at 6.30 p.m.



Epic echoes Sikkil Gurucharan with Akshay Ram on percussion; Mudicondan Ramesh on the veena; and scholars Priya Ramachandran and Mohamed Rela. (Below) An illustration of Kambar.

PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Beyond the antagonist

'The Rise and Fall of Ravan' was a retelling of Kamba Ramayanam by scholars and musicians

Kambar's Ramavatharam or Kamba Ramayanam with nearly 10,800 verses is one of the greatest literary works in Tamil, and is an impeccable showcase of Kambar's mastery over poetic forms such as agaval, venba and adiyar.

The programme, 'The Rise and Fall of Ravan', held recently at Narada Gana Sabha, featured scholars Priya Ramachandran and Mohamed Rela and Carnatic vocalist Sikkil Gurucharan with Mudicondan Ramesh on the veena (the instrument was an integral part of Ravan's persona) and Akshay Ram on percussion. The format sought to make Kambar accessible through expositions in English, while the music conveyed the emotive and aesthetic core of the text, thereby opening the experience to non-Tamil-speaking audiences.

This thematic approach evolved from an earlier presentation of select verses from the *Kamba Ramayanam* before Prime Minister Narendra Modi two years ago. Subsequently, the focus shifted from isolated verses to character-driven explorations – first Vali and now, Ravan – through Kambar's moral and poetic lens.

Ravan, as the scholars noted, cannot be dismissed as a conventional antagonist. He is Brahma's descendant, conqueror of worlds, master-musician and a devout Shaivite. His fall is rendered neither through martial defeat nor divine curse, but through a moral rupture. Kambar's Ravan is undone by an ordinary woman from within his own household. The presentation focussed sharply on this

single facet of Kambar's imagination: Shoornpanaka as the catalyst of Ravan's tragic descent, revealing the poet's nuanced and layered understanding of human frailty.

The presentation also looked at a decisive moment from the 'Sundara Kandam'. After Hanuman's rampage in Lanka and his capture, Ravan is revealed in full splendour, 10 heads engaged in parallel thought, from governance to obsession. Repelled by this dissonance, Hanuman assumes the role of a teacher, expounding the nature of Parabrahmam, the one without origin or end, 'Moolam naduvum eerum illadhu.' The Surya raga rendering of the verse subtly invoked Rama's solar dynasty.

Equally striking was the return to Ravan's first appearance in the 'Aranya Kandam'. Here, he is a ruler in perfect equilibrium, Devas reduced to servitude and the cosmos beneath his feet. Rendered through 'Puliyin adal udaiyan' in raga Saranathi, this scene precedes Sita's entry. Then arrives Shoornpanaka at Ravan's court, nose severed, signalling his unravelling. Her tale of two ascetics, who routed Kharan (younger brother of Ravan) is greeted with laughter by Ravan. Skepticism gives way to intrigue when she speaks of Sita, 'En vaayin utra kutram', sung in Suryasri, describing Sita's radiance and divine grace.

In Kambar's 'Bagathil oruvan vaithan,' rendered in Ranjani, Ravan wonders where such beauty should dwell – body, mind or soul. Here, Kambar seals the moment of dangerous reverie with 'Karanyum marandhan.' Gurucharan's choice of raga Gamanasrama deepens its weight and austere.

The presentation directly moved to the first day of war in 'Yudha Kandam'. Rama and Lakshmana arrive with a full *vanara* battalion, prepared for sustained warfare. Ravan, however, steps into battle without strategy or counsel. His logic is fatal yet revealing: if Rama is slain that day, the war ends. Ravan fights not as a general, but as a man driven by wounded desire.

By dusk, Ravan has lost his chariot, weapons and army. Rama's instruction to withdraw and return the next day inflicts a wound deeper than defeat. In 'Varanam porudha maarbum,' Kambar strips him of consolation – elephant tusks worn as trophies, shoulders that lifted the Himalayas and Shiva's sword bring no comfort to the vainika, who surpasses Narada. Set by Sikkil Gurucharan in Karaharapriya (Harapriya) – the raga Ravan sang while lifting the Kailasa.

Ravan speaks about Rama's power to Malayavan:

Rama's arrows depart the bow like a primal creation – 'Urpathi aiyan okkum,' rendered in Saveri, recalling Tyagaraja's 'Ramabaana sauryamu'. Ravan sends Kumbhakarna to battle, and goes to Ashoka Vanam and admits defeat to the tune of 'Thorpitheer' in Hindolam.

