

Trusting music, winning mind share

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Music lovers listening to a vocal concert at Music Academy in Chennai recently. Photo: V. Ganesan

With boundaries falling by wayside in this Internet-led technological age, artistes, too, are now looking for global clients, nay audience

“There is no better time for the music business than today, where the artiste and the consumer have a complete digital universe to mobilise the artiste-fan engagement and create a 360 business model,” argues Shridhar Subramaniam, President of Sony Music India and the Middle East, in an article for the upcoming annual number *The Hindu Survey of Indian Industry*.

Live music is really coming of age in Chennai, which is considered the Mecca of Carnatic music. A rough estimate suggests that over 3,000 concerts are held during the December music season in Chennai.

Transformation

Over the years, the music season itself has undergone a huge transformation. For one, the sabhas have mushroomed. For another, the sponsors have increased. There are traditional sponsors such as the Shriram Group, Nalli Silks, T. S. Mahalingam & Sons (TSM), Moser Baer, Indian Bank and Indian Overseas Bank.

Sundaram Finance of the TVS group has, in fact, been organising mike-less concerts at park on the first Sunday of every month to promote young talents in Carnatic music space.

Many a major industrial groups such as India Cements, Spic and the Murugappa Group have stamped their presence in one way or the other, especially during the music season. Of late, popular names such as Sri Krishna Sweets and RmKV, too, have become major patrons of Carnatic music.

Pre-December season

In the recent past, a new set of players in Chennai such as Arun Excello, Marg, Lancor, Kalpathi Investments, DLF and Sabari Group have joined the sponsorship bandwagon.

For some years now, the city of Chennai has been witnessing pre-December season music festivals as well. Media outfits – both from the print as well as television – have stepped in to sponsor music events of their own. Organisations such as HCL and ICICI Bank, too, have thought it fit to have presence in the Carnatic music space by hosting their own concert series, though not in the scale organised by these sabhas in December. Not just these. Even artistes have started organising events. Vocalists T. M. Krishna and Bombay Jayashri introduced mid-year music festivity in Chennai when they jointly led an effort to organise Svanubhava, a musical event for the students and by the students. The programme has since seen many editions and is now spearheaded by Krishna. So much so, it has now become some sort of a fashion for anybody and everybody to organise music festivity of Carnatic kind in Chennai, especially in December. Nobody – be it an artiste, fan or sponsor – wants to miss out on the music season. “I want to be on the radar of my client always,” a top official of a leading construction organisation, which sponsors concerts at Music Academy, puts it succinctly. “Also, associating with fine art such as Carnatic music gives these corporates a better brand image,” he argues.

A second-hand car seller, TSM has been sponsoring Carnatic concerts for over a decade now. For TSM, according to its partner K. Mahalingam, concert sponsorship, however, goes beyond the corporate objective. Nevertheless, he says, music sponsorship has given “TSM a huge brand recall value.” In this competitive environment, it is imperative to let the world know that “you are alive, healthy and kicking.” TSM is able to get high visibility during the entire December season because of the “quality of artistes we select in our sabha and the ambience of the concert venue,” he argues.

'Positive image'

For an entity like the Shriram group, which is a household name in this part of the world, promoting fine art is an integral part of its psyche, according to Akhila Srinivasan, who heads the life insurance arm of the group. “Being in the financial services space, we need to send out the message that we have a community conscious approach to whatever

we do. Sponsoring concerts help us to do this," she points out.

Given the hyper level of musical activity in December with hordes of people descending on Chennai from across the globe to partake in the festivity, corporate sponsors are out not only to garner mind share but also gain a 'positive image'.

Ticketing concept

Though cross-subsidising of concerts is prevalent hugely, the ticketing concept is slowly gaining currency in the Carnatic music world. The prime slot concerts of popular artistes in most of the sabhas during the December music season run full houses. So much so, some of the organisers have to accommodate the overflowing fans by live telecasting on LCD screens some of the concerts of premier artistes at a near by make-shift area. This is indeed a new phenomenon in Carnatic concert circuit. Even LCD shows are ticketed. Surely, the Carnatic music concert environment has undergone a sea change in the last few years.

Webcast

With top artistes becoming some sort of brands, corporates, too, are cashing in on their popularity. While a leading silk sari seller has featured vocalist Sudha Ragunathan in poster ads, Aruna Sairam has come in handy for this industrial group to push its wealth management product. With boundaries falling by the wayside in this Internet-led technological age, artistes, too, are now looking for global clients, nay audience.

For the first-timer ever in the history of this highly traditional December season, vocalist T. M. Krishna has decided to make three of his concerts 'available to watch' through high quality webcast.

The December music season has also seen heavy inflow of tourist traffic into the city of Chennai. With the season attracting people from within and outside the country, there are suggestions for promoting 'music tourism' on the lines of 'health tourism'. "If it is December, I must be in Chennai," says a leading violin player, who is also a director with Intel in Bangalore. Time has indeed come to promote the December music festival of Chennai in a composite way.