

fridayReview

THE HINDU

A slice of Margazhi
Reviews of concerts that took place at sabhas across the city **p2-p4**

Looking back, looking ahead
Urmila Satyanarayanan on her five-decade journey in dance, and her new work **p5**



CLASSICAL NOTES IN A COLLEGE
At Soulfest's mike-less concert at ACJ, flautist Sruthi Sagar showcased the purity of melody **p6**

Chennai's iconic annual festival proves that classical traditions are vibrant, adaptable and deeply relevant today



Guru Granth Sahib) in his concert at the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai.

Dancers too are striving to push boundaries. The iconic dancer-choreographer Chandralekha, whose radical movement vocabulary has inspired generations, pioneered this spirit of innovation nearly four decades ago in Madras – then a landscape dominated by rigid, codified constructs of dance.

Today, that spirit of exploration continues through diverse platforms. Organisations such as Natyarangam curate thematic productions, giving dancers the chance to bring their distinct vision to subjects beyond the repertoire. Likewise, sabha dance festivals often encourage choreographic experiments, giving artistes space to reimagine classical sequences.

Coming back to music. How will it sound in 2026? Classical traditions will continue to hold sway, even as hybrid genres gain momentum with the rise of AI-driven creators. Audiences, meanwhile, will engage with music beyond the stage by discovering experiences that blur the performance-technology-imagination boundary.

Why the season matters

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“This concert is dedicated to Muthuswami Dikshitar and will feature only his compositions,” announced T.M. Krishna at the start of his December 25, 2025, performance, drawing a thunderous applause from the packed hall. Smiling, he added, “It’s heartening to see such a response to the composer on his 250th birth anniversary. It’s not just about the composer or his works, it’s the sound of the period that we want to reach out to.” The Music Academy was overflowing, with extra chairs brought in and a television set up in the foyer for rasikas who couldn’t find a seat inside. The scene was a testament to how Carnatic music and its revered composers continue to command a huge following and relevance – even in an age dominated by social media and an array of global musical choices.

The scene was much the same at sabhas across Chennai, echoing what one has witnessed over the years. Rasikas – strangers only moments earlier – exchanged knowing smiles when a familiar raga, kriti, or even a well-loved phrase was sung. And when a lesser-known composition was rendered, they listened in contemplative silence while their minds kept the guessing game on.

Language has played a pivotal role in shaping the classical music landscape, with Tamil songs, in particular, finding renewed fervour among audiences. Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s popular production ‘Tamilzhum Naanum’ stands as a striking example of how the richness of Tamil not only preserves tradition but also deepens the emotional and cultural resonance of Carnatic music.

This also highlights how Chennai’s annual Margazhi festival continues to grow, with an increasing number of youngsters

embracing the classical arts. Some concerts this Season witnessed good attendance from young music enthusiasts, underscoring the festival’s widening reach. Concerns voiced by naysayers about exponential growth leading to disorganised, overcrowded venues seem to carry little weight against the evident vibrancy and enthusiasm on display.

Despite ongoing debates about the relevance of the margam – the traditional Bharatanatyam repertoire – often critiqued for its recurring theme of the heroine waiting for her man, lamenting his indifference, or his dalliances with another woman in an age shaped by progressive women, senior dancer Shobana’s performance at Krishna Gana Sabha this Season reaffirmed its enduring appeal. Presenting a classic line-up, she drew a full house.

Conversations often revolve around reinventing the classical for contemporary audiences and allowing the arts to evolve with changing times. Constant efforts are also being made to deconstruct the ethos of an unfamiliar era and render it accessible.

Kalakshetra’s staging of the complete Ramayana series, choreographed by Rukmini Devi, brought timeless splendour to the Season and received audience love. These seem to suggest that tradition, when performed with artistry and conviction, works.

Conversations often revolve around reinventing the classical for contemporary audiences and allowing the arts to evolve with changing times. Constant efforts are also being made to deconstruct the ethos of an unfamiliar era and render it accessible. Yet, as we step into 2026 after witnessing Margazhi 2025, the influence of the classical arts is certain to endure – reminding us that while styles may

shift and platforms multiply, their essence will inspire and anchor generations within a shared cultural memory.

When the Grammy nominations were announced in early November 2025, they once again spotlighted several Indian classical musicians – the late tabla maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain, kanjira virtuoso Selvaganesh, acclaimed violinist Ganesh Rajagopalan, renowned sitarist Anoushka Shankar, and sarod artiste Alam Khan. It underscored the fact that Indian classical music offers musicians the freedom to draw from its depths while simultaneously enriching it with fresh contributions.

