

MUSIC SEASON

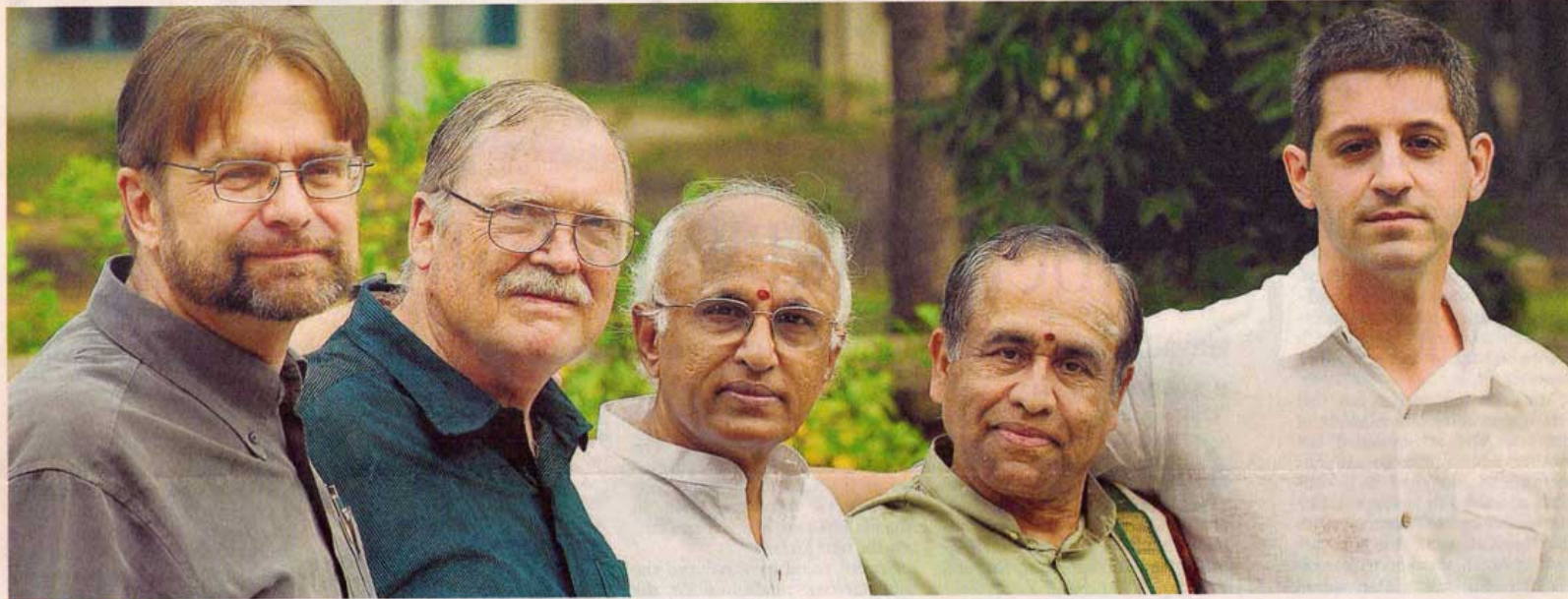
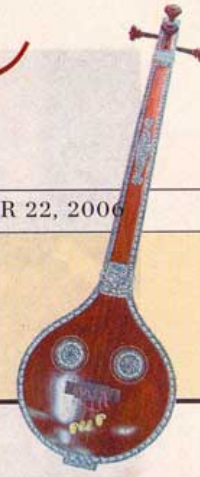
THE CHENNAI DECEMBER FESTIVAL • FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2006



R. Vedavalli
Brilliant
in niraval
page 4

Parur Trio
Violins in
perfect unison
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Anita Guha
Joyous
group dance
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HAPPY COLLABORATION: (From left) Eero Hameenniemi, David Reck, Karaikkudi Subramaniam, Tiruchi Sankaran and Nicholas Higgins. PHOTO: N. SRIDHARAN.

