

CHAT CORNER

'I keep experimenting'



Sudha Ragunathan

As Sudha Venkatraman, she had already started carving a niche for herself in the late Seventies, and as Sudha Ragunathan she is a household name. She has won the hearts of rasikas world over by her demeanour off the platform too. Amidst the constant global hopping, (except the December season) which has now become her style, Sudha also believes that there is something more to life than music. Hence was born the Samudhaaya Foundation in 1999 – a trust she launched for social welfare activities. Spearheading this trust as its Managing Trustee, she collects funds through her concerts to contribute to the Kargil Defence Personnel Relief Fund, the Cyclone Relief Fund in Orissa and the Earthquake Relief Fund in Gujarat. The Trust, this year, has embarked upon a noble project the details of which she reveals during the course of the chat on her way to the airport recently...

Hopping continents means different weather conditions, food, etc. How do you manage?

Not many would have had the opportunity to travel with their Guru as vocal support. I enjoyed the privilege. Between 1980 and 1989, I was part of almost all the foreign tours of my Guru MLV, and I gained experience not only in music but in meticulous planning of travel schedules, reading the pulse of the audience, managing power naps between long hauls to the venue: a virtual on the job training for me. To combat the weather changes, I just stay off anything cold and cover up sufficiently with warm clothes. Food? Well! I eat minimally.

A major reason for your success is concert structuring... comment

Again, I owe it to my guru, who was adept at it. I plan according to the audience. Not that quality is compromised. When the crowd is heterogeneous, it is a judicious balance to please both the learned and the uninitiated, but all within the parameters of Carnatic music. I'm expected to sing (in the second half of my concerts) songs bearing my guru's stamp, such as Chinnanchiru Kiliye, Aarumo Aaval to name a few, and songs such as Brahmam Okatae, Enna Thavam Seidhanai and Kanda Naall Mudhalaai and I don't disappoint them.

You have won many titles and awards... what is yet to come?

Besides Kalaimamani (State Government 1993) and Padmasri (Central Government-2004), Dei Gratia, I have received many awards and titles, here and abroad. All of these are certainly inspiring, but they also cast a heavy responsibility. This December, the Mylapore Fine Arts Club is conferring Sangeetha Kala Nipuna on me.

Forays into films - Why?

I keep experimenting, for novelty. When film offers came in I did cash in on them. I won the Best Female Playback Singer award (2002) of the Southern India Cinematographers Association, thanks to maestro Ilaiyaraajaa's soulful music for the film "Ivan." I did a modern number for his son, Yuvan in "Satham Podathey." I found a new dimension in my voice then. In "Morning Raga" it was exciting to sing Thayae Yashoda. Yes! The Thodi song in a setting of fusion. In "Uliyin Osai" it was a classical number; a tough one indeed. I perceive cinema as an opportunity to spread my wings. Nothing more.

World music festivals you have participated in...

It speaks volumes of the recognition given to Carnatic music. I was the first Indian and only Asian to perform at the International Festival ECHTERNACH at Luxembourg and also at the Sfinks Festival at Antwerp. Performing at the Theatre de la Ville, Paris, and at the Lincoln Centre, New York Broadway, to commemorate 50 years of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan are some of my cherished moments. Taking part in the Global Vocal meeting at Lorrach in Germany, as the only Indian vocalist, I met singers from various cultural backgrounds. Le Rythm de la Parole in Paris was another significant segment.

On your fans who comment on your attire and jewellery...

(Laughs) Well, I take it in my stride. Coming to think of it, they appreciate more than they criticise. So, let's leave it at that.

About Samudhaaya Foundation - what are you taking up this year?

The Trust is now nine years old. We help the deserving in music, education and many other charitable causes. This year we are donating Rs.25 lakhs to a private hospital for conducting heart surgeries for 30 under-privileged children. Also, we are going to support Sri Arunodayam, (a home for destitute children) with about 5 lakhs. I truly think that this is one of the best ways of saying thank you to God who has made all good things possible. We also honour personalities, in recognition of their selfless and outstanding service to society, with the 'Saadhana Award for Excellence.'

Of all the critical acclaims which one do you consider the best?

Subbudu once wrote that if he were left deserted on an island with permission to keep three things that he liked very much, he would like to take 1) an audio visual cassette of Sudha Ragunathan 2) betel leaves and tobacco to chew while listening to the music and 3) Poet Kannadasan's works. I think that sums it all up.

V. BALASUBRAMANIAN

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"CONCERT PLANNING - I OWE IT TO MY GURU."