Fifty years after the iconic Shakti, founded by Zakir Hussain and legendary guitarist John McLaughlin, demonstrated how classical sounds could be seamlessly woven into Western notes, several soloists and ensembles have followed suit, staging successful collaborations across the world. In recent times, one band that has cracked this fusion code excellently is Agam, the Carnatic-progressive rock-pop band led by vocalist Harish Sivaramakrishnan. The group’s performance on December 21, 2025, on the Shivala Ghat at the Mahindra Kabira Festival proved that classical music can be cool and trendy. When they rendered Purandaradasa’s ‘Chandrachooda shiva shankar’, the crowd erupted in delight. Equally striking was the launch of their latest album, *Arrival of the Ethereal* (June 2025), featuring five raga-based tracks. The opener, Tyagaraja’s timeless ‘Sita kalyanam vaibhogame’, was reimaged into a vibrant new soundscape – blending nagaswaram, chenda, guitar and Harish’s inimitable vocals.

Concert formats are becoming flexible too. Carnatic vocalist Vignesh Eshwar struck an experimental note this Season when he sang ‘Ik omkar’ (from

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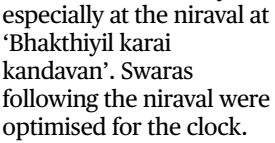
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Formidable team (from left)
Mridangam vidwan Umayalapuram
Sivaraman, Ashwath Narayanan, B.U.
Ganesh Prasad (violin) and B.S.
Purushottam (kanjira). PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

**THE MUSIC
ACADEMY**



Abheri was a masterpiece of nagaswara chakravarthi T.N. Rajarathinam Pillai. That was Bharat's reference guide for the alapana encapsulated in 13 minutes – short phrases, impactful sustains and karvais in an unhurried tempo got both the vocalist and the violinist



Mysore Vasudevacharya's epochal kriti 'Bhajare re manasa' demands an extended scale range across the octaves and Bharat passed the test. The niraval at 'Pavana japtham' was interesting even though slightly curtailed. Rajeev again came to the fore with brevity.

The RTP in Kalyani was a total package, steeped in ragas. The alapana start in nishadam was not just unusual, but seemed to mirror the pallavi which also starts with a 'ni' and swaraksha. 'Nee dayai puriya thamadama saravanabhava' set to Khandha Chapu, tistra madai. Bharat and Rajeev rendered four kalamas within one cycle, a mark of good laya control. The request to the audience to refrain from clapping was

‘Kuyilar’, the Kalki Krishnamurthy composition with attractive lyrics set in Mandu, got the serene treatment and pace the song demanded.

Rajeev played subtly, producing intelligent sequences and landings, and his sense of proportion allowed the concert to flow like a stream. Satish Kumar calibrated his normal style a bit, adding further subtlety to kritis such as 'Sathru vilakidum' and 'Sri Thyagaraja'. Guruprasad on the ghatam lent his weight in fast-paced swara korvais and in the tani.

The concert was also a good demonstration of balancing time, mood and variety. However, Bharat needs to play his middle overs cautiously to exploit his strengths fully.

A compact yet vibrant *Atana alapana*, dense with *briga* phrases, followed. *Ashwath* then unfolded an exploratory *niraval* at '*Rajakula kalashabdhi*', the second speed charged with moments of restrained drama. The rendition clearly evoked the *KVN* style, and *Sivaraman*'s accompaniment – measured, poised, and responsive – spoke of a profound internalisation of the *kṛiti*.

The classic 'Sri mathrubhootam' in Kannada raga unfolded at a relaxed pace – perhaps, at moments, almost too unhurried. Yet the Mishra Chapu tala, with its innate scope for ideation, allowed Sivaraman's judicious deployment of sarvalaghu patterns to subtly frame Ashwath's rendition. The result was a serene atmosphere that gently foregrounded the compositional genius of Muthuswami Dikshitar.

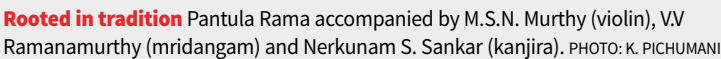
Ashwath's delineation of ragas was memorable, its emotional gravity occasionally drawing the music inward. On the violin, B.U. Ganesh Prasad brought a soulful richness to Kapi, his phrases steeped in warmth and introspective depth. KVN's immortal 'Inta sowkhyha' hovered in the mind, as Ashwath came up with his own interpretation with imaginative niraval and swara patterns.

What followed was a tani. From a perfectly tuned mridangam, the meetu and chapu resonated through the auditorium. Sivaraman's gumki

The contemporary concert hall is a space of mixed interests and multiple distractions. To hold an audience in thrall today, a musician needs not merely talent, but intelligence as well. Ashwath Narayanan demonstrated both in his *kucheri*. With a thoughtfully chosen repertoire presented in an unconventional sequence, he created moments of surprise for the listener.

