

# The voice that binds

In a conversation with **Meena Banerjee**, Carnatic vocalist Aruna Sairam talks about the meeting ground between Carnatic and Hindustani music, and the importance of audience.

Celebrated Carnatic vocalist Vidushi Aruna Sairam was in Kolkata recently to participate in ‘Arpan’, a uniquely designed all-women conference by ITC Sangeet Research Academy. In the final slot of the final evening of this Puja offering, she enchanted all with her inspired singing and amiable persona. Both these virtues are essential in evolving listenership among interested, albeit uninitiated listeners; but very few of the conservative Carnatic musicians step forward to do so. Usually, they take it for granted that the kritis they sing during a grand concert are familiar with all and, if not, there are ‘concert guide books’ to help them!

When asked about her noticeably different approach, Sairam answered in a very matter-of-fact manner, “This is due to a sequence of events that happened in my life. The unusual situation was that I am a South Indian by ancestry; my parents belong to Tanjore and Trichi in Tamil Nadu; but they started their life in Bombay (now Mumbai). My mother Rajalakshmi Sethuraman, a vocalist, initiated me into music. Both my parents were interested in all genres of music and my father, a connoisseur of arts, wished to expose me to the same. All the great artistes, with no demarcation as musician, dancer, painter or littérateur, visited and stayed in our Mumbai house; be it Ustad Amir Khan, Sanjukta Panigrahi, Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan or Balarasawati, MS



MELODY HER VIRTUE Aruna Sairam; (right) at the event PHOTO: R. RAVINDRAN

Subbulaksmi and Harikatha, the exponents from the South. The difference between dance and music or South and North was never there.” And yet she does not feel that she is ‘an authority’ to assess the similarities and difference between these two streams of Indian music. “Whatever I say is from my bird’s eye view. The raga and tala are the two anchors of both the systems. The beauty lies in the cyclic application of swaras (sa to sa and back)

and talas (sam to sam). But the style of gamak-laden swara-application is vastly different. Hindustani music focuses on steady notes and applies a particular type of gamaks while in Carnatic music mostly oscillation leads to a note. Even common ragas appear different due to this difference in swara-application. One needs to get accustomed to it to identify the raga.” She goes on to add that raga development is very

much “like architectural work”. “The building blocks of Carnatic music rely heavily on phrases while Hindustani music, at times, lays emphasis on notes. As for the innovative part, the genre of khayal enjoys a lot of loose area for innovative development. We can find that in pallavi to some extent because it has a refrain only. But while singing the kritis we do alap, bol-alap (neraval) and kalpana-swara (sargam). Despite all, the amount of composed or structured part

is more in Carnatic music. We try to keep the structure of the composition intact.” One learnt that when Sangeet Kalanidhi T Brinda, known for the Dhanammal bani, came to Sairam’s Bombay home as a guest once. That chance meeting became a life-long association of Guru-Shishya. Sairam’s musical style is a rich blend of Dhanammal school and the influences of her many other mentors who helped hone her skills in swara and pallavi singing,

taught her the finer nuances of ragas replete with swaraprastaras, augmented her repertoire of padams and jawalis apart from traditional kritis and helped enrich her literary skills as well. Always open to new vistas, she further enriched her repertoire to add new dimensions to her music with her research into Mallari and by learning compositions of Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi (1700 – 1765). She played a key role in propagating these brilliant, yet relatively neglected compositions on the contemporary concert stage. Blessed with a clear diction in Sanskrit, English and Hindi as well and hugely benefited by reputed voice trainers, who helped her exploit the full potential of her voice, she ushered in a welcome cosmopolitan approach to Carnatic concert presentation, while remaining firmly rooted in its classical grammar and tradition. Widely admired for her theoretical knowledge and articulation, she regularly participates in lecture-demonstrations. She has received many national and international awards including the Padma Shri. Despite all these decorations and accolades, she floored me with her honest answer when I asked whether she sings to entertain. “If one claims that music is ‘Swantah sukhyaha’ only, then it is a fallacy. The minute there are two/three people sitting in my music room, I will immediately become conscious of their presence and begin to ‘perform’. Why talk of people, even if I sing for my