As the mridangam played jazz

When East meets West in a musical dialogue, the resulting blend constitutes fusion in the truest sense.

LALITHAA KRISHNAN

Venue: The recording studios of All India Radio, Madras. Year: circa 1958. The famous jazz quartet featuring pianist Dave Brubeck and drummer Joe Morello was visiting town. Excited programme executives had arranged for the guest artists to perform with the mridangam maestro Palani Subramania Pillai.

The warming up session began. Within minutes, the jazz musicians stopped playing, listening awestruck, as the maha vidwan launched into stunningly intricate nadai variations. Gradually the mood lightened and a wonderfully spontaneous exchange was under way with free flow of ideas, making for an unforgettable programme, broadcast with the announcement 'When the mridangam played jazz!'

Years later when Tiruchi Sankaran, eminent mridanga vidwan, professor of Indian music at the York University and disciple of Pillai, met

Joe Morello, the iconic drummer exclaimed, "How could I forget? Encountering your guru's artistry was a humbling experience!"

"That was probably one of the earliest instances of fusion," reminisces Sankaran.

Fusion defined

When East meets West in a musical dialogue, the resulting blend of melody and harmony, emotion and intellect, improvisation and composition constitutes fusion in the truest sense. How is the term fusion defined by those highly-regarded Western classical composers, musicians and scholars who have experienced the December Music Festival for years, attaining a considerable degree of proficiency in Carnatic music?

David Reck, retired professor of Asian Studies, Amherst College, *avant garde* composer and veena artiste, says, "It is to do with the interface of different musics." Eero

Hameenniemi, classical composer from Finland, defines it as 'a genre, a discourse.' Nicholas Higgins, research scholar at the Columbia University, and son of the late Jon Higgins, concurs with Sankaran's summation as 'a blending of cultures.'

What drew them to Carnatic music? "The aspect of improvisation," answers Reck. "Listening to artists like K.V.Narayanaswami and Palghat Raghu at Wesleyan University sparked an interest that intensified when I visited India." Hameenniemi adds, "It is a very structured way of making music. For instance there are similarities in the development of ideas between a Tyagaraja kriti and a Beethoven composition." For Higgins, the defining moment was the synergy generated in a T. Viswanathan concert.

How did they begin the learning process? It's been 38 years of exploration, starting with the initial three years at the Carnatic Music College

studying under wonderful, generous gurus. Higgins has been a disciple of Rama Ravi. Hameenniemi's search has led to a long-term association with peer artistes such as Karaikkudi Mani and Subramaniam.

The efforts to stay connected have been sustained. A broader vision has enabled Hameenniemi and Reck to integrate ideas and rhythmic concepts into their compositions. The new dimensions have empowered Higgins in his endeavours as a jazz saxophonist.

For Sankaran and Subramaniam, tradition has been a way of life. Having experienced the gurukula system in its entirety, their deep-rooted faith in enduring values has defined their approach to learning, teaching and performing. Their collaborations with musicians of different genres in performance and academia have earned them immense credibility and respect internationally on the basis of artistic integrity. "Fusion performances are

only a part of the larger picture. The real fusion is the meeting of minds." Karaikkudi Subramaniam explains, "Tradition does not connote stagnation. It encompasses change through evolution."

Higgins adds, "Fusion is not necessarily anti-tradition. Its scope includes traditional modernists and modern traditionalists."

But today, with even fledgling musicians hopping onto the fusion bandwagon to produce an anything-goes admixture, isn't fusion better left to senior musicians? "Ideally, yes," concur the artistes. "Their maturity reflects experience and constant internalisation."

As Sankaran sums up, "Fusion should not become confusion. The artiste should know what he is doing and why. This is only possible if his foundation is rock-solid and his ideas are rooted in tradition. The bottom line for meaningful fusion is discipline, responsibility and aesthetics."