

Significant activity at the Owl Creek site

The 'Owl Creek' site at Bangalore is where the Chowdiah Hall, the unique violin-shaped building ('the world's biggest glass and marble violin' complete with seven strings and related features) honouring the memory of the musical legend, is located along with the Academy of Music, functioning since 1961. The owl is no stranger to music. According to a reference contained in the *Adbhuta Ramayana* (based on *Adhyatma Ramayana*), Vishnu is said to have advised Narada to go to the northern slopes of the Maanasa region to finetune his musical skills, from an owl ('ulooka') named Ganabandhu!

With a commendable track record, the Academy of Music is now poised to celebrate its golden jubilee. The five-day music festival including the academic sessions organised in November 2009 was convincing proof. The Academy is steered by Dr. Suma Sudhindra, an accomplished vainika of the Emani-Chittibabu school. The first woman to hold the post of the President of the Academy of Music, Suma is now a member of the council of the central Sangeet Natak Akademi

Mysore V Subramanya



also. This cultural activist was recently honoured with the title of 'Gaana Varidhi' by the M.A. Narasimhachar Music Foundation.

The academic sessions had the benefit of the expertise and guidance of Mysore Subramanya, the grandson of the illustrious 'Veena' Seshanna.

The evening concert sessions included two slots for young talent, mainly in vocal, both in Carnatic and Hindustani styles. The quality was highly gratifying, indicating the vibrancy of the music scenario, particularly with reference to Carnatic vocal. Meghna Murthy Balnad acquitted herself creditably with the Bhairavi alapana followed by Dikshitar's *Balagopala* with niraval and swaraprastara. Sangeetha, barely 15, created a deep impression, presenting a composition of Jayachamaraja Wodeyar in Hatakambari, with kalpana swara to embellish it. Her main piece was in Varali (*Etijanmamidi* of Tyagaraja); her elaborate alapana was at a level to be expected from a senior artist.

The major concerts in the evening included recitals by P. Unnikrishnan, R.K. Padmanabha, Kadri Gopalnath,

Ganesh and Kumaresh, and Aruna Sairam.

The academic sessions held in the mornings were purposeful and educative. The lecture demonstrations included:

A scientific analysis of Dikshitar's kriti-s by Dr. S.C. Sharma, Vice-Chancellor of the Tumkur University.

Ugabhoga of Haridasa-s of Karnataka, by Dr. Vidhyabhushana.

Tana varieties by R.K. Padmanabha.

Techniques of violin playing, by Ganesh and Kumaresh.

Padam-s and Javali-s, by Aruna Sairam.

Symposium on the role of accompanying artists.

Aesthetics of swaraprastara in Carnatic music by Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna.

On the concluding evening, M. Balamuralikrishna and Kadri Gopalnath were honoured with the 'Sri K.K. Murthy Memorial Chowdiah Award - 2009', by the Governor of Karnataka.

The response to the festival was overwhelming.

MANNA SRINIVASAN

Vidwan Govinda Rao felicitated on turning 80

Sangita Kalanidhi T.K. Govinda Rao was recently felicitated by the music fraternity on his completing 80 at Raga Sudha hall in Chennai. Organised jointly by TKG Gurukulam of Radha Ramji, a disciple of Govinda Rao and Nada Inbam, the programme started with TKG Gurukulam students



Govinda Rao

rendering varnam-s composed by Govinda Rao in vivadi mela-s. All the vidwans gathered there observed the astonishing facility with which Govinda Rao has handled the inherently difficult mela-s.

N. Murali, President of the Music Academy, presided over the function which was attended by many luminaries of the music world like N. Ramani, V.V. Subramaniam (VVS), R. Vedavalli, Guruvayur Dorai, T.R. Subramanyam, and P.S. Narayanaswamy.

