

Meet the musician who gave the Saraswati veena a makeover

Veena player Balachander has bridged the North-South gap in his own way. He remodelled the Carnatic instrument in order to play dhrupad music with it.

Susan Jose



Not many know that classical musician S Balachander, whose last performance in the city was held a few weeks back, is also the person who modified the Saraswati veena in order to play dhrupad — a genre in Hindustani music. The instrument is traditionally used to play Carnatic music. However, the artiste, who is also a physics graduate, tweaked it by using the principles of sound dynamics.

Balachander had no clue that the journey to bring the instrument from paper sketches to reality would take years. He had trained in Carnatic music during his childhood. He then trained in sarod under Pt Pradeep Barot. However, his interests soon turned to playing dhrupad, after being inspired by Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar. Between the `80s and the year 2000, Balachander balanced his corporate job as well as music. After this, he started leaning towards music much more.

“I realised that the traditional Saraswati veena is not apt to play dhrupad with. I read a lot of books about the acoustics of an instrument before I started work on redesigning it. In 2002, I quit my job to work on modifying

the design. After searching a lot across South and North India, with the help of few seasoned musicians abroad, I finally located a craftsman named Mohanlal Sharma in West Bengal. After being rejected by other craftsmen during my search it was a relief when he agreed to take up the work,” says Balachander.

The lucky streak continued and he was qualified for a junior fellowship by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, from 2004 to 2006, for the research work he undertook to remodel the veena.



Musician Balachander feels that government patronage and support is essential to preserve Indian arts and culture. (Rajasimha Karanam; picture for representational purposes only)

After completing his project, Balachander performed dhrupad music on the modified veena named “chandra veena”. He credits the name to gurus Ustad Zia Fariduddin Dagar and Ustad Bahauddin Dagar. The musician is happy with the outcome and does not want to “get into the copyright ball game”. “There is no proper provision to register it [the remodelled chandra veena]. Patenting is tricky,” he says.

The artiste strives for collective rather than singular recognition. “I request the government to give classical musicians their due recognition in their own country,” says Balachander, adding “Government patronage and support is essential for preserving our arts and culture”.

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