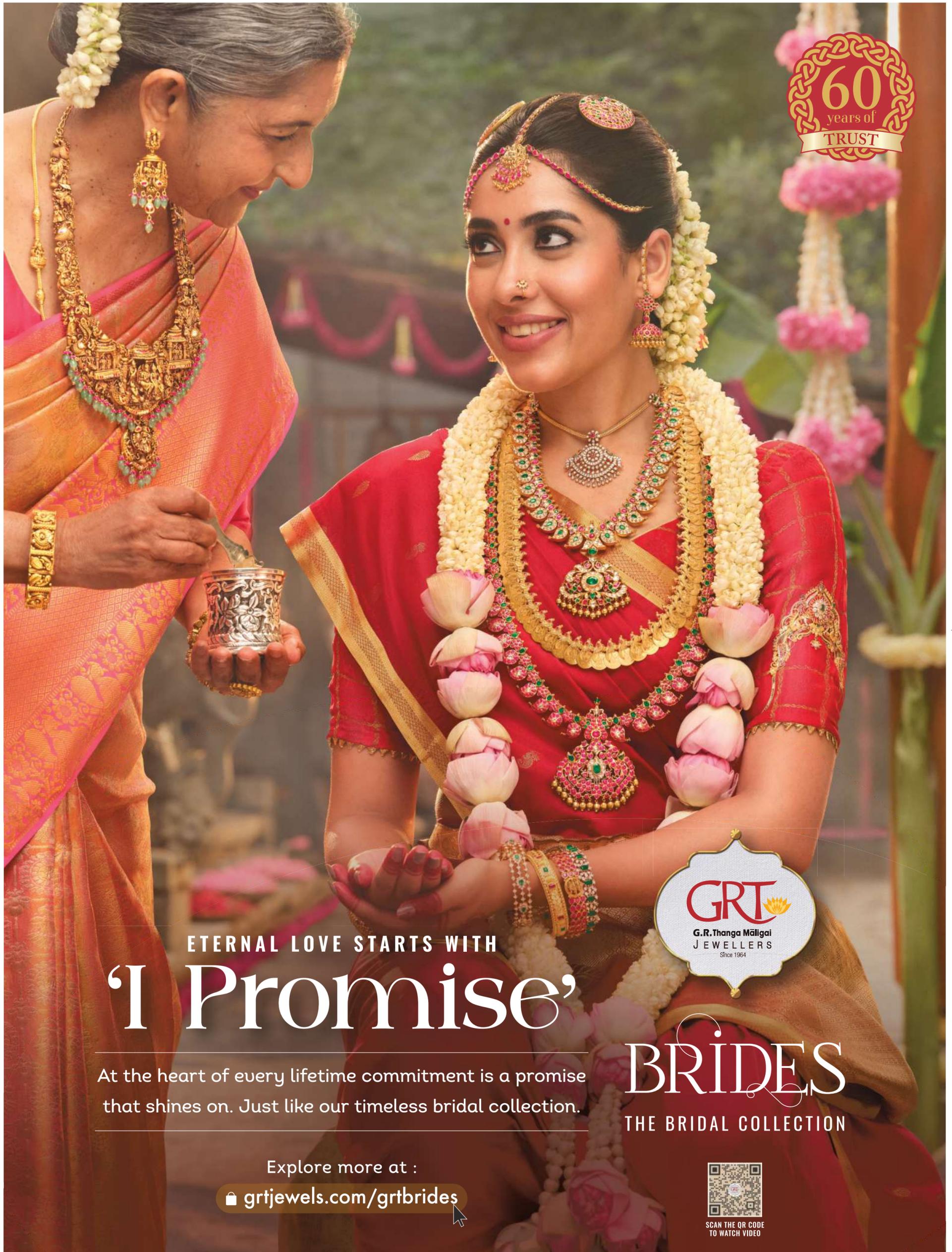


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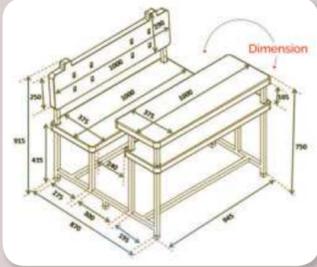
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THE HINDU

A dancer to watch out for
Meera Sreenarayanan impressed with her imaginative performance **p2**

Spotlight on laya
'Thakita Thath Jham' was a beautiful exploration of rhythmic sounds **p3**



SPRING AND ITS CONNECT WITH MUSIC

A look at ragas that evoke the colours of the season **p4**

Anuj Kumar
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Theatrewallahs through the Mandi House crossing in New Delhi as Bharat Rang Mahotsav returns in its 25th year with the promise to celebrate the best of Indian and international theatre. Fondly called Bharangam, the flagship event of the National School of Drama (NSD) will see over 200 productions from nine countries, staged across 13 locations in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Says Chittaranjan Tripathy, director, NSD: "In our culture, theatre is not seen as an extracurricular activity. It is respected as an essential ingredient for our physical and psychological growth."

