

The Cleveland Aradhana Festival Sustaining Sampradaya in North America

The inaugural concert at the 30th Cleveland Aradhana was a trendsetter. Called “Sustaining Sampradayam”, it featured a full concert by a group of 28 boys and girls brought up in North America. The children were trained for this concert by several well-known Carnatic music vidwans from India, without face-to-face contact, using the Internet. The students included about twenty vocalists, instruments making up the rest of the ensemble with venu, veena, violin and mridanga. These youngsters came from great distances across the United States— from California to New Jersey and from Texas to Michigan.

The idea was conceived by the organisers of the festival (read V.V. Sundaram) and announced in October 2006. There was much scepticism and many expressed doubts about the outcome. The more cynical perception was to view this as a mere fundraising gimmick at the expense of good music. But the Cleveland Aradhana Committee, the vidwans who took up the task of preparing the students and the students themselves proved them all to be mistaken.

Selected students had trained for this concert over the

Internet to sing specific kriti-s with several vidwans located in India for a period of a few weeks. The efforts and the training were painstaking. According to one of the teachers who spoke to us, each teacher would teach one student a song. The lesson would be recorded and transmitted along with notation to all the others so they could learn each song in that particular style— a somewhat Ekalavyan concept. Thus did Seetha Rajan teach the varnam and P.S. Narayanaswamy the Dikshitar kriti. Srimushnam Raja Rao even recorded himself accompanying each song, and his students used the recording as an aid to practice.

Every vidwan and every student had laboured long and hard to be able to create the evidence of effortless performance on the day of the programme. Even selecting the sruti was not easy. Alapana and swaram-s had to be “practised” to some extent to allow for seamless transitions, as each singer or instrumentalist would pick up where the other left off. The effect for the audience was quite extraordinary as a Bhairavi was started by a lower voice and handed over before being picked up by a violin and then a flute and so on. Each transition seemed natural and unrehearsed.

A section of youngsters participating in the “Sustaining Sampradayam”

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Guru-s on site

Suguna Purushothaman

A.S. Murali

R. Thiagarajan

H.S. Sudhinder

Jayalakshmi Santhanam

Srimushnam Raja Rao

N. Ramani

K.N. Shashikiran

Cleveland Awards

Each year the Cleveland Aradhana recognises a number of individuals for their contribution to the world of Carnatic music and to classical dance. The award ceremony is an abbreviated affair on Saturday evening squeezed between the two main concerts of the evening. The awards are an important recognition for those who serve the art world in North America. Some of the other awards are given to musicians and artists who are not always household names but are nevertheless individuals who have been a signal presence in the world of Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam. This year's main awardees included M. Chandrasekharan (Sangeetha Rathnakara), Chitra Visweswaran (Nrithya Rathnakara), Chingleput Ranganathan (Sangeetha Kala Sagaram), Yamini Krishnamurti (Nrithya Kala Sagaram), Chitraveena N. Narasimhan (Acharya Rathnakara), Dr. Harold Powers (Seva Rathna), Dr. Amrutur (Sheenu) Srinivasan (Kala Seva Mani), and Bala Devi Chandrashekar (Nrithya Seva Mani).

M. Chandrasekharan and Chingleput Ranganathan gave concerts at the festival. Chitra Visweswaran presented a dance programme in the coveted Sunday night slot.

The only rehearsals in which all the students were under the same roof and in the physical presence of many of the teachers were at Cleveland, a mere two days before the actual concert. According to one of the teachers, these two days were long and very strenuous. "But the students were attentive and hard working. They could also adapt and learn quickly and make the changes and adjustments required."

The planning of the concert was meticulous and adhered to sampradaya. Many major composers were represented. The concert started with the navaragamalika varnam followed by the invocatory Gaula piece (*Sree Mahaganapati*), Poorvikalyani (*Gnanamosagarada*) in the fourth slot, Bhairavi as the major piece (*Tanayuni brova*) and an RTP in Mohanam (Khanda Tripura tala), tillana and Tiruppugazh. Other songs included Nagaswaravali (*Sreepatey*), Tarangini (*Maaye*), Chenchukambhoji (*Vara raga laya*) and Hindolam (*Ma ramanan*). The announcement by one of the children about the different pathantaram-s of the kriti-s and what they had adopted (Poorvikalyani, Tarangini) was apt and reflected their attention to evolutionary details.