The tragedy narrows to Indrajith. After Atikayan's fall, Indrajith accuses Ravan, fights with ferocity, and exhausts every weapon. Unable to bear his father's destruction, he pleads for Sita's release. Ravan refuses, this was depicted through 'Munnaiyor irundarenika ippagai' rendered in Atana and 'Vendrilan endra podum,' in Dharmavati. Indrajith returns to battle, looks upon his father one final time and is decapitated by Lakshmana.



Ravan runs to the battlefield on hearing of Indrajith's death and finds only his son's arm amid corpses. He presses it to his chest and howls – 'Maindavo.' Kambar captures this in 'Sinathodum kotram,' sung in Vasanta, the latter half moving into Vasanta Bhairavi.

Mandodari then arrives and in 'Anjininen anjininen' declares that Sita who seems to be like nectar is poison to the one who is not her husband. Her words strike Ravan harder than any weapon. Desire gives way to fury. Ravan gets ready for his final battle. In 'Allan sivano' (Behag), Ravan realises Rama as the Vedic source, thus remembering Hanuman's *brahmopadesam*. Choosing death over surrender, he falls to Rama's arrow. Kambar mourns – 'Vemmadangal vegundu' (Mayamalavagowla) – noting that in death, Ravan's rajasic and tamasic veils fall away, leaving pure sattva – he glows three times more than he did after the penance.

Kambar describes Rama's arrows through the verse 'Mukkodi vazhnalum' rendered in Chenjurutti. Seeing Ravan's downfall, Mandodari reflects on fate, beauty and chastity – 'Ganthayurku anianaiya' (Pavani).

On the blood-soaked field Ravan lies still. Rama approaches and, seeing scars upon his back, speaks of cowardice. Vibhishana erupts, defending his brother's heroism through 'Aaiyiram tholinanum' in Kannada: no man could fell Ravan but for his fatal desire for Sita.

The programme

culminated in 'Por magalai,

kalai magalai, pugazh

magalai', as the hands

that wielded weapons,

veena and fame finally

touched Bhooma Devi.

D. V. Prasanna Kumar on the nattuvangam, D.S. Srivaths on vocals, G.S. Nagaraj on the mridangam, Niveditha Arun on the veena and Raghu Simhan A.N. on the flute.

Holding his ground

Despite musical setbacks, Avijit Das sustained the momentum throughout the performance

V.V. Ramani

A performance is always a tightrope-walk for a dancer as all elements need to be perfectly aligned. Kuchipudi dancer Avijit Das faced a few challenges during his performance at The Music Academy's dance festival when his vocalist suddenly developed throat issues – creating a void in the musical accompaniment. Yet, unfettered, the dancer continued.

From the contemplative opening stance, Avijit's stage persona came to the fore as he sailed through the composition 'Shiva stuti' – a homage to the lord of dance. Choreographed by Guru Vempati Chinna Satyam, the leisurely pace of the dance made it an aesthetic delight. His nuanced portrayal explored the varied facets of Shiva.

An intrinsic part of a Kuchipudi presentation is the Tarangam, excerpted from 'Krishna Leela Tarangini', but in popular parlance it is viewed as the dance on a brass plate. Avijit chose to present a new Tarangam with different facets of Kuchipudi – Kalapam, Yakshagana and Vyastya Nrithyam – woven into it. 'Kalaya yashode' was a Ragamalika, Talamalika composition set to music by Rajkumar Bharathi. The narrative, conceptualised on the Kalapam concept of three characters, dealt with the story of a gopi confronting Yashoda about Krishna's pranks, but sudden realisation of his stature dawns on her as she recalls the various leelas of Krishna and her anger dissipates.

Confident
Avijit Das.
PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

The story of Indra's wrath on the people of Vrajabhoomi – bringing torrential downpour in the region as an act of retaliation and Krishna coming to their rescue lifting the Govardhana mountain as an umbrella – was depicted using Jathikettu – a distinct rendition of jathis and circular movement patterns. Despite the discrepancies in music, the ease with which the dancer moved from one character to another in his portrayal of birds, animals and people in distress was impressive.