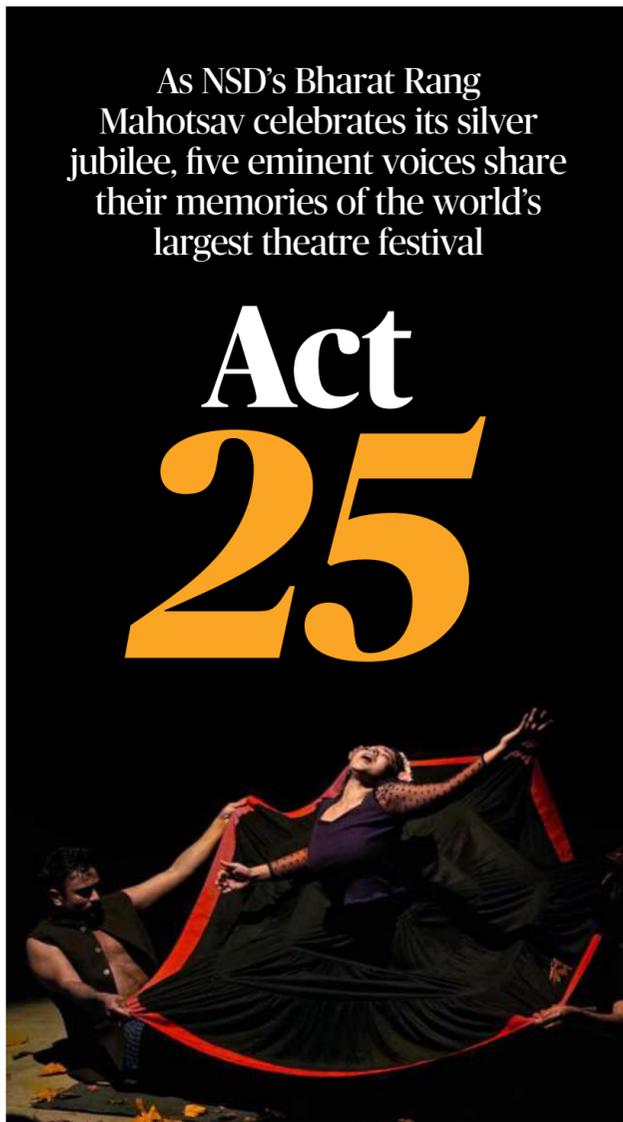
Though the festival's slogan is 'One Expression, Supreme Creation', Tripathy says Bharangam will see a confluence of different voices and traditions. It will also give space to the culture of disenfranchised communities – the festival celebrates the 150th birth anniversary of Birsa Munda by showcasing the folk theatre of tribal communities. "And, we pay tribute to Habib Tanvir in his centenary year by inviting his Naya Theatre to stage *Agra Bazaar*. The festival will culminate with a Ratan Thiyam production."

As Bharangam takes wing, we speak to five eminent personalities to check the festival's pulse.

Manto in Malayalam

Renowned theatre director Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry joins hands with Calicut University Little Theatre Group (CULT) to create *Tamasha*, an adaptation of Saadat Hasan Manto's four short stories in Malayalam. Neelam took the challenge of breaking the language barrier after senior theatre practitioner Abhilash Pillai of the School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, nudged her. "It was a wonderful journey through signs, sounds and words. What I found amazing was the young actors' unusual energy, curiosity and capacity to take instructions."

Having picked *Bu*, *The Dog of*



As NSD's Bharat Rang Mahotsav celebrates its silver jubilee, five eminent voices share their memories of the world's largest theatre festival

Act 25

Tithwal, *Hundred Watt Bulb* and *Paanch Din*, the veteran says some stories are so specific that they become universal. "Manto talks about human nature, sex, jealousy, power, survival instincts, all fundamental to the human experience."

Neelam insists Manto never belonged to just Partition. "We can still see human chasms around us. As

an artiste, everything is my business. Giza is my business."

She remembers the days when Bharangam was a space for risk-taking works and had a much stronger international profile. "Queues would, sometimes, start forming late at night. Even if they were hungry, people wanted to watch theatre. I don't see that madness anymore."

The stage is set (Clockwise from left) From *Tamasha* by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry and CULT; Nadira Babbar's *Farida*; Lubna Salim and Harsh Chhaya in *Hum Safar*. PHOTOS COURTESY: NSD



text. She sees Parsi theatre as a combination of "Sanskrit, folk and Victorian theatre." Agha Hashr drew from Shakespeare to create the complex emotional tapestry in his plays, and *Khwab-e-Hasti* carries the conscience of Macbeth.

From Rajpal Yadav, the festival ambassador this year, to Pankaj Tripathi, Hema has trained a generation of actors. She remembers the days when she would play a 16-year-old woman in the evening, rub shoulders with Zora Sehgal. "I miss that commitment and control over language and emotions in the young actors, but then every generation is different."

Urban alienation

Salim Arif, a name for all seasons, brings *Hum Safar*, a sharp take on contemporary relationships and growing urban alienation among children of fractured homes.

Written by Javed Siddiqui and starring Lubna Salim and Harsh Chhaya, the play follows the repercussions of divorce on children. The NSD alumnus participated in the first Bharangam as a designer on Naseeruddin Shah's *Ismat Aapa Ke Naam* and, two years later, brought his ambitious production *Kharashein*, a collage of scars of communal riots, written by Gulzar. He recalls how sniffer dogs suddenly took the stage as former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral invited himself to watch the production.

Revisiting Parsi theatre

Seasoned theatre practitioner Hema Singh is revisiting Parsi theatre with students of NSD to create a scene work of Agha Hashr Kashmiri's *Khwab-e-Hasti*. Over the years, Hema has envisioned the larger-than-life space of Parsi theatre with a contemporary lens and has imbued it with a feminine gaze by tweaking the

A Kashmir love story

Nadira Babbar, one of the doyennes of Indian theatre, returns to Bharangam with *Farida*, a contemporary love story set in Kashmir that she has written. Nadira says if falling in love was not easy for a woman yesterday, it is not easy today either. The play follows the poignant tale of Farida and Haider. Abandoned by her husband Sadiq, she finds companionship in her brother-in-law Mahmdu. Life again takes a turn when Haider, a wounded soldier, gets besotted by Farida's resilience. As their bond deepens, Mahmdu becomes the third angle of the story. Nadira fondly remembers the generous applause that *Begum Jaan*, where she portrayed the title role of the legendary classical singer, received when it was staged in an earlier edition. Similarly, she recalls the excitement when *Dayashankar Ki Diary*, the first play she wrote, was staged. "It always provides a *lajawab* (excellent) experience. Since the festival attracts the best from across the country, the love and respect you get at the festival is gratifying."

Critic's notes

Diwan Singh Bajeli, seasoned theatre critic and a constant presence in the selection committee, says Bharangam started during the tenure of NSD director Ram Gopal Bajaj, as a platform for the institute's students to express themselves. But, it has become a significant event in the international theatre calendar and provides a platform to voices from the remotest parts of the country.

"Theatre can't survive if it surrenders its anti-establishment tone," says Diwan Singh. "This space is shrinking but Bharangam is steadfast in not providing space to propaganda, obscenity, and communally coloured narratives."

While the festival promotes folk theatre, he says some folk traditions have not been given their due. Though its global footprint is spreading, and Diwan Singh talks highly of Polish productions, he spares a thought for the absence of plays from Pakistan and Bangladesh from the line up. He fondly remembers a Karachi production's contemporary adaptation of *Shakuntala*. "Cultural ties should endure," he muses.

