

COVER STORY CHENNAI SEASON

# Song and Dance

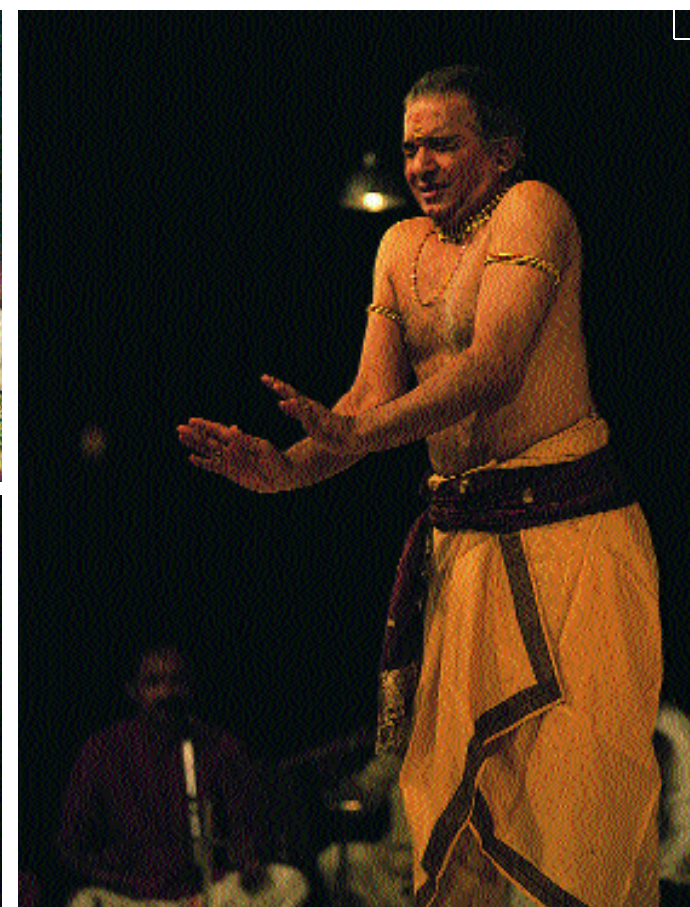
V. VENKATESAN gets in the mood for Chennai's soirées

I can't possibly say this without gloating: I've sat cross-legged on the dais of the Music Academy in Chennai during an M.S. Subbulakshmi performance. That's the Carnatic music equivalent of, say, watching a Test century by Sachin Tendulkar at Lord's—not from the stands, not even from the pavilion, but from near about the forward short leg position, barely a few paces away from him. The happy sequence of events that led to my getting a wing-side (repeat, wing-side) seat to watch the maestro at that majestic theatre was entirely fortuitous. Minutes earlier, the doors had been slammed shut on me and about a hundred others. An usher informed us in colloquial Tamil that the auditorium was bursting at its seams, that "there wasn't room enough even for a fly". At that moment, however, he received word that some of us could be accommodated on the dais provided we conducted ourselves with decorum. I was swept inside, by a pointedly indecorous surge of women in Kanjeevarams and flashing diamonds.

December-January in Chennai is the season of mists and mellifluous music. It's when the metropolis, cooled by the north-east monsoon, comes alive with festivals that showcase its musical and dance traditions. The musical tradition is, of course, centuries old, but the festival of music and dance in sabhas (concert halls) originated in 1927. Its roots can be traced to an 'all-India music conference' held alongside the Madras session of the Indian National Congress. The Music Academy, founded that year, has held its festival every year since. (That record of cultural continuum, however, has been

A kutcheri in progress (left); and audiences at the Music Academy

Photographs by G. SIVAPERUMAL



S. ANWAR/Wilderfile

V. MUTHURAMAN

**From left: classes at Kalakshetra; a nadaswaram kutcheri; V.P. Dhananjayan; and Gitanjali Kolanad's contemporary dance**

at risk in recent years owing to a legal tussle among its office-bearers.) Over the decades, many more such clubs have come up. At last count, there were more than 70; the 2002-03 'season' saw some 1,800 concerts and 400 dance performances.

This frenetic schedule—averaging over 70 performances a day—leaves even diehard rasikas spoilt for choice. Diligent sabha-hopping, therefore, offers the best chance to take in as many performances as possible. Most sabhas publish guidebooks and newspaper ads listing their programmes. Music lovers chart out their day's itinerary and criss-cross the city with the focussed intensity of rally drivers.

Performers like K.J. Yesudas, P. Unnikrishnan, Nityashree Mahadevan, Sudha Raghunathan, Aruna Sairam, Ialgudi G. Jayaraman and U. Srinivas draw full houses wherever they perform. The spectacular shows at Kalakshetra, the school of music and dance, too, are a big draw. And in recent years, The Park's The Other Festival, showcasing art forms from the world over, has drawn encouraging responses. Of the Hindustani artists (from Abdul Karim Khan in the 1930s to Bade Ghulam Ali in the 1950s to Parveen Sultana since the 1970s), Pandit Jasraj, Hariprasad Chaurasia, Zakir Hussain and Birju Maharaj enjoy tremendous popular appeal.

