FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Friends:

Sruti has presented many exciting programs since the last newsletter. In this issue, we include a review of the Nrityagram performance by Sanjay Doddamani (along with comments sent by others), comments on the recent Sruti co-sponsored dance workshop (conducted by the Visweswaraions, co-sponsored by Sruti) by Ramana Ramesh, a review by Shubha Bhat, of another unique dance performance in Delaware by the students of Shree Ramana Maharishi Academy for the Blind, and an interview from an earlier concert of Ranjani and Gayathri by Janani Prabhakar. The current issue also includes letters from our readers, a Fact or Fiction article by yours truly and some happy announcements of awards and graduations sent in by our members. As always, we thank all the contributors and welcome comments and suggestions from our readers.

The Library Committee is working on the annual issue of Sruti Ranjani to be published in November. We welcome contributions of articles related to classical dance and music for the issue. The deadline for submission is October 1. Please contact a member of the Library Committee if you are planning to contribute an article.

We also welcome advertisements from those of you who own businesses, to cover the cost of publication. Please contact a Library Committee member for rates. Your support will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you.

T. Sarada
For the Library Committee

Upcoming Events

Carnatic Saxophone Concert
Kadri Gopalnath
(Sept 27, 2003, See attached flyer for details)

Lecture/Demonstrations on Sangeetha & Laya
Geetha Bennett & Trichy Sankaran
(Saturday Oct 11, 2003, St. Mary’s Hall, Villanova University)

Hindusthani Sarod Concert
Usthad Ali Akbar Khan
(Nov 1, 2003, Zellerbach Theater, Annenberg Center for The Performing Arts)

Carnatic Vocal Concert
O.S. Thiagarajan
(November 15, 2003, St. Mary’s Hall, Villanova University)

Composers’ Day, General Body Meeting, Elections
(Details to be announced shortly)
From the President’s Desk

Dear Friends

The past few months were quite eventful with a variety of performances by Raja and Radha Reddy, Ganesh and Kumaresh and the Nrityagram Ensemble. The presentation Sri, In Search of The Goddess by the Nrityagram Ensemble at the Annenberg Center for The Performing Arts was indeed everything that we expected it to be and more. The event attracted a sizable audience and considerable media attention, with previews and reviews in major newspapers. Besides being an excellent presentation including modern and traditional Odissi pieces, the event turned out to be quite educational to more than 450 Indian and non-Indian audiences who attended the performance. In addition to segments of dance including modern and traditional Odissi pieces, the event included a very interesting question and answer session wherein the highly articulate leader of the troupe, Surupa Sen, answered questions from the curious audience about Nrityagram and Sri choreography.

We are now looking forward to presenting you an exciting Fall season of events including concerts by Kadri Gopalnath, Ali Akbar Khan and O.S. Thiagarajan, and lecture/demonstrations by Geetha Bennett and Trichy Sankaran. Please mark the dates on your calendar and look for details on our website and in our future mailings.

In the long range interests of Sruti, we have been working on establishing a permanent home for Sruti and a strategic plan for achieving this goal. We have also planned to set up a library related to Indian Classical Arts. The library will house, in addition to Sruti’s archives, concert recordings, literature on the classical arts and audio and video recordings of well-known artists. It is our fervent wish that in the near future, the library will be able to serve as an important resource for education and research in Indian classical arts. This will also go a long way in meeting Sruti’s goals of promoting the Indian Classical arts in the area. Donations are being accepted for the Library Fund. Donations of books and recordings are also being accepted. Please call a member of the Board if you have any questions.

Support from our members is very important for the growth of Sruti. Please attend the excellent programs that we offer and encourage your friends and relatives to become members. We are very happy that the response to patron membership (introduced late last year) has been good and we request all our Life members to consider joining the pool of patrons.

We have received many appreciative comments about Sruti’s new website, designed by V.V. Raman, a member of the Library Committee. If you have not visited the site recently, please do so. Your comments and suggestions are most welcome. We also invite the connoisseurs among you to participate in having interesting and meaningful discussions on the web on topics related to music and dance.