Trained in the legendary K.V. Narayanaswamy bani under vidushi Padma Narayanaswamy, Ashwath evoked memories of the maestro while seamlessly integrating his own musical choices. The stage, thus, was well set.

The evening found its summit in the accompaniment of the mridangam vidwan Umayalapuram Sivaraman, who turned 90 the day before. Alert, buoyant and quietly commanding, he infused the



Pantula Rama presented an elaborate Dikshitar composition in Gamakakriya

Pantula Rama's concert was effervescent, yet emphasised her scholarly approach to singing.

As always, she gave her best both during the pallavi session and the elaborate Dikshitar kriti presentation in keeping with the year's theme at The Music Academy – Muthuswamy Dikshitar 250.

The vocalist's initial Kalyanavasantham raga alapana set the tone for the concert. A much-appreciated 'Nadaludai' (Tyagaraja) featured slow and fast kalpanaswaras.

‘Sri ramya chittalankara’ (Jayamanohari raga, Tyagaraja) came next. Wishing to launch the Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi early, the vocalist set up a strongly rooted-in-tradition Kedaragowla alapana. She then enhanced the raga’s intricacies with an elaborate

tanam before the pallavi,
'Neelamegadham venuganala' set
to Misra Chapu tala – the tala was
set in mirror image. The singer took
the pallavi into the Trikalam
rendering followed by
kalpanaswaras.

The *piece de resistance* of the evening was Muthuswamy Dikshitar's 'Meenakshi me mudham dehi' (Gamakakriya also known as Poorvikalyani) filled with the intrinsic raga bhava embellishments; it drew audience appreciation. They

kept at it when Pantula Rama established a niraval-swaram suite in this kriti at the words, 'Veena gana dasha Gamakakriye' with flourish. In the tani avartanam that followed, V.V Ramanamurthy on the mridangam and Nerkunam S.Sankar on the kanjira proved their prowess.

Pantula Rama concluded with a javali 'Cheli nenetlu' (Paras) and a Khamas tillana composed by Patnam Subramania Iyer.



Expressive Amrutha Venkatesh with Bombay R. Madhavan (violin), S.J. Arjun Ganesh (mridangam) and Payyanur T. Govindaprasad (morsing). PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

with the pulse of the raga. A sketch of Niroshtha preceded 'Raja raja radhite', and the subsequent kalpanaswaras navigated its limited scalar swaras with inventive phrases.

An expansive alapana in Nattakurinji stood out for its breadth and developed contours. Nattakurinji lends itself to expressive improvisation and Amrutha thoroughly utilised this. Her alapana highlighted phrase continuity, clear anchoring on key swaras and a gradual widening of range, making the raga feel complete

without relying on speed or loudness. Swati Tirunal's 'Jagadeesha sadaa maamava' was rendered with a detailed niraval at 'Khaga vaahana sura shoaka vibhanjana'. Her niraval exemplified focused expansion on chosen melodic ranges. Substantial duration was dedicated to swarakalpanas as well.

Rhythmically complex material followed with a Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi in Sucharitra, set to a 27-beat tala also with the same name whose structure corresponded to the vowels and consonants of the word 'Sucharitra', articulated through a

framework of guru, chaturasra jathi laghu, druthashekara viramams and anudhrutam. The close alignment of raga and tala recalled themes explored in an academic session held at The Music Academy earlier. The pallavi text, drawn from a composition by M. Balamuralikrishna – ‘Chintayaami santatam sri muthuswami dikshitham parama pavitram’ – was followed by ragamalika swaras set to contrasting talas.

The pallavi demanded sustained academic rigour, bringing together linguistic structure, tala mathematics and raga

grammar. Its design foregrounded Sucharitra as a rhythmic and melodic idea, reflected an analytical approach to pallavi construction, and served as a considered tribute to Muthuswami Dikshitar, linking scholarship and concert practice without overt emphasis.

Throughout, the accompanists provided attentive support; Madhavan's violin echoed the vocal lines with textural sensitivity and Arjun Ganesh's mridangam and Govindaprasad's morsing contributed measured rhythmic dialogue.



