

# Celebrating women composers

Samuditha Foundation, founded by Carnatic vocalist Saketharaman, with its motto 'Carnatic music for all', has found a novel way to meet its objective. Kala Shiksha, the online music school run by the vocalist, provides innovative musical education to urban, suburban and rural children across the country through collaborations with seasoned teachers, who inspire and teach over 250 students, irrespective of caste or religion. The classes include the promotion of talents in various art forms while using Carnatic music as the fulcrum. Samuditha Foundation believes in the transformative power of music and that mentoring and building communities through music champions a positive social change. It conducts an annual event *Pennum Pannum*—a celebration of women composers, under its auspices where it honours women who have contributed to the fine arts, with the Samuditha Award of Excellence. This year, Sumathi Ramamohan Rao, the veteran mridangam artist, was honoured in the presence of Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi, Narthaki Nataraj, Akhila Srinivasan and Saketharaman. Akhila Srinivasan welcomed the gathering and shared that Shriram Group always associates with art and cultural initiatives. Vidushi Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi heaped praise on the awardee and mentioned that Sumathi Ramamohan Rao was the first lady mridangist to be conferred A Top grade. Dancer Narthaki Nataraj spoke about the need to make Carnatic music as part of the school curriculum. Saketharaman, in his vote of thanks, stated how children, by learning music, also learn cultural values, and that music will forever remain their companion for life. He spoke about abiding by



Sumathi Ramamohan Rao receiving the award from Narthaki Nataraj as Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi, Akhila Srinivasan and Saketharaman look on

our kalacharam (culture), samatvam (equality) and non-profit motive as the governing tenets of his foundation. He urged the members of the large audience to take their children to as many concerts as possible. The award function was followed by a concert rendered by Saketharaman on seven women composers; he was accompanied by vidwans H.N. Bhaskar, Patri Satish Kumar, B.S. Purushotham and Neyveli Rajalakshmi.

The number of songs composed by women that are sung on stage in a Carnatic concert is very less. There are close to 100 established women composers who have survived the societal barriers through their resilient artistry. Saketharaman's *Pennum*

*Pannum* - Season 2 was a celebration of women composers at a grand event conducted at Narada Gana Sabha this year.

Saketharaman commenced the concert with a *Tevaram* in Puraneermai pann—*Mangayarkarasi valavarkon paavai*. Mangayarkarasiyar is celebrated as one of the three women nayanmars along with Karaikal Ammaiyar and Isai Gnaniyar. She reformed her husband and brought the state back to Saivism with the help of Gnanasambandhar. Though she did not compose any song, Gnanasambandhar composed a *Tevaram* on her lauding her strong faith, and she is in an exalted status.

Saketharaman included an abhang

(L to R): Patri Satish Kumar, B.S. Purushotham, Saketharaman, Neyveli Rajalakshmi and H.N. Bhaskar



of Jana Bai in Malkauns raga, *Vidu maazalekuravaala*. Jana Bai was a servant maid in Sant Namdev's house but showed the world that true bhakti is the only parameter to attain God, not profession or caste. She is worshipped along with Namdev, Tukaram, Gnaneshwar, and Eknath amongst the Pandharpur bhaktas. Her powerful verses, over 300 in number, are soaked in atma nivedana form of bhakti.

Akka Mahadevi gave up everything in the material world and surrendered completely to Lord Chenna Mallikarjuna. She earned the name "Akka" for her fearless debate on philosophy. Saketharaman performed a vachana in Pahadi raga, *Akka kaelava* in simple Kannada, where she describes to her friend how she saw Lord Siva in her dreams.

Bangalore Nagaratnammal is the reason we all pay homage to Tyagaraja during his aradhana at Tiruvaiyaru. She spent her life's earnings to construct the Tyagaraja samadhi. Her javali in Khamas on Namakkal Narasimha intricately blends the raga bhava and sahitya bhava. Saketharaman performed the javali *Mathada baradeno* in a leisurely chauka kala.

The concert included contemporary composers as well. It is a common trend that we tend to ignore the greats around us. In this regard it is to be mentioned that musician-composer

Rukmini Ramani has composed on the 108 divya desams, on the 51 Shakti peethams, and the *Kapali Pancharatnam*. Saketharaman sang her Begada kriti on Tirukoodalur kshetram where Jagatrakshaka Perumal and Padmasanavalli Tayar are the deities. The divya desam is where the devas prayed when Hiranyaksha was running riot. Subsequently, the Lord took the form of Varaha in Srimushnam. The place is also famous for the Ambareesa-Durvasa episode. Rukmini Ramani has woven with brilliance the kshetra purana in each of her divya desa keertanas in classical ragas, intricate with swarakasharams—*Jagatkarana paripoorana Jagat rakshaka Narananey*.

Many are under the impression that bhakti is meant for the poor! Composer Ambujam Krishna clearly showed that although she hailed from a wealthy family, her mind was always devoted to God. Saketharaman presented a beautiful composition of Ambujam Krishna in Simhendramadhyamam tuned by vidwan Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan on Lord Narasimha. Saketharaman shared the background behind the composition which was narrated to him by Sujatha Vijayaraghavan. On the occasion of Narasimha Jayanti, T.N. Seshagopalan was invited to the house of Ambujam Krishna, who had composed the lyrics. He immediately tuned and sang it. Ambujam Krishna's brilliant verse

*Karana moondru than charanam thannil vaithu* has been brilliantly embellished with vadi-samvadi by vidwan Seshagopalan.

The finale of the concert was a tillana of Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi composed in Suddhasarang raga. This is a beautiful ode to Brindavana Krishna in the rich Lalgudi bani, wherein she has succinctly woven the raga mudra. Vijayalakshmi has composed many tillanas and set to tune many compositions of composers such as Suddhananda Bharathi.

The concert was followed by a performance by students of Saketharaman's music school Kala Shiksha. The students have been trained meticulously by the teachers of Kala Shiksha—Neyveli Rajalakshmi, Tripunithura Sreevidya, Mayiladuthurai Krithika, Sreelatha Balaji, Vidya Devanathan, Hubli Aparna, and Mumbai Nanditha. The acharyas specialise in various facets of Carnatic music and Tamil Isai—*Tevaram*, Malayalam compositions, Devarnama, and Sanskrit kritis. The 130 students performed in villupattu style to give an introduction about each of the ten women composers, which was followed by the musical renditions that touched everyone's hearts.

Overall, it was a well-spent evening for all the rasikas and parents of the children.

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