Achuthan T.K.

Ernest Hemingway's Nobel Prize-winning *The Old Man and the Sea* will soon get a Kathakali version. Shakespearean plays and, more recently, the Spanish classic *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, have been adapted into the art form, but this is possibly the first time a modern popular fiction is being given the Kathakali makeover.

Actor Kalamandalam Neeraj, who is directing and choreographing the play, says: "Kathakali is popular among sections of theatre lovers all over the world, but we would like to pitch it to a new audience interested in modern fiction. What we are trying to do is to translate the novel into the language of Kathakali. There won't be any compromises – the structure, costumes and dance movements called *kalasams* will strictly adhere to Kathakali syntax."

According to Peesappilly Rajeevan, a Kathakali actor, who plays the part of the Sea: "I believe one major difference between Indian and western theatre and dance is the aesthetic approach. Indian art forms give more importance to the face and the eyes whereas in the West, it's mostly



Hooked on Hemingway

After Shakespearean plays and the Spanish classic *Don Quixote*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* will be adapted into Kathakali

dialogues and physical body movements. We want to project the *sathvika abhinaya* aspect of Kathakali to a new younger international audience."

Neeraj also wants to challenge or examine the notion that Kathakali is a "perfect" art form and should not be meddled with.

"Kathakali emerged from elements of Koodiyattam, Padayani, and the like, but it seems to be stuck in its so-called perfection. We want to explore how the abstract ideas of a modern literary work can be expressed through the idiom of a classical artform such as Kathakali," he explains.

"We see Kathakali as theatre and believe the viewer experience can be enhanced by using features unavailable when Kathakali was conceived of. Lighting, for example, has a lot of potential. We know how it enhances the experience in modern theatre, and want to explore that," adds Neeraj.

However, there are

challenges that may need innovative solutions. Though descriptions of mountains and forests and oceans are common on the Kathakali stage, a *Sea* appearing as a character has no parallel. Presenting such an inanimate object as a

Novel adaptation (Left) The team rehearsing for the production. (Below) Mario Barzaghi as Parasurama in an earlier production. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

character will need imagination and deciding on a costume will need innovation. Because, in Kathakali, the costume and make up are dictated by the nature of the character – pacha, kathi, thadi and mimukku classify characters as noble hero, the anti-hero, the villain and the female/ascetic, respectively.

Another interesting point will be the writing style. While Hemingway is known for his concise

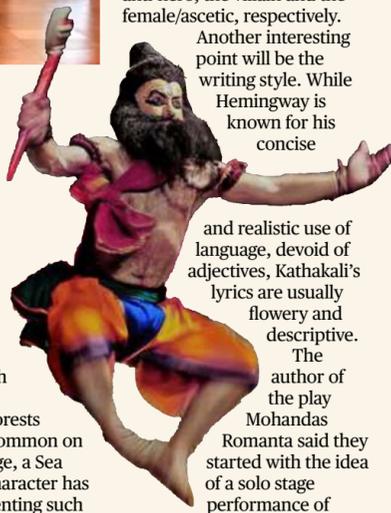
and realistic use of language, devoid of adjectives, Kathakali's lyrics are usually flowery and descriptive. The author of the play Mohandas Romanta said they started with the idea of a solo stage performance of *Santiago*. "Later, we

felt the whole play could fit into the technical or grammatical aspects of Kathakali. So, we added characters to establish the richness of the sea. We added four killer sharks too."

The Old Man and the Sea has just four major characters – Santiago the old man, the boy Manolin, the Sea and a giant marlin. While Mario Barzaghi from Italy will play Santiago, Peesappilly Rajeevan will play the Sea. Students from Kerala Kalamandalam will take up other supporting roles. Including vocals and percussion, the production may feature 20 artistes.

Mario, actor and director of Teatro dell' Albero in Milan, has learnt Kathakali from various gurus at the Kerala Kalamandalam and had his debut performance in 1985. Mario has worked in several projects aimed at fostering artistic dialogue between the East and the West.

Rajeevan is known for innovative interpretations even in the epic characters of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. He also dabbles in contemporary theatre. Neeraj, who is the choreographer, is a lecturer at Kerala Kalamandalam. His earlier production was *Koormapuranam*, an adaptation of the fable of the rabbit and the hare.



Meera Sreenarayanan lent a unique touch to her recital with nuanced sancharis

On an imaginative streak

High on aesthetics
Meera Sreenarayanan
PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI



V.V. Ramani

The understanding between the singer and the dancer, where both respond and resonate to each other's manodharma, results in a performance high on aesthetics. Meera Sreenarayanan's recital at The Music Academy's dance festival was one such.

From the first piece, the viruttam addressed to Ganesha and Hanuman, to the final thillana, Meera kept up the momentum through well-choreographed, graceful and sharp movements and finely nuanced expressions.

The Ramayana sabbdam, composed by Jayakrishna Unni, brought out the essence of the epic through brief depictions of important segments. The absence of melodrama made it more enjoyable.

'Saradijakdhu', the beautiful Thanjavur Quartet Kalyani raga varnam composed by Sivanandam, speaks about the nayika pining for Rajagopalaswamy. Some of Meera's sancharis were captivating, particularly the churning of butter, where by gradually increasing the speed, the entire process was visualised in vivid detail. Be it the draping of the pitambara vastram on the idol, awakening from a dream state to witness the raas in all its splendour, and the grandeur of the temple gopurams, the attention to detail was delightful. Her theermanams were precise.

'Kuniye kunu', an abhinaya piece based on a Malayalam Samvada Paatu, spoke about the interesting banter between Lakshmi and Parvathy, ridiculing each other's husbands. Finally, after their reconciliation, they return to their abodes in their vahanas. The piece was beautifully visualised.

Bijesh Krishna's soulful vocal support enhanced the impact of the performance. Indira Kadambi (Meera's guru) conducted the recital with flourish, aided by Charudutt on the mridangam, Easwar Ramakrishnan on the violin and Ananthanarayanan on the veena.



Promising Shreya Murthy performing at Krishna Gana Sabha. PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

Best foot forward

Shreya Murthy's performance was backed by good choreography and music

Manasa Vijaylakshme C

Shreya Murthy, a disciple of Priyadarsini Govind, recently performed for the Ilamayil Thiramaai series at Krishna Gana Sabha mini hall.