deity, I try to please Him. During Navaratri, I will not sing songs on Krishna. Once on the concert platform, I must think about all the listeners. I believe that the way I have taleem in music, they too have acquired proficiency in some other subject and for some reason they are here to listen to me. It is, therefore, my privilege to reach out to them and treat them with whatever I have in my melodic treasures. After all the audience is a part of one’s music!” For Sairam an occasion and its location is important, because “with reference to context my mood is created. Suppose I am in Tamil Nadu, I naturally speak in Tamil. I arrived here directly from the UK. There my mode of communication was English, but here I must include at least one Bengali item!” (and she did). “I also accept wedding

concerts simply because at least the hosts display their preference for classical to pop and aim at creating an auspicious environment. It is anticipated that there will be hustle and bustle. I do not expect everyone to listen to my music and accept it as a wonderful practice session where I can try out new things. For happy occasions I like to sing ragas like Kharaharapriya, Todi, Kamboji - with positive energy.” Goaded by her deep sense of social responsibility, Sairam keeps donating proceeds from her concerts and records to cancer hospitals and to rehabilitate destitute families of musicians. How does she, as the vice chairperson of Sangeet Natak Akademi, plans to help musicians and propagate music? “We have a wonderful team led by Shekhar Sen-ji and eminent musicians like Shivkumar Sharmaji, Ajoy (Chakrabarty) da, Birju Maharaj-ji, Vishwa Mohan-bhai. We have proposed various plans, including re-introduction of performing arts in regional languages in primary schools and make road-signs like, ‘You are approaching Bengal, the land of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Tagore’ to sensitise and educate people about our rich heritage. We now hold meetings at different states to spread the movement. I am glad the youngsters are taking classical music seriously. Albeit the path is difficult, they are blessed because music is an art that nourishes and enriches the soul.”



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## DANCE Moving like a master

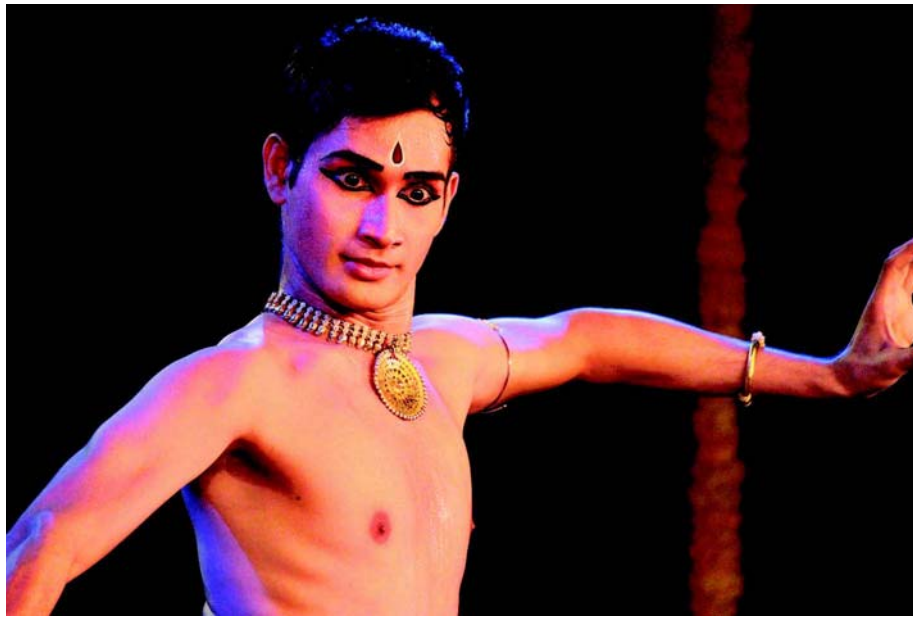
Kuchipudi dancer Avijit Das shone in parts during his performance in New Delhi.

RANEE KUMAR

Avijit Das, a rising star on the Kuchipudi horizon, gave a commendable performance in the traditional repertoire for most part of his performance at the India Habitat Centre. For this critic it felt like going down memory lane to watch a vibrant execution of a ‘shabdham,’ ‘Dasavataram’ and “Tarangam” devoid of interpolations in the name

of sophistry. Avijit brought the memories of Kuchipudi masters come alive with his untampered style. Beginning with a Pushpanjali and continuing into an invocation to Ganesha, the shabdham as this particular piece is termed had all the trappings of its category which the artiste executed with grace (a la Chinna Satyam maestro) and vigour. The Dasavataram was

quintessential Kuchipudi with its daru and repetitive refrain which gave ample scope for improvisation of each verse (avatar) in terms of abhinaya. The stances were etched out of a hoary past when this dance was performed only by male artistes. The pieces are always crisp and invigorating and never too long-drawn; so did the dancer who kept a close eye on the text and idiom in



RIISING TO THE OCCASION Avijit Das

all earnestness. His footwork, gesticulation and sancharis were accurate to the changing pace of the

rhythm; the only polish he brought into the dance without sacrificing its purity of expression was his

stylishly cut out movements and eloquent facial feelings in tune with the connotation of the lyric.

