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Issue Date: April 1, 2003

April 3, 2003



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[Community](#)

[People](#)
[Executive Profile](#)

[Arts & Entertainment](#)
[Opinion](#)

[Connecticut](#)

[World News](#)
[National News](#)



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[Columns](#)

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Singing, violin-playing sisters complement each other

Carnatic vocalists took first voice lessons from mother

By SHUCHITA RAO

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. - Two particularly versatile musicians took the stage as part of a Carnatic concert series at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

B. Ranjani and B. Gayatri, two sisters, gave a vocal concert accompanied by H.N. Bhaskar on violin and Manoj Siva on mridangam. The event, held at the Wong Auditorium, was part of a series sponsored by MITHAS, the MIT Heritage of the Arts of South Asia.

Ranjani and Gayatri have the distinction of being both accomplished violinists and a popular singing pair. It was only last year that they toured the United States as a violin duo.

This year they are touring 27 major cities in the U.S as a singing pair.

The Cambridge concert presented a great range of selections - in terms of composers, tempos and languages (including Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Hindi and Marathi). Compositions covered such ragas as Natai, Hindolam, Arabhi and Ananda Bhairavi. Featured composers included Muthuswamy Dikshitar, Thyagaraja, Purandara Dasa, Thulsidas and Annamacharya.

In addition to singing together, the sisters soloed, in particular while improvising or introducing a new song.

INDIA New England News interviewed the sisters.

Ranjani and Gayatri, how old are you and between you, who is the older sister?

Ranjani: I am 29 and Gayatri is 26.

Do either of your parents sing or play an instrument?

Our mother, Meenakshi Balasubramanian, sings and gave us our first voice lessons. She has a great knowledge of Carnatic music. We continue to learn from her.

At what age did you give your first concert as a pair?

Ranjani: We presented our first violin concert when I was 13 and Gayatri was 10.

What made you switch to giving concerts as a singing pair?



Sisters B. Ranjani and B. Gayatri recently brought their singing act to Cambridge, Mass., performing a concert as part of a series sponsored by the MIT Heritage of the Arts of South Asia.



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Ranjani: Carnatic music is based on vocal music. Both of us took training in vocal music along with violin lessons. It was our teacher, P.S Narayanaswamy, who was a strong motivating factor in persuading us to give concerts in vocal music. He went ahead and booked our first vocal concert four years back. Our career as singers took off so well that, now, violin concerts have taken a backseat.

What do you find easier, singing or playing the violin?

Ranjani: Singing is easier. Violin is an instrument and mastery of an instrument requires a lot of arduous practice. Singing requires more mental work though. The voice can be thought of as an instrument too, but this is the difference: Initially, the voice must be trained to come to the right track, but once the voice has settled, practicing long hours is not required. In fact, long hours of practice should be avoided, so that the voice is not strained. In contrast, the longer you practice an instrument, the better you get at it. One needs to practice at least four hours a day just to maintain one's standard as an instrumentalist.

How have the two learning backgrounds, in violin and vocal music helped each other?

Gayatri: Our training as concert violinists was a great asset. We had good voices, and it was just a matter of orienting ourselves to singing in concerts.

You sing in many languages and also bhajans in the Hindustani style. How did this happen?

Gayatri: Since we grew up in Bombay, we were exposed to a lot of Hindustani music. When we sing abhangs or bhajans we try to make them as authentic as we can.

Ranjani: We have not had formal training in Hindustani music. What we sing is based on what we have learnt by listening.

Ranjani, what do you like about Gayatri's singing?

Ranjani: Everything. She gets absorbed and involved in her music and that is wonderful to see and feel. Her transition to Hindustani style is very smooth too.

Gayatri, what do you like about Ranjani's singing ?

Gayatri: Ranjani has a sober voice that sounds very majestic in the lower octave. My strengths are in the upper octave and I have more dramatic and flamboyant style. It is Ranjani's music that provides me a firm foundation and a launching pad to launch my fireworks.

How do you feel you complement each other?

Gayatri: Our voices are quite different - Ranjani has more of husky component while I have more of treble component. That is how we complement each other."

Are you interested in experimenting with fusion music and what are your future plans?

Ranjani: Fusion music is not for us. We have no concrete future plans - we are just interested in getting better at what we do.

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