We look forward to seeing you all at the next performance. Please spread the word and support the organization.

Sincerely,

Viji Swaminathan, President
For the Board of Directors

Review: Sri – In Search of the Goddess

Sanjay Doddamani

The world as a global village holds true after witnessing SRUTI, the Indian Music and Dance Society host a premier Indian dance troupe, Nrityagram on July 12 2003 at the Zellerbach Theater, Annenberg Center for Performing Arts. Nrityagram is the only dance village of its kind where a confluence of performing arts has found expression in a truly ideal setting for the propagation of classical dance.

A stark but powerful opening scene set the stage for a contemporary exploration of an age old search for the divine female principle; Sri – In Search of the Goddess. Reaching the depths of feminine energy to ultimately discover the goddess within, the bold, unhindered lines empowered the dancers’ soft and curvaceous Eastern Indian dance form of Odissi to tackle esoteric concepts. Inspired by Aurobindo’s epic poem Savitri, the dancers vividly used imagery to portray the darkness of night, the brightness of fire and the silence of death. What is considered a difficult theme came through with ease and elan, bringing out audible reactions by a diverse multi-ethnic audience who were awe-struck by the spell-binding imagery. Movements were synchronized with exceptional accuracy and the footwork added powerful rhythmic time cycles.

A brief intermission changed the pace to a familiar and much adored Odissi repertoire. Donning traditional costumes with the crowning Shivara head ornament, the dancers gave displays of Hindu iconography amidst a background of lilting, professionally mastered music. The well-known Aarabhi Ragam Pallavi bears the rubberstamp of Master Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Credit for the flawless rendering and choreography goes to Nrityagram’s artistic director, Surupa Sen. Bijayini Satpati, the seniormost of the five-member troupe performed an Ashtapadi from the famed Geeta Govinda epic poem, highlighting Krishna’s exploits and curvaceous Eastern Indian dance form of Odissi to tackle esoteric concepts. Inspired by Aurobindo’s epic poem Savitri, the dancers vividly used imagery to portray the darkness of night, the brightness of fire and the silence of death. What is considered a difficult theme came through with ease and elan, bringing out audible reactions by a diverse multi-ethnic audience who were awe-struck by the spell-binding imagery. Movements were synchronized with exceptional accuracy and the footwork added powerful rhythmic time cycles.

The realization of a burning dream by founding guru and celebrity Protima Gauri Bedi to consecrate a sanctuary for teaching Indian classical dances, Nrityagram has become a veritable reality. They have won tremendous acclaim and danced all over the world. The Nrityagram performance was an impressive product of cultural globalization, opening minds and winning hearts through a contemporary infusion into an ancient heritage.

[Sanjay Doddamani, a cardiologist, is also a Bharathanatyam dancer and lives in Philadelphia]
From Darkness to Light
Shubha Bhat

In May 2003 I had the privilege of witnessing a group of four talented performers at the Hindu Temple of Delaware, as they danced with grace and confidence, despite their blindness. I remember sitting in awe as the four performers moved across the stage, weaving in and out of several intricate group configurations, all in sync. I remember admiring their perceptive sense of space as they danced the Deepanjali, holding lighted candles in their outstretched palms, and revealing their theme, ‘from darkness to light’. They were able to dance and maneuver the flickering candles in impressive patterns with the heightened strength of their other senses. The four students performed both Bharatha Natyam and Kuchipudi. Since I have been learning Bharatha Natyam for the past 11 years, I was especially interested in being exposed to Kuchupudi, another ancient form of Indian classical dance. I was amazed at how Manjappa, the eldest of the four dancers, was able to balance the pot of water on his head while dancing on a brass plate. It was thrilling to watch, as Manjappa would match the pattern and increasing speed of the beats danced by his fellow performers. I could only imagine the level of balance and concentration that went into performing such a piece with the precision and talent that they did!