The opening piece, Oothukadu Venkata Subbaiyer's 'Sri Vignarajam bhaje', raga Gambhira Nattai, tala Khanda Chapu, was musically arranged by Rajkumar Bharathi.

The centerpiece of the evening's recital was the varnam 'Sumasayaka', a composition by Swati Tirunal. Shreya brought the sakti to life, pleading with Lord Padmanabha to visit her friend, tormented by love. Through intricate expressions, she conveyed the sakti's urgency, her friend's longing, and the intensity of unfulfilled desire. Set in raga Karnataka Kapi and tala Rupakam, the jathi was composed by senior mridangist G. Vijayaraghavan. The jathi portion stood out for its choreography, characterised by sharp hand movements.

The abhinaya piece, titled 'Hey heramba kimamba', depicted a playful conversation between Parvathi and her sons Ganesha and Muruga. Parvathi hears Ganesha sobbing. He complains that Muruga pulled his ears, prompting Parvathi to scold Muruga. Defending himself, Muruga accuses Ganesha of counting his eyes, to which Ganesha counters that Muruga measured his trunk. Amused by this quarrel, Parvathi laughs and lovingly resolves the dispute. Set in Ragamalika and Talamalika, the music was by Rajkumar Bharathi.

Shreya's abhinaya conveyed Parvathi's concern and Ganesha's and Muruga's innocence. Through precise nritta, she captured the playful quarrel.

In the padam 'Choodare', set in raga Sahana and Misra Chapu tala, Shreya highlighted the nayika's boldness, despite the societal judgment she faces.

The artiste concluded the evening's recital with a thillana by Lalgudi G Jayaraman, set in raga Desh and Adi tala.

The performance featured Krithika Aravind on vocals, Sivaprasad on the mridangam, Nandini Sai Giridhar on the violin and Shwetha Prachande on the nattuvangam.

All the pieces were choreographed by Priyadarsini Govind, Shreya's guru.

How Kathak came about

Laxminarayan Jena revisited Kathak's history through carefully chosen pieces during his recital

V.V. Ramani

Kathak is often perceived by the uninitiated viewer as a combination of vibrant footwork and chakkars. A recent performance by Laxminarayan Jena for the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's Natya Vizha threw light on the evolution of Kathak from its Kathavacha tradition to its present-day avatar. The lucid information on each item, shared with felicity by his guru Mysore Nagaraj, and the sincere presentation by the dancer made this performance interesting.

'Damaru hara kara baaje' an ode to Shiva, was a dynamic composition set in Dhruvad style in raag Gunakali. The powerful movements of Shiva were interspersed with brief depictions of two episodes - Shiva drinking poison and the emergence of the Panchabhootas. Laxminarayan's footwork was marked by clarity while the movements were energetic.

Next came the Bhav Paksh. 'Radha bhava anubhava' spoke

about Radha's emotional distress as she awaits Krishna's arrival and when he fails to understand her feelings. She says, "You will understand my feelings only when you become Radha". Krishna adorns himself in her garb, understands her feelings and goes in search of her. The dancer transitioned from man to woman with ease, and the use of a dupatta to communicate the role reversal was visualised beautifully.

Present-day Kathak performances take up a taal and explore its many nuances. Here, the dancer chose a Prabhandh - a well-knit, structured composition, giving no leeway for expansion, for the Nriitya paksh segment. Revived by Maya Rao from the Shambhu Maharaj tradition, this Prabhandh was in raag Khamaj.

'Aaj jaane ki zid na karo', the soulful ghazal immortalised by Farida Khanum, was taken up to show how the dance style can accommodate diverse poetic expressions. Laxminarayan chose to portray the emotions of a couple in love but his visualisation did not capture the



Laxminarayan Jena.
PHOTO: M. SRINATH

Laxminarayan Jena threw light on the evolution of Kathak from Kathavacha tradition to its present avatar

beauty of the lyrics. Slower pace and intense expression would have helped. Tarana in raag Jhinjoti was marked by synchrony between footwork and tabla bols. And, guru Mysore Nagaraj shared a

trivia about when Amir Khusro was asked to compose something similar to a Prabhandh, the Tarana was the result of a musical composition that emerged from a compilation of the names of Allah.

Deepa Venkatraman

In the mid-1930s, a 10-year-old and her elder sister attended a summer music school conducted by musicologist and composer Professor Sambamurthy. The younger sibling Seetha, who received training in Carnatic vocal at age seven from Bhagavathars Seetharama Sharma and Kodaganallur Subiah in Tirunelveli was fascinated by the jalatharangam, where musical sounds are created by striking varied sizes of water-filled porcelain cups.

Seetha expressed a desire to learn the instrument from exponent Ramaniah Chettiar. He taught it to only a select few, and as a test, asked her to change the raga from Mayamalavagowla to Sankarabharanam. Seetha passed the test, changing the rishabam and dhaivatam by adjusting the water levels.

The talented child, daughter of illustrious engineer Ganapathy Iyer and Meenakshi, a descendant of Sanskrit scholar Appaya Dikshitar, went on to become Seetha Doraiswamy, a pioneering woman jalatharangam artiste.

The porcelain's lingering melody

Remembering Seetha Doraiswamy, the pioneering jalatharangam artiste



Trailblazer Seetha Doraiswamy accompanied by sister Shanta on the harmonium during a performance in 2007. PHOTO: THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Impressed by her dedication, Sambamurthy gifted his porcelain cup set to Seetha. She also learnt the harmonium on her own, and underwent veena training from vidwan Suryanarayana Sastri. Meenakshi was a disciplinarian, and insisted Seetha practise before school. This laid a strong foundation, and Seetha and her

elder sister started participating in vocal concerts even when young.

Seetha was married to N. Doraiswamy Iyer at a very young age, and in an era when society restricted women's movements to within the home, he enrolled his 14-year-old wife in the Teacher's College of Music, run by The Music Academy. She studied under

distinguished maestros during Valadi Krishna Iyer's tenure as principal, and was the first female student to receive a gold medal during graduation for standing first in her course in 1941, and in a college competition.

