

Unique classical fusion

By Garimella Subramaniam

CHENNAI, JULY 25. In the musical landscape of the multifaceted Chitraveena N. Ravikiran, the seemingly irreconcilable worlds of Indian and western classical music blend admirably. It seems paradoxical that the pre-eminent maestro of the Chitraveena, vocalist and composer of Carnatic classical music should also be the pioneer of this *avant-garde* musical vision. But then this prolific composer of *Varnams*, *Kritis*, *Tillanas* and ballets numbering over 500 has also lent his creative imagination to ventures involving the world's leading pop, jazz and blues groups for nearly two decades.

Mr. Ravikiran has always held that tradition and innovation are but two sides of a coin. It is the same philosophy that underlies his novel mission to make Indian *ragas* — melodic scales — accessible to western composers and audiences. The new genre is Melharmony — short for melody and harmony — a term Mr. Ravikiran coined *en route* to London aboard a trans-Atlantic flight in 2000. He performed the first ever concerto in the new genre in collaboration with the BBC's Philharmonic orchestra at the Millennium Festival in October that year. It was rated among the top five out of 2000 performances. Says Mr. Ravikiran: "The appeal of Indian classical music overseas has been limited to



Ravikiran

appreciating individual "brilliances. It is about time the interest in the concert deepened and the concept gained recognition. The exotic appeal of Indian *ragas* as ethnic music may have been a good starting point.

But this is not enough." Explaining the concept, he emphasises that melody and harmony are not really mutually exclusive. Rather, Indian classical music is pre-eminently melodic, whereas the western

system is fundamentally harmonic. In a *raga*, notes appear in a sequence. In the western system, notes occur simultaneously in a triad and produce harmony. Melharmony creates harmony by using the melodic rules of the Indian system. This way, the nuances of the melodic system become more intelligible to those conversant with harmony. It also adds a fresh dimension to Indian music.

In its current stage of evolution, Melharmonic concertos are rendered in the instrumental format. But Melharmony is a distinct entity and stands apart from a *Vadhyabrunda* or a *jugal bandi* or other forms of fusion.

Today there are Melharmonic compositions in *ragas* Sarasvathi, Kapi, Chakravakam, Hamsanadham, Varunapriya, Hamsadwani, Hamirkalyani and Nattai.

The potential and scope of a vocal rendition of Melharmony is at this stage perhaps a matter of conjecture.

Harmonic music evolved in the Middle Ages as a means of attracting audiences when the influence of church music was on the decline.

The advent of a novel format on the Carnatic scene may well be the answer to growing concerns over declining audiences at Kutcheris.