

In search of *duende*

At the Festival of Sacred Music, held amid nature and heritage spaces in the hometown of Carnatic legend Thyagaraja, one comes tantalisingly close to experiencing that moment of oneness

❖ 📷 Saritha Rao Rayachoti



Duende. I came across the word in Spain. I have often wondered whether this is what our Indian bards, saints and *bhakti* poets meant when they sang of being one with their lord, the beloved, the Other.

While the word literally means 'elf', in the context of Flamenco music and dance it takes on a figurative form. Poets, writers and philosophers have tried to explain it, musicians and dancers aspire to achieve this intense state, but mere words cannot describe the feeling of being possessed by the spirit of a performance, of self-oblivion, of surrendering to an amplified emotion, of channelling something primal in one's veins. Who experiences this? Is it the performer? Is it the audience member? Is it both?

In a Sevillan courtyard, I watched a male Flamenco dancer combine grace and masculinity in staccato stomps of sole on wood. At the Piazza della Signoria in Firenze I have

noticed passersby stop in their tracks, mesmerised by a guitarist's fingers conjure fluid melody out of wood and nylon. In the raspy age-lined voice of the old man who sang praises of *Maa Ganga* seated on the steps of the Assi Ghat in Varanasi, I may have felt a semblance of it.

But the Spanish say that when one is in the state, one knows for sure. That's the confusing part, there's self-oblivion but there's also a heightened sense of awareness.

It is this feeling that I have searched for, chased and one could even say, quested after. And like an addict who has not tasted even a grain of the rare drug, but has heard of its effect, I began to seek it in the city I live in, Chennai. But what are the chances that I will find it in the current establishment?

The high point in a year for most people above a certain age in Chennai is the annual Music and Dance Season in

December and January when a wealth of talent is showcased. While there have been numerous instances of free performances made possible by generous sponsors, *sabha* or artists, most performances are ticketed. The performance space is usually an air-conditioned auditorium and the *rasika*—people who by definition savour the elixir of the performance—are those who can afford to buy a ticket.

Despite being a regular concert attendee for the past four years, I have little knowledge of the intricacies of Carnatic music. I have picked up key phrases of a few *raga*, but I get distracted by the words and the cadences. I extrapolate the snatch of a particular *krithi* with the interlude of a film song that's embedded in my mind. It's only then that I bridge it with the *raga* it is composed in. It is a slow chaotic way to learn and, to be honest, I may also be rebelling against the rigorous structure of the form. But it works for me.

In the last Season, however, I felt a growing sense of unease. As an ambience, an enclosed auditorium heightens distractions and preoccupations. Ringing mobile phones; the off-key rendition of some audience members intent on humming along with the performer; the frequent altering of the sound system to suit the performer's exacting standards... distractions galore. There is also the 8-pm exodus

when some *rasika* abruptly take leave Cinderella-style, sometimes to the amusement and often to the chagrin of the performers who can be understandably perturbed by this desertion, especially when the percussionists have just begun the *thani avarthanam*. But full bladders, hypoglycaemia and the prospect of not finding an auto rickshaw to ferry one back home are all real issues to contend with for the majority of the audience, the senior citizens. It is understandable, and as I see it, unavoidable unless there's a scheduled break.

There's a certain amount of self-consciousness among the *sabha*-goers, almost as if we are all watching ourselves watch a performance. In a strange sense, we may also be putting up performances of our own, playing knowledgeable *rasika* to others.

In my need to belong to this milieu, I, who once tapped into the emotion of a song, have become a frenetic *raga*-guesser. I fear that I may be quite content to stand on the shore preoccupied with my pocket-sized *raga* guide, rather than step in and taste the sweet waters of the Carnatic stream of music.

Would unlearning what I know about *raga* work? Or should I immerse myself fully into the nomenclature disregarding



the unease that creeps up every time I feel like a failure at not getting the right *raga*?

Maybe this *duende* is not something one seeks, maybe one stumbles upon it. Maybe the Spanish celebrate insanity!