Seetha taught the veena, vocal music and jalatharangam for two decades at home while managing

10 children. Her musical odyssey's turning point came at the age of 41, when she earned a B-high grade from All India Radio in the early 1960s. Her performances in Sarva Vadya kutchcheris and AIR's Vadya Vrinda (multi-instrumental orchestra) earned her recognition in the Carnatic music fraternity, leading to more opportunities.

Seetha performed alongside well-known musicians, including violinists Dwaram Mangathayaru, A. Kanyakumari, R.K. Shriramkumar and Thanjavur R Kumar.

She was bestowed with the Kalaimamani award, the TTK Memorial Award from The Music Academy, Trivadhya Shikhamani from Kanchi Mutt for her proficiency in the veena, jalatharangam and harmonium, and honoured in the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival and with the Jalataranga Sri by Kavi Suddhananda Bharati, for her mission to keep the instrument alive.

Fondly called Seethamma, the musician enjoyed creative musical explorations. Enthused by her sister Meenakshi Shankar's 'kitchen orchestra' concept, she and other women in the family popularised

using kitchen utensils to render popular songs, and these were aired on national TV channels.

Seethamma passed on her expertise to the next generations - daughters Kala Srinivasan and Mala Raja, son Krishnamoorthy, and grandsons Karthik Ganesh and R Rajagopalan, recipients of a scholarship from the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training. Seetha's son D. Ramasubramanian accompanied on the mridangam while granddaughters Ganavya Doraiswamy and Bindhumalini, and her great-grandson MS Krsna are well-known multi-genre musicians.

As a tribute to her mother, Seetha's eldest daughter Visalakshi Narayanaswamy, an AIR-graded Carnatic vocalist, has brought out a book on Tamil translations of the Mooka Panchashati slokas in Sanskrit, which her mother regularly chanted.

Centenary celebration

The centenary celebration 'Seethamma Mayamma' featuring performances by family members will be held on February 1 at Rasika Ranjani Sabha at 4.30 p.m. The event, open to all, also includes the release of Visalakshi's book.

Setting the rhythm

Thakita Thath Jham explored diverse hues of laya in art and the universe



Srividya

As part of the dance festival conducted by Brahma Gana Sabha at the Dakshinamurthy Auditorium, the students of Kripa's Centre for Fine Arts presented Thakita Thath Jham, a thematic presentation on layam, which took the audience through a journey into the joys of

rhythmic sounds found in every aspect of the universe.

The idea was conceived by Saikrupa Prasanna, and the research was by G. V. Guru Bharadwaj, who also helped give form to the concept. The music by Rajkumar Bharathi ensured that each musical composition aligned perfectly with the choreographer's vision. The lyrics were taken from the

Upanishads, Kuthanool and Pancha Marabu.

A series of six different categories of layam was depicted by way of elaborating the concept. Starting from the bountiful beauty of nature, Prakruthi Layam portrayed the seasons, rivers, the joyous sounds of rain, the frightening sounds of thunder, and more.

The simple mechanical sounds

that humans make in their everyday life was shown in Nitya Jeevan Layam... the intrinsic rhythm created by supposedly mundane movements such as threshing grains, cutting a log with a manual saw, and washing clothes were shown with creativity.

Since time immemorial, humans have exhibited a deep sense of layam through their folk art forms.

Synchrony and sound Students of Kripa's Centre for Fine Arts.
PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

With their vibrant costumes, rhythmic movements and the use of traditional musical instruments, folk dancers play a significant role in preserving and celebrating a country's diverse cultural heritage. Thevarattam from Tamil Nadu and another tribal dance were performed to depict Loka Kala Layam.

Using the same tala, various permutations that emanate from several percussion instruments brought out the inherent harmony within each one of them in Sthara Layam.

To sustain the onlooker's attention and break the monotony of abstraction, a humorous interpretation of the sounds in human relationships Bandava Layam was presented.

In conclusion, rasikas were taken into the workings of the various dimensions of the mind in Mano Layam. This was portrayed through a Ragam, Tanam, Pallavi in the powerful Hindolam.

Ragam, which implies colour, was depicted through the flowing and graceful movements of drapes. Metaphors to showcase the mind – flowers, monkeys and bees – were portrayed in the tanam, The pallavi was shown through a vibrant morah korvai. The beautiful lyrics by Rajkumar Bharathi 'Manam alaindu' said it evocatively.

The costumes were simple and effective. The basic colour dominant throughout the presentation was black and gold tempered with green, red, orange, pink and blue – this enabled the artistes to showcase changing emotions well.

Of bhakti and bhava

Manasa Sriram's engaging portrayal



Manasa Vijaylakshmi C

Manasa Sriram, a disciple of Mahalakshmi Ashwin, began her recital at Krishna Gana Sabha's Pongal Dance Festival 2025 with the invocatory hymn from the Thirumanthiram, 'Ainthu karathanai', in praise of Ganesha. She then moved to a Ganesha alarippu set to Tisra Nadai Adi tala, showcasing the essence of Bharatanatyam's rhythmic foundation. Her movements were crisp and sharp. Following this, she performed a jatiswaram in raga Rasikapriya (Adi tala), a composition by Lalgudi Jayaraman.

For the varnam, Manasa chose 'Swamiyai azhathu vadi' by the Thanjavur Quartet in raga Khamas. In the pallavi, the nayika takes along her friend to witness the procession of Sundareswarar during the Chithirai vizha.

Manasa captured the anticipation of the nayika moving through the procession, even as the sakhi questions her if the lord in the procession is the one from the pancha sabhas. The sanchari portrayed the heroine's longing and devotion. Manasa chose a unique keerthanai, a visual exposition of the Dasa Mahavidya of Durga. In 'Sri jagadeeswari', composed by Lalgudi Jayaraman in raga Ahir Bhairav, the dancer showcased fierce emotions, and the transition from intense passion to serenity was seamless. The red-and-orange-hued lighting enhanced the performance's appeal.

Manasa concluded her recital with 'Gangai', a mangalam. The orchestra featured Mahalakshmi Ashwin on the nattuvangam, Nagai P. Sriram (who also composed the jathis) on the mridangam, Srikanth Gopalakrishnan on the vocals, Anantha Krishnan on the violin and Sruthi Sagar on the flute.