Felicitating Govinda Rao, N. Murali described him as a multifaceted personality while Flute Ramani recalled that his guru Mali admired him. VVS recollected the high regard the doyen of Carnatic music, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer had for TKG and his music. He recollected that Semmangudi told Musiri Subramania Iyer in a conversation that when Govinda Rao sang, the raga devata would spring to life and dance. Guruvayur Dorai recollected TKG's generosity in sharing his knowledge and guiding him on occasion. He also said that it was a pleasure to play a tani with TKG keeping tala. Keeping the tala should not be a mechanical matter

of keeping the beats accurately. It is important to understand the korvai, understand the bhava of the mridanga player and keep tala accordingly and this Govinda Rao did perfectly. P.S. Narayanaswamy remarked that TKG was always engaged in some musical activity. Vedavalli said she had witnessed TKG weaving magical webs during recording sessions. This was in the 1970s when he was with All India Radio. He would suggest appropriate sollu-s for the mridanga, sometimes from folk rhythms or from the world of tavil or even the udukkai; and how appropriate and rich it sounded with that effect! He was as generous with sharing and applying his erudition and knowledge, she recollected, as he was with sharing tea his wife Haimavati brought to AIR during the afternoons.

T.R. Subramanyam, a 'college buddy' of TKG, was as good as his promise to give the shortest speech. Describing TKG as his dearest friend, he recollected that during their days in college together, all their friends would turn to TKG for doubt clarification. "We used to call him 'Guru Govindar!'" TKG and he had

taken vocal as the main subject and mridanga as ancillary, and so it was that TKG accompanied TRS on the mridanga in many a concert and vice versa.

Dr. Prameela Gurumurthy and Dr. Radha Bhaskar too spoke on the occasion. While Prameela spoke about the immense benefit she derived as a student of TKG, Radha said that TKG's magnificent contribution to the music world by bringing out the volumes of compositions made him a guru to every musician; there was no musician who did not refer to them sometime.

Featured in a presentation titled *The Musical Journey* of TKG, put together by Radha Ramji and her students, were many musicians like Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna, T.M. Krishna, S. Sowmya and Neyveli Santhanagoplan speaking of the veteran musician. Earlier, a CD titled *Varnamanjari* with varnam-s composed by Govinda Rao and rendered by students of TKG Gurukulam, was released by N. Murali and the first copy was received by N. Ramani (see photo).

LAKSHMI SRIRAM

Embar Vijayaraghavachariar centenary Seminar on Harikatha

28 November 2009 was the birth centenary of the doyen of harikatha Embar Vijayaraghavachariar. A harikatha series was organised as a befitting tribute to his memory at the Asthika Samajam in Venus Colony, Chennai. The celebrations concluded with a valedictory function at the Narada Gana Sabha, featuring eminent speakers. The seminar covered a variety of aspects of harikatha.

Sriram made a presentation on the key legendary exponents of harikatha like Tanjavur Kalyanakrishna Bhagavatar, Soolamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, Tirupayanam Panchapagesa Sastrigal, Lakshmanachar, Mangudi Chidambara Bhagavatar, Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar, Annaswamy Bhagavatar, Saraswati Bai, Banni Bai, Chidambaram Embar Srirangachariar and Embar

Nalli Kuppuswami honouring Kamala Murthy as Kalyanapuram Aravamudachariar, A. Natarajan and R. Krishnaswami look on



Homage to Embar Vijayaraghavachariar

Vijayaraghavachariar. With photographs and short life sketches, the presentation set a wonderful tone and backdrop for a literary discussion on various aspects of Harikatha.

Prameela Gulumurthy, Head, Dept. of Indian Music, University

of Madras, author of a book on harikatha kalakshepa (which formed the subject of her doctoral thesis), and a harikatha exponent who learnt the art from Banni Bai, gave an account of how harikatha developed over time in South India.