Of course, for many rasikas, attendance at kutcheris isn't entirely motivated by appreciation of the arts. Nityashree Mahadevan's sartorial preferences at different concerts are analysed as clinically as her raga alapanas. Likewise, Sudha Raghunathan's jhumkas and saris have pitchforked sales of

similar fashion lines. Salwar kameezes are becoming fashionable among audiences, but a growing preference for pashmina shawls is unfathomable, given that Chennai temperatures never go below 20°C even in this 'coldest' season.

Alongside the cultural feast within the auditoriums, other sensory delights are on offer without: canteens attached to some sabhas do roaring business. Over mouthfuls of onion pakodas and filter coffee, connoisseurs of music share notes, debate the nuances of raga delineation and critique performers. Old-timers recall magical moments from the past—when concerts lasted four hours or more. Vocalist G.N. Balasubramaniam's last concert at the Academy in December 1964 is recalled with particular fondness: despite a chronic heart ailment (which claimed his life barely six months later), GNB gave a masterly performance, and his delineation of the Kalyani raga that night gives goosebumps to listeners to this day. GNB's disciple, M.L. Vasanthakumari, was another colourful personality. V. Sriram, a member of the core group that runs the music portal Sangeetham.com, recalls that during the 1970s, cricket Test matches in Chennai inevitably coincided with the music season: MLV was known to spend whole days cheering the Indian team at Chepauk and then proceed to the Academy to give outstanding performances.

Critiques are not confined to sabha canteens. Reviews of performances are tracked closely—and, in turn, subjected to savage criticism. One man, in particular, has elevated music and dance criticism to a mass-appeal art form: the octogenar-

ian Subbudu (as he is best known) has, over more than 50 years explored new frontiers in the genre. No artist, however exalted, is immune to Subbudu's sharp-edged pen, with its wit-laced ink. In fact, he has been sued by several artists for defamation; some sabha organisers put up notices barring "dogs and Subbudu"; and, on one occasion, he was roughed up in Tiruvaiyaru by fans who didn't savour his questioning the contributions of a revered 18th-century composer.

Of course, the season is open to criticism on other counts. A recurring concern relates to the inability—or unwillingness—of performers and organisers to reach out to audiences beyond the Tam-Brahm bhadrakok and the diaspora. Some of this is rooted in the evolution of Bharata Natyam from the nautch tradition of Sadir, practised by the Devadasi community in temples. Social reform movements of the 1920s and the 1930s, which sought to banish the Devadasi system, also banned Sadir performances for their association with it. E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale (incidentally, Brahmins both) rescued the art form, bowdlerised it—some would say 'Brahminised' it—by emphasising *bhakti* over *sringara*, brought it on to the stage, and lent it a certain respectability which ensured continued patronage.

Other critics rant about the commercialisation of sabha culture—to the point where indigent clubs offer their platforms

in return for a donation—and the consequent dilution of standards. Others, like dancer and arts administrator Anita Ratnam, have redefined the grammar of artistic expression with contemporaneity. She positions The Other Festival as a "path-breaking, icon-shattering, ground-shaking" expression of art forms. "Today, tradition is treated like a pond: stagnant and dull," says Ratnam. "We, however, define tradition as what we can easily identify with, what makes us comfortable."

Another tradition in Chennai is the Margazhi Bhajans, particularly the one around Mylapore's Kapaleeswarar temple. At daybreak, a group of people gather at the temple, with tambura and harmonium in tow. Singing Carnatic compositions—principally those of Papanasam Sivan, who revived the bhajan tradition here—they perambulate the temple agraharam and the tank, with brief musical stopovers at assigned spots. Anyone can join in, as singer or listener. There's a nip in the air, women in nine-yard saris are drawing elaborate kolams outside their agraharam homes, and alfresco singers belt out compositions you won't hear in concert halls... Plus, there's the prospect of rounding off the morning with idli-vadai-pongal-coffee at the famed Karpagamal Mess.

Sangeetham.com, promoted by vocalist Sanjay Subrahmanyam, has been organising early morning 'walks' around places with a musical history. On occasion, participants get a chance to interact with musicians and music historians, which adds another dimension to their appreciation of the fine arts that Chennai resonates with, come December. ●

## CHENNAI SEASON

## THE INFORMATION



N. THAMBIAH/Wilderfile

**Women draw kolams at the entrance to their home****Schedules**

The websites [www.sangeetham.com](http://www.sangeetham.com) and [www.kutcheribuzz.com](http://www.kutcheribuzz.com) publish programme guides online from mid-November. Kutcheribuzz also brings out a hard copy of the guide to some key sabhas; write to [editor@kutcheribuzz.com](mailto:editor@kutcheribuzz.com) or call 044-24994599 for a free copy (you'll have to pay for postage). Sabhas should have drawn up their programmes by Nov 15.