A personal quest

Adithya's recital saw him relate to the gods in his own way

Rupa Srikanth

Adithya PV is a well-honed Bharatanatyam dancer, who has studied under Latha Edavalath and Sandhya and Kiran. He also takes guidance from veteran dancer Sudharani Raghupathy. He is artistic director, Upadhye School of Dance. Adithya has clear lines, great agility and a precise style to his adavus. There is also a notable subtlety in his abhinaya.

In the opening salutation during his performance at The

Music Academy dance festival, Adithya cautions Ganesha to not eat too much. In 'Siddhi vinayakam' (Mohana Kalyani, Adi, Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavata) and other offerings, he related to the gods on a personal note, as he beseeched Ganesha to take care of him.

Adithya had the support of a strong orchestra, with Srikanth Gopalakrishnan's melodious vocals, Anjani Srinivasan's participative veena and Parshwanath Upadhye's nattuvangam along with Mahesh Swami's flute and Harsha Samaga's mridangam.



Impressive Adithya PV.
PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

Adithya continued with 'Saamini ramanave sakhiyaro' in an enjoyable Khamas, Adi by the Thanjavur Quartet's Ponniah Pillai. It is a poem of bhakti-sringara, admiration, viraha and longing towards Brihadeeswara, in which the nayika tells her sakhi about her feelings. There was no exaggeration, just good abhinaya.

Adithya was in control in the nritta portions as well – perfect timing, good araimandi and kudichi mettu adavus, but was let down by the azzhutham. It got better in the second half, the stamping and the well-anchored steps. Finally the sakhi sets out, with the nayika observing her every step.

In Gopalakrishna Bharathi's 'Nandanar Charitham', the underprivileged devotee is not able to see Shiva in Thirupungur. He cries when he sees Nandhi blocking his path of vision, 'Vazhi maraithirukkude'. Moved, the lord asks Nandhi to move in 'Satre vilagi' (Purvikalyani, Rupakam). The conversation between Shiva and the sulking bull was captured effectively; the rest could have had more depth.

Adithya finished with a Pahadi thillana (Misra Chapu, Lalgudi Jayaraman) in which the attentive rhythm-keepers kept up with the change in pace, showcasing the dancer's timing and agility. The footwork was good, the music superlative. Everything came together well as Adithya's last jump into a muzhu mandi gave him a picture-perfect finish.

A slice of Benaras

Vishal Krishna conveyed the flavour of the gharana



Rupa Srikanth

In the opening Ananda Tandav (Bairagi, teentaal, Tulsidas), Vishal as Shiva had a delicately shaking palm, depicting the shifting snake around the neck. Grace in the wrists is important, but it felt like the elegance went right up to his fingertips.

The footwork was also subtle and minutely accurate, the sounds primarily coming from the

movement of the heels. From afar, one could think he was not doing any tatkar. He is also not accustomed to doing it in front of the mike, and the sound is sometimes lost at the back of the stage. With the mike, the perfect timing is apparent. The chakkars – with one leg lift as he turns around – were there for all to see.

In the 16-beat Teentaal in vilambit and drut lay, Vishal performed in slow and fast speeds, including that in vilamba and tihais in different

Carrying forward a legacy
Vishal Krishna. PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

matras. The repetitive lehra in a haunting Yaman was poetic. There was ghat bhav, where the dancer mimics people and animals with minimal gestures, but this was shown more elaborately in the subsequent drut lay paramparik Kathak, which presented different walks and gat nikas in Teentaal.

We do not see this much nowadays – a shy woman with a ghoonghat, Krishna, Radha and the peacock in gat bhav without lyrics, showing the lighting, drops of water and the peacock opening its plumes, all flowing so beautifully with the lehra and the movement. This subtlety is the essence of Kathak.

The abhinay piece 'Bhoogat shyam kaun tu gori' (Surdas) was a delightful shringar piece when Krishna and Radha first see each other by the Yamuna. Composed by Pt. Mukul Shivputra and Pt. Madhup Mudgal in Misra Pilu and visualised by Madhavi Mudgal, it captured the delicacy of the moment and the quiet promise of their relationship. Vishal shone in it.

Interestingly, Vishal danced on a brass plate – subtly emphasising the sharp tap to the softer beat. This was an addition to the Benares repertoire by his grand-aunt Alakananda Devi.

Recorded music, especially for an interactive dance form such as Kathak, is not a great idea. But the music here was of such high order, it did not matter.

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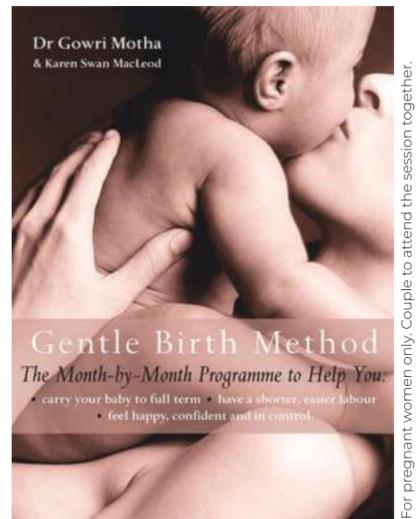
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Tradition (From left) Some of the stalwart musicians who performed at the festival over the years; and Pt. Ulhas Kashalkar and Shubhendra Rao at this year's edition. PHOTOS COURTESY: SAPTAK

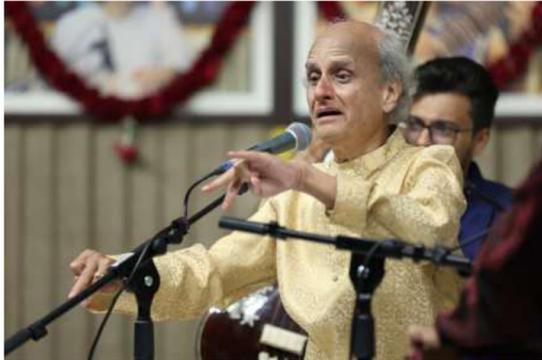
Shailaja Khanna

Attending the 45th Saptak festival in Ahmedabad after a gap of a few years was nostalgic. Everyone missed founder Manju Mehta, who passed away in 2024. But, the unobtrusive courtesies and warm hospitality remained the same. Artists who perform at Saptak are like family, even if it's their first appearance on stage. Some things never change at Saptak – the simple stage in a school premises, the excellent sound system despite the event being both indoors and outdoors, and the strict adherence to time. Today, Saptak, founded by Nandan and Manju Mehta, has become one of India's longest classical music and dance festivals, held from January 1 to 13 every year. Sandeep Joshi, the founders' son-in-law and one of the organisers, said the festival grew from one day to three, a week and to the present 13 days.