She spoke about the role of the saints and keertankar-s of Maharashtra, their abhang-s and keertan-s. She explained that the varkari sampradaya of abhang singing included a discourse and musical presentation while on a pilgrimage, and its influence and confluence in the kalakshepa tradition of the South. She also spoke about the Naradiya parampara of harikatha, its pravachana and sangeeta, developed with the help of story scripts called nirupana-s. The performer presented it with chipla or cymbals in hand as she stood in one place, employing aspects of usi, ovi, abhang-s, and other sloka-s and songs to start and finish the harikatha. She spoke of *Dasabodha*, the text on harikatha by Samartha Ramadas and his influence on harikatha.

Prema Nandakumar emphasised that harikatha was meant to elevate bhakti in the audience. The harikatha exponent should at all times concentrate and explain only those aspects that highlight this emotion. She said that the texts on harikatha say that descriptions of women and sringara rasa should be minimal, insignificant or even completely avoided. She referred to various aspects of bhakti focusing on the saguna and nirguna aspects of God



Seminar participants (L to R): R. Vedavalli, Prameela Gurumurthy, Sriram, Bala Meera, Prema Nandakumar, Nandini Ramani

and how the Nayanmars and the Alwars had extolled these through their outpourings. It is the responsibility of the harikatha performer to preserve this aspect and correctly bring out the necessary emotion, thus elevating the level of the performance.

Vedavalli spoke of the importance of music in harikatha. Music and pravachana are inseparable aspects of this art form, she said. She demonstrated how to employ ragas suited to the mood of the story. The harikatha artist should merge his speech with the sruti of the song sung before the narration, thus highlighting the importance of voice modulation and histrionics. She demonstrated with examples how much and what facet of a musical presentation should be brought to the narration. She also drew attention to the creativity of the harikatha artist who has to move from one raga to another without repeating a single raga during a programme. She explained the concepts of 'usi' tala (started after a beat), 'the silent beat' and how variations of the same are used to produce different perspectives. She said harikatha was more demanding of a singer than a regular concert; the artist had the responsibility of

singing and narrating the story at the same time.

Nandini Ramani talked about the Sanskrit works and epics that form the core of the storyline of harikatha. The nirupana-s gain in significance only with the inclusion of Sanskrit, she said. As harikatha is based on purana-s and kavya-s, which are mostly in Sanskrit and form the basis of the script and the story, effective use of the language in the form of quotations and verses gains a lot of significance and helps to raise the quality of the performance. She also referred to 'banam', a form of Sanskrit drama in which the narrator tells the story in a monologue. He communicates with an imaginary character in a format called 'akasabhashitam'. Nandini referred to Embar Vijayaraghavachariar's mastery over Sanskrit and Veda Vedantic scriptures and his creative employment of them in his performances. She also referred to many notes and texts of nirupana-s handwritten by the stalwart, handed down by the descendants of Embar to the Music Academy library.

Bala Meera Chandra highlighted the importance of spirituality and communication of spiritual thoughts and values through harikatha. She referred to the

Dasabodha of Samartha Ramadas. Through many of his verses, she explained how a harikeertan or harikatha should be used as a medium of explaining spiritual values to the listeners, thus elevating them from the mundane aspects of life. Not just the gross aspect of the story, but the subtle or 'sookshma' aspects of the underlying Vedantic meanings too have to be communicated to the listener. The harikatha performer has to set aside his self glory and concentrate on the aspects of spirituality and surrender at the feet of the Lord.

Kalyanapuram Aravamudachariar, an exponent of harikatha and the founder of Sreyas, which propagates the learning of this art form, and R. Krishnaswami, Secretary, Narada Gana Sabha, jointly conducted the centenary celebrations and honoured the speakers. Harikatha exponents were honoured with the tile of 'Harikatha Ratna' on each of the four days.

The concluding day's harikatha was *Ranganatha Vaibhavam* by Kalyanapuram Aravamudachariar who was honoured by Srimad Andavan Sri Ranga Ramanuja Mahadesikan Swamigal, the chief guest. N. Gopalswami and N. Murali felicitated the artist.

SIVAPRIYA KRISHNAN