**Highlights**

Music connoisseurs believe the pick of the sabhas this year will be the Krishna Gana Sabha in T. Nagar (28140806), which is celebrating its Golden Jubilee. With most sabhas, you won't need to book tickets in advance—except for prime-time slots (6-9.30pm). Kutcheribuzz offers advance booking at select sabhas, for a small fee; Vincent D'Souza of Kutcheribuzz is helpful.

Music Academy's schedule for this season (Dec 18-Jan 1) isn't out yet. Given its place in musical history, attending a concert here is a must-do. Look out for its double-bill tickets (valid for two back-to-back performances, from about 4.30pm onwards). On Jan 1, Lalgudi G. Jayaram is billed to perform at the auditorium at Mylapore Fine Arts Club (2499-2660); that and the performance by K.J. Yesudas are sure to be

sell-outs, so book ahead.

Kalaksheetra's festival (Dec 26-Jan 4) promises to be special—2003-2004 marks Rukmini Devi's birth centenary. For tickets, call 2491-1169 (10am-4pm); also, visit the campus to watch classes (9.30-11.15am; entrance Rs 25).

The Park's The Other Festival this year (Dec 1-7) will be held at the quaint, circular 100-plus-year-old Museum Theatre in Egmore. This year's programme includes poetry reading by Zohra Sehgal; contemporary dance by the Taipei Li-Yuan Chinese Opera Theatre from Taiwan; and a puppet, mask and actors' performance by Brigitte Reveill and A. Selvaraj. Season tickets: Rs 300-1,000; daily tickets: Rs 50. Contact Arangham Trust (28524917).

**Lec-dems**

In the season, a few sabhas organise lec-dems in the afternoons/early evenings—audiences get to interact with musicians, musicologists and dancers. But they're really intended for an informed audience, so if you don't know a Hamsadhvani from a Charukesi, you may not find these sessions gripping.

**Soul food**

Sabhas with canteens draw disproportionately heavy crowds—the interplay of Carnatic music and culinary offerings runs deep. Some caterers have acquired

**Sabha canteens rustle up kutcheri specials**

rather more fame than some junior artists! Krishna-murthy's halwas were legendary. Today, 75-year-old 'Arusuvai' Natarajan is the undisputed king; until a few years ago, his famed fare was on offer at the Academy, but he has since taken his skills—and a section of the Academy's audiences!—to the

Parthasarathy Swami Sabha, one of the city's oldest concert clubs. His brothers 'Gnanambika' Jayaraman (caters at the Narada Gana Sabha) and 'Minambika' Kannan (Mylapore Fine Arts Club) are next in line in the catering sweepstakes.

**Music sales**

For Carnatic music lovers, this is a great time to go on an acquisition spree: AVM and Essen Musicals sell cassettes and CDs at huge discounts. The AVM sale is held at the Sankara Hall on TTK Road, near the Academy. Essen's sale is held not far away.

**Music walks**

Sangeetham.com plans to organise four music walks this year: Mylapore (Dec 13); Santhome (Dec 20); Triplicane (Dec 27); George Town (Dec 28). Rs 300 per person per walk; there are limited seats for the two-hour, early-morning walks, which take in places of musical interest and conclude with breakfast. To book, email V. Sriram at [sangeetham@sangeetham.com](mailto:sangeetham@sangeetham.com)

**Margazhi bhajans**

Held every day during the Tamil month of Margazhi around Mylapore's Kapaleeswarar Temple. To attend, assemble at the eastern gate by 5.30-6am. Dress warmly, and carry an

**Bharata Natyam performance**

facilities as well. UR Options offers stays in centrally located city homes, in Nungambakkam, Harrington Road, Egmore and T. Nagar. (The T. Nagar home is closest to most of the bigger sabhas.) AC rooms (single/double occupancy) with baths, TV, phone, laundry and kitchen facilities, for short stay (up to 1 week) and medium-term stay (more than a week). Short-stay tariffs range from Rs 1,000-1,400 a day. Contact: Savita Rao (9841074498);

**The in-season CD and cassette sales offer huge discounts**

umbrella. Look out for the elaborate kolams around the agharam. For details, contact S. Natarajan (52123015).

**Mylapore Festival**

Organised every year by community newspaper Mylapore Times (24982244), near the Kapalee temple's eastern gate. Folk arts are showcased, and a kolam competition organised. This year, there are plans to draw a massive kolam (with one lakh dots).

**Where to stay**

Chennai has a range of hotels to suit every budget, but you now have homestyle accommodation

[ur\\_options@hotmail.com](mailto:ur_options@hotmail.com);

[www.geocities.com/vuuroptions](http://www.geocities.com/vuuroptions))

Some music lovers offer PG accommodation in the season; these are not commercial establishments, and often have only a room or two to let. Options: one AC room with twin-beds and breakfast in Karpagam Avenue, R.A. Puram for Rs 1,500. Contact: Radha Venuprasad (24951451). Two double-bedrooms, also in Karpagam Avenue for Rs 400-1,000 (AC billing and breakfast extra). Contact: Sowmiya Madangopal (24953430).

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