Nandan Mehta was a disciple of Pt. Kishen Maharaj, who used to come to the festival on December 31 and stay till January 15. Initially, the event was held informally – artistes used to stay in the home of Nandan Mehta, and other like-minded music lovers. Gradually, an award honouring artistic excellence was instituted. This, too, was unique in that artistes who performed were called upon to do the honours. Recipients of the award include Pt. Jasraj, Pt. Shiv Kumar Sharma, vidushi Kishori Amonkar, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan and Pt. Samta Prasad. Even this ceremony used to be personalised. Archival

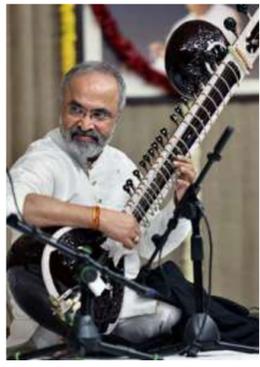
For the seven notes

The 13-day annual Saptak festival is known as much for its live performances as its rich archives



recordings of the artiste would be released, and Kishen Maharaj would write a poem on them. Apparently, he would quip – “If you want a copy of my poem on you, you will have to come to Benaras and perform at the festival in memory of my father. Only then will I present it to you, duly framed!”

Pt. Birju Maharaj's debut There have been memorable concerts at Saptak. In 1997, at his debut appearance, Pt. Birju Maharaj played the 'naad', Pt.



Rishi Upadhyay played the pakhawaj and Pt. Kishen Maharaj the tabla. A two-hour tabla solo by Pt. Samta Prasad is another rare gem.

This year too, there were some special concerts. Shubhendra Rao, senior disciple of Pt. Ravi Shankar and guru bhai of Manju Mehta, rekindled memories of his guru in his heartfelt tribute concert (the festival this year was dedicated to Manju Mehta and Ustad Zakir Hussain). He played raag Jogeshwari composed by his guru, a combination of raags Rageshwari and Jog. The seamless alap jor gave way to an unusual jhala, before moving on to the madhya laya composition in Jhaptal. The second composition was in Ektaal.

Next, displaying his command over rare pieces of music, Shubhendra played raag Mishra Gara. The composition was an old one, redolent with 'bolkaari', and an aural feast. On the tabla was Tanmoy Bose from Kolkata.

Another satisfying concert was by Pt. Ulhas Kashalkar, who expertly crafted Nayaki Kanhra, a raag considered succinct, into a full-length piece. Establishing the Kanhra content fully, the maestro created a web of notes using the Agra style of gayaki to embellish it. His rounded meends and emotive singing was satisfying – he sang three compositions. The next raag was Paraj. Ulhas was accompanied by Yogesh Samsi

Saptak formally opened its archive wing in 2004. Today, there are more than 15,000 hours of music and 1,500 videos, with more in the pipeline.

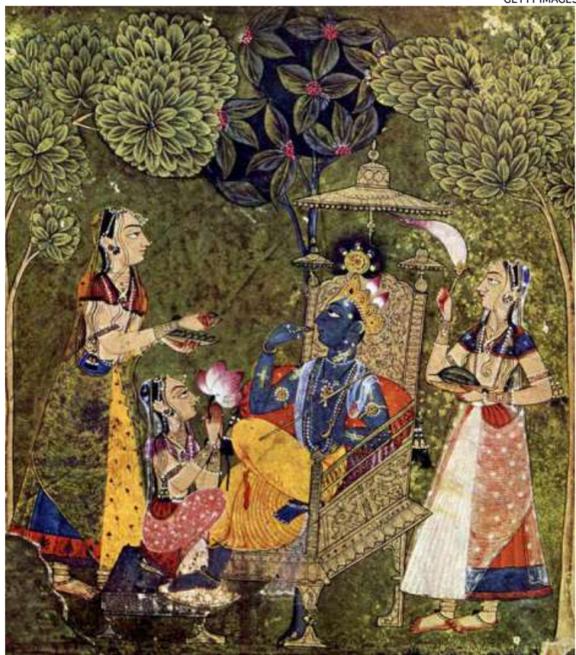
on the tabla, and Sudhir Nayak on the harmonium. The rapport between the two was evident, with the former taking musical liberties fearlessly. Vocal support was provided by the Vadodara-based Bhavik Mankad. Pawan Sidam, a disciple of Pt. Nayan Ghosh and the winner of the annual Saptak percussion competition, impressed with his confident playing and extensive repertoire.

Ustad Shujaat Khan was in his element, accompanied by Amit Choubey and Sapan Anjaria on the tabla. The raag chosen was the Carnatic Vachaspati, and the style was inimitably Shujaat's.

Digital archiving Saptak is efficient with archiving too. All concert recordings have been painstakingly digitised and are available for students to hear. One can search for an artiste, a raag or a taal, making it quite useful for research.

Saptak formally opened its archive wing in 2004, and started collecting recordings from private collectors too. Today, there are more than 15,000 hours of music and 1,500 videos with more in the pipeline. It also has the private collections of several rasikas and patrons. Rare recordings include a private concert by Kishori Amonkar in the 1990s, when she sang at the residence of the Mehtas, and unusually allowed herself to be recorded. Amongst the rarest recordings are thumris rendered by 28 tawaiis of Benaras, some dating back to the 1900s.

As of now, the archives are only available offline, though Saptak curator and tabla artiste Sapan Anjaria shared that in the future, online access may be given to members.



Spring song

Over the centuries, musicians have heralded Spring with specific raags and lyrics that capture the sounds and sights of the season

Shailaja Khanna

An iconic composition in Raag Basant, 'Phagwa brij dekhan ko chalo ri...' sung by Pt. Bhimsen Joshi around Basant Panchami still rings in my ears, more than 40 years after I heard it. The notes and lyrics were so evocative of Spring in verdant Vrindavan. Basant Panchami, which

heralds the season of Spring, is a day sacred to musicians. It is the day when Saraswati, the goddess of the arts, is worshipped. Spring signals new beginnings, burgeoning life, and a time of hope. The Indian musical tradition that uniquely attributes music to every emotion (rasa) and to every time of the day (prahar), has a special music for this important season too. Perhaps, the extreme variations in

temperature in North India, with the freezing cold winter being dispelled by Spring's warmth, is celebrated and welcomed. Elsewhere too, this change in season is special. Specific raags for Spring have been created and popularised.