Treasured compositions S. Sowmya accompanied by Embar Kannan (violin); Neyveli R. Narayanan (mridangam) and G. Chandrasekara Sharma (ghatam).
PHOTO: AKHILA EASWARAN

P. Srihari

A musician of rare calibre, S. Sowmya possesses a sensibility attuned to the finer aspects of her art. Unwavering in her commitment to classicism, she offers listeners profound insights in her concerts. Her repertoire often foregrounds lesser-known kritis, and the recital was firmly in that mould. Indeed, the first five songs she presented belonged entirely to this category. Sowmya was accompanied by her regular collaborators Embar S. Kannan (violin), Neyveli R. Narayanan (mridangam) and G. Chandrasekara Sharma (ghatam). Sowmya began with a vivadi touch in the form of Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavata's 'Anandamaya manave' in Jyotiswarupini. She topped it with a lively swarakalpana, with Kannan

A penchant for the rare

S. Sowmya offered listeners profound insights through a tradition-rich repertoire

relishing the early exchanges.

If the first piece hinted at the concert's course, the second was an intriguing statement in itself. Sowmya presented a Husseni alapana that stood apart from contemporary practice. The vakra

sampurna-sampurna raga, as commonly heard today, employs chatusruti dhaivatam in the ascent and its suddha variant also in the descent. Her interpretation, she said, dispensed with the suddha dhaivatam altogether, using only the

higher note throughout. She later explained that this was the raga's original formulation, the lower note having crept into usage over time. While the alapana and the rendition of Vallalar's Tiruvartupa 'Enna punniyam seydeno amma' naturally

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sounded a shade different, they retained the raga's innate elegance. Muthuswami Dikshitar's 'Sri guruna palitosmi' in Paadi, a raga derived from Mayamalavagowla, followed. The speciality of the kriti, which extols the guru embodied as Shiva, lies in its consistent use of antya prasa (ending-syllable alliteration) on 'na' for poetic effect. The lyrical import and the musical structure vest the composition with solemnity, a quality emphasised in the rendition and extended through the swara sequence with the violinist.

A bhava-laden Gowrimanohari alapana preceded Papanasam Sivan's 'Gowrimanohara karunakara', which was echoed by Kannan. The niraval and swara

segments at the charanam line 'Taratalam pugazh' were absorbing, especially in the second speed. Sowmya then rendered Gopalakrishna Bharati's 'Vandalum varattum' in Balahamsa with a measured gait, deftly articulating its characteristic, zigzag ma-ga-ma-ri-sa phrase. The ensemble displayed compelling synergy in Tyagaraja's Pantuvarali kriti 'Vadera deivamu', delivered in a gripping kalapramanam, and in the niraval and swarakalpana at the charanam line 'Dhatru vinutudaina'.

The main raga of the evening was Bilahari. Sowmya developed it methodically, deploying compact phrases to telling effect, before easing into longer, more expressive arcs. The vocalist's exposition was well complemented by Kannan's violin essay. It had to be a Dikshitar kriti for topicality's sake – the 250th birth anniversary – and 'Kamakshi sri varalakshmi' it was. After a serene rendition, the vocalist and violinist offered engaging swara passages, particularly in the second speed, underscoring panchama nysam. In the ensuing tani avartanam, Narayanan and Chandrasekara Sharma engaged in a spirited rhythmic dialogue in two-kalai Adi tala, culminating in a crisp korvai.

The post-tani section comprised 'Parulanna mata', a Kapi javali by Dharmapuri Subbarayar, a Kavadi-chindhu, Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar's Purnachandrika thillana and the 'Tiruppugazh 'Thullumadha velkai kanaiyale' in Hamsanandi. The recital presented a rich compositional canvas, sourcing from 10 composers for its 11 songs, with Dikshitar featuring twice.

Getting the fundamentals right

Vidya Kalyanaraman's concert showcased how youthful enthusiasm can co-exist with time-tested values



Bhava-rich Vidya Kalyanaraman with B. Ananthkrishnan (violin); Papanasam Kumar (mridangam) and H. Prasanna (ghatam). PHOTO: M. SRINATH

Bala Shankar

The emergence of talents like Vidya Kalyanaraman augurs well for the performance scene of the next generation. It is a double delight that she embraces the time-tested musical values, as was evidenced in her concert. 'Gajavadana karuna sadana' in Sriranjani was sprightly in a brisk kalapramana with a volley of sangathis. Sriranjani kritis are rarely sung without some swaras and Vidya did not alter that. The alapana of Varali was sedate and delivered with ease, but the focus seemed to be on stringing all familiar phrases. Alapanas are meant to incorporate some 'aha' moments, which Vidya will come to realise. 'Seshachala nayakam' had all the tenets of classicism that the master composition demands and Vidya's niraval at 'Aravinda padma nayanam' was engaging, especially in higher octaves. Violinist B. Ananthkrishnan raised his game during this phase with pleasing articulation and raga bhava. A piece with a somewhat elaborate alapana and niraval could go without the mandatory swaras but the urge to sing them seems palpable these days. Vidya affirmed her primacy for the Trinity with 'Marivere gati' (Syama Sastri, Ananda Bhairavi, Misra Chapu) and 'Naada loludai' (Tyagaraja, Kalyana Vasantham, Adi). The latter had some sprightly swara passages, largely

