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THE HINDU Friday Review » Music

Taking Indian music to U.S. classrooms

Special Correspondent



Where cultures meet: Chitravina maestro N. Ravikiran (left) at a recently-held workshop in Middleton School District, US, where he introduced to the concept of 'Melharmony' to the students. Photo: Special Arrangement

Chitravina maestro N. Ravikiran is holding music classes and workshops

When more than 1,000 school students at the Middleton School District in the United States perform hardcore Carnatic ragas such as Bangala and Nattai with ease, you know Indian classical music has gone truly global.

The performance was part of a recent initiative by Chennai-based Chitravina maestro N. Ravikiran, now touring the U.S. The artiste, who developed 'Melharmony' — a concept that seeks to blend harmony, a popular technique in western classical music, with melody from the perspective of the Raga-based Indian classical music — about a decade ago, is now orienting schoolchildren in the U.S. to the concept by holding music classes and workshops.

Recently, a group of students trained by him performed two pieces based on 'Melharmony' — 'Bay of Bengal' (based on the carnatic scale Bangala) and 'Not i' (which, he says, is a pun on raga Nattai).

In an e-mail interview to *The Hindu*, Mr. Ravikiran said: "What is truly exciting is how the students respond to music of their own culture as well as that from diverse cultures." During rehearsals, students would ask him many questions about the Indian approach to music in order to get a better grasp.

This is not the first time Mr. Ravikiran is working with schoolchildren. Back home, he has engaged himself with music curriculum for schoolchildren as part of the Union government's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Besides training nearly 400 teachers, he also developed content — involving senior artistes — with elementary lessons that sought to make classical music more accessible.

As an artiste keen on integrating music education into school curriculum, he made a detailed proposal to the Union government a few years ago. He said, "I was privileged to be the only musician [in the country] to be in the government's core committee for music education in schools. I have attended meetings and given them a syllabus from Class I to VIII. It is high time the government created such a system in every school so that our future citizens cultivate a passion for our culture."

Mr. Ravikiran observed that he would be most happy to work with the government. "Culture is the strongest glue for a country's unity and stability. Any country that ignores this fundamental truth would be in grave danger of losing both.

I am placing much faith in the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's assertion during one of our meetings that culture is definitely the soft power of our country and his government would see to its renaissance."

Terming his effort in the U.S. "a small beginning," he said he was eager to replicate the model in India and other countries as well. In addition to creating informed music appreciation among young audiences in different countries, the initiative would help to expand the listener base for Indian music.

"My knowledge as a composer who is familiar with both the Indian idiom as well as western approach to harmony, arrangements, and notation will hopefully enable me to consolidate upon the wonderful foundation that Pandit Ravi Shankar laid for our music by making Indian concerts popular," he said.

Keywords: [Chitravina maestro N. Ravikiran](#), [Indian music](#), [U.S. classrooms](#), [Middleton School District](#), [Carnatic ragas](#)