

## **SRI KRISHNA GANA SABHA**

*A world-class institution with a Carnatic flavour*

by Chitravina N. Ravikiran

The very thought of Sri Krishna Gana Sabha conducting its Golden Jubilee is music to any music lover's ears and more so, to all musicians' ears. The fact that this Golden Jubilee is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Gotuvadyam Narayana Iyengar, during his Birth Centenary Year, makes it additionally special to me at a personal level.

Sri Krishna Gana Sabha is easily one of the most dynamic sabhas in the country today with its wide-ranging activities. The sabha that was started in 1954, by a musician who was to become a legend, Shri Maharajapuram Santhanam, with another musical marvel who was already a legend, none other than his father Shri Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer as its President, has become a legend in its own right through the unstinting efforts of the one and only Mr. Yagnaraman, who took over as its main office bearer in 1957.

Today, the events conducted by Krishna Gana Sabha are held in one of the most beautiful auditoria in the country, at the Nalli Gana Vihar. This is a far cry from the days when concerts used to be held in the Hindi Prachar Sabha premises in T. Nagar, before moving to Griffith Road in 1961. Mr. Yagnaraman has been the Secretary of Sri Krishna Gana Sabha uninterruptedly for over 40 years. He is an organiser par excellence, a connoisseur of music and dance, not to mention theatre.

The Krishna Gana Sabha auditorium, re-named in honour of its current President and long time patron Dr. Nalli Kuppaswamy Chettiar, sports a very artistic facade, with specially ordered wooden pillars from Chettinad. From a musician's point of view, the acoustically sensitive false ceilings and new sound system that have been installed, have improved the quality of the auditorium by leaps and bounds.

**Trendsetting Festivals:** The Natyakala conference is a special feature of Krishna Gana Sabha. While most sabhas are busy conducting the music festival in December, Krishna Gana Sabha has furrowed its own path and conducts the dance conference at that time, but this does not prevent a copious supply of music concerts. Every day of the December season spent at the Krishna Gana Sabha can be a rewarding experience right from early morning to late night, covering everything from devotional music to dance performances.

But the main music festival is conducted during the August/Sept/Oct timeframe, commencing around Gokulashtami every year. The Gokulashtami series is not merely a platform for top-ranking artistes to perform. It has unearthed several invaluable young talents in the last few decades. An opportunity at Krishna Gana Sabha's Gokulashtami festival means a lot to artistes of the younger generation striving to make a mark in the field. Not that it means anything less to the established stars.

The Sabha also balances its agenda with an adequate number of drama presentations.

**Awards:** The titles bestowed by Krishna Gana Sabha are much coveted by artistes and looked forward to, by music lovers. Every year, rasikas indulge in debates as to who would receive the 'Sangeeta Choodamani' or 'Nritya Choodamani' and Krishna Gana Sabha has never been the center of controversies over its choice of awardees, choices that have generally been spot on and wholeheartedly welcomed by the cultured enthusiasts.

One of the main reasons for this is the Committees ability to unerringly spot highly deserving candidates every year. Some of the commendable selections for Sangeeta Choodamani include vidwans M. Chandrasekharan, Trichy Sankaran, Tanjavur S. Kalyanaraman, Prof. T.R. Subramanian and P.S. Narayanaswami.

The Sabha has also been meticulous in encouraging reputed theatre artistes with the title, 'Nataka Choodamani'. The title 'Acharya Choodamani' is now being conferred on eminent gurus, which is a most praiseworthy move indeed.

An artiste's stature rises with the award bestowed by Krishna Gana Sabha. Once the sabha recognises an artiste, it sets the tone for several other institutions to follow suit.

In recent years, Krishna Gana Sabha has done much to promote religious discourses and bhajana-related programmes. I am sure it is a matter of time before exponents in these areas are also given titles such as 'Harikatha Choodamani' or 'Sankeertana Choodamani'.

Krishna Gana Sabha is more than a mere concert-churning organisation. The institution also runs a school for basic training in music, dance, veena and mridangam, making it a center for learning of the arts.

**My experiences at KGS:** At a personal level, Krishna Gana Sabha has always been a special organisation for me since I was a toddler. Mr. Yagnaraman was one of the very first people in Chennai to spot me and immediately provide opportunities to bring me to the limelight. I have heard several accounts about my raga-demonstrations here as a two-year-old.

I remember my first concert on the chitravina here in 1979 or 1980, when the inspiring audience enabled me to play masterpieces like Giripai in Shahana. This is one of the venues that inspires an artiste to dig deep and present really worthwhile music every time he/she performs. It is also one of those venues that gives the motivation to innovate and create something new without losing sight of the core values of our music.

When the office bearers of Krishna Gana Sabha called my home with the information that I had been chosen to receive the Sangeeta Choodamani award for 1995, I was in Los Angeles and my father and guru, Chitravina Narasimhan, conveyed the news to me. I was quite hesitant to accept the title, as I felt that

there were several senior artistes who deserved it ahead of me. But Mr. Yagnaraman was quite insistent and as usual, had his way! A few years later, I also had the pleasant task of felicitating Prof. Mysore Vishweshwaran, when he was conferred the title.

**Listening experience:** Krishna Gana Sabha attracts not only the best performers, but also some of the most ardent music lovers. Listening to good music here is a special treat that can only be experienced.

Even with an asbestos-covered hall and not-so-permanent structures around the side, the place had a special atmosphere that brought the best out of several great artistes and provided a treat for rasikas. I remember attending some excellent concerts here by artistes of several generations, right from Sangeeta Pitamaha Shri Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer through Shri T.N. Seshagopalan, to my friend and colleague U. Srinivas and many others. One of the most memorable concerts I attended here recently was Shri K.V. Narayanaswami's, in Dec 2001. My good friend Mr. V.V. Sundaram was with me that evening, and we continued collecting that event for months afterwards.

**Dynamic Approach:** One of the things I have admired in this sabha is its dynamic approach, which enables it to do things with a difference. As mentioned earlier, Krishna Gana Sabha has not only been the first major organisation to provide a platform for many artistes to showcase their mettle, but has also boldly honoured several artistes.

Mr. Yagnaraman is always clued in about what is happening in the field and positively responds to it in his own way. For instance, he proposed to dedicate this year's festival to my grandfather's Birth Centenary, even before I thought of discussing it with him.

I would like to share a couple of instances illustrative of his dynamism approach. About 2-3 years ago, I was to fly down from Europe on the day of my chitravina concert here. I reached Chennai to discover that the airline had misplaced my chitravina in Belgium, and I promptly called up Mr. Yagnaraman to convey my inability to play the concert that evening. I suggested that they have an alternate artiste perform in my place. But he would not take no for an answer. "Why don't you give a vocal concert instead?" he suggested. Which is what I ended up doing!

This year, having observed my work on Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi's compositions, he took the initiative to ask me for a thematic vocal concert on the compositions of this great vaggeyakara besides my usual chitravina recital.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Yagnaraman's service to the arts has also attracted notice abroad, particularly in overseas events such as the Tyagaraja Festival in Cleveland, USA. He has been awarded several titles.

On this glorious occasion of its Golden Jubilee year. I pray to the Almighty that Krishna Gana Sabha may cross several such milestones with him at the helm.