Next, the story of Chanura filled with dramatic moments unfolded turning the spotlight on the theatrical format of Kuchipudi. The confrontation between Krishna and Kaliya – a favoured episode in dance – was a beautiful sequence with a series of swara passages called Swara Kattu. Tuned in Vasantha, it was a powerful depiction of the fight.

The Kshetrayya padam 'Eduvanti vade varo' in Kalyani raga, Tirsa Tripata tala, dealt with the emotions of a samanya nayika aspiring to be the love interest of Muvvagopal. The restraint in the portrayal enhanced the appeal, though a little more depth could have amplified the emotional impact. A Hamsanandhi thillana by Mudicondan Venkataraman was the concluding piece.

The musical team featured D.V. Prasanna Kumar on the nattuvangam, D.S. Srivaths on vocals, G.S. Nagaraj on the mridangam, Niveditha Arun on the veena and Raghu Simhan A.N. on the flute.



CULTURE BRIEFS

Songs and stories



Under the auspices of Madhuradhwani, the following programmes are scheduled to take place at Arkay Convention Center. Schedule: Today, 6.30 p.m.: Madhuradhwani and Sevalaya jointly present 'Madham Thorum Mahakavi' by Isai Kavi Ramanan. February 7, 4.30 p.m.: Akshara Samskriti and Dhanya Rudrapatnam; 5.40 p.m.: Aditya Madhavan and 7 p.m.: K. Gayathri. February 8, 4.30 p.m.: Pathangi Brothers; 5.40 p.m.: Bhargavi Balsubramanian; and 7 p.m.: Ranganatha Sharma. February 9, 6.15 p.m.: 20th episode of 'Tamizh Moovar' series by Dr. Sudha Seshayyan with Santhosh Subramaniam on the vocal.



Tamil kritis take centre stage

As part of the Tamil Isai Vizha, being hosted by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore, Brindha Manickavasakan will perform today at 6 p.m.: Venue: Bhavan's main auditorium.

On a promising note

Vaishnavi Ramdoss embellished her recital with some rare kritis

H. Ramakrishnan

Some concerts leave a lasting impression. One such was Vaishnavi Ramdoss' performance at Kedaram Makara Sankranti Isai Vizha. Her rendering of 'Muthukumarayyane' by Ramaswami Sivan in Sankarabharanam and two-kalai Roopaka tala was the highpoint. The alapana was a display of her training and talent. A disciple of R.S. Ramakanth, she has imbibed the performing style of the legendary R.K. Srikanth school.

Vaishnavi commenced her concert with a rarely heard Kalyanasanthan varnam 'Vinayaka saranam' by T.M. Thyagarajan.



Musical dialogue Vaishnavi Ramdoss with Shreelakshmi Bhat on the violin; Tirucherai Kaushik on the mridangam and Sai Bharath on the kanjira. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Tyagaraja's 'Toli janmamuna jeyu dudu' (Bilahari, Khanda Chapu) was a neat rendition. Her next extensive alapana was in Karaharapriya for 'Senthil andavan' (Roopakam) by Papanasam Sivan. The singer deliberately adopted a vilambu kala for this kriti, with elaborate niraval and swaras at 'Kolamayil vahanam

karunalalava' ornamenting it further.

Muthuswami Dikshitar's 'Mamava meenakshi' (Varali) with a Samashti charanam in Misra Chapu also had a

lingering effect, particularly the alapana. Niraval and kalpanaswaras were at the usual 'Shyame sankari digvijaya prataapini'. Tirucherai Kaushik (disciple of Mannargudi Eswaran) on the mridangam and Sai Bharath (disciple of Umayalpuram Sivaraman and Sunil Kumar) on the kanjira offered an excellent tani in Misra Chapu. Violinist Shreelakshmi Bhat (a disciple of Sriram Parusaram) demonstrated her spontaneity and improvisational ability in alapanas, niravals and swara passages. Her ability to anticipate enriches her accompanying talent – an asset to any main artiste.

Vaishnavi wound up her recital with a Tiruppugazh 'Oonaththasai thoalkal sumantha' in Jhponpuri.

A forgotten feminine arc

Apurva Kasaravalli's play *Shurpanakhi* shows the Ramayana's most-maligned woman in a new light



Shilpa Anandraj
shilpa.anandraj@thehindu.co.in

Shurpanakhi is remembered as a rakshasi – crude, fearsome and mocked for daring to voice her desire for Rama and later Lakshmana. Yet, that is not the focus of writer Apurva Kasaravalli's play *Shurpanakhi*. Instead, it presents the demon as a woman, who can also be vulnerable.