The execution of the pieces was flawless, exuding enthusiasm and confidence. The unison in which they performed was just unbelievable. The 'accompanists' were excellent, particularly the two youngsters on the mridanga. Plenty of scope was provided to show individual prowess by sharing the raga alapana, niraval and kalpana swara sessions. The concert was truly majestic, in spite of the various constraints under which the participants had trained. The repeated ovation they received during the full-featured concert was testimony to the impact it made on the audience. They received well-deserved thunderous applause and a sustained standing ovation at

the end of the concert. A combination of vision, planning, talent, teachers, technology and sheer tenacity enabled the stunning event. To sustain sampradaya on foreign soil is not easy, but here was proof that it could be done. Whether it can be repeated each year without losing its impact remains an open question.

Did the concert fill the bill of 'sustaining sampradayam'? A resounding yes! The young artists, their teachers, parents and the organisers of the event can be justifiably proud of the enormous success of the project. The memories of this concert event will linger for those who were fortunate enough to witness it. Many would agree that this alone was worth the trip to Cleveland this year. Others can only hope that this group will take their music across North America and to the many music festivals of India. Will this spawn similar efforts at other music festivals around the world? Let us hope so.

S.T. RAO &
SHANKAR RAMACHANDRAN

Children make it special

I arrived at Cleveland on Friday and went straight to the main hall. The lobby was buzzing with activity. Among the visitors, the artists, display booths and vendors, were all the children. They were everywhere. Bright faces and ages from age 5 to 17 or even 18. They were in the halls and the corridors. They filled up every room in the big complex, as competitions for six to eight or more different age groups and categories took place simultaneously. There were parents hovering about, some meeting up with friends, some nervous and others purposeful. Grandparents stood by with food and drink. Volunteers for everything—from ticket sales to serving food and from sound systems to

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stage sets were up and bustling about. The children whose turns were over looked relaxed and were playing. Others were practising in every nook and cranny of the halls of Cleveland State University.

At the *Sruti* table, we got to see a lot of the families. Every so often we would have a youngster stop by. We asked them how old they were and where they came from. Some were a bit shy and soft spoken; others spoke with a sunny confidence. We asked a number of children to sing for us. With a few exceptions, they adopted a serious expression and proceeded to sing kriti-s like *Chakkani raja* or *Marubalka*. We even heard a *Dwaitamu sukhama*. The voices were steady and had a firm grip on the months and years of effort.

Every corridor and every classroom was a scene of serious activity. The judges were listening as the children performed. Not just vocal. There were mridanga and violin competitions. Veena and flute. There was even a Harikatha competition this year judged by Visakha Hari among others.

New Jersey and California seemed to be the most frequently represented States, but there were children from nearly every contiguous State on the mainland. Canada was well represented; Toronto and Montreal at any rate.

Vidwans and vidushi-s abounded. I cannot begin to name them all. Senior musicians, musicologists, instrumentalists, established stars, and up-and-coming musicians— all had congregated in Cleveland. They were all there to judge and to perform and suddenly it struck me that they also seemed to be enjoying mingling with the young children who were there for the competition.

Here and there in the great lobby one could see the small hives of activity. One could spot a Vellore Ramabhadran or a TRS holding court with students and parents listening attentively.

Returning from lunch I heard someone playing the violin around the corner. I thought it must be a senior artist. I waited for someone to emerge from behind the wall. I saw a little girl come by! No one else came out. I looked at the girl again and I saw she was carrying a violin box almost too big for her. I squatted down a bit so I could be close to her as I spoke. I asked her if that was her playing the violin. “Yes,” she hesitantly replied. I asked her if she would play a song for us at the *Sruti* table. “I’m feeling a bit uncomfortable,” she said. I suggested she go ask her parents. She nodded in relief and walked away in her pavadai and chokka. She returned a while later with her

mother. She was ten years old. She sat on the floor by our table and played *Kaligiyyuntegada*. Exquisite firm notes emanated. Not a hint of any hesitation. The violin spoke and sang and we felt every phrase being delivered with a depth not found in more senior musicians. People around us stopped to listen. Listening to her play it is easy now to understand why we think music is a divine gift. The next day she came by our table again clutching a handful of trophies she had won.

What brings all these youngsters here? How do they experience Cleveland? What do they take away from all this? I caught up with three youngsters who agreed to meet and speak with me about their experiences at Cleveland. Swetha Chandrasekhar and her brother Rohit from Princeton, New Jersey and Sarvesh Ramprakash from Potomac, Maryland chatted with me for a while before they, along with most of the other children, disappeared on Sunday.

“It is as if we all attend a music gurukulam for that short period, learning, enjoying and appreciating music, while meeting old and new friends,” says Rohit. “One of the most exciting parts of Cleveland is meeting the artists in person and getting autographs. It is not just about coming and competing to see who’s the best. It brings people from all over the world under one roof to share the one thing guaranteed to be common among everyone, the love for music,” adds Swetha.

