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News & Notes (Continued)

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HOMAGE TO MAX MUELLER IN CHENNAI PRESENTATIONS OF MUSIC, DANCE & DRAMA

Max Mueller Bhavan (German Cultural Institute) in Chennai organised a clutch of cultural programmes and a seminar during 28-30 November 2000 to mark the death centenary of Max Mueller, a great Indologist. Born in 1823, Mueller died when he was 77.

Mueller is remembered for stimulating widespread interest in Indology, mythology, philosophy, comparative religion, linguistics and social criticism. The special cultural relations between India and Germany are largely attributed to his works.

Mueller never visited India. But, had he come to India, he would likely have sought the company of musicians and scholars in the field of the performing arts, considering that he wanted to become a musician and belonged to a family that considered music and poetry a way of life. His first love was indeed music which he would have taken up as a profession but for the unfavourable climate for such a pursuit in his days.

The famous Indologist is best known all over the world for the publication of the Sacred Books of the East (51 volumes), amongst several other works. He was an ardent promoter of Indian independence and cultural self-assertion.

Max Mueller Bhavan, Chennai, entrusted Ludwig Pesch, a German who has spent years learning and studying Carnatic music, with the task of planning a befitting programme of tribute in Chennai in the wider context of a major German festival under way in India. Hundreds of German artists and scholars are presently touring India but Pesch was to help mount a celebration of a different kind- primarily with and for South Indian participants.

Ludwig Pesch felt that this presented him with an opportunity to highlight the manner in which Max Mueller would have wanted the manifestations and contributions of other



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civilizations to be recognised, and to explore cultural achievements connecting people from different periods and places. In the event, he sought and secured the cooperation of several renowned performers and scholars, and the students of Brhaddhvani, to be Max Mueller's guides on 'a cultural tour' of South India.

The celebrations began with an invocation and ended with a Musical Journey, both presented by Brhaddhvani's students.

The morning and afternoon sessions organised at the Max Mueller Bhavan consisted of lecture demonstrations by the artists of four public programmes held at the MMB and at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan auditorium.

There were also lectures and lecdems by several eminent scholars in accordance with their chosen fields of specialisation: Dr. K.V. Ramesh (Patronage in South Indian Performing Arts: Evidence from Epigraphical Records); Dr. Premeela Gurusurthy (Harikatha Kalakshepam: A popular multicultural art in the 19th and early 20th centuries); Nirmala Paniker with her daughter and disciple, Kapila (Mohini Attam: About the research conducted at Natanakairali); P. Nanda Kumar (Dance music in Kerala: edakka with mizhavu players of the Natanakairali ensemble); Dr. Prema Nandakumar (References to South Indian Performing arts in early literature); Dr. V.V. Srivatsa (Language in Indian Art); Vidya Shankar (Sanskrit and Music); Rajkumar Bharathi (Bharatiyar's contribution to the South Indian music repertoire); T.R. Sundaresan with Pakala Ramdas (The beauty of Yati patterns); S. Rajam with disciples and T.R. Sundaresan (Max Mueller's great musical contemporaries in different parts of South India: Parameswara Bhagavata, Patnam Subramania Iyer, Ponniah Pillai, Vedanayakam Pillai, and Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar).

Considering that theatre was the original performing art which also comprised dance and music to varying degrees, the first day was entirely devoted to theatre and Harikatha. The second was devoted to dance, and the third to music to reflect the evolution of these arts in their own right.

G. Venu, Founder-Director, Natanakairali (Irinjalakuda) gave the opening lecture-demonstration titled 'Koodiyattam, the Sanskrit theatre of Kerala: Research, training and presentation in the tradition of Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar'. The story of this small, but famous cultural centre is fascinating and unique in having quietly worked with minimum resources, but successfully so, for the revival of Kerala's traditional performance traditions over a period of 25 years, this being the silver jubilee.

