

## Striking new notes

V. Ramnarayan

**F**usion in music involving Indian classical together with other forms, mainly from the West, has been a controversial subject in the music community over the years. Traditionalists may not appreciate or approve these collaborative efforts by musicians from different cultures inspired by the high quality of the music adhering to idioms other than their own, while young listeners embrace such experiments more readily, as we have seen in recent years at *The Hindu Friday Review November Fest*. To many of them, it is their first step towards appreciation of our classical and semi-classical music, even if they were first drawn to fusion by the presence of their favourite pop, rock or jazz idols. It is not known how many of them go beyond the first step to become true rasika-s of classical music.

Similar experiments in dance have probably faced less criticism for a variety of reasons. One possible explanation could be that many of these collaborations have been among diverse but Indian forms with many similarities, that too by outstanding artists of obviously comparable merit. International encounters between leading artists are also sometimes of acceptable quality. Dancers Alarmel Valli and Madhavi Mudgal have combined effectively, while Anita Ratnam has extended her collaborative work beyond Indian borders. Collaborative works by Astad Deboo, Aditi Mangaldas, Geeta Chandran, Prakriti and Bharat Sharma, Chitra Sundaram, Lata Pada, Shobana Jeyasingh, and Jayachandran, to name a few, are well known.

We learn that in music, the earliest fusion efforts began in the US, where jazz and rock and even classical music combined to capture the imagination of serious listeners in search of novel experiences. We also know that the late Robert E. Brown, who came to Chennai more than four decades ago to learn mridanga, established the ethnomusicology programme at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, U.S.A. He called what was taught there world music, the first time the description was used. Shakti and the Mahavishnu orchestra were successful fusion endeavours involving top musicians from the Carnatic and Hindustani tradition — L. Shankar,

L. Subramaniam, T.H. Vinayakram, Zakir Hussain and so on. In later years, Hariharan and Shankar Mahadevan have been in the forefront of collaborative efforts with Western musicians too. Chitraveena Ravikiran has been involved in his own brand of experimentation with his Melharmony. T.V. Gopalakrishnan, Kadri Gopalnath, and U. Shrinivas are among our leading musicians to take part in experimental music.

Unnoticed by students of fusion or world music, Indian film music, starting with Hindi film songs of the 1940s, or perhaps even earlier, has successfully blended Indian raga-s and Western orchestration, even tunes and instruments from other oriental music as well. The trend continues into the present day, with an amazing variety of genres being melded together by composers of the stature of Ilayaraja and A.R. Rehman to great effect.

It is becoming increasingly clear that whether we like it or not, we cannot continue to ignore fusion or world music. Our own view is that, however sincere such explorations may be, the products we frequently see on stage tend to be half-baked. Quite simply, the rigour that underlies the preparation for a career in traditional music or dance performance is rarely evident in the musical or dance joint ventures, national or international, we get to see or listen to. While it may take an Indian or Western classical or jazz musician at least a decade of formal training before she makes her debut, how much time and effort go into preparation for a fusion concert? Do the artists of the different backgrounds spend solid time to master the intricacies of the alien system they are learning to incorporate in the new genre they are fabricating together?

In the following pages, we present well-informed comment by experts from the worlds of music and dance on what fusion or world music and contemporary dance are and should be. The idea is stir up some debate, not look for definitive answers to the questions that supporters of tradition invariably ask of the pro-changers. ■