At the end of the performance, I was convinced that I had seen a unique show of strength, determination and talent. I was curious to learn more about the skilled performers and about their artistic director. I learned through their brochure that the four performers, Manjappa (23), Shridhar (16), Hemalatha (18) and Savithri (18) were students of the Shree Ramana Maharishi Academy for the Blind (SRMAB), a voluntary organization in Bangalore, India which encourages people with disabilities to fulfill their potential in all aspects of their lives and focus on ability. I was also curious to know details about their lives as blind students and performers. I called Dr. B.T. Lakshman, the coordinator of the programs and host of the troop, to see if I could speak with the artistic director, Smt. Swaroopalakshmi, an accomplished performer who has been teaching at SRMAB since 1995. When I spoke to her over the phone, she was open to my curious questions. I asked her about the students that attend SRMAB and the various things they learn there. She said that SRMAB is a boarding residency school that is free of cost for students with disabilities from different parts of Karnataka. Currently, SRMAB offers education for 300 students ranging Pre-K to 10th grade. Based on their interests, the students are allotted into groups and taught dance, music or drama. The four students that performed at the Hindu Temple of Delaware have been learning dance at the academy from Smt. Swaroopalakshmi for several years and have performed all over India and abroad.

I also wanted to learn about the process of teaching dance to blind students. She told me that she attends to

(Continued on page 4)
An interview by Janani Prabhakar

The day after Ranjani & Gayathri’s concert on April 13, 2003, I had the opportunity to talk with Ranjani (the older of the two sisters) over the telephone. I was not able to write down Ranjani’s responses word for word, but I have tried my best to recapture her comments. She was very nice to talk to and I really enjoyed the opportunity.

JP: Janani Prabhakar, RB: Ranjani Balasubramaniam

JP: How long have you and your sister been learning and from whom did you both learn?

RB: I have been learning vocal music formally since the age of five from my mother Meenakshi Balasubramaniam. I started learning the violin at the age of eight from Sangeetha Bhushanam T.S. Krishnaswamy. My sister, Gayathri, started learning the violin at the age of 6 and also learned vocal. Our Guru would make us learn to sing the song before playing it on the violin. At that time, we were not seriously singing.

JP: When did you two make the transition from violin to vocal?

RB: We have been giving vocal concerts for the last five to six years. Our vocal teacher was Sri P.S. Narayana Swami, disciple of Sri Semmangudi Iyer. He thought that we had good voices and motivated us to give concerts. So, he arranged a concert for us. Gayathri was very skeptical and was not sure if we would sound good. Also, our father had not heard us sing together and did not know whether we would sound good, so he cancelled that concert. But, we competed in competitions and won, so we eventually arranged another concert. Our first concert was in Nanganalur and after that, we started singing mainly.

JP: Do you feel that learning the violin helped your singing and vice versa?

RB: Both ways, playing instrumental helps vocal and learning vocal helps instrumental. Each feed on the other. Each boosts the other.

JP: How do you and your sister practice together?

RB: We have been giving vocal concerts ever since I was 13 and my sister was 10. We practiced both the manodharma and non-manodharma parts together. The non-manodharma parts like kritis and varnams we practiced to develop a set way of singing them. Coordination just happens naturally since we have been singing together for so long. Now, we practice together as far as kritis, but not varnams.

JP: When is the best time to practice? Many say that morning is the best time.

RB: Early morning is the best time to practice aakaaaram and lower octaves. You should not practice the upper octaves because your voice is not broken in yet. By practicing the lower octaves, you will develop a firm foundation and a wide range in the lower octaves. After doing that for an hour, you can move on to varnams. But, about an hour and a half of early morning voice practice is a must.

JP: How many hours do you and your sister practice each day?
RB: It is very flexible. We practice early mornings and throughout the day. There are never a set number of hours.

JP: Is music your main profession?

RB: Yes, it is.