adhering to raga lakshana without the drum-beat effects. Such preferences underline a musician's core choices. Mohanam was Vidya's mainstay in the concert. While she had been a bit tentative until this point, the raga sketches were calm, enjoyable and had a good progression. Roller-coaster sangathis were kept in proportion. The raga has an inherent attraction and the musician's role is just to visit the peaks and valleys without heroism, as Vidya demonstrated. Ananthkrishnan's response had similar fundamentals. 'Kapali' of Papanasam Sivan is a colossal kriti in Mohanam, laced with vivid portrayal of the Lord and several tempo combinations. Vidya's patantara is good and bereft of unpolished flights. There were a ton of swaras at the end, including a kuraippu and korvais, with ga, pa, sa, ri, ga as the overarching theme. The whole piece, engaging as it was, robbed Vidya of valuable time for some pensive pieces at the end. 'Krishna nee begane baro' (Yamuna Kalyani) was soulfully rendered as Vidya's soft voice lends itself to such pieces. Papanasam Kumar and H. Prasanna (ghatam) supported the multi-tala programme with good anticipation of the sangathis. The two-hour concert featured only one niraval and four swaras. That underscores the tilt in the balance away from spontaneous expression to an audience-friendly diet of orchestrated swaras and more swaras, even by artistes with a classical bent. If you take away the swara segments, many concerts may shrink to a half.

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A raga-centric performance

J.A. Jayant’s artistry unfolded through alapana, swara patterns and rhythmic structures

N.C. Srinivasaraghavan

F lautist J.A. Jayant presented a concert that foregrounded raga elaboration and sustained audience engagement. He was supported by L. Ramakrishnan (violin), N.C. Bharadhwaj (mridangam), Giridhar Udupa (ghatam) and Sunil Kumar (kanjira).

The programme opened with a brief alapana in Kamboji, leading to ‘O rangasayee’. The kalpanaswaras that followed were brisk and interactive, marked by extended exchanges with the violin. Jayant explored multiple swara patterns,

including kanakku passages that moved through tempos. The percussionists participated actively in these exchanges, contributing to the momentum of the segment, which elicited sustained audience attention.

In Bhavapriya, ‘Shreekanta niyada’ was presented with kalpanaswaras, steadily building them in mel kala. Jayant’s approach highlighted the flute’s capacity for clear articulation in faster registers, underlining its potential as a concert-leading instrument, despite its relative marginalisation in vocal-dominated formats.

A detailed alapana in Kanada followed, notable for its exploration of the upper octave,

including phrases extending beyond tara shadja. Curved movements such as ‘ma-ga’ phrases were rendered with tonal control, emphasising idiomatic flute phrasing. Ramakrishnan mirrored this approach on the violin, maintaining stylistic alignment. ‘Shri narada’ in Rupaka tala once again provided a fluid platform for kalpanaswaras.

Bindumalini was introduced through an alapana before ‘Enta muddo’. Throughout the concert, Jayant’s emphasis lay in engaging listeners through raga elaborations, swara patterns and rhythmic structures rather than reliance on the compositions alone – this was a

Melodic J.A. Jayant accompanied by N.C. Bharadhwaj (mridangam); Giridhar Udupa (ghatam); Sunil Kumar (kanjira) and L. Ramakrishnan (violin).
PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

good approach. The central Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi was set in Kalyani, Mohanam and Ritigowla, a concise division that balanced contrast with listener attention. The pallavi was set in Khanda Jathi Triputa tala, traversing chaturashra and tisra gatis. Within each avartanam, raga and gait shifted without overlap, particularly between the somewhat closely allied Mohanam and Kalyani. Swaras alternated between ragas, demanding careful control of melodic identity and rhythmic precision.

The concluding pieces included ‘Govardhana giridhari’ in Bageshri, where Jayant employed a longer flute to produce a distinct tonal colour, and ‘Madhava lokanam’ in Jhonpuri by Swati Tirunal.

The accompanists offered support throughout, contributing to a recital that balanced structure, raga detail and rhythmic clarity.

sublime emotion of the kriti. ‘Ituleni malayamarutamuche’ turned out to be his choice for niraval as well as swaraprastara. After a few brisk rounds, the panchamam-centric swaras added extra lustre to the rendition.

The interlude was ‘Renukadevi samrakshitoham’, a rare composition by Muthuswami Dikshitar in raga Kannada Bangala.