The popular Narayanateertha tarangam ‘Aaloka ye Sri Bala Krsnum...’ was preceded by a divine sloka that was like a pointer to what would follow. His sanchari and abhinaya as he skirts along the refrain (sangathoe) ‘Govatsa brunda palaka...’ a number of times varied as he unfolded the instances in child Krsna’s life (Bhagavat). Krsna’s tussle with the serpent Kalindi in the waters of Yamuna was depicted with dexterity - on one side a playful lord trying to vanquish and on the other, a venomous reptile wanting to overpower. The tarangam as usual wrapped up with dance on

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the brass plate. It was a neat execution with clarity of sound and jingle (anklet bells and plate) to mnemonic utterances and percussion. The artiste has tremendous balancing power going by his striking postures. However, the tillana to a Swati Tirunal composition was a far cry from the traditional Kuchipudi pattern that has so far regaled us. The song and tune were such that the tillana had to be undertaken in a leisurely fashion, a reversal from the vigour of this genre. The last piece, a Purandhara Dasa’s aarti was repetitive of Dasavatara imagery in a nutshell as it was embedded in the lyric. In fact, the artiste emulated the avatars with elan yet the repetitive element could not be overlooked. A judicious choice of items would have embellished the recital as it reached a conclusion and made for a wholesome treat.

## EVENT Custodians of heritage

The performances at Delhi Classical Music Festival and Uttaradhihar festival by Raza Foundation reaffirmed our belief in the efficacy of guru-shishya parampara.

MANJARI SINHA

Our centuries old intangible heritage of classical music is the precious legacy being carried forward by the stalwarts of each generation to the worthy inheritors of the generation next, who are groomed with care by their gurus. The two festivals held recently were an assurance for those who worry for the future of this cherished heritage and reaffirmed our belief in the unique tradition of the guru-shishya parampara that carries it forward. If the Delhi Classical Music Festival presented stalwarts like Pandit Jasraj, Dr. N Rajam, Pandit Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, Ustad Iqbal Ahmad Khan, Ustad Rashid Khan, Pandit Satish Vyas, Ustad Nishat Khan, Pandit Ronu Majumdar, Vidushi Kalapini Komkali and the young duo Ustad Jawaad and Mazhar Ali Khan in a five-day

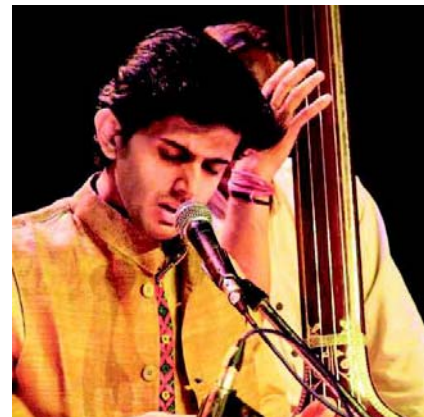
festival of classical vocal and instrumental music; the Raza Foundation showcased the worthy inheritors of the



Kalapini Komkali, the gifted daughter and disciple of Pandit Kumar Gandharva and Vidushi Vasundhara Komkali, mesmerised the audience with her vibrant vocal recital.

classical vocal and instrumental music in the dhrupad recital by Chintan Upadhyay, rudra veena recital by Venkatkrishnan and the impressive khayal rendition by Srijan Deshpande in their festival Uttaradhihar. The Delhi classical Music Festival took off to a flying start with the soulful sitar recital by Ustad Nishat Khan, the worthy inheritor of the Itawa Imdadkhani Gharana. Nishat, the son and disciple of Ustad Imrat Khan and the nephew of Ustad Vilayat Khan. He had the distinct tonal touch and the ecstatic echo of both the renowned ustadhs from his gharana in his detailed delineation of the evening raga Yaman, Nand and the romantic Tilak Kamod. The unhurried hour-long Aalap-Jod-Jhala in Raga Yaman was followed by two traditional gat-compositions in Teen tala that continued with the bandishh “E bare Saiyaan....” in Raga Nand that

