

Paris falls in love with Indian music

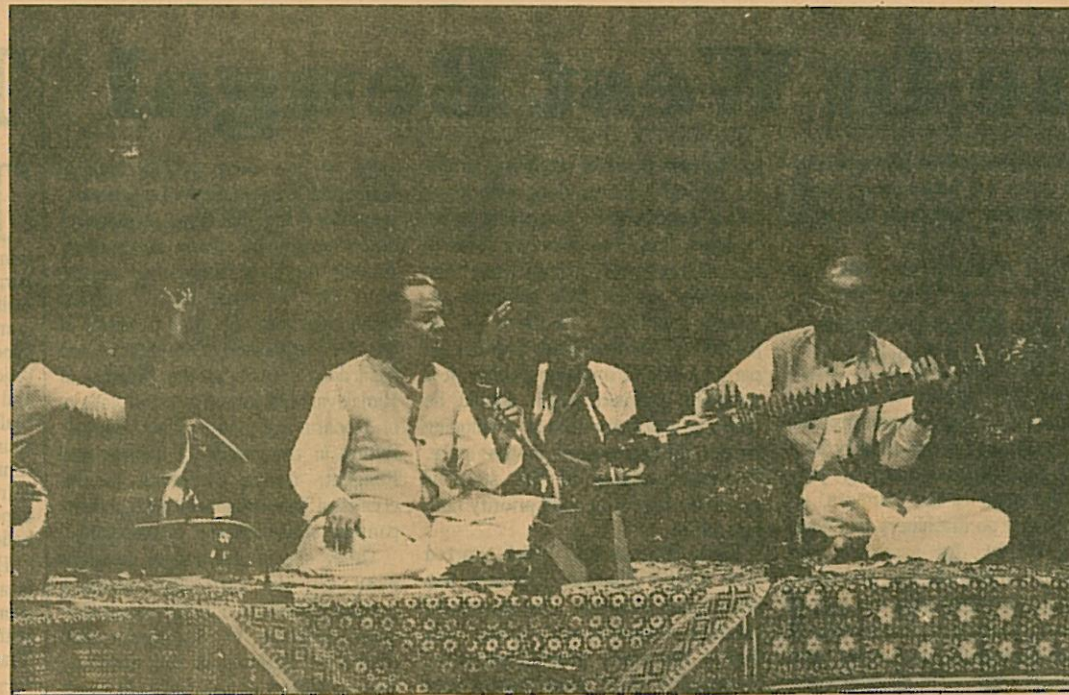
In the world of European music and dance the Paris autumn festival has a unique place. Now in its fourteenth year, this event provides the strange, the outlandish and the far-out to titillate the jaded appetites of the Parisians stuffed to the gills with their own culture. The ritual song and dance of Australian aborigines was the star turn of 1983, the throat games of Quebec Eskimos provided entertainment in 1984 and the whole of the Indian heritage in 1985. The Chinese are due in 1986.

The first week of October 1985 had *dhrupad*, *khayal*, *sitar*, *santoor*, *gottuvadyam* and *Kuchipudi* in the three halls of the theatre Du Rond-Point. Often there were three simultaneous performances. It is a credit to all concerned that there were rapt audiences in the 1,000-seater, 300-seater and 100-seater halls. The organisers take great pains in selecting artistes and booking them well in advance. Josephine Markowitz had personally chosen the performers for 1985. In addition, the French retained Y.G. Doraisami to advise and assist them. His presence, comments and suggestions helped improve the quality of the performances in Paris.

The only artiste wished on the French was the unfortunate Kishori Amonkar. She had bad luck in the USA and lost all her cash and papers. This delayed her arrival in France. The number of her hotel room upset her and the dropping of a *sindoor* box caused the last crisis before her performance on October 1, 1985. The sound adjustments were inadequate and her voice rarely rose above the drone of the *tan-pura*.