Presented by Anandi Arts Foundation, *Shurpanakhi* will be staged at Ranga Shankara, Bengaluru, on February 10 at 7.30 p.m.

Directed by Vandana Supriya Kasaravalli, this 90-minute Kannada play blends Odissi's sculptural grace with Yakshagana's folk vigour and presents Shurpanakhi as a woman with humour, longing and strength. "I wanted to place her at the centre of the stage, without justifying or condemning her. We often ignore

her presence," says Apurva, during a rehearsal at Vyoma Artspace and Studio, J.P. Nagar.

The play features Vandana as Shurpanakhi and Yakshagana artiste Srinidhi Holla as the sakha. Vandana, trained in Odissi at Nrityagram and under guru Bichitrani Swain in Bhubaneswar, has performed to Kannada lyrics. Srinidhi, with 18 years of experience, brings stylised exaggeration to his role.

"Most of the characters have a sakhi. So we thought why not Shurpanakhi too, and that is how the story was created," shares Vandana, who adds: "The play is a result of intense discussions, arguments and collaboration between me and Apurva. It all started when I was trying to choreograph movements to a rasa from *Shoorpanakha Navarasa Gadya* by Karthik Hebbar. And Apurva suggested we write a script about what happens to Shurpanakhi before and after Karthik's composition, and that is

how the play came into being." Apurva wrote the script in 2019 and *Shurpanakhi* premiered at Adishakti's Veenapani Festival in Puducherry in 2020. Since then, it has travelled across venues.

What is endearing is how the play looks at Shurpanakhi, her struggle to change her walk, talk, voice and her entire personality to be accepted by the man of her desire: Rama. Helped by her sakha, the anxious Shurpanakhi transforms into the docile, sensual Chandranakhi.

The dialogues, in the Mangalore dialect, are poetic and poignant, especially when Shurpanakhi hears from her sakha that Ravana has kidnapped Sita to avenge his sister's insult. She condemns her brother's act and asks: "Why do women become

For Srinidhi, working with Vandana and Apurva has been a transformative experience. "In Yakshagana, Shurpanakhi is always depicted as a demon. I have never seen her being portrayed differently. I was excited when I heard this story."

Apurva shares: "I wrote this script for my wife and it was a conscious choice. I was not trying to rewrite the epic, but to look at what we have inherited and ask, quietly but firmly, where empathy had slipped away."

According to Vandana, "At its core, *Shurpanakhi* is a feminist reinterpretation that unsettles rigid binaries of good and evil. With its interplay of Odissi and Yakshagana's energetic exaggeration, it creates a visual metaphor for the contradictions within Shurpanakhi herself – a woman caught between vulnerability and defiance, tenderness and rage."

Artistic resurrection Saju Thuruthil with the murals he worked on at Karuvelippura Malika. PHOTO: A. JAYAMOHAN



Hues of heritage

Meet art researcher Saju Thuruthil, restorer of murals at the Fort Palace near the Padmanabhaswamy Temple

ornaments, bangles, hair accessories or nose pins, says Saju. "Women are seen wearing pichipoo (a type of jasmine) as well. The colour composition is also unique."

The restoration work was initiated under the directive of Pooyam Thirunal Gouri Parvathi Bayi and Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, members of the erstwhile Travancore royal family.

The process was far from easy. "Not much of the original paintings remained when I took on the project. They were not only faded, but also had scratches and stains and were in a dilapidated state due to years of neglect. The condition of Gajendramoksham was the worst of the lot, whereas in Venugopalam only one figure was visible," he says.

The paintings are a blend of traditional Kerala mural tradition and miniature Rajasthani painting technique, says Saju. "Which means there must have been an artist from that part of the country

in Marthanda Varma's court. Using a single-hair brush, the artist has put in so much detailing! But for some cleaning and the application of colours, I have not done much to the miniature landscape in all the three paintings."

Saju also points out that the visages of Marthanda Varma and his prime minister Ramayyan Dalawa, who contributed in a large measure to running the affairs in Travancore, have been included in Sreerama Pottabhishekam.

