

## A JEWEL IN THE CROWN OF CULTURE

By Lakshmi Viswanathan

A Sabha is widely accepted to be a cultural organisation which serves its members and the general public a selective range of classical music and dance, predominantly Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam. The occasional eclectic mix of other classical dances and Hindustani music, and Tamil drama, is not uncommon in the better established sabhas. Sabhas have been the back-bone of South Indian culture both in Chennai and allover India for atleast a hundred years. To-day, under new nomenclature, Sabhas have sprung up even in remote areas of North America.

When a sabha has been doing the work it sets out to do, for fifty years, in a world changing so fast that most things of deep cultural value are no longer recognised for their true worth, that sabha must be congratulated, supported, and lauded for it's monumental efforts. This is the unique distinction enjoyed by Sri Krishna Gana Sabha which was founded on January 24th 1954. It was founded by the legendary Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer who was the first president, and his son Maharajapuram Santhanam the star vidwan of the latter half of the twentieth century, was the first secretary.

Performances were first held in the open air auditorium of the Hindi Prachar Sabha and later at the Thakkar Baba Vidyalaya.

Three years later, when the sabha seemed to be needing a new lease of new life, R.Yaganaraman took over as secretary and began conducting concerts under a thatched roof in a vacant plot on Nageswara Rao Road. An auspicious beginning was made in this venue on Vinayaka Chaturthi day in 1957, with a scintillating concert by GNB, accompanied by Palani Subramanya Pillai and his disciple Trichy Sankaran on the mridangam, and on the violin, Lalgudi Jayaraman, who has over the years become a part of this institution. Members grew in numbers with this flying start which was followed by performances by a who's who of Karnatic music and Bharatanatyam. The added attraction were the dramas staged by versatile stage and screen actors like Sivaji Ganesan, Sahasranamam, and the inimitable TKS brothers.

The move to a leased piece of land in Griffith Road was not merely a bold one, but one that demanded a lot of support from members and sponsors. With loans offered by the members and generous donations from patrons a more or less permanent space was created for the Sabha. A Grihapravesam event was a memorable concert by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. To this humble

abode, the giants of music willingly came and gave of their best. Whether it was M.S Subbulakshmi, M.L. Vasanthakumari, or flute Mali, Bhimsen Joshi or Bade Gula Ali Khan, they came and found the reception to their music spontaneous and rousing.

Yagnaraman, gathered enough courage and had enough foresight to launch a festival. True to the name of the sabha, he launched the Gokulashtami series with just five top artistes, and went on to expand it to sixty concerts. The bonus of course is the award that is given nowadays on the inaugural day, with the title Sangeeta Choodamani. This was followed by a challenge to the already established December festivals in T.Nagar. A full scale festival series, with a dance programme every night literally broke the existing pattern of festivals. Sri. Krishna Gana Sabha has the unique distinction of pioneering the institution of an award for a dancer every year, with the title, Nritya Choodamani.

People like myself were drawn to Krishna Gana Sabha much before the dance festival and award were established. I have fond memories of finding a re-awakening in my interest in Carnatic music largely kindled by the maestro Lalgudi Jayaraman, and the grandest vocalist among women, M.L. Vasanthakumari. This was in the golden 60's. I call those years "golden" because music lovers had the distinct advantage of listening to the widest variety of stalwarts, each with an inimitable and distinct "bani" or style of singing, and an exclusive repertoire which they had inherited from their gurus. Kutcheris were few and far between, leaving music lovers eager for more. Like fans of tennis pros who follow their heroes everywhere, we used to trail our favourite musicians and drink deep from their, delectable artistry. Innovations like the Violin-Veena-Venu concerts in which to Lalgudi, Venkatraman and Ramani collaborated were premiered in Krishna Gana Sabha, sending fans into raptures. Madurai Somu, with Lalgudi and Sivaraman, went soaring with his Nageswaram - like bani. Violin duets by Lalgudi and his sister Srimathi Brahmanandam, sounded like the music of the Gandharvas which, we had until then only imagined.

A certain relaxed atmosphere with no time constraints inspired artistes at Krishna Gana Sabha. For months we would speak of that special evening when M.L.V. Sang the raga Gamanasrama, or when T.M. Tyagarajan spread the wings of a Todi ragam like a phoenix. Whether it was a Maharajapuram Santhanam, or an M.S. Subbulakshmi or D.K. Pattammal and D.K. Jayaraman, they always gave generously to this Sabha, making their concerts memorable. One can name a vast galaxy of musicians up to the present time who have

made the Sabha a haven for the best in classical music. Suffice it to say, that for all of them, this is a special venue.

The titles Sangeetha Choodamani for music and Nritya Choodamani for dance were instituted in 1974. I recall vividly, opening an aerogramme letter from my mother while I was camping in London to perform in the prestigious Brighton and Edinburgh festivals, that Sri.Yaganaraman had telephoned to say I was getting the Nritya Choodamani title the following season (Dec. 1975). I was pleasantly surprised, and grateful for the "recognition" of a highly refined and classical style of Bharatanatyam which I had imbibed from Guru Kanjivaram Ellappa. The crowning glory of the occasion was undoubtedly receiving the award from Smt. T. Balasaraswathi, with felicitations from M.L.V., the beloved Guru of Charu, my sister, who used to sing for my performances. Smt. Vyjayanthimala Bali who knows the true form of classical dance, presided over the function. A long line of dancers have since received the Nritya Choodamani title and the list reads like a who's who of Indian Dance. But to be young, and receive a prestigious title was veritably a heaven.

In the early eighties, Krishna Gana Sabha broke new ground by holding the Natya Kala Conference. Every aspect of Indian dance soon found a place in this conference, with a huge variety of styles presented by the top artistes of the country. An air of expectation and excitement was created in T. Nagar, which was not to be found anywhere else in the city during the December season. I have distinct memories of the early years when I was invited to be the Convenor, and the large audience we had for the discussions and lecture - demonstrations. Artistes like the Manipuri exponent Rajkumar Singhajit Singh and the modern dancer Astad Deboo whom I invited, were making their debuts in Madras, and the former actually went on to receive the title Nritya Choodamani. To-day the Conference is well established and has more or less become a must in the calender of young dancers and dance lovers everywhere.

Any organisation which has grown and re-invented itself, must be steered by people of extraordinary commitment. In Presidents ranging from Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, V.D Swamy, B.V.S.S. Mani and Nalli Kuppuswami Chettiar, Krishna Gana Sabha has found great support. With a dedicated Committee, guided by the indefatigable Yagnaraman who has constantly monitored the growth of this institution, the sabha, now in its golden jubilee year, is a jewel in the crown of Indian culture. May the future hold equal promise and greater glory for the Sabha which presents the best in classical arts.