In the *dhrupad* performance of October 2, this year, Guy Noel had to blend the strident *pakhawaj*, the voices of Nasir Aminuddin Dagar, Alok Nandy and Ashoka Dhar and the *rudra veena* of Zia Mohiuddin Dagar to get an acceptable meld. It took nearly three quarters of an hour and he had to take away the mike of the *pakhawaj* before he got the

Akhilesh Mithal discusses the performances in the first week of October by Indian classical musicians at the autumn festival



(Left to Right) Alok Nandy, Nasir Aminuddin Dagar, Ashoka Dhar and Zia Mohiuddin Dagar perform at the autumn festival

optimum mix. The result was felicitous. A single note whether sung, played or struck would fill the hall and create vibrations to stir the soul of the listeners.

The Dagers approach a *raga* with great humility. The *alap* clears the atmosphere of all earlier experiences and creates the mood for the *raga*, which is built up straw by straw and brick by brick. The *alap* creates an image without formal outline although the colour and tones are quite definite. The song gives a face to the form and the *raga* and the *rasa* becomes manifest in all essential details.

The *Yaman alap* and *dhrupad* performed that day was a truly great experience. The awe induced by the setting sun and the gathering darkness, the mystery of the evening, the majesty of the godhead invoked and worshipped were delineated by the singing of Aminuddin Dagar and quick-

ened by the playing of Zia Mohiuddin Dagar. When Alok and Ashoka picked up the words "*dusht dalani*" or the trampler of evil-doers, the *Devi* invoked could be seen in the hall and Calcutta Puja was made manifest in Paris.

From awe a wondrous cosmic order, dignity and majesty the mood changed to the revelry of the *Holi bacchanalia* when the Dagers moved to a *dhamar* in *Desh*, *Saanvaray rung daar diyao*. The audience was thrilled. They clapped and clapped and shouted "encore" despite the late hour. The Dagers obliged with a *kham-maj* also in *shringar rasa*.

Meanwhile, in the third or 100-seater hall, the prodigy Ravi Kiran was performing on the *gottuvadyam*—five days running. On the first day there were 50 people in the audience of whom ten were Indians. On the fourth day the hall was full—mostly French—and the audience had learned that ex-

pletives of praise were in order.

Ravi Kiran has an assurance and authority in his handling of this complex instrument which augurs well for the future of Indian music. His proficiency derives from devotion—he recently played 24 hours non-stop as an offering to his deity. By the third day he had started departing from the announced programme and was playing what came to his mind on the stage. His rendering of *Kharaharapriya* in *khandatripta tala* on October 4, stands out as a great performance of *ragam tanam pallavi*. It is hoped that this little master will continue to perform in the older tradition of evoking and developing a *raga* and take his audience into the golden hall of musical experience made divine by improvisation. The accompanists gave a good account of themselves, in particular, G. Harishankar on the *kanjira*.

The French audience is different from the Indian audience. The latter chew *paan* and go in and out of the hall at will. When moved by a particularly telling rendition or improvisation they say "Wah! Wah!" in the north and gently susurrate "Tch Tch" in the south. In contrast, the French sit stock still, intent as in Christian prayer, and look daggers at anyone saying "Wah Wah."

Shiv Kumar Sharma played his *santoor* on October 4. His sheepskin hairstyle, red *kurta* and flashing buttons are much more 'showbiz' than the restrained style affected by the Dagers. His instrument is pleasant and undemanding of the conceptual and spiritual resources of the audience. Sharma ended with the *sawaal-jawabs* with the percussionist that has become a common feature of Indian music. This kind of performance caters to the lowest common multiple in the audience and is a sure-shot success.

Kuchipudi is a charming, entertaining and vibrant art form. Vedantam Satyanarayan Sharma, Mahankali Sri Ram Sharma, Pasumarthi Panduranga Vithal, Pasumarthi Shrinivas Sharma delighted the audience with their performance. Satyanarayan, Panduranga and Shrinivasan featured in feminine roles with great elan, and convincingly. The musical support was very weak and the fact that the performances were successful despite this handicap shows the excellence of the dancing.

The performance seen and heard during the first week of October 1985 should help to create a larger audience for Indian classical music and dance in Paris. This will please the shade of Jean Riboud who made the Festival of India possible. He could not attend the opening *mela* as he was struck by illness and died on October 20. Those who saw the Indian and French flags on the Trocadero and the Eiffel Tower in June 1985 will remember this great friend of India with joy at his achievements and sorrow at his untimely demise.

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