

Story of the “Sruti” Magazine, an Indian Performing Arts Magazine that Celebrates its 30th Anniversary in October 2013!

By Shuchita Rao

Three decades back, on 16 October 1983, when “Sruti”, an English-language South Indian classical music and dance magazine, was launched in Chennai (then Madras), India, many were skeptical of the venture. Popular magazines in India were struggling at that time and far from thriving, no one expected a niche magazine with serious essays, commentaries and reviews on Indian classical music and dance to survive, even for a short period of time.

The skeptics have been proven wrong. Today Sruti, with a readership base spreading far beyond the borders of India, proudly celebrates its 30th anniversary year.

It is no surprise that Sruti has emerged as a jewel on the horizon of Indian performing arts. Comprehensive profiles of leading Indian performing artists and scholars, authoritative analyses of classical music and dance, and detailed reviews of performances have appeared in the 360 editions of Sruti that have been published thus far.

Sruti magazine has many admirers among celebrities and music lovers alike. It occupies a proud place on the coffee table of the world famous sitarist, the Bharat Ratna, late Pandit Ravi Shankar's home in California. When the aged parents of Meena Pennathur, a Philadelphia resident, moved from India to settle permanently in the U.S, they brought with them, among a few personal belongings, favorite editions of Sruti magazine from their collection. “Seeing how fond Amma was of Sruti magazine, I purchased a subscription for her,” she says. “Amma would wait eagerly every month for the magazine to arrive by mail. She would choose to sit on a chair by the main door, where the sun shone the brightest, and devote several hours at a stretch to reading the magazine from cover to cover. My daughter Anitha was learning Bharatanatyam from a local teacher, and Amma would enthusiastically share articles on Kalakshetra and Rukmini Devi with us. Today, Anitha teaches Bharatanatyam to several students, and they give public performances in Philadelphia's cultural festivals. I believe Sruti played an important role in helping my parents re-live their deep connection to India, and also in inspiring the younger generation of Indian descent living outside India.”

The foremost reason for Sruti being a much-loved and treasured publication is the high standard of articles, reports and reviews that appear in the magazine. The articles are chosen with care by the editor so that true talent is recognized, appreciated and represented properly. Additionally, over the years, a variety of interesting initiatives have been undertaken by the Sruti Foundation. For instance, Sruti has conducted national seminars on topics such as Bharatanatyam dance traditions and on the

percussion instrument “*tavil*”, one of the South Indian barrel-drums. It has brought together scholars from the Carnatic and Hindustani music traditions with a view to bridging the musical North-South divide. It has revived the Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi project. It has hosted chamber orchestras where artists performed without the use of microphones. It has involved musicologists, performers and music lovers in active discussions and debates, as is evident in enthusiastic letters from readers who appreciate the knowledge transfer, or freely criticise the opinions of the experts. The Sruti Foundation has also established awards such as The Arts India Award, the Vellore Gopalachariar Award and the Venkatakrishnan Memorial Award to promote excellence in the arts.

Through spreading awareness of performing arts, Sruti improved the aesthetics of Indian music and dance concerts, raised standards of acoustics and audience etiquette, and has established new norms of objective evaluation and talent-spotting in both young and emerging artists, as well as the established masters. Over the years, Sruti has widened its scope to cover not only Indian performing arts, including theatre and folk arts, but also Western music, dance and theatre. Its open-mindedness shows itself in articles that recognize and summarize international artistic collaborations.

Who was the visionary who took the bold decision to launch Sruti in the early 80s? It was the late Dr. N. Pattabhiraman (1932-2002), who was an economist by profession. In 1981, he took early retirement from his position as the Director of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and returned to India from the US to lead a quiet life. Hailing from a family of writers, he used his journalistic talents by writing articles for several publications including the *Indian Express*, *The Financial Express*, *Commerce*, *Deccan Herald* and the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. His nephew, Sri V. Ramnarayan, the current editor-in-chief of Sruti magazine, shares the story behind Sruti's launch. “Pattabhi’s father, V. Narayanan, held a degree in law and was also an unacknowledged genius of a writer in three languages — English, Tamil and Sanskrit. His contributions to the Tamil lexicon and sloka books of the *Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham* were as considerable as his role as editor of the *Indian Express*. Pattabhi's great-uncle, A. Madhaviah, had been one of the early Tamil novelists. His older brother, Sundaresan, retired as *The Hindu’s* sports editor. Pattabhi himself had dabbled in journalism in his student days, bringing out a magazine he had grandly called *The Societarians*. On his return to India, Pattabhi found the raison d'etre of his post retirement life: a crusade for the preservation of tradition and promotion of innovation in Indian classical music and dance, starting with Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam. He developed a deep interest in documentation and research of teaching methodologies of various schools of music and dance, and started an English-language monthly magazine, called “Sruti”, devoted to the performing arts of India.

Sri Pattabhi Raman's venture was initially supported by members of his extended family that included older brothers P.N. Sundaresan and P.N. Venkataraman, nephew V. Ramnarayan and his wife Gowri Ramnarayan, as well as Gowri's mother, Anandhi

Ramachandran. In the course of time, a distinguished galaxy of scholars, musicologists, art critics, and journalists, as well as performing artists, began contributing well-researched articles to Sruti.

When Sri Pattabhi Raman passed away after a brief illness in December 2002, there was much anxiety about the future of the magazine, for no succession plan had been put in place. The trustees, especially M. Subramaniam and publisher P.S. Narayanan, worked to keep the magazine alive. Retired bureaucrat and former resident editor of the Indian Express K.V. Ramanathan, a walking encyclopedia and connoisseur of the arts, took over as chief editor. S. Janaki, now executive editor, and a small Sruti team of loyal employees with more than 20 years of service, carried out the work of publishing the magazine without missing a single issue.

The Sanmar Group took over Sruti and reconstituted the Sruti Foundation that owns and runs it today. It is headed by Sanmar group chairman Sri N. Sankar, with Sri Subramaniam and Sri Narayanan continuing as trustees, along with new trustees V. Vaidyanathan and Sukanya Sankar. Sri V. Ramnarayan, an experienced player and writer on the subject of cricket sport, who took charge as Editor-in-Chief in December 2007, improved the look and feel of the magazine, introduced color in the magazine's published version, and actively blogs about the arts using such social media as Facebook.

Sruti will soon embark on its 31st year of existence. Its popularity continues to grow every year. While Sruti is gradually building a strong online presence, the print version of the magazine still has thousands of active subscribers all over the world. Its devoted fan base now has both kinds of readers - those who buy bound volumes of old issues, as well as readers of its e-books. Sruti has been my personal favorite magazine for several years. My pulse quickens when I see a copy in my mailbox to this day. I disappear into a hiding corner with it to be transported away from the daily grind into the magical world of performing arts just for a little bit.



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