

Family revive Indian tradition

An ancient type of Indian instrument, first mentioned in a musical treatise 2,000 years ago, has undergone a revival in the country thanks to the efforts of one talented Madras family.

The chitravina, a delicate instrument also referred to as Gotuvadyam and known for its smooth singing voice and capacity for infinite shades of tone, fell almost entirely into obscurity by the early 1900s as more modern instruments became popular.

But that changed hugely when it attracted the attention of virtuoso Narayana Iyengar, who redeveloped the instrument in a number of ways - not least by trebling the number of strings.

"The way that my grandfather developed it, he really took it to tremendous levels of virtuosity," N Ravikiran, Iyengar's grandson and one of the most famous chitravina players in India, told BBC World Service's The World Today programme.

"[He] proved that tremendous speeds could be played and with a lot of grip and firmness."

Talents

While its more common cousin, the vina, has frets like a guitar, the chitravina - which has a flat top and is set on two chambers - sits on the floor and the player gets the notes by moving a sliding object up and down the strings.

After Ravikiran's grandfather reworked the design, his son - Ravikiran's father - helped to maintain his legacy.

But it was with Ravikiran that interest really picked up, not least because of his own huge talents.

At the age of two he stunned senior classical musicians when he identified over 325 melodic scales and 175 rhythm combinations.

"In the last few years we have had lots of disciples come and learn the instrument," Ravikiran said.

Ravikiran has now taken the instrument his grandfather reworked to new levels, performing worldwide and working on fusion events with other musicians such as Taj Mahal, Glen Valez and Martin Simpson.

'Instrumental beauty'

In turn, this has seen the instrument's influence on other world music restored, Ravikiran argued.

"I think one of the greatest impacts in recent times has been its influence on the Hawaiian guitar and the origin of the slide guitar in the West," he stated.

"I read in the Guitar Player magazine in the USA that there was this Indian sailor boy who was supposed to have run away some time in the early 1900s or late 1800s with the chitravina, then known as "gotuvadyam", and introduced it in the West."

Ravikiran's instrument itself is one of the finest examples - made of jackfruit with inlaid ivory and, at the end of the fingerboard, a fearsome-looking creature called a Yari is carved into the wood.

"It has a tremendous amount of scope to produce both vocal-style music as well as its own instrumental beauty," Ravikiran said.

"And its tone is unique, and this kind of string arrangement makes it a very pleasant timbre.

"That's one of the reasons I love the chitravina."

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/entertainment/3126781.stm>

Published: 2003/08/06 09:21:54 GMT

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