

# A raga for all

A Bharatanatyam dancer in Chennai on her mission to demystify Carnatic classical music

Bibek Bhattacharya  
bibek.b@htive.com

If there's one thing that leaves Chennai-based Bharatanatyam dancer and musicologist Vidya Bhavani Suresh frustrated, it is that Carnatic music isn't as popular as it should be. And she puts this down to the fact that singers and musicians don't bother to explain the nuances of the music to the audience. A former company secretary who has trained in the dance form since she was five-and-a-half-years-old, Bhavani Suresh decided to embark upon an extended project to demystify Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam, in 1999.

Along with her husband B.A. Suresh, who is also her editor, Bhavani Suresh started self-publishing monographs on Bharatanatyam and ragas in Carnatic music under the name of Skanda Publications. Over the next decade, the popularity of the titles prompted them to tackle bigger books, including *Maths In Music And Dance*, *A Comprehensive Dictionary Of Carnatic Music*, and *50 Evergreen Ragas Of Carnatic Music*. The latest, which is called *50 Rare Ragas Of Carnatic Music*, was published in November. *Lounge* spoke to Bhavani Suresh over the phone to understand what she is doing to document and demystify the Carnatic art form. Edited excerpts from the interview:

## What prompted you to start doing this?

I received my *arangetram* (the performance that marks the completion of formal training) when I was 16 years old. It would trouble me that you would repeat what you were taught and nobody bothered to tell you the meaning of what you were enacting. All you needed to worry about was getting your moves right. Now, I was passionate about Bharatanatyam, its aesthetics. I wanted to use it to talk about other things. So I started interpreting old Tamil texts using Bharatanatyam, for example *Thiruppugal*, which, apart from its devotional content, is also very rhythmically challenging for a dancer to interpret. It goes beyond your basic rhythms like *rupaka thalam* or *adi thalam*.

I studied folklore in college, and I remember my professor telling us that an art is alive only if it is among people. An archive exists only for studying, for understanding, for historical documentation. Not for preservation. An art form is preserved only if you perform it, narrate it. Art has to live amidst an audience.

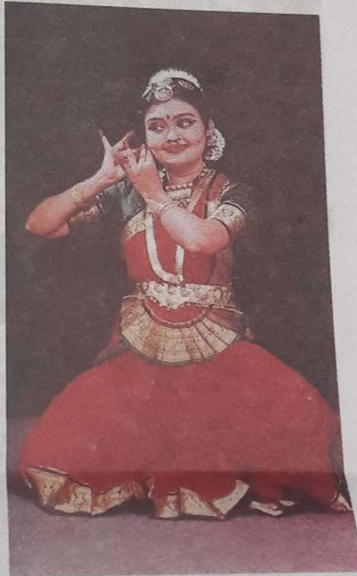
## Do you see a disconnect between musicians and performers in Carnatic music?

Audiences feel so puzzled whenever they go for Carnatic music concerts. You can appreciate it as a magical performance, but you're not told what the song is about, what raga it is in. During the Chennai music season, you always hear from knowledgeable concert-goers that "the thrill is in identifying the raga". But everyone isn't what I call a "knowledgeable *rasika*". I feel this creates a huge divide in the audience. During a concert, there's a lot of buzz in the

audience, trying to identify the raga. I remember, some 10-12 years ago, when a singer started, one gentleman in the audience stood up and asked, "Whose composition is this?" The singer informed him. People want to know. Not all composers have a self-referential *mudra* in the lyrics, so you can identify a Tyagaraja or a Muthuswami Dikshitar or a Syama Sastri—the *trimurti* of Carnatic music. It hurts me that there are so many amazing composers, and nobody knows them. If you announce all this, the recall would be more. Attending a musical concert shouldn't be a test of one's knowledge.

## In this respect, what can be done to make Carnatic music less opaque?

People should be encouraged to go for a concert, like they're going and watching a film. You're supposed to forget the world, forget everything and just enjoy yourself. Everyone is too puzzled to enjoy the concert. And then performers complain that audiences are getting smaller, that only older people come, and that tastes are changing. I ask you, why? Ultimately, it will live only if more people come voluntarily to enjoy the music. Everybody likes to enjoy a good art form. But you can't make them feel out-of-place, or belittled because they aren't as knowledgeable as you.



Vidya Bhavani Suresh.

Vidya Bhavani Suresh's books for Skanda Publications are available at select book stores in Chennai. You can also order the titles online at [skandapublications.in](http://skandapublications.in).