The scholarly books published at Natanakairali have gone a long way in creating an awareness that these living traditions are far from being provincial or obsolete but have a major role to play in world culture. Asian and European fellow artistes, institutions and scholars have acknowledged this fact long before India's cultural establishments took notice of Koodiyattam, Nangyar Koothu, Pavalakathakali, Tolpavakoothu and other rare art forms. Interestingly, after the success has been achieved through sheer perseverance and personal commitment by a few well trained individuals, under the personal guidance of Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar (seniormost teacher of Koodiyattam), and with lean resources have appeared on the scene to stake out their claims to these artistic traditions.

Indologists of the 19th century could hardly have gauged the central role played by the performing arts (to clothe complex phenomena in an all too simple and modern term) in the evolution of Indian civilization. This makes the more recent insights provided by archaeologists and epigraphists all the more interesting, and would certainly have delighted Max Mueller. For this reason, the organisers approached Dr. K.V. Ramesh, being the Honorary Director, Oriental Research Institute, Mysore University, and

former Chief Epigraphist, Govt. of India. His lecture, 'Patronage in South Indian Performing Arts: Evidence from Epigraphical Records' shed an interesting light on developments of dance and music from ancient to late medieval times as far as they can be traced in the stone inscriptions across the country. Although inscriptions pertaining to the performing arts and their exponents are few and far between, they are of great interest as pointed out by the learned speaker.

The dilemma faced by Dr. Prema Nandakumar was of quite a different kind, namely that of an over abundance of references to the performing arts. Her paper 'References to South Indian Performing arts in early literature' provided participants with a fascinating survey of this symbiosis between literature, dance and music from earliest times, a unique phenomenon in world civilization worth exploring by all lovers of Indian culture.

Mr. Christoph Hahn, who recently produced several radio programmes on Indian music gave an account of the unexpected response from listeners. His radio station, Bayerischer Rundfunk (the Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation), had set up a "hotline" which, to his own surprise, was intensively used by listeners of all age groups who wanted to know more about the various music forms and musicians featured in his six-hour "long night of South Indian music" broadcast in early October last year. He observed that even young listeners responded most favourably to those parts of the programme wherein classical Carnatic standards were upheld.

Mr. Hahn also felt that many South Indian musicians heard in Germany were engaged in a self-defeating quest for public attention, catering to imaginary listeners' expectations and making unnecessary adjustments for "Western tastes". Their cause would be better served if Carnatic musicians concentrated on what they know best, like on concert platforms at home. This seems to be the chief reason why Carnatic music, other than its well established North Indian counterpart, hardly gets any attention in Germany. In his view, it is regrettable that Carnatic musicians interact with their classical Western counterparts all too rarely. Instead, there remains a prevalence of Jazz and fusion oriented interaction which, according to one participant in the proceedings at the MMB, is also promoted by Indians abroad.

Kamala Murti P.V. JAYAN



Dr. V.V. Srivatsa's lecture, 'Language in Indian Art' was richly illustrated with quotations from musicians, poets and theorists from India and Europe. Reflecting the wide range of this scholar's interests, the presentation proved to be a firework of ideas, presented with wit and passion, and in tune with the theme of posthumously introducing Max Mueller (represented by the audience at the German Cultural Institute!) to India's living art traditions.

The lecture-demonstrations by Dr. Premeela Gurumurthy, Nirmala Paniker and her daughter and disciple, Kapila, P. Nanda Kumar, Vidya Shankar, Rajkumar Bharathi, T.R. Sundaresan with Pakala Ramdas, and S. Rajam with his disciples were worthy tributes to Max Mueller and the cultural values to which he devoted his life. Each of them presented a unique, colorful facet of an immeasurably large artistic scenario. The same must be said of the four public performances held at the Max Mueller Bhavan and the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.



Vidya Shankar

P.V. JAYAN

In her *Nandanar Charitram* of Gopalakrishna Bharati, Kamala Murti proved that Harikatha is very much alive today, and audience long for a close rapport with the artist. This particularly applies to a genre like Harikatha. Musical narration is far less enjoyable on a big concert stage compared to the intimate surroundings like that found in the library of the Max Mueller Bhavan. (The German cultural institute hosted many similar events over a number of years; it should be credited with being the cradle of the Sampradaya Centre for the documentation of South Indian music whose co-founder was responsible for planning this 'Homage to Max Mueller' series).