Akshay’s choice for the main raga was Thodi, which provides immense scope for a musician

to explore and improvise. He unhurriedly ventured into

the raga essay and highlighted every nuance of the raga. The chosen kriti was Dikshitar’s ‘Sri Krishnam bhaja manasa satatam’. Paucity of time made Akshay go straight for the swara segment on ‘Pankajaasanaadi devamahitam’.

VSP Gayatri Sivani on the violin followed the vocalist with perfect synchrony. Her raga and swara responses were measured and matured. Ajay Gopi on the mridangam and Sathya Ganesh on the ghatam came up with enjoyable exchanges in the tani.

SRI PARTHASARATHY SWAMY SABHA

Impressive Akshay Padmanabhan.
PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

At a leisurely pace

Akshay Padmanabhan highlighted every nuance of Thodi in his essay

G. Swaminathan

T he laudable aspects of Akshay Padmanabhan’s concert were his voice, choice of kritis and how he structured a well-balanced concert.

Akshay opened his recital with Lalgudi Jayaraman’s varnam in Nalinakanti and signed off with Lalgudi’s thillana in Khamas. Muthuswami Dikshitar’s ‘Sri varalakshmi’ in Sri raga followed.

After a brief delineation of Bilahari, Akshay presented Tyagaraja’s popular ‘Paritana michchithe’. He opted for a brief niraval on ‘Rokkami chutakunea’ and added a few rounds of swaras on the pallavi.

Raga Mukhari was taken up for detailing. It was a good exercise, but a few more sections of reposeful phrases would have lent an edge. He chose Tyagaraja’s ‘Muripemu galigegada’, and did justice to both the raga image and the



MADHURADHWANI



Carrying on a legacy Poised raga clarity and sensitive percussion defined the concert by the trio. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

H. Ramakrishnan

M adhuradhwani presented three young musicians – vocalist Gokul Namagiripettai, violinist Shreya Ananth and mridangist Pranav Tirumalai – for a Sunday morning concert. Gokul, great-grandson of the Nagaswaram maestro Namagiripettai Krishnan, is endowed with a rich voice that traverses the three octaves without a hitch.

Having had his initial training under Manakkal Rangarajan and Kadayannallur Venkataraman, he is presently being groomed by Rohit Chandrasekhar.

Among the kritis rendered, mention must be made of Tyagaraja’s ‘Nannu palimpa’ in Mohanam for its graceful raga alapana with the niraval and swaras at ‘Karamuna sara’. His rendering of Papanasam Sivan’s ‘Unai allaal vere gati illai’ after a Kalyani alapana had a poignant touch. He also enjoyably handled Syama Sastri’s ‘Himachala tanaya’ which had a wholesome Ananda

Vocalist Gokul Namagiripettai and accompanists Shreya Ananth and Pranav Tirumalai showcased seamless synergy

greatness of the reference to the Ramayana.

Sankarabharanam not only offered Nandini and Lalitha a chance to explore the essence of the raga, but also allowed them to showcase their individuality. The niraval and swara section in Swati Tirunal’s celebrated Navaratri kriti ‘Devi jagajjananim’ were well-conceived.

This was followed by Sharavanabhavananda’s ‘Jnana vinayagane’ in Gambhira Nattai and Dikshitar’s ‘Sriguruna palitosmi’ in raga Padi.

The concert was buoyed by Vijay Ganesh on the mridangam and Hariharasubramaniam on the ghatam. They matched the verve of the sisters with their percussion support, and engaging tani avartanam.

THE INDIAN FINE ARTS SOCIETY

Strings in sync

Lalitha and Nandini’s concert stood out for seamless exchanges and individual flourishes

G. Swaminathan

G race and poise marked popular violinists Lalitha and Nandini’s concert. From the vibrant ‘Jalakaksha’ varnam in Hamsadhvani by Manambuchavadi Venkatasubbiah to the closing soulful Tiruppugazh, their proficiency came through in every piece.

In raga Mandari, the siblings chose to play Patnam Subramania Iyer’s ‘Paraloka bhaya’. The niraval and swara section stood out for their seamless exchange.

The sisters then presented the soulful ‘Sriramam ravikulabti somam’ in Narayanagowla by Muthuswami Dikshitar. Nandini shared that they learned this kriti from Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, who highlighted the



Sibling dynamics Lalitha and Nandini
PHOTO: UMESH KUMAR

Poetic essence of the pasurams

Sunil Gargyan captured the Margazhi mood with these devotional verses



Vibrant Sunil Gargyan accompanied by Anayampatti Venkatasubramaniam (violin); H.S. Sudhindra (mridangam) and Nerkunam Shankar (kanjira). PHOTO: M. SRINATH

Kalyan Gopalan

S unil Gargyan, endowed with a clear voice that moved effortlessly across registers, opened his concert with a Pantuvarali varnam by Sadkala Narasayya. H.S. Sudhindra’s resonant kappi mridangam, marked by brisk and assured strokes, set an energetic tone for the evening.

