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Across the musical bridge



The Hindu

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS: Shekhinah Shawn and Sikkil Gurucharan performing at Opera Carnatica. Photo: R. Ravindran

Opera Carnatica, a rare musical confluence of Western opera and Carnatic raga, was performed recently at The Music Academy

For years, the wind blew in from Europe — opera, for most music lovers in the city, resonated from a distance, unfathomable and exquisite. Our choirs and orchestras performed Western classical music treading carefully around the sanctum that formed the heart of the genre. Till we found our own home-grown opera diva — Shekhinah Shawn. One of the country's most gifted and qualified opera singers, Shekhinah holds a Fellow of Trinity College London diploma, the highest examination in Western classical, for vocal. But it was in Carnatic music that Shekhinah first found her voice.

The same genre of music that well-known vocalist Sikkil Gurucharan found his niche in. His musical lineage, the Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar and the many experiments with pianist Anil Srinivasan have helped him metamorphose into a creative vocalist.

At The Music Academy last weekend, Opera Carnatica was an experience in mapping music with Shekhinah, Gurucharan, the symphony orchestra led by Jerry Fernandes and conductor Augustine Paul translating Western and Indian music into a unique language. Throughout the concert genres bumped softly into one another rather than melding. The nearness, however, was a very rousing prospect.

Tuning into classics

With Shawn Jazeel as the concert-master the show presented by Euphony and V.S. Hospitals, got off to a grand start with the 'Overture' from Bizet's *Carmen*. Then Shekhinah took centrestage and began with 'L'amour est un oiseau rebelle', an aria sung by the bold Carmen. This was followed by the pleading 'O mio babbino caro', an aria from Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*. Shekhinah then oscillated between German, English and Italian giving voice to the stubborn Konstanze in Mozart's 'Martern aller arten' from *Il Seraglio*, the travails of Dido, queen of Carthage in 'When I am laid' from the English Baroque composer Purcell and the joyful bride Elvira singing 'Son Vergin Vezzosa' from Bellini's *I Puritani*.

The orchestra then tuned into a world much away from theirs and performed Jerry Fernandes' 'Carnatic Rhapsody', a soothing composition in Mayamalavagoula. The first and second violins played equivalents in Carnatic music while the violas kept the Western edge. This is when Gurucharan stepped on board. Accompanied by his able violinist Sanjeev he physically manifested the language of the orchestra through his swaras. He followed it up with a Thyagaraja composition, measured and grand, showcasing its musical intricacies. Then Gurucharan sang Bharati's 'Suttum Vizhi', scaling swaras and multiple harmonies, in the breadth of the poet-freedom fighter's evocative verse.

Then with Handel's 'Un Pensiero Nemico Di Pace' from *Il Trionfo del Tempo e Del Disinganno*, Shekhinah and Gurucharan moved in lock-step singing coloratura volleys and chord progressions. The different genres and languages fused beyond the realm of their boundaries. It was Italian opera seen through the veil of Carnatic music.

Shekhinah then rounded off the concert with a series of solos — 'Lascia chio pianga' also from *Il Trionfo del Tempo e Del Disinganno*, 'Heil sei euch geweiten' and 'Der Holle Rache' from Mozart's *Magic Flute*, 'Tacea La Notte' from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, and 'Andero volero gridero' from Vivaldi's *Orlando finto pazzo*.

The orchestra's musical criss-crossing and the remarkable ability of the conductor to hold the concert together defined the evening.

The high string notes and the singers' sweeping melodies and their ability to mould their voice to their will, confirmed that this was a journey well worth making.