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A French toast to music



The Hindu

Their expansive approach to the performance deserves praise and the beautiful interplay of their individual sound, commendation. Photo: M. Karunakaran

The inaugural concert of the Arties Festival India in Chennai was a tribute to French classical music.

Despite the acres of woodland, it was a sweltering summer evening, when a barefoot audience filed into the Rukmini Arangam Auditorium at the Kalakshetra Foundation for the inaugural concert in Chennai of the Arties Festival India. A novelty showcasing the rare works of French masters, it was organised by Alliance Française, BNP Paribas and the National Centre for the Performing Arts and hosted by Kalakshetra Foundation.

The biannual festival founded in 2008 has as its ambassadors, musicians who can compare with the finest in Europe and are united by their uncompromising love for India. The five who took the stage — Laurent Manaud Pallas (violin), Mathilde Borsarello Herrmann (violin), Cecile Grassi (viola), Gauthier Herrmann (cello and founder-manager of Arties Festival) and Emmanuel Christien (piano) — are all graduates from top-end schools and have performed at prestigious venues worldwide.

The programme opened with Adam Greig, faculty at KM Conservatory, succinctly introducing the pieces — Maurice Ravel's *Piano Trio*, Gabriel Faure's *Après un Reve*, a tribute to Jean-Philippe Rameau and Cesar Franck's *Piano Quintet in F Minor*.

Ravel's *Piano Trio*, composed a hundred years ago on the eve of his enlisting to fight in the Great War, is a chamber work dedicated to his teacher and celebrates his Basque heritage. It's a piece that demands technical prowess from the pianist, violinist and cellist, and Christien, Pallas and Herrmann rose to the occasion. Through the four movements — 'Modere', 'Pantoum',

‘Passacaille’ and ‘Final’ — the violin whispered, the cello sighed and the piano sang the octaves in between. The ‘Modere’ draws from a Basque dance form and was played with such harmony that the listening pleasure came from both the cool elegance of Christien’s piano and the capacious warmth of Pallas’ violin. The ‘Pantoum’ with its Oriental sounds was anchored by a muscular yet sensitive cello that melted in the background with lovely swiftness in the ‘Passacaille.’ Flashes of colour emerged through the trills, tremolos and timbres before the trio dived headlong into a bombastic ‘Final’ where they volleyed back and forth in fluid interplay.

Faure’s *Après un Reve*, as the title suggests, is the dream of eloping with a lover and is a song arranged for the violin, viola and piano. The scherzo took on a meditative note, with the violin searing through the plaintive melody. The tribute to theorist, opera composer and French legend Rameau, on his 250th death anniversary, played by all five musicians, was a warm, sweet-toned piece rich in lyrical sound and vibrato. Rameau was long forgotten in the land of his birth in the years following his death and was resurrected only at the time of the Franco-Prussian War nearly a hundred years later, a popularity he enjoys till today.

Gallic musical soul

After the intermission, the artists gave a poignant yet vibrant traversal of Franck’s *Piano Quintet in F Minor*. Written for piano, two violins, viola and cello, it phrases the pioneering essence of new-age music. The three movements — ‘Molto moderato quasi lento,’ ‘Lento con molto sentiment’ and ‘Allegro ma non troppo ma con fuoco’- echoed the Gallic musical soul of the era. In a piece with torrid emotional power, the violinists played the slow melodic phrasing while the piano, viola and cello with unbridled swing captured the boisterous spirit of the score.

Throughout the evening, the musicians dedicated the concert to ornate readings of the works of these composers. They became springboards not only of their music but also of their time. Their expansive approach to the performance deserves praise and the beautiful interplay of their individual sound, commendation.

Some classical musicians showcase the genius of the composers, others the genius of their talent. When they played A.R. Rahman’s Oscar-winning ‘Jai Ho’ for the encore, these Arties musicians outdid themselves on both counts.