

# Sankara Nethralaya Pays Homage To M.S. Subbulakshmi

By A Staff Writer

**A**noushka Shankar, the daughter of sitar maestro Ravi Shankar, mesmerized audiences at the Lincoln Center November 5, performing one of her father's most prized compositions. During the concert, Indian non-profit Sankara Nethralaya had the opportunity to honor renowned Indian classical singer M.S. Subbulakshmi on her 100th birth anniversary.

The Lincoln Center event was the 12th and last event at which Sankara Nethralaya paid tribute to Subbulakshmi who was an early and strong supporter of SN and helped the non-profit grow.

Shankar played her father's Rāgā-Mālā Sitar Concerto No. 2, to a packed audience of more than 2,600 people, about 250 of whom were Sankara Nethralaya invitees, organizers told Desi Talk. She was followed by the

New York Philharmonic's rendition of Schubert's 'Unfinished' Symphony with Austrian conductor Manfred Homeck. Originally, Zubin Mehta was supposed to be the conductor but he took ill and Homeck stepped in, K.S. Vasana, managing director of SN told Desi Talk. Mehta was instrumental in giving Sankara Nethralaya the opportunity to honor Subbulakshmi at the concert, Vasana said.

The president of the New York Philharmonic, Mathew VanBiesien, spoke about the accomplishments of Subbulakshmi, and invited

Dr. S.S. Badrinath, founder and chairman-emeritus of Sankara Nethralaya, and his wife Dr. Vasanthi Badrinath to the stage. In his speech, Badrinath gave a history of the organization and how Subbulakshmi had played a critical role in its formative years by lending her name and fame, giving concerts and

contributing her songs to raise funds for the organization. She also encouraging Badrinath to stay in India and commit himself fully rather than return to Boston.

Anita Achar performed Maithreem Bhajatha, a song that calls for world peace and was composed by Jagadguru Chandrasekharendra Saraswati in India specifically for Subbulakshmi. She performed it 50 years on Oct. 23, 1966, at the United Nations General Assembly on UN Day, to a standing ovation. This October, Sankara Nethralaya held a commemorative event at the U.N. to honor Subbulakshmi. Musician and composer A.R. Rahman was the highlight at that event.

The Lincoln Center event, Vasana said, was a "fitting finale" to honoring the late classical singer. "It also provided tremendous exposure to Sankara Nethralaya's work of providing eye-care in India," Vasana added.



Photo right, from left, Dr. Sudha Parikh, Dr. Sudhir Parikh, publisher of Desi Talk and recipient of Padma Shri award, Dr. S.S. Badrinath, founder and chairman-emeritus of Sankara Nethralaya a non-profit missionary ophthalmic care organization in India, his wife Dr. Vasanthi Badrinath, renowned sitarplayer Anoushka Shankar, and India's Consul General in New York Riva Ganguly Das at the Nov. 5 Lincoln Center concert during which Sankara Nethralaya also commemorated the 100th birth anniversary of Bharat Ratna M.S. Subbulakshmi. Above, Dr. Badrinath speaking at the event; Above right, Anoushka Shankar playing at the Lincoln Center; Below, Dr. Badrinath greets some Indian Americans at the event.





Can A R Rahman's Eclectic Music Spanning Sufi To B'wood Match The Soulful Kritis Of M S Subbulakshmi's UN Concert?

# Tribute to MS sparks debate

S Viswanathan

**O**n October 24, 1966, M S Subbulakshmi performed at the United Nations on the occasion of UN Day. This was the first ever occasion where an Indian musician was invited to perform in the UN. Fifty years later, on August 15, A R Rahman presented the second such concert at the UN along with an 80-member orchestra.

S S Badrinath, chairman-emeritus of Sankara Nethralaya, conceived the idea to present Rahman in the UN in commemoration of the centenary of MS. Apart from Rahman, Badrinath also plans to present two other celebrities — Sudha Raghunathan on October 2 and Zubin Mehta with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at the Lincoln Centre in New York on November 5. The effort is to raise funds for eye surgeries for the poor and also to set up a chair in the name of M S Subbulakshmi at an American university.