Spring has four main raags – Basant, Bahar, Hindol and Paraj. Raag Kafi is also rendered a lot during this season. The season of Basant goes on until Holi, which is again celebrated with songs. Kafi being a favourite choice for Holi too. The fascination with these raags associated with seasons extend to the visual sphere as well, with Ragnala paintings depicting them beautifully. Raag Hindol was always depicted as a swing (hindola), and Basant as a garden with flowers, peacocks, birds and dancing girls.

While Basant, Hindol and Paraj are considered traditional raags, Bahar has been attributed to the 13th century musician-poet Amir Khusrau. It is interesting that Bahar has a striking similarity to Mian ki Malhar, created by the 16th century Mian Tansen, and this cannot be considered a coincidence. In note structure, Mian ki Malhar is distinct from other existing Malhars, so it was probably inspired by Bahar, though a few say the reverse is true.

Ustad Wasifuddin Dagar, whose family has been practitioners of dhrupad for 20 generations, confirms that there are traditional dhrupads composed in Bahar, though attributing a time frame to their composition is impossible.

Renowned Gwalior exponent Pt. LK Pandit recalls quite a few compositions in Bahar by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, who composed under the pen name 'Akhtar piya'. In the Gwalior gharana, considered the senior gharana of vocal music, there are 'ashtapadis' composed in Bahar. Over time, Bahar came to be

associated with auspicious occasions too, and was not confined to Spring. There are several compositions in Bahar, which speak of weddings, grooms and sehras.

However, Basant remains the primary raag of Spring, and can be rendered at any time of the day. Adi Basant is considered the original form of Basant, and Shuddha Basant another variant. Earlier, every concert held in February and March always featured raag Basant or a variant. However, this practice has since been abandoned.

Basant Bahar and Hindol

have been rendered in different combinations, with other raags as well, creating around 25-30 variations. Popular Spring raags include Bhairav Bahar, Basant Bahar, Hindol Bahar and Hindol Basant. Usually, the lyrics of the compositions in these raags reflect the season, speaking of flowers, breeze, bees and romance.

Most recently, the song 'Sakal ban phool rahi sarson' in Bahar, attributed to Amir Khusrau, from the web series *Heeramandi* made waves.

Here's looking forward to hearing raags heralding Spring.

CALENDAR

Anniversary special



Nadopasana Music Trust organises a series of concerts as part of the 57th annual music festival, to be held from February 4 to 9, at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan mini hall, Mylapore. K. Venkitchalam, deputy director, BVB Chennai Kendra, will inaugurate the six-day festival, supported by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

The line up begins with a keyboard recital of Arjun Sambasivan and Narayanan (Feb. 4, 5 p.m.) followed by Madurai T.N.S. Krishna's vocal concert at 6.30 p.m. The festival will feature two concerts each day, 5 p.m. and 6.30 p.m.

Concerts to take place on other days are: Feb. 5: Surya Sriram and Kolkata Padmavathi Saranathan. Feb. 6: Kamala Deepthi followed by M. Lalitha and Nandhini (violin). Feb. 7: Harshitha Sambath and P. Ganesh (Chitravina). Feb. 8: Adithya Madhavan followed by J.A. Jayant (flute).

The festival concludes on February 9 with the presentation of 'Gotuvadyam Narayana Iyengar International Award for Excellence' to musician Padma Narayanaswamy (6 p.m.) followed by T.V.S. Mahadevan's vocal concert (6.45 p.m.).

NRI festival

Paalamtv presents a 13-day global festival featuring NRI artistes, both vocal and instrumental, from February 1 to 13, 6.30 p.m. The concert series will be telecast on www.paalamtv.com

The curtains will go up with Balu Raguraman and Aparna Raghuraman's violin duet. They will be accompanied by Vijay Ganesh (mridangam) and Ravi Balasubramaniam (ghatam).

Concerts to be featured from Feb 2 to 13 are: Vikram Nitin; Sutikshana Veeravalli; Anirudh Raja; Savita Sundaresan; Nachikethan Vivek Srinivasan; Guhan Venkaraman (veena); Ananth Mysore; Rasika Sivakumar; Uma Ranganathan; Shashank V. Mahesh; Lavanya Karthikeyan; and Madhav Subramanian (mandolin).



Lecture series

Madhuradhvani will feature the following programmes at Arkay Convention Centre, Mylapore. Schedule: Today, 6.15 p.m.:

Discourse on Tirumoolar by Dr. Sudha Seshayyan with Hamzini Vytheeswaran lending vocal support.

February 1, 6.15 p.m.: Talk by Madhusudhanan Kalaiselvan on 'Kaliyan Kanda Kannapuram'. February 2, 6.15 p.m.: Sri Ariyakudi KV Narayanaswamy Trust has organised Hemmige V. Srivatsan's vocal concert in memory of the legendary Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. February 5, 6.15 p.m.: The 11th episode of Tamil Moovar lecture series, featuring Dr. Sudha Seshayyan with Santhosh Subramanian on the vocal. February 6, 6.15 p.m.: Mudicondan Ramesh and R Sowmya (veena).

Musical ode

Narada Gana Sabha will feature the following programmes on February 2 at its main hall. 8.30 a.m.: Puja and Veda parayanam will be followed by the rendition of Tyagaraja's Pancharatna kritis by eminent musicians at 9 a.m.

A week-long Bhagavad Gita discourse will also take place at the venue from February 2 to 9 at 6.30 p.m. To be presented by Ramanacharana Tirtha (Nochur) Swami, it will deal with Chapters 1 and 2 of the Gita.



Tamil plays

Hamsadhvani celebrates its 35th annual music and drama festival with the staging of two popular Tamil plays. February 1, 6.45 p.m.:

Stage Creations' Sikkal Sivaraman and February 2, 6.30 p.m.: Crazy Creations' *Chocolate Krishna*. Venue: Youth Hostel, II Avenue, Indira Nagar, Adyar.

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