In early March this year, my family and I set out to Thanjavur to attend a music festival. Thanjavur and the neighbouring villages along the river Kaveri have been ruled by the Pallavas, Cholas, Nayaks and the Marathas, who have all contributed to the region being considered one of the most sacred and most fertile. Thanjavur was the seat of creativity, where music, dance and art were nurtured by royal patronage. The trinity of Carnatic music, Muthuswami Dikshitar, Shyama Shastri and Thyagaraja, lived and composed prolific music in the region. Every year, multitudes of Carnatic musicians descend on Thiruvaiyaru to pay their respects to

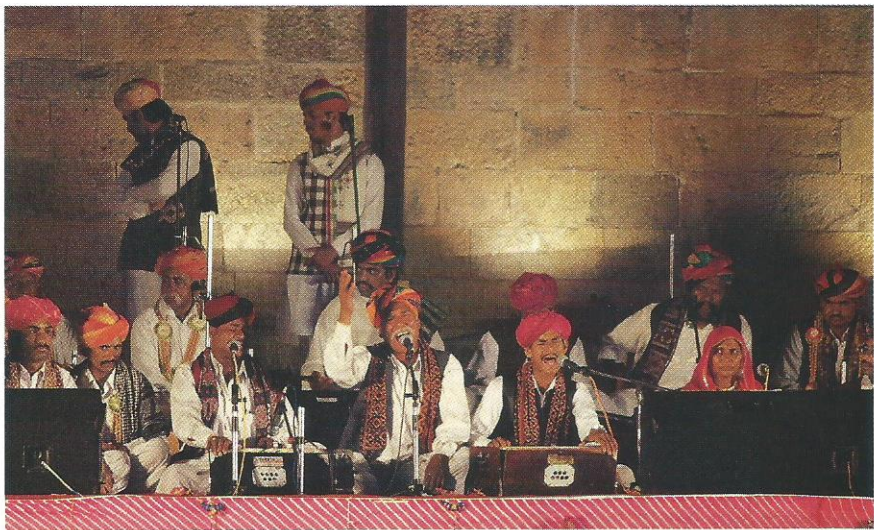
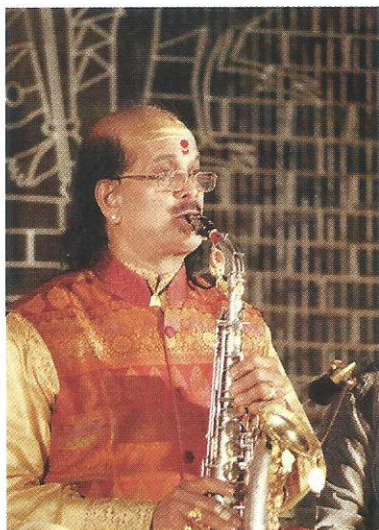
the saint-composer Thyagaraja on his death anniversary by participating in a group rendering of the Pancha Ratna Kritis, the five gems in the grand treasure chest of a musical legacy.

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After our plans to attend fell through two years in a row, it seemed as though the stars were finally aligned to make our visit to the Festival of Sacred Music happen. The Festival is a three-day event organised by Chennai-based Prakriti Foundation established by Ranvir Shah in 1998, and takes place in heritage spaces in Thiruvaiyaru, about 15 km from Thanjavur.

Since its inception six years ago, the festival has played host to genres as varied as chants by the monks of Drepung Loseling Monastery to Rajasthani folk music by the Manganiyars. While outstation guests are required to make their own travel and stay arrangements, the performances themselves are free.





I wasn't expecting much. It was simply a new ambience to hear live music.

On the first evening, we made our way to the Diwan Wada, in the ruins of a Maratha palace on the banks of the Kaveri, where a temporary stage bedecked with marigolds stood against the backdrop of a glorious peepal tree. There was also the pagoda-like *pura koonda* (dovecote) with its numerous alcoves illuminated by tea-lights. The evening began with Krishna's Temple Rock that combines musical talent from diverse streams to perform contemporised Carnatic music. The second band for the evening, Filter Coffee, had a unique blend of the old and the new, the melodic and the electronic.