But there were stark differences between the two concerts at the UN. The initiative for organising MS' concert was taken by C V Narasimhan, the then chef de cabinet of the UN. Narasimhan was well-versed in music and learnt under maestros like Musiri Subramania Iyer and MS. His close rapport with the then UN secretary general U Thant also ensured the total involvement of the UN. Add to this the marketing genius of media magnate T Sadasivam.

The programme was planned to the minutest detail with rich back-grounders on Carnatic music, notes on the composers, meaning of the kritis etc. The compositions were chosen with great care and included pieces from the trinity of music — Thyagarajar, Muthuswamy Dikshithar and Shyama Shastri — and Purandaradasa, Swati Tirunal and the Maharaja of Mysore. There was also a piece in western classical music composed in English by Rajaji and set to music by Handel Manuel.

The event was widely publicised, with the Tamil weekly 'Kalki', founded by Sadasivam producing a

cover story and dedicating an entire issue to the event.

In stark contrast, Rahman's concert was marked by poor media coverage, in India and on the internet. Unlike MS' concert, not much effort was made to provide details on the items presented or about the composers. The selection of songs by Rahman — mostly constituting film songs, a few sufi lyrics and ghazals — had little to relate to MS' monumental contributions.

Another major difference was the absence of strong diplomats from south India, knowledgeable in music, at the UN, and the Indian Embassy at Washington. India's permanent representative to the UN ambassador Syed Akbaruddin, not quite familiar with Carnatic music or MS, did send a couple of tweets though. Union minister of state for external affairs and veteran journalist, M J Akbar, flew to New York to participate in the function; he was again someone not too familiar either with Carnatic music or with

MS and her works. Besides, the UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon was not present at the event nor were the Indian ambassador or

other plenipotentiaries from Washington. The absence of prominent NRIs who are glittering business icons in the US — many of these from south India and familiar with MS and Rahman — was also felt. American leaders too were largely missing from the event. Due to the rapid growth of UN, 800 seats had to be reserved for diplomats and members of the UN. Only a few seats were left for the strong NRI community in the US.

Rahman's concerts in Chennai and elsewhere are held in stadia and other large open spaces that attract people in thousands. A concert in New York's Central Park may have been fitting, given the prosperous Indian diaspora in the US.

*(The author is a veteran journalist and editor of Industrial Economist. He was in the US during June-July and closely followed the preparation of the UN concert)*

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**VOICE THAT WOODED MILLIONS:** The concert by A R Rahman at the General Assembly of the United Nations on August 15 was organised by Sankara Nethralaya to pay obeisance to legendary Carnatic musician M S Subbulakshmi

## 'Rahman's concert was spiritual, not filmy'

K S Vasani

**M**S Subbulakshmi was a very dedicated patron of Sankara Nethralaya. Funds raised through many of her concerts in India went towards providing free ophthalmic services to the poor in India, helping them regain eyesight and dignity in their lives. When founder and chairman emeritus of Sankara Nethralaya Dr S S Badrinath, wanted to celebrate MS' 100th birth anniversary in the US, he decided to mark it through a series of events. One of these events was the August 15 UN concert by AR Rahman at the General Assembly, where MS performed 50 years ago.

As part of the celebrations, Sankara Nethralaya has also organised Carnatic music concerts by Sudha Raghunathan in Atlanta, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, Houston and Washington DC in September. Sankara Nethralaya, with support

from Permanent Mission of India in the UN, has also organised another event at the UN on October 2 with Sudha Raghunathan. Furthermore, Sankara Nethralaya has been successful in getting the New York Philharmonic to honour MS at their concert by Anoushka Shankar and Zubin Mehta on November 5 at the Lincoln Center.

The tribute to MS goes far beyond one concert by Rahman at the UN. The Rahman concert

was not only an important event played to a packed international audience, it was also a historic occasion showcasing MS and India in the international arena. We at Sankara Nethralaya believe that these events not only celebrate MS but also bring a greater awareness about the good work that Sankara Nethralaya is doing in India.

