



Date:06/11/2002 URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mp/2002/11/06/stories/2002110600100200.htm>

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Of a childhood dream...

The Edinburgh Festival has provided an opportunity to many Indian artistes to display their talent and win international acclaim.



HAVE YOU ever had a childhood dream that was fulfilled long after it was forgotten? It happened to me when I attended the Edinburgh International Festival of the Performing Arts in August 2002.

My introduction to the festival had been at a 1962 chamber music concert in Madras. My aunt told me in a hushed whisper, "Lord Harewood, the Director of the Edinburgh festival, is the chief guest today. He is first cousin to Queen Elizabeth." A royal prince! When the man actually appeared, my schoolgirl fantasies were rudely shattered. Tall, soberly outfitted, he had a ready, toothy smile. But where was the crown? And the velvet cloak? I had been so sure that he would outshine the only princes I knew, who glittered on the movie screen.

But it was a special evening all right. The literati and glitterati of Madras had turned out in dazzling regalia of silk and diamond, *zari angavastram* and snuff box. The artistes present made a `Who's who of Carnatic music' - Musiri Subramania Iyer, K.S.

Narayanaswami, T. Brinda, M.L. Vasanthakumari, K.V. Narayanaswami and the inimitable dancer Balasaraswati.

Dr. Narayana Menon, a scholar who held key posts in various cultural bodies set up by the government, spoke in polished accents about the spiritual aspects of the Carnatic tradition. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer sang only as he could, resplendent, majestic. He was followed by the glorious voice of M.S. Subbulakshmi.

The very next year, Indian artistes were invited to perform at the Edinburgh Festival. At a time when foreign travel was uncommon even for businessmen, their trip became a matter of wonder and debate. While the optimists were sure that Indian music would teach the White Man a thing or two, the doubting Thomases denounced the export of our prized treasures!

Carefree 1963 was a stranger to the stringent rules which cordon off public places to all but the terrorists. At the airport, crowds came to see off the warriors, crossing the oceans for the first time on a voyage of conquest!

Subbulakshmi's calm exterior hid taut nerves. Balasaraswati treated the venture as no different from her other engagements at home. Violinist R.S. Gopalakrishnan, mridangist T.K. Murthy and ghatam player Alangudi Ramachandran did not know then that they were the pioneers of the jet setting age for Carnatic musicians, which was to follow. What they did feel was that, handling a foreign audience would be child's play compared to the hassles of managing the Western outfit adopted for the journey.

For poor Ramachandran, who had never worn anything but eight yards of *veshti* material round his waist, found his limbs refusing to fit into shirt and trousers, feet determinedly sliding out of shoes. Recalls T.K. Murthy, "He was so terrified of keeping people waiting, that once in Edinburgh, he began to get fully dressed at dawn, going back to sleep in suit and shoes!"

Sartorial and etiquette hassles in the East-West encounter made for good jokes. But the worrisome question was, with no exposure at all to Carnatic music, how were Western audiences going to receive such a traditional art form? How were they going to react to Balasaraswati's dance, a style that was confined to the cognoscenti even in India? Would it have been wiser to have introduced the West to lighter genres?

The doubts proved unnecessary. The Edinburgh Festival became the first step towards international acclaim for Balasaraswati (which made her better known in India!) Subbulakshmi's voice knew no cultural barriers. Though she was not going to undertake many foreign trips, after the Edinburgh experience she would win accolades from world celebrities - whether the Queen of England or the Pope at the Vatican; and musicians everywhere, Yehudi Menuhin, Om Kulsum, Zubin Mehta...

When the artistes returned, what stories they could tell! Foreign trips were so rare in those times that their impressions of the exotic occident became fair tales: of well designed space, mood lighting, perfect acoustics, of silences that blanketed the hall before and during the performance, thunderous ovations at the end, curtain calls...

Lord Harewood came to Madras again - with a different, younger, taller wife, and made equally fastidious choices. That is how K.V. Narayanaswami and Lalgudi Jayaraman made it to Scotland.

Today Lord Harewood is no longer connected to the festival, and Edinburgh is an unknown name for the young Carnatic musician. In Delhi the Narayana Menons have been replaced by mandarins who, when asked why Carnatic music has been excluded from this year's festival, can answer blandly, "But Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi dancers perform to carnatic music. What more do you want?" That is how August 2002 saw Hariprasad Chaurasia, Amjad Ali Khan and Shruti Sadolikar casting their spell in their "All Night Raga" recital at an overflowing auditorium, "unhindered" by any carnatic interloper.

To attend the magnificent music performances in Usher Hall and Queen's Hall, was to wonder how listeners attuned to Mozart and Stravinsky, would have responded to chaste carnatic music way back in 1963. When I asked Press Officer James Allenby for the press reviews of the 1960s, he shook his head, but brightened to say that they did have records of all the events over half a century. Finding the book was the next step.

What a thrill to actually locate the 1963 programme! Sandwiched between operas, ballets, string quartets, wind ensembles and huge Philharmonic orchestras, was a section headed Indian Music. And what a schedule! Day one had Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan and Alla Rakha, with Yehudi Menuhin to join them part way through the recital. M.S. Subbulakshmi (identified as "tenor") comes next, followed by Balasaraswati. The finale is remarkable - T. Viswanathan playing the flute with Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan on sitar and sarod, with tabla and mridangam for percussion.

The programmes are introduced by Dr. Narayana Menon who also gives a veena recital at the festival. Menuhin attends them all, with the Duke of Edinburgh making a royal guest.

The one puzzling detail is the venue - Freemasons' Hall. "Forty years!" says Allenby. "Could be demolished by now." Present day managers of other theatres have not even heard of it. Old timers recollect the name but not the location.

You are resigned to leaving the city with this mystery unsolved. Then, one day, as you walk from the Assembly rooms in George Street towards Charlotte Square, a last twilight ray flickers on a small engraved sign outside an old building: Freemasons' Hall.

Steps lead up to three wooden doors with glass panes covered by green curtains. A bell says "Caretaker". You ring and wait. Nothing comes down the spooky staircase - all that you can see through the chinks.

Yet you cannot leave. You sit on the steps. Under the fading sky, George Street flows on, with revellers of the First World ambling towards theatres and cafes, parks and bars. Snatches of many tongues swish past - Italian, German, French, Japanese... You are conscious of being far away from home...

But are you?

The scene shifts suddenly. Brilliant lights beam in. sleek cars swing into a halt. The doors open. A tambura is handed out with care. Men in gold bordered *veshti* and creaseless shirts, emerge with cases of violin, mridangam and ghatam, followed by a lady in a green Kanchivaram silk sari splashed generously with gold. The diamond nose ring flashes rainbows. A string of roses and

chrysanthemums makes a crescent on the `bichoda' coil of her hair. Corkscrew curls swing beside her ears in nervous anticipation. The group walks in through the wide open doors.

Soon the steps are crowded with black coats and evening wraps, all mounting the staircase. They turn left... and are lost to view.

You hear the curtains part, the welcoming applause. The tambura string begins to vibrate. The first shadja note resounds in the silence...

The street is empty now, the lights are out. The doors are shut. But the music fills your whole being... pure, radiant, true...

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