

## Sydney Music Circle turns 25

On a cold winter night in Sydney in 1983, about 20 people sit on the living room floor of a small townhouse in the city's southwest, a few hundred metres from the local meatworks. As the temperature falls towards single digit, the sound of a varnam in Sankarabharanam – *Saami ninne kori* rises in the air.

In both the unadorned setting and the choice of song, it was a modest opening to The Sydney Music Circle (SMC). But over the next 25 years, the volunteer-run association would inspire hundreds of Indian immigrants, and their children, to celebrate Carnatic music far from its birthplace.

For 25 years, SMC has hosted monthly concerts and Carnatic music festivals. It began as a bold vision hatched in a brief conversation between two recent immigrants to Sydney – Dr. M.S. Ramanathan and P.S. Ramachandran (the writer's late father and younger brother of *Sruti's* publisher P.S. Narayanan) in the early 1980s. Both from families with strong musical ties, they believed there was latent passion for Carnatic music among Sydney's then tiny Indian community, and wished to cultivate it.

"We'd all just come out of our country and lost touch with our music," Ramanathan says. "We decided we had to provide a forum for these people who were artists of an amateur nature so they could get better, and for young people to participate in our tradition."

Ramanathan hosted the first SMC concert, on that cold July night, at his townhouse in 1983. Ramachandran coaxed his wife, Raji, to perform. "He just told me I was going to sing the



At SMC's Tyagaraja aradhana

first concert," she says. "I had never performed in public, but he told me I had the talent."

This symbolised SMC's mission: encourage local artists no matter their calibre to enrich their skills. Raji Ramachandran shared the first concert with another local, Rajini Chandrasekhar. It was a night of varnam-s and kriti-s of Dikshitar, Tyagaraja and other greats.

In the first year, a small band of locals – including Dr. Ramanathan, a well-learned vocalist – performed monthly concerts in rasikas' homes. The audiences grew and SMC soon moved to a larger function hall.

"The quality was up and down, but the idea of SMC was to improve the quality," Ramanathan says. "It's like when you are thirsty: we all had this deep thirst for Carnatic music and appreciated whatever music we got."

There was a social appeal too, says Ramu Ayyar, an early SMC stalwart whose wife Uma performed the third concert. "Those were the days when we longed to see new Indian faces. If we saw someone wearing a saree in a car three cars ahead, we would chase them down to meet them."

SMC gave Raji Ramachandran her first chance at public performance. For Uma Ayyar, an experienced performer, its inception was momentous. She had been an All India Radio artist, and an assistant professor of music in Tiruchi, but her zest for music had faded as her young family battled to establish itself in a new country. "Initially (after migrating to Sydney) I didn't have much motivation for music. I probably would have lost much of what I'd studied. But then SMC started ... truly a landmark ... and after performing at SMC's Tyagaraja festival, I felt the passion again."

Slowly, Sydney's Carnatic music scene flowered as SMC sparked dialogue between artists and rasika-s. "They are quite a knowledgeable audience, and every time somebody performed they'd get really good feedback, and then want to improve and show more of their ability the next time," Uma Ayyar says. This led her to one of her best performances – a rendition of 'Raagattil Siranthathu Kalyaniya Kambhojiya', a complex piece featuring quick shifts between a large number of raga-s, which she improvised significantly.



An enthusiastic group of young singers

Over time, SMC became a breeding ground for younger rasika-s. Parents brought their children to the monthly concerts, exposing them to live classical music. Ragam-tanam-pallavi became part of growing up in Australia, like glittering beaches, eucalyptus and broad accents.

Mohan Ayyar (39), became interested in Carnatic music in the 1980s after his parents took him to SMC concerts as a teen. He says, "I found it intellectually challenging, started experimenting on the keyboard, and was very keen to attend each month as it was a rare opportunity to hear Carnatic music."

His first performance was as an accompanying artist at SMC's Tyagaraja festival in Canberra in the late 1980s. "I had no clue of talam and just played, but people encouraged me and told me I should learn formally," he says. "There wasn't pressure to perform. You could see people weren't doing it professionally, they were amateurs giving their best shot. Now I'm a regular accompanying artist, I'm doing a Ph.D in music and hope to perform in the December music season in Madras." He also runs

a popular classical music website, Carnatic Corner.

SMC's focus on youth has strengthened. Each concert opens with a student performance. Two years ago, four young Indians, just out of school, were even handed the reins of the association, to book the artists and orchestrate special events.

"It was an opportunity to refresh SMC – we made it our mission to get more young people involved," says Aparna Ramachandran aged 20. The quartet brought new ideas, such as more group performances to increase the number of participants. The founders were thrilled when 140 students and 60 adults performed at last year's Tyagaraja Festival.

Ramu Ayyar believes SMC also instils cultural confidence in young Indian Australians. "One of the greatest treasures we can hand the next generation is our culture, one of the richest cultures in the world that has stood the test of thousands of years. The children exposed to SMC realise this rich culture, become proud of their heritage, and are more confident."

Despite its growth, SMC today operates much as it did 25 years ago – run by volunteers and funded by donations. This keeps passion for music at SMC's core. The group nevertheless welcomes donations to improve facilities and update its ageing sound system.

For now, financial concerns are in the background. Sydney's Carnatic music rasika-s have their sights set on an extravagant celebration next April to commemorate SMC turning 25. The "gala" event will be true to SMC's original charter, says Dr. Ramanathan.

"My idea is to make everybody who has participated in SMC participate again. Because that's what Sydney Music Circle is – a circle full of people, and it needs everyone to contribute and hold hands to make that circle. If even one person drops out, there's no circle there."

ARJUN RAMACHANDRAN

### Honoured

Mridanga maestro **Guruvayur Dorai** with the Man of the Year representing India Award for 2008, "in recognition of his outstanding contribution to Carnatic music", by the American Biographical Institute, recently in Raleigh, NC, U.S.A.

### Selected

**R. Rajagopal** (Vice President, Kartik Fine Arts) to receive the Guru Surajananda Award, and **Nagai Mukundan** (kathakalakshepa), to receive the Gowri Manohari Award, from Sruthilaya Kendra and Sruthilaya Kendra Natarajalaya, 13<sup>th</sup> December in Chennai.

Visit [www.sruti.com](http://www.sruti.com)  
for Sruti's  
Silver Jubilee photos