

SRUTI ENTERS 30th YEARPattabhi Raman remembered on his 80th anniversary

October 2012 is a significant month for *Sruti*, India's premier magazine for the performing arts. Not only did it enter its 30th year on 16 October, the 80th birth anniversary of its late Founder-Editor falls on 24 October 2012. It was a double celebration from 19 to 21 October at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chennai. It was a stormy day with heavy rain flooding the roads. The evening started with a short, well made 13-minute film on *Sruti's* journey. It featured various *Sruti* covers, glimpses of significant articles, comments by K.V.

Ramanathan, V. Ramnarayan, and S. Janaki, and testimonies by Aruna Sairam, the Dhananjayans, Gowri Ramnarayan, Amritha Murali and Rithvik Raja.

The film described how the first issue of *Sruti* was launched by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer in October 1983 with D.K. Pattammal on the cover and child prodigy Mandolin Shrinivas. *Sruti* was promoted as a not-for-profit venture and placed under a Trust in April 1985 when the Sruti Foundation was established with Founder-Editor N. Pattabhi Raman as its Managing Trustee. As far back as 1998, the *Sruti* website was launched by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. When Pattabhi Raman passed away in 2002, the question uppermost on everyone's mind was who would take on the leadership mantle. K.V. Ramanathan became the next Editor-in-Chief and the magazine got by the next four years till 2006, when The Sanmar Group took over *Sruti* and put it on a sound

footing. The film had present Trustee of the Sruti Foundation Sukanya Sankar talking about the plans of the magazine. The main challenge now is to get younger readership and a step towards that is the online version and blog. Over the years the *Sruti* issues featured profiles of top musicians and dancers, the who's who of the art world. *Sruti's* horizon has expanded now and also features theatre work, contemporary Indian dance and articles on our heritage.

Interesting slide show

Making its premiere, the programme on the first evening was an outcome of Sruti's coverage of heritage. It was an interesting mix of lecture and slide show by historian and archaeologist Dr. Chithra Madhavan, Carnatic vocal by Bharathi Ramasubban and Bharatanatyam by Roja Kannan. Titled as *Chidambaram – Seen and Unseen*, it focussed on the temple town of Chidambaram (Tillai) and its deities, a place renowned not only for dance but music too. The pleasant backdrop designed by Thomas had a string of bilva leaves in the centre, as in the temple's "Chidambara rahasyam" that denotes the formlessness (space) of the Lord. Chithra spoke about the legend and history associated with the temple. Showing various sculptures of Nataraja in dancing pose, Chithra explained the Nataraja iconography in brief. Roja then performed to *Ananda natana prakasam* composed by Muthuswami Dikshitar. The illustration by artist S. Rajam was beautiful. *Ithu daano Tillai sthalam*, a composition of Gopalakrishna Bharati, started with

a beautiful violin and mridanga prelude and Roja performed with elegantly understated emotions.

Chidambaram is also one of the 275 "paadal Petra sthalam-s" that has been praised in the songs of the Nayanmars and Saivite devotees. It is also a holy place for Vaishnavites. Bharathi sang some beautiful hymns of Sambandar, as well as a melodious Tirumangai Alwar pasuram. Roja performed to Gopalakrishna Bharati's *Tillai Ambalatanai Govindarajanai darisikka kondaney* in Surati raga.

Chithra then elaborated on the recorded history of the temple that can be gleaned from the various inscriptions covering much of its walls, how the temple grew over the years into the massive edifice it is today. The temple as it stands now is mainly of the 12th and 13th centuries, with later additions in similar style. The nritta sabha, place of the dance contest between Nataraja and goddess Kali, is in the form of a chariot pulled by two stone horses. Thanks to modern renovation, half the horse and most of the wheel are masked by concrete! Chithra also showed us slides of the mangroves (at Pichavaram) and spoke about the foresight of the Chola kings in maintaining the mangroves that acted as protection against natural calamities.

The recital ended with a Manickavasakar hymn sung as a mangalam. G. Vijayaraghavan (mridanga) and R. Kalaiarasan (violin) completed the versatile music ensemble. The guests of

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honour for the evening were eminent musician R. Vedavalli and dance guru-s the Dhananjayans.

On day two was the much awaited award ceremony. In his welcome speech, Editor-in-Chief V. Ramnarayan said, “Founder-editor Dr. N. Pattabhi Raman took the foolhardy step of plunging into serious performing arts journalism in October 1983, amidst many a dire prediction of its early demise. He and his devoted band of colleagues and successors have kept it going against heavy odds for nearly three decades, without sacrificing the commitment to quality writing.” Ramnarayan saluted the many personalities associated with *Sruti* including P.N. Sundaresan, P.N. Venkatraman, S. Rajam whose paintings and columns on music have enriched *Sruti*, cartoonist Sarathy, naturalist-photographer M. Krishnan, T. Sankaran, Sulochana Pattabhiraman, S. Krishnan, V.S. Sundara Rajan, P.C. Jayaraman, N. Ramanathan, Manna Srinivasan, Sunil Kothari, Leela Venkataraman, Deepak Raja, Sriram V, K.S. Kalidas, Vamanan, Nandini Ramani, Sujatha Vijayaraghavan, Gowri Ramnarayan, Lakshmi Devnath, and Gayathri Sundaresan who had contributed over the years to the high quality of the magazine.

