

I audience

Capitalise on culture

The December music festival is big but sabhas can do more to give it a world-class feel, writes Chitravina N Ravikiran

It was gratifying to hear Ann Stock from the US State Department, who works closely with Hillary Clinton on culture, acknowledge Chennai as the cultural capital of India last week at a luncheon gathering in the city just as it was heart-warming when Belgian National Television ran a 10-episode series on India recently, focussing on Mumbai for business, Hyderabad for food but Chennai for culture. The city earned the distinction of being the country's cultural capital nationally ages ago but it certainly is commendable that its reputation is now going global.

Culture in Chennai is more deep-rooted than in other metros and is a way of life. Even today, many parents are keen to give children a rudimentary education in classical music and/or dance. There are more concerts of high quality artists held here every year than in any other city. Chennai listeners are regarded as connoisseurs and all artists from M S Subbulakshmi to today's stars and aspirants deem it imperative to woo audiences here in order to 'belong'.

The December season in Chennai is statistically the world's biggest festival with around 3,000 concerts within 30 days. The charged atmosphere in The Madras Music Academy during some concerts would parallel that of Eden Gardens during a nail-biting cricket match.

But where is Chennai in the global context? Wouldn't music lovers want to discuss what can be done to take it to the next level?

The question is: how many of the season's concerts are beyond the regional? A handful of musi-



Organisers could plan early and apply for government grants rather than rely on corporates

N Ravikiran / MUSICIAN

cians and dancers are invited from other parts of the country and the occasional paper is presented by a non-Indian scholar. Having played in festivals in the US, UK, France, Australia and other countries, I believe that leading organisations can take steps to make the festival more 'international'. A couple of collaborative concerts between our musicians and artists from Western Classical, jazz, Chinese, South American and African traditions would be the first step.

Sabhas and organisers could plan early as it will help them apply for government grants, rather than rely on corporates. Every year, several crores of rupees as government grants go unutilised. Organisations must make every effort to apply for such funds. This will ensure that top performers are paid close to their market prices. The organisations too will be able to afford the best artists.

Revamping hall acoustics and audio systems to meet world standards is essential. This might involve bringing qualified audio engineers from abroad for one or two seasons but the investment will be worth it. Improving the hall aesthetics to give it a more world-class feel is also something the organisations should look into.

All this can go a long way to add to Chennai's stature and its festival will soon be on mainstream calendars across the world. Needless to say, Chennai should aspire to scale-up without diluting the innate purity and classicism. After all, extraordinary is ordinary plus extra.

(The writer is a musician-composer of global stature, acclaimed as the initiator of melharmony)

MUSIC

Distinctive contributor

Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi's genius is felt and experienced in all of his compositions, writes **CHITRAVINA N. RAVIKIRAN** in the first of his two-part series on the composer.

One of the greatest composers that India has produced, Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi (also referred to as Venkata Subbayer) is said to have lived sometime between 1700 and 1765 AD. He composed hundreds of brilliant songs in Sanskrit and Tamil and a few in Marathi. Around 500 have survived of which more than 60 per cent have been published. Though his versatility and predilection for music, dance, drama and poetry are obvious even at first glance, the depth and breadth of his works demand years of study by scholars of music, Sanskrit, Tamil and Srividya worship.

For over 200 years, these compositions were almost hidden from the mainstream music field but preserved by a small number of family members and a close circle of disciples. Around 1940, they gained wider exposure through noted Harikatha exponent Needanagalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavathar, a direct descendant of Venkata Kavi's brother. Those who learnt from him include artists such as Rudrapatnam Brothers, Aruna Sairam, Savitry Sathyanurthy and Kunjuman Bhagavathar, nephew of Papanasam Sivan.

Today, his torch is borne primarily by Alamelu and Subbaraman. The latter's thesis on Venkata Kavi's Tamil compositions proves

maynam and so forth) is the most eloquent proof of Venkata Kavi's thoughts, attitude and mastery. As Prof. T.V. Subba Rao affirmed, "These creations blend bhava, raga, tala, sahitya, shabda and swara."

Venkata Kavi's compositions also give an indication of the places he visited such as Chennai, Kanchipuram, Madurai, Tiruvannamalai, Pandharpur and Puzhani. His references to historic personalities such as Jayadeva and Purandaradasa provide a vital clue to his time period, since Tulsiadasa seems to have been chronologically the last personality the poet mentioned.

Venkata Kavi has employed compositional forms like kriti, tillana,

