

Sow a seed of music

The Oppilal School of Music and Fine Arts in Chennai presented a three-day festival of concerts and other events on the occasion of Kandhar Shashti Vizha in 2020. It featured performances by their students, and others. There was vocal and instrumental music, talks and short concerts by senior musicians. The multi-talented Revathi Sankkaran was conferred with the title Oppila Mani (Gem Nonpareil) on the inaugural day, which she accepted with humility and characteristic humour.

The school was started about nine years ago by Seetha Chidambaram at the house in the heart of Mylapore, bequeathed to her by her mother Oppilal Achi. Classes in vocal and instrumental music, Tevaram, dance, yoga and theatre are conducted by competent faculty and it has a current strength of about 75 students, young and old.

Several students showed remarkable promise in their short home recordings. The teenager Spoorthi Rao invited from outside to perform,

Spoorthi Rao



Entrance to the Oppilal School of Music and Fine Arts

is a rising star and impressed with her poise, maturity and a rootedness in the classical idiom. Endowed with a felicitous voice that courses with ease through akaram, gamakas, karvai and briga, she invests her music with a rich raga experience. Her brief alapana in Begada as a prelude to Papanasam Sivan's *Gana rasamudan*, gave a foretaste of the amazing depth and detail of her musical acumen. Saveri was powerful and weighty, though a tad long for the Tiruppavai.

The Shanmukhapriya, starting at the top, was vintage nagaswaram.

Among the several concerts of instrumental music, two stood out in the unique approach and presentation. In both, the instrument was the main and the voices served as accompaniments. 'Veenai' Kannan Balakrishnan led, as his wife Gayatri Kannan and daughter Mahathi Kannan followed. The voices blended

mellifluously, matching note for note and modulation for modulation. Tevaram, Tiruppugazh, kavadi chindu evoked bhakti in various moods and aspects while Kannan's sonorous strings rang with masculine power and robustness. His raga alapanas and interludes heightened the mood of the songs.

J.B. Sruthi Sagar's flute started as a solo with a bright opening *Mooladhara moorti* in Hamsadhwani. He was thereafter accompanied by his sister Keerthana, who joined with

Kannan Balakrishnan, Gayatri and Mahathi



her ringing voice. *Intha paramugam yethu* in Poorvikalyani was the main piece, rich in raga bhava. The sahitya bhava shone in the niraval for the lines *Nee oru silaiyo*. The siblings have a common sterling pathantaram and an unwavering grip on the solid core of classicism. With perfect understanding and anticipation, they provided a rich and wholesome fare.

Tamil and Muruga, S. Sowmya was on favourite and familiar ground where she could play to her heart's content in her one-hour concert. Opening with the varnam *Neelamayil* in Reetigaula by her guru S. Ramanathan, she followed with a viruttam *Aadum parive* where she dwelt on the interesting line *Paadum paniye paniyai arulvai* (Grant me the boon to have singing as my vocation). This formed the prelude to the brisk composition of Papanasam Sivan, *Mal maruga Shanmukha* in Vasanta. The peacock continued its dance with varying rhythmic patterns in Mazhavai Chidambara Bharati's *Ma mayura meethileri va*. The Bhairavi alapana was graphic and grammatic, exhaustive and scintillating with its architectonic grandeur. The Periasami Thooran composition *Pazham nee Pazhani* was reminiscent of the kriti *Upacharamulanu* of Tyagaraja in its musical score. *Va Velava* in Sivaranjani – composed by her guru, was a poignant number. With a fair sprinkling of viruttams, Tevaram, Tiruppugazh and kavadi chindu, Sowmya presented a rich spread of the various genres inspired by Lord Muruga.

Well-known media personality, Subashree Thanikachalam, presented a bouquet of film songs on Muruga over the decades, with details about the composers, music directors and the singers who came together to immortalise many of the melodies. Two young singers Santhosh and Rishipriya pitched in with a high level of competence, as the male



Subashree

and female voices. Some of the songs were in the classical mould while the others were light classical or light. Nevertheless, all of them poured forth bhakti in ample measure whether it was *Chindanai sei maname* in Kalyani or *Tiruchendooril kadalorattil*. Subashree's added descriptions of the God and the temples and festivals heightened the fervour.

Amazing prodigies

Sisur veti pasur veti, Vetu gana rasam phanee—(Babies and animals and even snakes recognise music) goes the saying. That children take to music at an incredibly young age has been seen in the lives of many prodigies. Mozart is supposed to have written his first composition at five. Carnatic music has had its share of prodigies like Mali, Ravikiran, E. Gayatri, U. Shrinivas, Abhishek Raghuram and others whose concert career started even before they entered the teens. In recent times, we have seen children like Surya Gayatri and Rahul Vellal who reached a wider audience through the web. The instant digital communication is now spreading amazing footage of prodigies in their homes. Several babes lisp out raga names as someone sings a few phrases.

Millions of viewers have watched this clipping, where the three-year-old toddler Shree is learning vocal music from his father Tanhaji Jadhav of

Surat. The kid belts out each line after his father, in full-throated fervour. The song is a piece of Natya Sangeet, a popular form of vocal music of Maharashtra, a genre of Hindustani music, that requires a high level of training. The baby sits straight backed, in total concentration as the music courses through his body, rather hurtles through as his arms wave about, his torso pitches forward and the face lifts to reach a high note.

Another prodigy, who is nameless, uses two sticks and a wooden board to beat out a fast rhythm in accompaniment to a film song played in the background. The boy cannot be over five and the assurance with which he plays the variations with precision belies his age. His teddy bear, perched on the window sill behind him, is a silent observer. The teacher, who is probably a chenda vidwan, can pride himself on identifying the extraordinary talent of the boy and training him to reach this level of mastery of rhythm.

A baby just about a year old, seated on his mother's lap and leading a Sai bhajan is a marvel with his perfect sense of melody and rhythm. He may be lisping, but the music is mature enough to lead a group of adults.

It is kids such as these who would inspire a whole new generation to take to music with a serious intent. Barely three decades ago despair had set in over the future of Carnatic music. With musicians and rasikas advancing in age, and the absence of youth on and in front of the stage, the future looked bleak for the art. The dramatic renaissance that commenced in the 1990s has brought in an army of talent to the fore and every year brings in new waves of performers. And they start young and how!

Music certainly holds a key to the mysterious and unfathomed powers of the human brain.

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