Margazhi and the Tiruppavai are inseparable, and Sunil swiftly followed with Andal’s pasuram ‘Pullum silambina kaan’ in Sankarabharanam set to Misra Chapu. Each verse of the pasuram was rendered with clarity while the overarching bhakti rasa came through with conviction.

G.N. Balasubramaniam’s ‘Samagana lole’ (Hindolam, Tisra Ekam) showcased Sunil’s command over briga-laden phrases in the alapana. Anayampatti Venkatasubramaniam’s violin responses were restrained and

complementary. This was followed by ‘Vinaradhana’ in Devagandhari by Tyagaraja, set to Adi tala. The main piece of the evening, Tyagaraja’s ‘Pakkala nilabadi’ (Karaharapriya, misra chapu), featured a well-chosen niraval at ‘Manasuna’. Venkatasubramaniam provided measured accompaniment, while the tani avartanam by Sudhindra and Nerkunam Shankar on the kanjira was simple and cohesive.

A student of the late P.S. Narayanaswami, Sunil presented his guru’s Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi in Hamir Kalyani, set to Chatusra Jampa tala in kanda nadai. Sudhindra rounded this off with a mohra and korvai, highlighting his rhythmic acuity, though the focus leaned towards calculation than tonal aesthetics.

Sunil concluded with Purandaradasa’s ‘Jagadodharana’ (Kapi), followed by ‘Manadirku ugandadu’ in Sindhu Bhairavi by Thanjavur Sankara Iyer.

Bhairavi alapana.

Muthuswami Dikshitar’s ‘Siddhi vinayakam anisham’ in raga Chamaram set to Rupakam with swaras at pallavi gave the concert a brisk opening. Gokul showcased how a good rendering of the well-structured Swati Tirunal kriti ‘Gopalaka pahimam anisham’ in raga Revagupti, Misra Chapu tala, with a unique jatiswaram, could calm the mind. The singer concluded the concert with Thanjavur Sankara Iyer’s ‘Manadhirkugandhathu murugan rupam’ in Sindhu Bhairavi.

Shreya Ananth, daughter and disciple of senior violinist B. Ananthakrishnan, embellished the concert with her splendid accompaniment. Her alapana and swara responses in Mohanam, Kalyani and Ananda Bhairavi were of a high quality. On the mridangam was the ever-alert Pranav Tirumalai from the Bay area in the U.S. A disciple of Trichur Narendran, Pranav has imbibed his master’s style; this added to the appeal of the concert. He offered a lovely thani with many melkala phrases.

Young brigade regales



Crowning glory

Urmila Satyanarayanan, recipient of this year’s Nritya Kalanidhi award, looks back at her 50-year journey in dance



V.V. Ramani
The Music Academy’s Nritya Kalanidhi award comes at an important stage of my life – it has been 50 years since my arangetram and 30 years of my dance school Natya Sankalpaa,” says Bharatanatyam exponent Urmila

Satyanarayanan. The happiness, she says, is manifold, because her mother, who introduced her to this art form, is around to share this moment. Looking back at her journey, Urmila says this recognition is a culmination of her parents’ dreams. Her bond with the art form began at Saraswathi Gana Nilayam, the dance school run by Ranganayaki



Today, we constantly have to adapt teaching methodology to suit the needs of the present generation, which has to juggle many things. For instance, instead of attending separate classes, they now have the advantage of learning dance, music, theory and yoga in the same institution. I have been fortunate to have excellent dancers as faculty members, who are my pillars of support,” shares Urmila.

URMILA SATYANARAYANAN

constantly have to adapt teaching methodology to suit the needs of the present generation, which has to juggle many things. For instance, instead of attending separate classes, they now have the advantage of learning dance, music, theory and yoga in the same institution. I have been fortunate to have excellent dancers as faculty members, who are my pillars of support,” shares Urmila. Talking about the changing nature of rehearsals and performances, Urmila points out how musicians were employed full time at her vadyhar’s class. “We used to practise with live music. Today, getting musicians for one rehearsal itself is a daunting task. The performance duration has also shrunk, so the repertoire needs to be edited.” A recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi award and Nritya Choodamani, Urmila has performed widely as a soloist. She also choreographed and presented many thematic productions along with collaborating with other artists. She will be presenting her new work ‘Karunya Kavaya - Legends behind poetic masterpieces’ on the inaugural day of The Music Academy Dance Festival on January 3. “Dance is an inseparable part of my life. Apart from giving joy and recognition, it has also taught me discipline, commitment and humility. But this journey wouldn’t have been possible without the wholehearted support of my family and rasikas,” says Urmila.