S. Rajam & disciple

P.V. JAYAN

The public presentations on 28 November were announced as 'Sanskrit drama of Kerala'. This unforgettable event featured two elaborate character delineations: Poothana Moksham (Nangyar Koothu by Kapila) and Toranayuddham of Bhasa (first part), a Koodiyattam performance by artists trained and guided by Ammannur Madhava Chakyar (Irinjalakuda). The play was directed by G. Venu who also played Ravana, the lead role. Almost unknown in this part of the country, it was made amply clear why Kerala's drama is regarded as being unique in the world of living theatre traditions, so much so that actors and directors from Japan and Sweden-- two nations with great theatrical traditions of their own-- make annual pilgrimages to Irinjalakuda, and have repeatedly invited Natanakairali troupe to perform in the best theatres of Tokyo and Stockholm, to mention but two prestigious venues visited by them in recent years. Most importantly, however, the presentation at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan convinced the spectators that the ancient Koodiyattam tradition of acting has re-emerged from near-oblivion, and senior critics present agreed that the art has found worthy heirs in the young actors. The superb appearance of Kapila, who also trained for 12 years under Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, left no doubt that Nangyar Koothu can be used to greatest dramatic effect even by modern standards.



Kapila

P.V. JAYAN

Another unique offering to the memory of Max Mueller, and never before seen in Chennai, was Ushas, a dance programme choreographed by Manjari (daughter of Prof. C.V. Chandrasekhar). She and the dancers were able to develop all the subtle nuances offered by the theme which was, most appropriately for the occasion, inspired by the Rigveda. Mahalakshmi in the role of Usha, and Suhasini as her counterpart lent grace and emotional depth to this lovely theme which deeply moved the discerning audience gathered at the auditorium. The music, an unobtrusive blend of traditional and contemporary Indian idioms, was composed and directed by Prof. C.V. Chandrasekhar. Vanati Raghuraman (vocal), B. Muthukumar (flute), N. Sigamani (violin), and Balakrishnan (mridangam) created the right atmosphere.

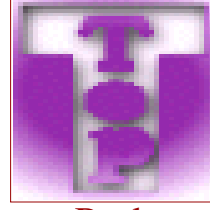
In view of the depth and variety of the presentations and performances offered for three days, it is impossible to do justice to all of them in brief. Vidya Shankar, in her well researched and presented lecture- demonstration 'Sanskrit and Music', showed the other learned participants how much benefit is yet to be derived from in-depth studies of the great composers of South India. It became also clear that they, most notably the Trinity and their disciples, have ingeniously interwoven classical conventions with the modern standards of musical creativity of their times. Their works form the foundation of more recent masters whose contributions were dealt with by S. Rajam.

T.R. Sundaresan, continued this fascinating journey across time and space with a novel type of lecdem titled 'The beauty of Yati patterns'. Assisted by Pakala Ramdas, the equally renowned violin player and vocalist in the tradition of Lalgudi Jayaraman, he showed how rhythmic beauty is derived from a very conscious application of various traditional tala features. These include increasing, decreasing, and symmetrical patterns called yati, based on corresponding numbers, each representing a subdivision of a beat (akshara). They are also applied in the ragam-tanam-pallavi sequence. It was demonstrated how a combination of knowledge, skill and inspiration enables a musician to create new and unique patterns that enhance the melody for which this music is primarily known, yet equally benefits from the work in the field of rhythmic elaboration.

The concluding Musical Journey: Taking Max Mueller on an imaginative tour of South India was an original programme with, for and by the children who study at Brhaddvani- a unique research centre in Chennai. It was researched and directed by Soumiya Muralidharan. As an added attraction; there was live painting by the young students of Brhaddvani guided by P.V. Jayan, a young designer and dance photographer. Throughout the skit, soulful classical music by senior students alternated with skilful displays of innovative lessons by the children, such as dual tala

exercises and 72 melakarta raga exercises. They showed that this approach not only helps to master and remember the names and melodic entities of these raga-s but can be fun too. The programme, presented with utter involvement, self-confidence and wit by the numerous participants, evoked much admiration and laughter among the visitors at the MMB's packed library.

A CORRESPONDENT



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