JP: Any advice you would give to young music students, especially those in the United States?

RB: Listen to a lot of concerts, especially the stalwarts of current time and from the Golden years like Sennangudi Srinivas Iyer, Arikuddi Ramanujam Ignar, and Maharaja Ram Vishwana Iyer. Listening is the only way to improve your singing.

[Janani, a Carnatic music student of , recently graduated from High School and will be attending Pittsburgh University]

Rescue of Bhadrachalam Ramadas from Imprisonment

T. Sarada

This story, in the series of fact or fiction is so dramatic that it deserves narration. It is about Sri Bhadrachalam Ramadas (1620-1688) who is a well-known and revered composer in the Karnatic music world. His life history is well documented and recorded by himself in his kirtanas. At the same time, there are also incidences quoted and written about that fall in the realm of myth of outstanding proportions. Judge for yourself from one of them given below.

First a little background on Sri Ramadas. He was christened Gopanna. Details of family history are in his Dasarati Satakam. Because of his devotion to the deity Sri Rama of Badrachalam, he has been known as, “Badrachalam Ramadas”, even during his lifetime. It is interesting to note that Bhadrachalam got its fame due to its association with the composer and devotee Gopanna and not vice versa. His maternal uncles were working in the kingdom of Golconda at that time and hence he was appointed as the Tashildar of Badrachalam Taluq. This was during the reign of Abdul Hasan Qutub Shah, also known as the Tanisha. (1672-1686.)

Ramadas wrote music in the kirtana form, with pallavi, anupallavi and caranam and his songs have many caranas. They are mostly in Telugu and a few in Sanskrit. He did use some typical Tamil expressions once in a while. They are mostly in Telugu and a few in Sanskrit. He did use anupallavi and caranam and his songs have many caranas.

Now comes one of the hard to believe incidences. His release was considered to be due to heavenly interference. The story goes that at the end of twelve years, two majestic and young men commanding respect, (Rama and Lakshmana) appeared before Tanisha, paid him six lakhs of rupees, (Rs. 600,000, the amount owed by Ramadas to the State), had Ramadas released and disappeared. There is even now a gate on the Golconda hill, which is called Ramji-Lakshmanji gate. This is about a hundred yards from the prison cell and at a short distance from the palace of Tanisha on the hill.

Once the Tanisha realized what had happened, he realized the greatness of Sri Ramadas, apologized to him and reappointed him as the Tashildar. Not only that, he endowed the temple with the Jagirs (revenues) of Badrachalam, Palvancha and Samkaragiri pattai and gave additional moneys to the temple. The gold coins believed to have been given by Ramji are still held very sacred and are referred to as Ram Tanka coins (Ramrajya coins). These coins have, on one side, a depiction of Sri Rama Paattabhisheka and on the other, Sri Anjaneya. References


[T. Sarada is a member of the Library Committee]
Dear Editor,
Re: Sruti Notes Vol 6, Issue 1, 2003, Sruti Ranjani, 2002
That G.N.B. got his B.A. (Honours) degree as a student of Madras Christian College is a well established fact. When I was a student in that college several years later, we were attempting to get him to give a concert at the College. When we mentioned this to Professor McPhail of the English Department, he, with his usual cold civility, said “Yes, he was not a good (Literature) Honours student; he got a Second class.”

Also, I have a recording of a ‘National Program’ of G.N. B. The introductory announcement in English says that he was an Honours graduate in English Literature. Announcements by All India Radio are usually very accurate. The biography of G.N.B. published by his son also confirms this.

S. Sankaran, Blue Bell, PA

---

Dr. Lalitha Krishnan of Havertown, PA, was awarded the Community Service Award-2003 by the Council of Indian Organizations at the India Day Celebrations at Penns Landing in August, in recognition of her services to the community. A life member of Sruti, Dr. Lalitha Krishnan has been an active volunteer for many organizations and has served on the committees of Sruti and SEWAA. Our congratulations and best wishes to her.