For the Rahman concert, the UN had allocated 900 seats for Sankara Nethralaya and we were able to fill

them purely by word of mouth. A large number of well-wishers came forward readily. In fact we had a list of over 1,300 at one point and had to limit the numbers. The UN had mandated that this was not going to be a ticketed event and that it was going to be open seating. No amount of ads or publicity would have helped.

### MELLIFLUOUS MELODIES

Regarding the songs performed by Rahman, we would say that he was extremely respect-

ful of MS and wanted to have a programme that was spiritual in nature and not Bollywood style. The songs performed by him transcended religion. Several MS songs were played by Carnatic musicians from Berklee College of Music. Guitar Prasanna and Sivamani rendered Carnatic music on the guitar and drums. AR Rahman is internationally known and has great respect for MS. This event was not only about Carnatic music but about one

legend of India celebrating and paying a tribute to another legend.

Regarding criticism that the who's who of UN was missing and that minister M J Akbar who attended the event has little connection to Carnatic music, we can say that Ban Ki-moon was traveling but he sent a two-minute video for the event. M J Akbar is a high ranking government official. The consul general of India, NYC, and diplomats from many other countries — 800 in all — attended the event.

One may argue that the venue could have been bigger, given Rahman's crowd-pulling abilities. But, the venue chose itself since this was where MS performed 50 years ago. If we had intended it to be a mere commercial venture, we would have chosen Madison Square Garden but the primary purpose of the event was to honor MS and Carnatic music at the UN general assembly.

*(The author is the MD of Sankara Nethralaya)*

## BRINGING FAME TO INDIA

Many concerts of Subbulakshmi helped in raising funds for the poor

### THE NIGHTINGALE'S SONG

➤ M S Subbulakshmi was invited by the then UN secretary general U Thant to perform at the General Assembly in New York on the United Nations Day on October 23

➤ Embarking on a seven-week concert tour, the singer gave 15 performances between October 2 and November 19

➤ She was accompanied by T K Murthy (mridangam), V V Subramaniam (violin), T H Vinayakaram (ghatam), and her children Radha Viswanathan and Vijay Rajendran

➤ She was the first Indian to represent one of the oldest musical cultures in the world

➤ She began the performance with a Sanskrit 'Guru Vandana' in praise of Dakshinamurthy

➤ Sang an English hymn composed by C Rajagopalachari; her singing an English hymn sparked controversy among the Indian audience

➤ Compositions included pieces from Thyagarajar, Muthuswamy Dikshithar and Shyama Shastri

### PRESENT PAYS OBEISANCE

➤ Rahman's concert on Aug 15 marked India's 70th Independence Day and 50 yrs of Subbulakshmi's UN performance

➤ Rahman performed renditions of M S Subbulakshmi, Sufi songs and his compositions from films like 'Dil Se' and 'Bombay'

➤ Also performed his version of the 'Vande Maataram' and his Oscar winning song 'Jai Ho' from the film 'Slumdog Millionaire'

➤ He was joined by his two sisters, singer Javed Ali, and percussionist Sivamani

➤ Students of Sunshine Orchestra, an initiative by A R Rahman Foundation to teach music to youth from unprivileged backgrounds, also participated



# Rahman At U.N. Blends Tradition, 21st Century Spectacle



Senior Indian government and United Nations officials were among the guests at the A.R. Rahman's concert at the United Nations August 15. From left, Dr. S. S. Badainath, chairman Emeritus of Sankara Nethralaya, and wife. The Nethralaya cosponsored the event along with the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations; Ambassador Syed Akbaruddin, Permanent Representative of India to the U.N., Minister of State for External Affairs M.J. Akbar and U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon who addressed the independence day via video conference. Photo below, Minister Akbar opens an exhibition of photographs of M.S. Subbulakshmi.

By ARUL LOUIS

— UNITED NATIONS

Oscar winning Indian composer A.R. Rahman's music of universal harmony blending traditions, time, faiths and languages soared on August 15 through the General Assembly chamber, a venue known more for cacophonous discord.