Venugopalam captures the Vrindavan on a full moon night, when Krishna plays the flute with the whole universe – humans, birds, animals, celestial figures – drawn towards Him. "This Venugopalam is different from the ones I have seen in other places. Imagination has run wild in this particular work with the inclusion of so many elements of Nature. The miniature components speak volumes of the artists' skill."

Myth and defiance A scene from the play and (below) Apurva Kasaravalli. PHOTOS COURTESY: RAGHAVENDRA BHAT AND SUDHAKARA JAIN

collateral damage as a result of men's egos and arrogance?" and 'Why should my desire be considered a sin or I be judged by my appearance or the family I come from?'

Once her nose and ears are cut off by Lakshmana, Shurpanakhi screams and says: "I may be cornered now and you see me as ugly because I have no nose and ears. But to me, I am still beautiful. I may come from a demonic clan, but am not one who nurtures wicked thoughts in my soul." Then she asks the audience if they really know her story – these words pierce through centuries of dismissal. As Vandana emotes powerfully, her tears sparkle like tiny stars in her eyes with the fading lights. Music by Hemant Kumar, Karthik Hebbar, Keerthan Holla and Thunga is central to the production.

Apurva says his vision for the script was clear: "Don't judge a book by its cover. Just because she is Ravana's sister does not make her cruel. She is a woman with her own strengths and weaknesses."

Vandana states that choreographing Odissi to Kannada lyrics was exciting and challenging. "I always wanted to work with a Yakshagana artiste and see how the two forms would blend."

For Srinidhi, working with

Vandana and Apurva has been a transformative experience. "In Yakshagana, Shurpanakhi is always depicted as a demon. I have never seen her being portrayed differently. I was excited when I heard this story."

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Stepping back in time

Madurai R. Muralidharan's *Marudhiruvuvar* brings alive the story of the Marudhu brothers



A slice of history
The production features more than 50 dancers.
PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

But, I am also aware that our history books don't teach us much about regional leaders who stood tall in their defiance. And hence, the focus on the Marudhu brothers."

Muralidharan wanted to stay neutral and so chose to base the production on a book by Colonel James Welsh who lived in the region at that time, which he chanced to read in a library in Boston. "He was a great chronicler and mentions how they taught him to throw the *valari* (a sort of boomerang), their reliance on guerrilla warfare, and minute details such as the height of the Marudhu brothers (six foot and more). He speaks of how they finally surrendered when there was a threat to demolish a temple dedicated to Shiva. They were hung for three days, and as per their last wish, their heads were buried facing the Kalaiyur temple, and their torso was buried in Tirupathur."

Muralidharan remembers being immensely stirred when his father narrated the story of the brave siblings.

When it came to the production, Muralidharan knew it demanded a huge budget. "Over the past year, each one in the team has taken on additional roles to ensure we meet our deadline. There is special focus on two props – a horse and an ox (boom boom maadu), both designed by film art designer Anbu. The show will be on for 2.5 hours, but Muralidharan says even that is not enough to narrate the stories of all the freedom fighters of that time.

The choreographer is known for his trademark jathis, but this production will feature none, because the story did not need them, he says. The animation goes into the nitty-gritty of the time period it is set in. The opening scene, for which the Budapest-recorded song will play in the background, showcases Col Welsh's house. He's the narrator too and speaks of the situation then and having to shoot the brothers, who were also his *valari* gurus.

The show will be staged on February 7, 6 p.m. at Sir Mutha Venkatasubba Rao Concert Hall. Tickets on MDND

Students, formally studying classical dance in colleges and universities, will receive a free pass at the venue.

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The mridangist talks about how music and the town of Tiruvarur have given his life purpose

Nahla Nainar
nahla.nainar@thehindu.co.in

For mridangam exponent Thiruvarur Bakthavathsalam, 2026 began with good tidings – he has been chosen for the Padma Shri, his Laya Madhura School of Music in Chennai rings in its 26th anniversary this week, and he completes 60 years as a professional artiste.

"I have worked hard to get to this stage, and even though I am 70 years old, I feel I have to keep improving myself. Recognition only reinforces how indispensable constant, disciplined practice is for artistes," says Bakthavathsalam, who received the Sangita Kalanidhi from The Music Academy in 2021.

The mridangist, along with certain other veterans in the field, has witnessed the progress of percussionists from accompanists to a vital part of cross-cultural ensembles.