Down memory lane (Clockwise from right) Urmila Satyanarayanan; with students at Vaggeyakara Bharatham. PHOTOS: R. RAGU, S.R. RAGHUNATHAN & K.V. SRINIVASAN

Viyoga holds a mirror to society

Vaibhav Arekar’s new production reflected on vanishing spaces and values



Message in movement
Vaibhav Arekar and dancers of the Sankhya Dance Company. PHOTO: M. SRINATH

Rupa Srikanth
Kalavaahini Trust’s first commissioned work that premiered at its Dance For Dance Festival was ‘Viyoga- Fragments of Light’ by Vaibhav Arekar with choreographic guidance by Malavika Sarukkai, Kalavaahini’s managing trustee and curator of the Festival. ‘Viyoga’ is based on the premise of ‘Loss’, which Vaibhav split into three – loss of horizontal spaces, loss of authenticity and loss of a need-based society. There were existential questions, not about the philosophical self, but about us as a society going downhill. Along with five well-conditioned dancers (Eesha Pinglay, Swarada Bhawe, Poorva Saraswat, Gautam Marathe and Ann Christy-Pillai), Vaibhav crafted an abstract production with mostly original mood music (Karthik Hebbar) to suit the occasion. He also included Kabir’s verses and Annamacharya’s compositions. The movements and the postures were well-choreographed, the suggestive lighting (Sushant Jadhav) highlighted the spirit of the work, and the voice-overs guided the rasikas well. The effect was grand and Vaibhav employed different kinds of theatrics to enhance the slick group choreography. The voice-overs featured statements such as ‘The horizontal expanse of my existence has been cramped into a vertical...’; ‘The great trees thinning with the grey concrete’ to indicate urbanisation; ‘Noise outside destroys the silence inside’; ‘Where truth is blurred, envy rules’; and revelling in false perceptions and leading the person inside astray’ for social media-led false images leading to stress and losing the calm within. After a struggle to shut out distractions, Vaibhav finds Shiva. The whole group sways in unison to ‘Sadashivane... Shivam Shivam..’ - this gentle moment was one of the highpoints of the otherwise loud and busy production. The third segment had some Bengali folk and portrayed some happy times covering the dark effects of commercialisation where you are enticed into buying more than you need. Annamacharya’s ‘Nanati baduku’ spoke of birth and death as a natural part of life. ‘Deh devache mandir’ (Sant Tukaram) brings them back from their state of self-absorption and self-adulation. They finally learn ‘to do the right thing’. Many factors worked on their own, but ‘Viyoga’ did not work as a whole. It felt repetitive and too clinical. If there was a storyline behind the abstraction, it did not come through.

Rupa Srikanth

Aswathi K, a disciple of Shijith Nambiar and Parvathy, won the Junior Kalavaahini Scholarship, which offers mentorship by Malavika Sarukkai for a certain period of time. For her performance at this year’s edition of the Dance for Dance Festival, she chose K.N. Dhandayuthapani Pillai’s pada varnam, ‘Saamiyai azhaithodi va’ in Navaragamalika, Adi, which has plenty of scope to elaborate. Aswathi is a promising young dancer with a presence and maturity beyond her age. A strong orchestra backed her – Udaya Sankar Lal (nattuvangam), Binu Venugopal (vocal), P.K.Sivaprasad (mridangam) and Easwar Ramakrishnan (violin). The beautiful nayika feels the onset of spring, the season for romance, and yearns for her soulmate ‘Eesan (Shiva). She establishes the nayaka when she describes his procession and the many variations of his regal walk. In ‘Mamadi mugamo’, she expanded on the viraha she suffers from. Easwar’s Mohanam

Mature portrayal

Aswathi K is a promising young dancer with a presence



set the mood and Binu’s tanam added to it. The moon’s rays scorch the nayika’s body and she cannot bear to see the blossoming flowers and the bees buzzing around them. Aswathi’s abhinaya style, a mix of mukhaja and angika, and explained with metaphors, influenced her delineation. The dancer was convincing in her portrayal. The anupallavi ‘Tamadam’ was taken before the dividing jathi, an unusual step, though the song continued in the same vein. Aswathi’s footwork and timing are impressive, and one could hear the distinct sound of her bells with every beat. The lack of araimandi was, however, of concern. She should not be using space-covering movements at this stage of her career. The music was most enjoyable, and the orchestra was fully in sync with the dancer throughout.

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