he sang too. This was followed with a Tilak Kamod Bandishh in drut ek-tala, his own composition. Rashid Mustafa Thirakwa was brilliant in his tabla accompaniment. Pandit Jasraj took the inaugural evening to its climax with his in-depth rendition of raga Jog, the spiritual aura of the Haveli Sangeet style Ashta-Chhap Pada and the concluding Krishna Naam Sankeertan with its individualistic devotional fervour which got him standing ovation. The sonorous strains of raga Bageshri on the melodious violin by N. Rajam was followed by the bandishhi thumri in Khamaj “Na manoongi...” with the typical purab ang Benarasi touches and the concluding Bhairavi Dhun. Kalapini Komkali, the gifted daughter and disciple of Pandit Kumar Gandharva and Vidushi Vasundhara Komkali, mesmerised the



MUSIC WITH A SOUL Srijan Upadhyay and Pandit Jasraj

audience with her vibrant vocal recital. Her main raga Shuddha Kalyan with the traditional bada khayal “Bolan lage...”, the chhota khayal “Mora re...” and a drut ek-tala composition by Kumarji, had all the authentic grammatical ingredients of the raga, yet sounded refreshingly innovative. She specially sang the composition “Deep ki jyot jale...” welcoming the Diwali Festival in raga Dhana-Basanti created by Patiala Gharana, santoor by Pandit Satish Vyas and flute recital by Pandit Ronu Majumdar were some of the highlights of the five-day festival that concluded with the roaring applause for the star vocalist Ustad Rashid Khan. Making their gurus proud Raza Foundation’s Uttaradhihar Festival was the brainchild of artist and a great visionary Syed Haider Raza, who wanted to promote young talents.

Madhuvanti and Shiva Ranjani, followed by his usual series of “Vande Mataram”, “Vaishnava Jana” to “Raghupati Raghav”, the Grammy tune and of course the “Kesaria balam” in which he also insisted to sing along. Vocal recitals by Ustad Iqbal Ahmad Khan of Dilli Gharana, Mazahar Javaad of Patiala Gharana, santoor by Pandit Satish Vyas and flute recital by Pandit Ronu Majumdar were some of the highlights of the five-day festival that concluded with the roaring applause for the star vocalist Ustad Rashid Khan. Making their gurus proud Raza Foundation’s Uttaradhihar Festival was the brainchild of artist and a great visionary Syed Haider Raza, who wanted to promote young talents.

Uttaradhihar showcasing the worthy disciples of the Raza awardees from the field of classical music and dance opened with the rudra veena recital by T.M. Venkatakrishnan. This talented disciple of Ustad Bahauddin Dagar, who came from a small village of Trichi, played a detailed Aalap-Jod-Jhala in raga Chandrakauns followed with Dhrupad Gat compositions set to Chautala. Chintan Upadhyay, the dedicated disciple of Pandit Uday Bhawalkar, chose the sombre evening raga Puriya and rendered alap in vilambit, madhya and drut followed by dhrupad compositions set to raga Chautala and Sool-Tala respectively, doing full justice to the serenity of the raga and the dhrupad style of singing. Srijan Upadhyay from



Mumbai, trained under his father Pandit Satyasheel Deshpande in khayal gayaki, chose to sing raga Bhimpalasi, the melodious afternoon raga one hardly gets to listen. Srijan hit the bull’s eye right from his first Swar-Lagaav of his introductory alap and rendered the slow composition set to jhumra tala, with systematic alap-badhat, bol-alap, boltana and aakar taans. This was followed by a beautiful tarana composition of Kumar Gandharva in teen-tala. The second raga Gaud-Malhar had a traditional bandishh in teen-tala followed by a lovely composition of Pandit Satyasheel Deshpande in Drut Ek-tala “van me, saavan men, sakhi baras gayo Shyam Ghan tan men...”. It was difficult to believe that it was Srijan’s first stage performance for such a prestigious festival. There were also a Kathak recital by Arti, a talented disciple of Prerana Shirmali on the inaugural day, Bharatanatyam by Jyotsna Jagannath, the worthy disciple of Malavika Sarukkai and Odissi recital by Saumya Ghosh, the male dancer trained under Sujata Mohapatra. All these young artists made their gurus proud with flawless renditions by their chosen disciplines and assured the music lovers that the future of classical music and dance is totally secured.