Graduations: Our congratulations and best wishes to...

Soumya Menon, daughter of Dr. Kala Menon, Graduated from Harriton Highschool in Lower Merion as a distinguished scholar. She will attend Villanova University this Fall on a full merit scholarship. She was a Captain of Varsity Speech and Debate team since her sophomore year and has won several awards in public speaking at regional, state and national level competitions. Soumya is also a student of the Natya Academy and had her Bharathanatyam arangetram last June.

Viraj Narayan, son of Vasantha and Narayan (former president of Sruti), graduated from Radnor High School. In Radnor, Viraj was active in Cross Country and Varsity Tennis. He sang with the Meistersingers and Pro Musica. He played first violin in the Radnor High School Orchestra. He is also interested in Carnatic music and is a violin student of T.N. Bala. Viraj will be attending Carnegie Mellon University starting in September ’03.

Janani Prabhakar, daughter of Kalyani and Kris Prabhakar (our vice-president) graduated from Upper Dublin Highschool, PA. She will be pursuing her studies as a Neuroscience major in the Honors College at the University of Pittsburgh. She is the recipient of the Dr. William R.M. Ritter Science Award and Scholarship, the Outstanding Botany Project Award/ Scholarship, Who’s Who Among American HighSchool Students Award, and a three-time recipient of the Creative Communications Poetry Award. She sings Carnatic Music and recently performed in Madras, India, with her sister Ranjani.

Chethan Ramamurthy, son of Smt. Hema and Dr. Hullur Ramamurthy of Morrisville, PA, graduated from The Hun School of Princeton as Salutatorian of his class and will be attending Dartmouth College in September, 2003. He was nominated to the Academic All-Stars Team in the Princeton area, was inducted into the Cum Laude Society, and was a finalist in both the National Merit Scholarship Competition and the National Chemistry Olympiad. Chethan received Carnatic vocal training from T.N. Bala until the age of 12, and has been learning tabla and western drums for several years. He served on the Youth Committees of SRUTI and Triveni.

Srikant Rao, son of Gayathri and Sudhakar Rao (former president of Sruti), graduated from Wissahickon High School. He was a Valedictorian, President of the National Honor Society and Senior Class President of his graduating class. Srikant will be attending the University of Pennsylvania this fall to study under the Jerome Fisher Program in Management and Technology. He will be pursuing a degree in business from Wharton and a degree in bioengineering from the School of Engineering. Srikant was also a part of his school’s Varsity tennis team and a cappella singing groups. He has also pursued his interest in music as a student of Carnatic music under Sri T.N.Bala.

Mahesh Swaminathan, son of Viji and P. Swaminathan of Ambler, PA, graduated from Jefferson University Medical School with an MD degree. He started the residency program in Internal Medicine in July at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan, New York.

Welcome New Members
SRUTI is happy to welcome Ms. Meena Pennathur as a patron member. Our hearty welcome to Sampath Kannan and his family of Philadelphia, PA as a new Life member.

Events in the Area

The Philadelphia Fringe Festival runs August 29 - September 13. Akram Khan, master of Kathak and contemporary dance, presents *Kaash* (if), his first full-length work, the culmination of his two years as the Choreographer-in-Residence at the Royal Festival Hall in London. For the set and music, he collaborated with the famed Turner Prize-winning sculptor Anish Kapoor and the Mercury Prize-winning composer Nitin Sawhney. A company of five, including Khan, performs the work on Wed 9/10 8:00pm and Fri 9/12 8pm. For details, visit http://www.pafringe.org/.

Sangeet Rajani Music Competition
The 2003 Sangeet Rajani music competition will be held on Saturday October 18, 2003. Children under the age of 20 are welcome to participate. There will be separate categories for both Karnataka and Hindustani music. All entries must be received by Sept 25th, 2003. For more information please call Vivek Khadilkar (215-357-5383), Sangeeta Akolkar (215-855-1422), or Hema Ramamurthy (215-295-1980).