His tribute to M.S. Subbulakshmi, the "Queen of Music", brought 21st pizzazz to the classic and the traditional, upholding the sacred even as electronic music and a kinetic backdrop transcended centuries.

The unity in diversity that is India was weaved through the concert, starting with Sanskrit and Tamil devotional hymns in Carnatic tradition and seamlessly moving to music in a popular modern, Hindustani and qawwali styles, and on to soulful Islamic songs, ending finally with a resounding "Jai ho".

This spectacle of India presented in music proclaimed a universal message to the world in the wood-paneled chamber transformed for a day from a platform for dissensions to a music hall where Hindu and Islamic voices were raised together in pleas for peace.

The backdrop shifted from temple-like scenarios and Islamic structures and timeless motifs of scenic beauty and shimmering light spectacles that reflected the music.

India's Minister of State for



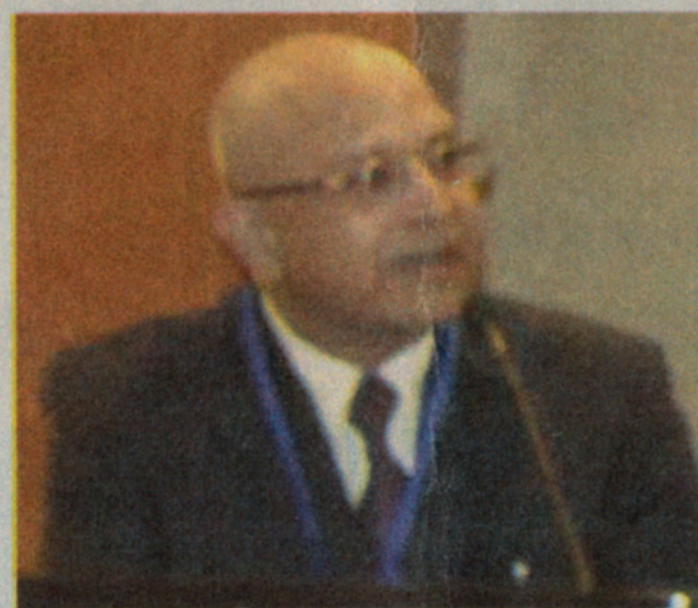
## The Nonprofit Behind Rahman's U.N. Concert

By A STAFF WRITER

— UNITED NATIONS

Amid the media glare on A.R. Rahman's concert at the United Nations, paying tribute to M.S. Subbulakshmi last week, the name of Chennai-based Sankara Nethralaya that was the cosponsor of the event along with the Permanent Mission of India to the United States, seemed to have been relegated to the background.

But the gala music concert



was made possible because of tireless efforts by the Nethralaya that officials said had been working for six months with the PMI to make it happen. "It is a public-private partnership," one

official said referring to the collaboration behind the concert. The nonprofit eye institution has been consistently rated as the number one hospital in India and recognized among the best managed charitable institutions in the country.

"We at the Sankara Nethralaya would like to pay out humbled tribute to MS as she is affectionately called the world over," Dr. S. S. Badainath, one of the leading ophthalmic surgeons of India and chairman Emeritus of Sankara Nethralaya said.

External Affairs M.J. Akbar reflected on this as he spoke before the concert. In India, he said, the day starts with the 'aazans' from the mosques, 'bhajans' from temples, devotional songs from the gurdwaras and hymns from churches.

During the freedom struggle, Mahatma Gandhi started his meeting with the song, "Ishwar, Allah, tere naam", he recalled.

"Our freedom lay in music," he said, recalling that the freedom struggle started with the song "Vande Mataram" and India is represented by that and the National Anthem, "Jana Gana Mana".

Unlike most countries that get an anthem after attaining nationhood, India already had an anthem before Independence, Akbar said.

The concert with the audience overflowing in the three level chamber, enchanted the international audience.

Panama's Permanent Representative Laura E. Flores retweeted Akbar's remark: "Music is what links us as individuals to eternity" and said she expected a "fantastic" evening.

