

Date:14/12/2007 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/fr/2007/12/14/stories/2007121450910200.htm>

[Back Friday Review](#) [Bangalore](#) [Chennai and Tamil Nadu](#) [Delhi](#) [Hyderabad](#)  
[Thiruvananthapuram](#)

## Obeisance at Houston

GOWRI RAMNARAYAN

DIASPORA Even in the U.S., where music festivals are growing in number and size, the annual Tyagaraja aradhana remains special.



**Tradition: The Unchavritti procession begins**

Morning begins at the temple with rites. A bell announces *unchavritti*. Rama and Sita sail on the shoulders of chanters in *panchakacham*, carrying the flower-strung palanquin around the prakaram, followed by women in Kanchi silks.

Enthroned on the dais at the kalyana mandapam, the gods exchange smiles with Tyagaraja, framed on the wall. With mridangams and violins eager singers strum tamburas, hum themselves into sruti. As the priest ends the puja, they intone: “Jagadanandakaraka...”

### Cherished space

We are at the Meenakshi Temple in Houston, Texas, a cherished space for the growing Indian diaspora. Like the village temples of their grandparents in India, the Houston shrine binds them in prayer and ritual, bonds them through music and dance. Even in the U.S. where music festivals are growing in number and size, the annual Houston Tyagaraja aradhana remains special.

Attending the fest becomes a pilgrimage. Listeners from near and far come also to worship Minakshi and Balaji, reliving an intimate home experience in an alien land.

And yet, the four-day Houston Aradhana 2007 had its own flavours, bigger and stronger this

year. Mayor Tom Reid spent an evening at panel discussion and recital, and conferred a Lifetime Achievement Recognition on Tiruchi Sankaran.

The festival gained distinction through an inspired move. It engaged a frontline musician for the first time (anywhere?) as artistic director. “Deifying the saint will not reveal the full measure of his contribution,” said Ravikiran, and presented Tyagaraja as a human being. He gave each participant a different “Tyagaraja theme” to explore. The multifaceted genius of the composer came into splendid view, in the journey of the mortal towards the immortal.

### Poetic sensibility

Visakha Hari’s Harikatha set the idea going with “Pancharatna vaibhavam,” analysing the structure, texture and mythological import of the five gems. She balanced aesthetics with bhakti, and showed how poetic sensibility guided his choice of word and melodic phrasing.

The first concert had old favourites from “Evarikai” to “Karunajaladhe” to highlight “Ramavatara mahima.” Gayathri Girish (with Akkarai Subhalakshmi and Thiruvarur Vaidyanathan) did not forget raga content in the brisk pace she set for herself. Unnikrishnan’s finale before the packed hall (with Vitthal Ramamurthy, Arun Prakash) was billed as featuring the saint’s Sanskrit compositions, which it did partially.

The group singing of Houston residents was impressive. Trained and led by Rajeswari Bhat, children in colourful *pavadai* sang “Elanidayaradu” and “Needayarada” where the sangati-based musical progression underlined Tyagaraja’s “Intimate Bhakti,” their allotted subject. Their presentation had sruti alignment, precision, and modulations difficult to maintain in group singing.

Anuradha Subramanian’s adult group treated listeners to a fine rendering of Tyagaraja’s rare kritis (Karunajoodu-Kalyani, Dhanasuta-Kamalamanohari), their authenticity ratified by Nedunuri Krishnamurti, who had recreated their lost music.

Mini concerts by youngsters showed that Carnatic music is becoming a serious pursuit for the diaspora, and that painstaking students go beyond internet and skype lessons, to learn directly from gurus in India. The youngsters made eager listeners at the panel discussion of Tyagaraja’s stylistics, and in Ravikiran’s lec-dem which mingled erudition, science, sensitivity and pragmatism to explicate the reasons for the composer’s pre-eminence.

Ravikiran did not waste words on Tyagaraja’s bhakti, an ineffable personal matter anyway, but brought out the composer’s singular vision of melodies common and rare, easy and tricky, with irrefutable examples. His concert matched this talk in excellence. Unobtrusive virtuosity heightened the emotion. His raga alapana invariably painted the mood of the following kriti, whether Yadukulakhambodi (“Hechariga”) or Ritigowla (“Nannu vidachi”).

Intriguingly, Ravikiran chose note-perfect, phrase-chiselled vivadi ragas for elaborate treatment. Chandrajoti (“Bagayanayya”) had never sounded so majestic, its eerie notes converted to meditative quiet. A profound Vagadisvari made it clear why Tyagaraja had chosen this mela for pouring out his soul.

As Chennai rains raga and tala in its December season it is interesting to note that a small festival in faraway Houston managed to capture the spirit motivating Carnatic music,

epitomised in Tyagaraja: finding godliness in self-forgetful art.



**Tradition: The Unchavritti procession begins**

### **How it all began...**

Nalini Mukhopadhyaya and Prabha Bala, part of the Houston Tyagaraja Aradhana since it was launched 30 years ago by the late Indu Krishnamurty in a modest school hall celebration, trace the growth of the aradhana in their hometown. They are co-founders of the Houston Classical Arts Society running the festival today.

### **Nalini Mukhopadhyaya**

In the early years we were the singers, organisers and audience. With more children and more Indian settlers, with musicians among them, the event grew and moved from a school hall to the Rice University auditorium.

The building of the Minakshi temple (1973) was a godsend. Besides, a temple is the natural space to nurture art and culture. When the Kalyana Mandapam came up, the Classical Arts Society began to expand the festival and create the right ambience with festoons, lamps and kolam. I commissioned a portrait of the saint. I make fresh silk thread garlands every year. These details are vital. The temple itself instils a sense of peace essential for our arts. The festival has made a huge difference to the community which bears the costs. It fans children's enthusiasm for investigating roots, stimulates them to excel in our arts.

### **Prabha Bala**

Why Tyagaraja? Because we are proud to uphold a 30 years old tradition in our city. No longer do we have to motivate people to come. They take the initiative now. Our organisation is loose-structured, an advantage in introducing new ideas. As with the decision to engage an artistic director this year, which revitalised the format and content, an enrichment. But we must reach out more, get more volunteers. The fest serves the need for performance by the increasing local talent, exchange of ideas, and brings the best Carnatic music live. Eventually, though slowly, mainstream population will become aware of the Tyagaraja festival. There's some publicity in the newspapers and a classical music radio channel. Finally, self-centred America is changing to accept global culture.

© Copyright 2000 - 2008 The Hindu