Born in 1957 in a family of traditional musicians from Tiruvarur, Thanjavur district, Bakthavathsalam's talent was nurtured by the maternal side of his family. He underwent vocal music training under his mother and noted singer T.R. Anandavalli, and eventually started playing the mridangam under the guidance and tutelage of his maternal uncle Tiruvarur Krishnamurthy.

"By the age of nine, I was accompanying my mother in



Six decades of rhythm

concerts. I had my formal arangetram when I was six or seven, at the Thiruvaiyaru Tyagaraja Utsavam. It was an exciting experience and I returned inspired," he says.

In the 1970s, aged 16, Bakthavathsalam migrated to Madras, attracted by its thriving classical music scene. "There were plenty of sabhas, with year-round concerts. I attended at least one recital a day, and made sure I listened to the stalwarts," he reminisces.

All India Radio (AIR) gave the young Bakthavathsalam a 'double promotion' from 'B' to 'A' grade, bypassing the 'B high' grade.

Though he belongs to the Thanjavur style of playing, Bakthavathsalam has developed his own variation. He is known for his energetic playing, and for embellishing niraval and kalpanaswaras.

Bakthavathsalam also leads the music ensemble 'Laya Madhura' that includes the nagaswaram, violin and flute as melodic instruments and the

mridangam, kanjira, ghatam, morsing and tabla as percussion. In 1992, the senior mridangist played at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games held in Barcelona, Spain.

"I have trained over a hundred students in the past 26 years through our school. I am very happy to see them grow as artistes and teachers all over the world," he says.

At his home in Chennai, the maestro keeps his 35 mridangams made with jackfruit wood from Panruti, in two large cupboards. "It is getting harder to make instruments in the old style due to a



Though I am 70 years old, I feel I have to keep improving myself. Recognition only reinforces how indispensable constant practice is for artistes

Keeping the beat Thiruvarur Bakthavathsalam. PHOTO: R. RAVINDRAN

scarcity of raw material. For instance, the leather vaaru used as the mridangam's braces, has now been replaced with nylon belts. I have a few mridangams that are over 50 years old. About 25 years ago, I bought enough mridangams to last me the next few decades. It is difficult to maintain these instruments because of their natural components. Even though more lightweight alternatives are available, I prefer to keep mine traditional," says Bakthavathsalam.

Music and spirituality have shaped his life, he says. "My mother introduced me to the path of spirituality and it has anchored me." For over seven years, Bakthavathsalam also served as secretary of Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Mummoorthigal Jayanthi Vizha festival held annually at the Thyagarajaswamy Temple in Tiruvarur, where numerous artistes pay their tribute to the great composers.

"This region is where Carnatic Music's Trinity lived. I have legally added Thiruvarur to my name, because I am immensely proud to hail from this hallowed land," he says.

Celebrating a milestone



Thiruvarur Bakthavathsalam during a lec-dem.

A special event has been organised to celebrate the silver jubilee of Laya Madhura School of Music, and Thiruvarur Bakthavathsalam's six-decade journey as a performing artiste. He will be felicitated by Ekatvam at the event today, 4.30 p.m. at Narada Gana Sabha.

On the occasion, the title 'Madhura Laya Samrat' will be conferred upon legendary musicians T.K. Murthy, T.V. Gopalakrishnan, Umayalapuram K. Sivaram, A.V. Anand and Tiruchi Sankaran. And Mysore C.R. Himanshu will be honoured with the 'Madhura Kala Sevak' title.

Sri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswathi, the 70th Acharya of

the Kanchi Math, will present the titles and release the book *En Vaazhkai En Payanam* (The life journey of Thiruvarur Bakthavathsalam).

The evening will begin with Thirumeignanam brothers' nagaswaram recital, followed by Jaalavarali, a unique 25 akshara tala drawn from the 72 Melakarta talas, to be performed by the students of Laya Madhura with pallavi composed by Rajkumar Bharathi and rendered by Sikkil Gurucharan.

The evening also features a mridangam recital by D.H. Jashwanth, grandson of Thiruvarur Bakthavathsalam. The event will end with Kanchi acharya's anugraha bashanam.

