

Far from the madding crowd and into a Temple hall bliss

SRUTI Fills the Philadelphia Museum of Art temple hall with Music (October 20, 2018)

A Review by Dinakar Subramanian

Bliss - that is exactly how I felt when I was at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for the Music in the galleries (MITG) Sruti Outreach event on the afternoon of October 20 this year. Sruti worked with Greg Stuart (Museum Educator, Adult Learning) from the museum for this outreach event to showcase Indian American youth from the area to propagate awareness of Indian classical music to the mainstream public.

The Temple Hall in the Museum is a unique environment that houses parts of an original temple in south India from hundreds of years ago. This hall and the surroundings display idols from Indian mythology representing both the epics - the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Keeping this in mind, Sruti selected pieces that wove together the temple setting and the Ramayana theme.

The structure of the MITG had the artists perform 3 times for half an hour each that afternoon with the intent of organically having a rolling audience that was visiting the museum. The Phila museum is one of our favorite places to visit on a weekend and I could not wait to experience the afternoon with the young musicians. I could see the excitement building already in the area with the neatly arranged seats with the program flyer on them.



*L to R: Keerthi Ramani, Shishir Kumar, Kamalakiran Vinjamuri, Samyuktha Sreeram
Image courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2018. Photo by Susan Beard photography.*

Though the artists were young they are not new to performing, with their skill and with the beautiful structure of Carnatic music, the musicians who have not played together before can easily gel and provide a synchronized performance and boy did they!! Kamalakiran Vinjamuri on the violin, Shishir Kumar on the saxophone, Samyuktha Sreeram on the ghatam and Keerthi Venkataramani on the mridangam presented a Mallari (celebrating a temple ritual) followed by a kriti by Swati Tirunal - Bhavayami Raghuramam that illustrates the story of the Ramayana from young Rama's ascent to his coronation and a Thillana suited for dance in the ragam Dhanashri.

After the introductions, the music and the magic began. As the strains of the violin and the saxophone wafted through the Temple hall, people started walking in, drawn by the absolutely euphonic sounds emanating from the hall. The seats were full but there was additional foot traffic around the seats for people to catch a closer glimpse of what was going on in this hall.



The reactions of the generationally diverse audience were truly remarkable and unique. One of the ushers was totally taken in by the sound of the saxophone that he had a persistent smile throughout the afternoon. Curious people walked around the dais from both sides of the Temple hall to get a close look at the young artists and how the sounds were being emitted.

From my assessment, the audience consisted of art lovers, musicians, music students and other curious Georges. Two young couples with infants were thoroughly enjoying the program. The babies were quite happy and the dads were dancing to the music. Over 200+ people enjoyed the proceedings that afternoon, many of them recording segments of the music for later enjoyment.

Two things captivated me - one as a music aficionado and the second as a presenter. The first was the interplay between the young artists during every session; I enjoyed watching them enjoy themselves on stage. Kamalakiran and Shishir alternated their playing with repetitive and gradually escalating phrases in the songs which enhanced my enjoyment. They encouraged and appreciated each other with enthusiasm. Keerthi and Samyuktha providing wonderful percussive support that the total output was true synergy indeed.

As a presenter, I was amazed at how the program affected the audience - there was palpable excitement in the crowd and after each session, there were people who approached the musicians and asked questions about the instruments. I had people approach me with questions, one asked if these compositions were written for the saxophone and another if the clay-pot (ghatam) artist had any protective caps on her fingers to play it.

The show genuinely intrigued anyone within the listening radius of the Temple hall and left the attendees that included Sruti members on a blissful high. We all came away with another successful outreach program.

Dinakar Subramanian is an ex-President of Sruti and is part of the current Sruti Board of Directors. He has been teaching and performing carnatic music over many years.