The award winners

The prestigious E. Krishna Iyer Medal was presented to 80-year-old Bharatanatyam Guru K. Kalyanasundaram Pillai of Sri Rajarajeswari Bharatha Natya Kala Mandir, Mumbai, and the Vellore



Guru Kalyanasundaram, Suguna Purushothaman and Gopalkrishna Gandhi

Gopalachariar Memorial Award to eminent Carnatic vocalist Suguna Purushothaman by Gopalkrishna Gandhi, Chairman, Kalakshetra Foundation. The award function was followed by an erudite speech by Gopalkrishna Gandhi (see following article) which drew thunderous applause. The awardees expressed their thanks briefly. Guru Kalyanasundaram called Gopalkrishna Gandhi's speech a beautiful margam in itself. His elder brother Mahalingam Pillai had also received the E. Krishna Iyer Medal. Hailing from a family that has been devoted to dance for 300 years, Guru Kalayansundaram is an eighth generation artist. “Bani-s may be different but dance is the same. E. Krishna Iyer made many sacrifices to put Bharatanatyam where it is now and I am honoured to receive a medal in his name.” Suguna Purushothaman said she started singing for the love of it, but to be recognised for it and being bestowed this prestigious award meant she must have done something right!

Accompanied by her talented disciple K. Gayatri, Suguna Purushothaman presented a special programme titled ‘Nuances of the Musiri bani’ soon after the award ceremony. Musiri Subramania Iyer's sruti layam gave her “goose bumps” and from him, she learnt how much gamaka to give and where. Her guru was very particular about maintaining the purity of the raga. In the Musiri school, it is considered an art to decide where to sing the niraval. It is the nuclear point of a song, where one word or line is sung in different ways with voice modulation. The pause is important and the way the words are split or are joined should make sense and not give the wrong meaning. Musiri was fond of rare raga-s like Kokilavarali and was also a great devotee of Tyagaraja, she said. Suguna and Gayatri demonstrated by singing excerpts of songs like *O Jagadamba*, *Broovavamma* and the Swati Tirunal padam *Dani samajendra*. Since she was feeling unwell, she was not at her sparkling best but her simplicity, humility

and deference to her guru touched the hearts of the audience. Guest of honour K. Krishnan – representative of Pattabhi Raman’s family – honoured the artists of the evening at the end of the programme.

Spectacular Chhau

Presented in collaboration with the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, the final evening featured the three styles of Chhau – Seraikella, Mayurbhanj and Purulia – by Guru Shashadhar Acharya and his troupe. The programme started with a short film on Chhau that showed the importance of breath control and training in martial arts central to performing Chhau. It had short clips of Chaitra Parva festival, the masks of Seraikella Chhau as different from the masks of Purulia Chhau, the various guru-s, some really old, passing on their knowledge to aspiring Chhau performers many of whom are cobblers, farmers, and hairdressers, the juxtaposition of everyday tasks that have inspired many Chhau movements, these were a good prelude to the audience – giving information on a dance form and its practitioners rarely seen in south India.

The performance started with a

musical invocation in all three Chhau styles. Inspired by *Ratri Sukta*, the famous item *Ratri* in Seraikella style based on the Vedic concept of celebrating forces in nature had Shashadhar Acharya donning the role of Ratri, an abstract imagery of the night playing with the moon. *Radha Krishna* was presented in Mayurbhanj as well as Seraikella style. In *Hamsa*, we got to see the beautifully choreographed movements of the swan in Seraikella style. The conflict in Arjuna’s mind and Krishna’s advice to him during war came alive in *Geeta* performed in the Mayurbhanj style. The grand finale was *Durga* in Purulia Chhau style. The charming Ganesa, the demon Mahisha in green costume, and the Goddess Durga – all in elaborate headgear, were such a treat to watch with their acrobatic leaps and twirls. The percussion and music were new to the Chennai audience who could not stop clapping to show their appreciation for a colourful evening of dance and music.

Shashadhar Acharya, a fifth generation Chhau artist, has groomed many in the art of Chhau. His brothers and sons were part of the troupe. He said that 20 years

ago, from about 20 families from the villages, there are at least 200 families from each style which had now entered the performance circuit. He promised to work for the wider popularity of Chhau. The guest of honour was L. Sabaretnam, Chairman, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chennai. At the end of the performance, every member of the all-male 27-strong Chhau troupe was presented an angavastram by L. Sabaretnam, Bhaskar Ramamurthy (Director, IIT Madras and nephew of the late Pattabhi Raman) and V. Ramnarayan.

Janaki was impressive as the anchor person on all the three days. The programme was well conducted and there was a good mix of dance and music. The stage décor was elegant and artistic. What was disappointing was the poor audience turnout. What happened to all the *Sruti* subscribers, musicians and dancers, if not the general public?

LALITHA VENKAT

(Content editor of narthaki.com)

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