The most popular performance, going by the turnout and recall, was on the second evening, when the 45-member band of Manganiyars from Rajasthan performed from the steps of the Kalyana Mahal Ghat with the audience seated on the sands of the nearly-dry river bed of the Kaveri.

On the third day, the performance was at the Panchanadeswarar Temple (temple of the Lord of the Five Rivers). The five rivers in the name of the presiding deity allude to the five rivers that flow in the vicinity—Arasilaru, Vennaaru, Vettaaru, Kudumurutti and Kaveri—also giving rise to the name of the town, Thiruvaiyaru (*Thiru-ai-aaru*

which means 'five holy rivers'). A group of music students rendered devotional *bhajan* as a preamble to Kadri Gopalnath's performance on the saxophone accompanied on the violin by this year's Padma Shri awardee, A Kanyakumari.

At least that's the straightforward factual narration of the Festival. However, there's a different set of highlights that stood apart for me.

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A toddler sits in the front row of the floor-audience chaperoned by his grandmother. He crawls on the coir carpet towards the stage, drawn to Krishna's Temple Rock's rendition of Adi Shankara's *Bhaja govindam*. The child's grandmother gently drags him back and teaches him to pat the *tala* with his chubby hands on her own chore-worn ones.

Some distance away, against the backdrop of the *pura koonda* and standing close to the loudspeaker, a man claps in rhythm to the *tala* being verbalised by Mahesh Vinayakram in collaboration with

Swarupa Ananth, the percussionist of Filter Coffee. The man's checked shirt comes un-tucked from his waistband thanks to his feisty movements, but he is oblivious. Does it really matter what *tala* is being performed on stage, as long as he has the rhythm pulsing through him and his face is awash with a feeling of oneness with the music?



Krishna's Temple Rock performing contemporised Carnatic music; (opposite page) Dr Kadri Gopalnath on the saxophone; the Manganiyars at the Kalyana Mahal Ghat

The audience catches on to Bhanvari Devi's idiosyncrasy of pulling the edge of her sari over her head to cover her face while she sings. Sitting on the riverbed of the Kaveri under a nearly full moon, the audience erupts in applause for the soulful rendering from the sole woman in a 45-member strong band of Rajsthani musicians who have found admirers in interior Tamil Nadu, over 2,000 km from home.

These vignettes somehow link back to the basic elements of a performance: the performer, the audience and the patron. I can't help feeling that the Festival of Sacred Music and many others like it herald a return to the old days, of concerts in temples, in public spaces and amid nature. Performers free of the confines of an enclosed space, performance formats and all that it entails. Most important, the patronage is behind the scenes, a certain enabling of events without adhering to the 'flex banner' school of sponsorship.

For some of us who travelled for the Festival, it was an opportunity to listen to music in a different ambience. For others, it was a convenient break for the long Holi weekend. For me, it wasn't so much about Thyagaraja's *Nagumomu* being sung a mere stone's throw away from his *samadhi*, as much as the informality of the performance format, and the difference it made. I remember the music and the performers, but I was riveted by the audience

that was largely local. They belonged in that performance space. One could even say the space was incomplete without them. The inclusivity, in this case, was about their acceptance of us.

Did I find the moment of *duende* I sought? I may have come close, but I didn't return empty-handed.

When Bhanvari Devi began to sing her first song for the evening, it was like being swept away by a tidal wave of raw emotion. The music was in my veins. The lyrics did not matter. The *raga* did not matter. I did not have to tune out my surroundings and all of it—from the gently lapping trickle of the Kaveri by our feet, the feel of soft sand underfoot, the cool breeze, a waft of *sambrani/dhoop*, the sight of little children trying to catch tadpoles and small fish in the few patches of water, families on an evening picnic sprawled on the sands and cheering the musicians on—added to the experience.

It is not that such festivals do not occur in Chennai. They do—in temples, on the beachfront and in the instance of the Urur Olcott Kuppam Margazhi Vizha, in a fishing village. But I have been blind to them. Maybe all that was required was a soul-affirming but fleeting experience in an unfamiliar aesthetic ambience to renew my quest. If anything, the experience affirmed that my chances of finding *duende* in a formal concert ambience are minimal. ✨