All the children have gone back to their busy lives, schools. Many will stay in touch with the new friends they have made. And they will again return to Cleveland as part of this annual migration. Many of the artists will be back as well— to see all the children again.

A Bharatanatyam camp

One inspiration after another seems to be emanating from the home of V.V. Sundaram, one of the organisers of the Cleveland Tyagaraja Aradhana. First the group concert titled ‘Sustaining Sampradayam’, a new Bharatanatyam competition, a Harikatha competition. Now a nine-day Bharatanatyam camp for aspiring students conducted by Rhadha and Savithri Jagannatha Rao. With the exception of the two larger-than-life hoardings of Sree Rama on the stage, this has been a year for innovation, inspiration and unqualified successes.

I first got wind of the Bharatanatyam camp when I saw the two dance guru-s at Cleveland being followed about by several dance students. They were looking for a room for practice and rehearsals. I heard about the camp they

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were conducting and the Sunday morning programme that was to be the result of the week-long camp. I eventually caught up with the two guru-s and their students in a carpeted classroom. They were putting the five students through their paces and rehearsing an ashtapadi.

At first the girls seemed like the typical over achievers; all headed for top schools and each of them excelling in several sports and other activities. And then as I was speaking with them as a group, their passion for dance and the hard work they had been putting in came to the surface. They had all been learning dance for more than ten years, except the nine-year old who had trained for a mere five years! They seemed to have an abiding interest. Their teachers encourage them to attend dance performances whenever the opportunities present themselves. They also attend concerts they say.

They seemed to be lapping up all that the two teachers could offer. They were learning some of the nuances of the Vazhuvoor school (Rhadha) as well as the Pandanallur-Kalakshetra school (Savithri). Both the teachers seemed impressed with the ability of the students to learn and accept two different bani-s of Bharatanatyam and see the beauty and the perfection in each of them.

The two teachers seemed to be enjoying their time with these students. "It was Sundaram's idea. He brought us together at his home in Adyar and suggested this format. We both immediately agreed," they said.

Fast Forward

The story of ... the Cleveland Aradhana ...

“Thatha, can you again tell me the story of how you heard T.M. Krishna sing at the Cleveland Aradhana 2007?” the young boy asked, as he and his grandfather were walking to the lakeside park in the afternoon.

The old man smiled, almost to himself, as he brought the visual and auditory memories back into focus. “I was a young man in those days, Ravi,” he said. “I still remember that concert as though it were just yesterday. In those days

the festival was actually held at Cleveland and it wasn't run by Jaya TV either. There was an Aradhana committee consisting of V.V. Sundaram, Toronto Venkatraman and Cleveland Balu and Gomathi who, along with many volunteers, ran the festival for many years. It was held at the Cleveland State University Campus in those days. Now I think 2007 was the year of the late snow. A sudden snowstorm plunged temperatures on Thursday



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Savithri (extreme L) and Rhadha (far R) with the participants

“It is a very short time but what a good experience it has been for the girls,” says Savithri Jagannatha Rao. “The only problem is that it has been very difficult to find a room for practice. They have to solve that problem next year.” Would they like to do this again next year? “Why not?” was the immediate response from both the guru-s.

The next morning saw them present a short margam programme with Rhadha doing a varnam and a javali solo. The girls presented their programme of items learned and practised during the week at Cleveland. They seemed happy with themselves and would take away memories, friendships and surely some valuable lessons that will stay with them throughout their dance careers.

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and a foot and more of snow fell as the festival began with the children's competition on Friday. That's all anyone could talk about. All the artists struggled to get back and forth from the venue to the hotel. Not like today when everything is under one air-conditioned roof."

"If my memory serves me right, Krishna's concert was on the second Friday evening. All week there had been competitions and many concerts by the well known names of the time like flautist Ramani, T.N Seshagopalan, Chitraveena Ravikiran, S. Sowmya, and Sudha Ragunathan; and many younger artists too: Gayathri Girish, Amritha Murali. Cleveland was also a congregation of great musical minds and talent. T.K. Govinda Rao was there as well as Suguna Purushothaman, Srimushnam Raja Rao, and Vellore Ramabhadran. Akkarai Subbalakshmi, Nagai Sriram and many others were also present."