Chants across continents

U.K.-based singer Jahnavi Harrison on the increasing reach of Indian devotional songs



Narendra Kusnur

Though not Indian by birth, Jahnavi Harrison has been immersed in Indian spirituality and music since childhood. She grew up surrounded by *kirtan*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the works of saint-poet Tukaram, the *Subbulakshmi*, and the music of maestros such as Carnatic violinist Lalgudi Jayaraman and sitarist Pt. Ravi Shankar. Her album *Into The Forest* – which beautifully blends Sanskrit mantras with English lyrics even earned a nomination at this year's Grammy in the Best New Age, Ambient or Chant Album category.

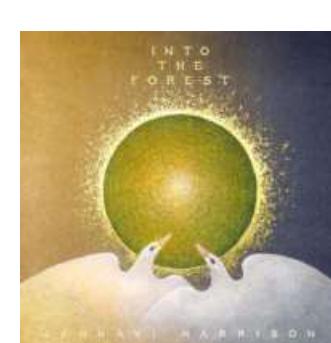
Jahnavi's passion for Indian culture is a legacy from her family. Her mother, raised in a Jewish household in Canada, and her father, brought up in a Christian family in England, both embraced Bhakti Yoga. "The only Indian connection was that my great-great-grandfather had spent some time in Allahabad," she explains.

"When he was 12, my father discovered a book on yoga and began practising asanas. Soon after, he heard the Hare Krishna mantra on a record produced by George Harrison.

Both my parents eventually became disciples of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder-acharya of ISKCON."

For Jahnavi, *kirtan* was woven into daily life. "We would recite Sanskrit prayers with harmonium and khol," she recalls. "I was also deeply influenced by Indian classical music through recordings. One of my fondest memories is listening to Ustad Bismillah Khan's evocative performance of a morning raag on the shehnai."

Jahnavi first encountered Indian music at the age of 16. "Though I had studied a little Western violin, I never realised how deeply the instrument was woven into Indian music until I discovered a cassette of Lalgudi Jayaraman," she recalls. "His music opened up an entirely new world for me. Soon after, I learned that one of his senior disciples, A.G.A. Gnansundaram, was teaching in London, and I



decided to study with him." Alongside violin, Jahnavi also trained in Bharatanatyam and Carnatic vocals, further deepening her connection to Indian traditions.

This was a period when yoga and related practices were flourishing across the West, and devotional music was finding new audiences. Kirtankars such as Jai Uttal and Krishna Das were drawing large crowds to their concerts, bringing sacred chants into mainstream spaces. In 2009, Jahnavi's friend Gaura Vani invited her to join his new devotional music project, *Mantralogy*. It proved to be a turning point in her life.

Jahnavi released her debut album *Like A River To The Sea* in 2015, and later collaborated with singers Madi Das and Willow Smith. *Into The Forest* was conceptualised during the pandemic, when she got in touch with producer and

musician Chris Sholar. The guest musicians in the album include pianist Utsav Lal, spoken word poet Londrelle and mridangist Ananta Cuffee.

Besides her own songs in English, the album also

Sacred sounds Jahnavi Harrison; and (below) the Grammy-nominated album PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

features 'Guha maha mantra', 'Govind damodar madhaveti' and Tukaram's popular abhang 'Sundar to dhyani'.

On her maiden India visit last year, Jahnavi performed in Mumbai, Delhi and Chandigarh. She looks forward to returning this year. "The response was phenomenal. In my travels around the world for over 20 years, I can confidently say spiritual music, particularly kirtan, is becoming popular among youngsters. In India, people feel it's only for the old and devout. Even in the West there was a hippy or counterculture stereotype in the past. But I feel those ideas are now outdated," she says.

According to Jahnavi, the fact that the Grammys has a category for 'chant music' means a lot for musicians like her. "With increasing conflict, divide and tech addiction, people are being driven to find peace and deeper meaning to life," she says.

Bharatanatyam solo

Under the auspices of Sri Parthasarathy Swamy Sabha, N. Ananya Ranganayaki, disciple of Jayanti Subramanian, will present her solo Bharatanatyam recital today, 5.30 p.m. at R.K. Swamy Auditorium, Sivaswami Kalaiyappa School, Mylapore.



Tamil play

JB Cultural Foundation presents United Visuals' Tamil play *Sangeetha Mummoorthigal* on February 8, 6.30 p.m., at Krishna Gana Sabha, T. Nagar. Dialogues are by C.V. Chandramohan and TV. Varadharajan. Bombay Jayasri Ramnath has composed the music.

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