David Roet, Israel's Deputy Permanent Representative, tweeted the music was "amazing".

It was "mesmerising" and a "magical treat," Britain's Deputy Permanent Representative Peter Wilson said.

In a video message before the concert, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, celebrated the 70 years of India's participation with the UN that started even before it became independent.



# On inclusive music...



**AT THE U.N.:** (From left) Anirudh Athreya, Sriramkumar, K.V. Prasad, Sudha and Raman



# Looking beyond the summit

Sudha Ragunathan talks about reliving the M.S. magic during her recent concert tour of America and performing at the UN. *Geetha Venkataramanan* listens in.



MINING PATTERN Sudha Ragunathan PHOTO: K.V. SRINIVASAN

**I**t was a beautiful experience, once-in-a-lifetime kind," exults Sudha Ragunathan, referring to her concert for the United Nations in New York. Her tour of the U.S. itself was an overwhelming success with people gathering to listen to one of the most famous voices of Carnatic music.

"The magic of M.S. was so visible, wherever I performed," says Sudha. It was a commemoration of the Nightingale's centenary and fund-raiser for Sankara Nethralaya. Except the one-hour performance, which the U.N. hosted in style, the trip was dedicated to this mission, which took her to six places, where she presented full-fledged concerts.

Was she surprised that she, an MLV disciple, was chosen for an M.S. retro?

"Yes, I was a little surprised but extremely happy."

Did it involve any unlearning?

"Not really," says Sudha. "I had to get the bhava and intonation perfect. So it was nothing but M.S. for three months... through ipod, ipad, laptop, phone, etc. Through

sleep and waking hours it was her divine voice that was resonating in my mind." So much so that she refrained from indulging in distractions during the tour. "I preferred to stay indoors listening to M.S.'s songs, almost like meditation."

Sangita Kalanidhi... Padma Vibhushan and the U.N. invitation half a century after M.S. performed... what next? "Yes, I'm contemplating too," says Sudha. "Sabha hopping, endless kutcheris, globe-trotting... an inner voice says my calling is beyond all this. Samudaya is doing good work but I should contribute something more for posterity," she muses. "It may not happen overnight but again I'm sure the guiding light will come."

The MLV mantle fell on her, naturally, but there is no

sign of succession. What could be the reason? "I do have disciples with potential but the time has not come, I guess..." After a pause, she speaks. "You know, my guru never actually taught. One had to be with her, listen to her and learn. I accompanied her but during the 13-year tutelage, my guru was not present in any of my concerts." But MLV was clear that Sudha should marry a man, whose family should support her talent.

"Yes. The initial years, however, were not easy," laughs Sudha. "My in-laws certainly did not discourage me from performing but they were not prepared for a daughter-in-law, who was constantly in her teacher's company and running off to concerts. If MLV Amma had a kutcheri at 7 p.m., I would

Sudha is presiding over the annual Music Conference of the Indian Fine Arts and will be conferred the title Sangeetha Kalasikhamani. On February 19, she will be conferred the Samagana-Mathanga National Award by the Bharatiya Samagana Sabha, Bengaluru, at the Sabha's annual music festival - Abhijnana Thyagaraja Sangeetham - at the Chowdaiah Memorial Hall.

be with her from 4.

"This involved travelling and my concerts were there too. I had to virtually declare that music was my first priority. A bright student, I had altered my academic course to accommodate my singing. With a guru of MLV's stature, no way I was going to compromise. So it was definitely not a cakewalk."

*Continued on page 3*

## Peace tunes

The day she performed at the U.N., October 2, Gandhi Jayanti, also was the International Day of Non-violence. The U.N. had decided to release a stamp in honour of M.S. Sudha's agenda, therefore included 'Santi Nilava Vendum,' M.S.'s prayer for peace. In her brief speech Sudha quoted Martin Luther King (Jr), "Darkness cannot drive away darkness, only light can do that; hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that..."

Apart from the singing, there were minute things to be observed, remembered and executed, all of which made the occasion both challenging and exciting, she recalls.