"Amritha Murali seemed to be everywhere as the violin accompanist of the festival. I remember her accompanying Visakha Hari in the Harikatha. The violin in her hands, it seemed to me, was also telling the story of Hanuman. I think she should have been nominated to the Guinness book for most violin concert accompaniments in a week! No, no. What am I saying?" said the old man. "In Chennai during the season every accompanist worth her name plays as many concerts in three or four days!"



Amritha

But Amritha Murali also gave a vocal concert. I still remember that. She sang quite beautifully and her Pantuvarali song, Tyagaraja's *Vadera deviamu manasa* still echoes some times. I think because she sang it with such simple bhakti. As though she was speaking to herself."

"An amusing incident happened. I was promoting *Sruti* magazine that year at the festival. It used to come in print. You know those magazines I have stacked up to the ceiling on the table in my room? Do you read it every month Ravi?" he asked suddenly in a firm voice. "Yes Thatha," said the boy with affected patience. "I get it on my Ipod. Sometimes I read it and sometimes I switch it to listen mode," said Ravi impatiently. Before the old man could say it, he added: "Only reading builds up the habit and

promotes a sharp mind," mimicking his grandfather's singsong tone.

"Any way let me continue", said Ravi's grandfather. "I saw this young girl enter the hall one afternoon. I thought she had come to attend the festival. I immediately tried to sell her a *Sruti* subscription. She was quite polite and said she would subscribe when she got back to India. Then one or two others came by and told me who she was. She was the artist Subhiksha. Even in those days she was doing pencil sketches. But she had come to Cleveland to accompany her mother Lakshmi Rangarajan. A few minutes later they were both on stage singing. I felt a bit embarrassed that I had made such a faux pas." He chuckled quietly at the memory of his own embarrassment. "I felt better soon after when someone else told me he had tried to sell her mother a set of DVDs!" "What is a DVD Thatha?" asked the boy.

"Never mind. Let me tell you the rest. They sang so well together. *Ennaganu Ramabhajana* was my favorite. I think I remember a solid Sankarabharanam essay and a robust rendering of *Eduta nilachite*. After the concert I did get to meet Subhiksha again and she showed me some of her sketches. I still have the two she gave me that day. One is of the violin maestro M. Chandrasekharan who was felicitated that year. and another of a section of the children who presented the Sampradayam concert.

"Thatha! You have original sketches by Subhiksha?" asked the boy. "Can I see them? They must be worth a lot of money."

"Well they don't really belong to me. You see I told her I would pay for them, but she didn't seem too keen on that. Then she left. Since I did not ever pay for them I don't feel they belong to me. So I have just kept them all these years. I didn't know she would become such a famous artist. When we go home I will show them to you. But only if you can get your mother to make me a cup of strong coffee."

That was also the year Visakha Hari came to Cleveland. People raved about her *Sundara Kaandam*. I was able to catch a part of it. My, she sang well. Tyagaraja's *Appa Ramabhaktiyento*. Detailed and crisp niraval at 'Kapivaridhi dhatuna'. I don't think I had heard such a silvery voice on the Harikatha stage. She held the audience in her hand switching back and forth between Tamil and English."

"Why Thatha? Didn't people know Tamil?" "Well. In those days many of the children of Indian origin were growing up in North America without learning Tamil or

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The percussive trio— Vellore Ramabhadran (mridanga), Guruvayur Dorai and Chitraveena Ravikiran (khanjira)

any other Indian language. Even in India this was a big phenomenon. These days that has changed. All of you now speak, read and write two Indian languages besides learning English. Back then it was different. So many of us, including myself, were language orphans,” said the man wistfully. So I was curious to see how Visakha Hari would communicate with the Cleveland audience on the first Saturday evening. Many of the young people who had come to sing in the competition would be in the audience. She had them spellbound and there was standing room only. I heard later that she finished only after 11 pm. During the parts I heard, I saw she was working with her accompanists to create an atmosphere. Her husband was the mridangist. My friend Ravi Balasubramaniam was doing a brilliant job of accompanying her on the ghata. I don’t know if he had ever played for Harikatha before that.”

“I have many good memories from the festival that year. I got to see Chitraveena Ravikiran play the khanjira on stage during the Pancharatnam group singing. There were so many concerts and as usual I could not attend many of them. Ravikiran, Sowmya, T.N. Seshagopalan, N. Ramani, all of their concerts were said to have been very good. There must have been other good concerts as well— over 30 concerts and several dance programmes. But I could not be there all week.”

“I was fortunate to have heard the beginning of Sowmya’s concert. The moment I heard the Reetigaula varnam I could

sense she was in good form. Vellore Ramabhadran was accompanying her on the mridanga and now and then he would sing along as well. I heard from others that it grew even better as it progressed. Her concert included pieces like *Varalandu* (Gurjari), Subbaraya Sastri’s *Venkatasaila vibhara* (Hamir Kalyani), Syama Sastry’s *Parvati ninnu* (Kalgada), some of which were presented after the style of her late guru S. Ramanathan.’

“Thatha!” cried the boy. “I asked you to tell me about T.M. Krishna.”

“Oh yes. I am rambling. But your questions brought back so many memories. Let me just tell you about the first ever ‘Sampradayam’ concert. So many youngsters from all over North America sang together. They must have all trained under different teachers in different styles. Differing levels of skill and ability. Some gifted, some determined, others with determined parents. All of them learning all these songs from several senior vidwans in India. The teachers using Skype and MP3 recordings, I was really amazed at how well it came together. I think this was V.V. Sundaram’s brainchild. Took a lot of guts to arrange such a concert, charge each participant, get them and all these illustrious teachers lined up. I can’t imagine the confidence and optimism it must have meant on his part. I am glad he did it. It was a resounding success and those first participants will remember the experience for the rest of their lives.”

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“Another first that year was again a V.V. Sundaram initiative— a week-long Bharatanatyam camp with select students, as well as a Bharatanatyam competition. Savithri Jagannatha Rao and Rhadha conducted the camp, working tirelessly with the students every day. The girls were exposed to aspects of the Kalakshetra, Pandanallur and Vazhuvoor styles. Besides working hard they all seemed to be having fun. They put on a great show on the second Sunday morning. And Rhadha was gracious enough to participate in the programme. She presented a varnam in Sankarabharanam, as well as a javali.”

“Some of the children who participated in the music competition were so gifted and the music they made was just out of this world. I heard a little ten-year old girl play the violin so beautifully it made me believe in God.”

“Okay okay. Don’t be angry. I will now tell you about Krishna,” said the grandfather, catching the scowl on the boy’s face.

“On the second Friday everyone had been waiting all day for his concert to begin. Krishna strode onto the stage in a bright turquoise kurta. He looked like a bridegroom at that moment. Guruvayur Dorai was to play the mridanga with Nagai Sriram accompanying on the violin and Kartik Venkatraman on the khanjira.”

“Do you know what Krishna did then?” asked the old man squinting through wrinkly eyes at the eagerly attentive child. “Tell me. Tell me Thatha,” said Ravi as though he were hearing this story for the first time.

“He began the concert with *Swararagasudha*. Made everyone sit up, I can tell you. The grandeur of

Krishna and Dorai

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Sankarabharanam coupled with Tyagaraja’s words and Krishna’s effortless outpouring, Guruvayur Dorai’s expert accompaniment— now soft, now full, and then sparkling swarakalpana phrases at the end. The mood was set. As the concert progressed, Krishna seemed to transform himself on stage. His presence filled the entire auditorium. With *Mayamma* he was the devout bhakta entreating Meenakshi Devi. With *E papamu jesitira* (Athana) I could visualise Tyagaraja addressing and asking Sree Rama to explain his behaviour. With *Smarasundara* (Paras) he was an ardent admirer, with *Sarvam Brahmamayam* he seemed to be a mendicant. Saveri followed Athana with an expanded *Sreerajagopala* and niraval at ‘Deeraganya deena saranya’. Krishna and Dorai passed the music back and forth between them. The singer and the drummer. At that moment there was no one else on the stage.

And then an effortless Harikambhoji alapana. Every phrase so distinct. No matter that we had heard Sankarabharanam earlier. There was not a phrase out of place here. The tanam was nothing short of brilliant. Majestic phrases vibrating though the hall. All of us were watching Krishna pour out insistent drumming phrases with Nagai Sriram accompanying each with equal vigour and impeccable control. I remember the mood he created and the emotions that seemed to fill the hall. I can’t seem to remember the Pallavi itself. But exquisitely chiselled ragamalika swara-s in Varali, Vasanta, Anandabhairavi, Sahana and even Behag have remained with me to this day.”

The old man looked up from his musings. Ravi was not walking next to him any more. He was alone with his thoughts. He snapped out of his reverie and craned to see where the boy had gone. He spotted the boy a few hundred yards ahead. Ravi was tossing pebbles into the water from the pier. Walking up to the boy he laid his hands on his shoulder and stood there looking at the deep blue waters of Lake Erie. “This whole area used to be the CSU campus you know,” he said almost to himself. “I know Thatha,” said Ravi with a playful laugh. “Appa has already taught me all about global warming.” The two stood there looking at their own reflections in the water.

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