

Chennai's newfound stress buster: music

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Talking about how music is connected to the different chakras, Lalita says, "Everyone is unique in their own way, and they react differently based on their chakras. If our chakras are balanced, we react in a balanced way. All our emotions are based on these chakras, which is why we get emotional when our chakras are not balanced. In such situations, music therapy helps."

So, what exactly happens during the sessions? Lalita says she starts with a short chant of 'Om' and then begins the session by singing an *alaap*. "They have to repeat after me. I don't introduce lyrics; I just stop with the *alaap*. This helps the person focus on their breathing and their mind begins to shut out the other things."

Attending music therapy has several benefits, says Lalita. "By singing, you are letting out a lot of stress and are forced to concentrate on what you are hearing. When you start breathing, your body relaxes. It's like how you feel good after taking a deep breath. Classical music is soothing to the brain. And wealth-wise, music therapy so reduces stress, blood pressure and sugar levels."

Lalita says that the sessions are mainly targeted at people who are between the age group of 20 to 60. The sessions are mostly held on the weekends and she has had different experiences with people who come for the session. "I want people to concentrate entirely on breathing. I believe when you take these sessions, you tend to identify a problem. I want people to understand

MANY MUSICIANS CALL THEMSELVES THERAPISTS. BUT JUST BY KNOWING MUSIC ONE CANNOT BECOME A THERAPIST

— MYTHILI CHARI, SPECIAL EDUCATOR

that music can do wonders, they just need to experience it," she says.

Another music therapist, Rajam Shanker, follows a system called, *nada-anu sandhana* which also evokes the various chakras in the body. Her sessions begin with chanting 'Om', followed by an *alaap*. But the most



challenging aspect of her job is working with autistic children. "Many of these children cannot speak and are very restless. The initial sessions are the most difficult ones considering these kids don't listen to me sing. It takes a lot of time to grab their attention," explains the certified therapist. Several children have been coming to Rajam for the past six years and have in fact started reciting shlokas. Rajam also works with disturbed and violent children, which is a different task altogether. "I let them do what

ever they want to, but I insist that the kids' parents also be present so that the kids don't hurt themselves. I keep singing in lower pitch and tempo and that slowly makes an impact on the children," says Rajam, who has been a music therapist for the past 15 years. Rajam also works with women who have anxiety disorder, anger management and menopause issues, suicidal tendencies and who are depressed. But Rajam doesn't take on any patients without consulting a doctor first. A special educator, Mythili

Chari believes that music therapy is a boon for children who suffer from autism. "Many of these children have behavioural issues because they cannot express themselves properly. Music comes as a relief for these children. It calms them down," says Mythili. However, she raises concerns about the increasing number of music therapists in the city. "A music teacher cannot become a music therapist. Many musicians call themselves therapists because that brings in a lot of business. But just by

MUSIC THERAPY HELPS ME HAVE TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF VOICE CONTROL

— RADHAKRISHNAN, THEATRE ARTISTE

knowing music one cannot become a music therapist, she suggests.

But can music therapists replace doctors? City-based doctor and the head of Chennai School of Music Therapy, Sumathy Sundar tells us that music therapists cannot cure patients. "We don't use the word 'cure' with our patients. We don't treat one particular organ. We talk about help, which can be social, mental, physical and psychological. We try and work for the well-being of a person. We are not substitutes for doctors. We are concerned about a patient's social needs, especially when they are under a lot of stress," she says. As far as the therapy is concerned, Sumathy checks on the interests of a patient and suggests the kind of music for the therapy. "I don't limit it to just

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Now, heal using music therapy

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Sure, everyone loves listening to music, but did you know that music has therapeutic properties, and that experts are now using music to lower stress levels, especially among youngsters?

Chennai is now witnessing a mushrooming in the number of music therapists. Many, like Lalita Sharma, a student of Pandit Jasraj and a Hindustani music maestro, now conduct music therapy

sessions. "It is all about sound frequencies. In classical music, there are seven *swaras* that give rise to 12 *swarasthanas*. In music, the sound comes first, then the tune and finally, the lyrics. If you are not a musician, you will connect to the sound first and then the lyrics. All of this is also related to the seven *chakras* in our body which are located along the spinal cord," says the city-based musician.



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Inclusive initiative

Pt. Jasraj's disciple, Lalitha Sharma's aim is to take music to the underprivileged

LALITHA KRISHNAN

Swaraangan, a school for Hindustani classical music in Chennai, founded by Lalitha Sharma, a senior disciple of Pt. Jasraj, celebrated its fifth anniversary with a programme at the Arkay Convention Centre.

Trained in and adept at both the Carnatic and Hindustani streams, Lalitha's expertise is highlighted by her emphasis on clear diction and clarity of notes.

Having learnt from gurus Padma Narasimhan and V.R. Krishnan, Lalitha obtained her Diploma in Music from the Government Music College, Chennai, and holds a B.A in Music from the University of Madras.

Developing an interest in Hindustani classical, Lalitha came under the tutelage of eminent vocalist, Pt. Jasraj and with his guidance, was concert-ready as an accomplished exponent of the Mewati gharana. She has performed extensively at prestigious venues and arts festivals in India and abroad, conducted workshops and lec-dems and is the recipient of several prizes and accolades.

Among the institution's aims and objectives are outreach programmes to take music to underprivileged children to unlock their potential and adopting a teaching methodology that follows the traditional guru-sishya parampara system to inculcate a sense of deep appreciation for the aesthetic nuances of music.

An invocation on Lord Ganesha was followed by the Mewati gharana's signature lakshan geet in Yaman. Delivering the keynote address, chief guest, Adwan G.S. Mani reminisced about events that led to his fascination for Hindustani music. He urged students to value the privilege of learning from a guru and to devote time for daily practice.

Involved rendition

Students of Swaraangan presented a group rendition of raag Behag. Beginning with solfege, the well-balanced vo-

cal had alternating male and female voices blending harmoniously in the bhajan "Jai Ram" invested with emotive appeal. Tuned in raag Jaiwanti Todi, the bhajan 'Krishna Krishna Bolo' was sung with much involvement by Tina, Mridula and Vishal. Long-time disciple Anasuya Subbaiah opened her solo segment with a tranquil 'Ram Simar Ram' in Hamsadhwani. Voice opened up in the ensuing composition 'Bhaaje Bhaaje Damari' (raag Gunkali) with poignant touches at the rendezvous with the tara saptak rishabh.

A working professional employed in the U.S, yet determined to pursue his passion for vocal music, Madhur Ranjan Mohaan was introduced as a dedicated student.

His neat presentation of Purya Dhanasree reflected earnestness and a committed approach, dwelling on the plaintive dhaivat and the 'ga-dha' link in 'Doond Na Jaa' (vilambit, ek taal) and 'Shyam Murali' (drut, teen tal). Tara saptak passages, taans and sargams carried power and punch. The abhang 'Majhe Maher Pandhari' (Yaman) injected a shot of energy, culminating in the 'Vitthal' refrain.

Following a speech by Vasudha Prakash, educationist and trustee of Swaraangan, guru Lalitha Sharma embarked on a recital. The lyrics 'Anantha Hari Narayana' bore a meditative alap forward into the bandish 'Dekh Dekh Bar-Thori' in raag Marwa.

Taans at the line 'Dhyan Gyan' were invested with solidity and heft. An exposition of raag Shudh Bhairavi and the concluding bhajan 'Niranjani Narayani' in raag Bhairavi also left their impact on rapt listeners.

Complementing the group's efforts were Pt. Srikrishnan (harmonium) and Pt. Sainath Bhure (tabla), while Pt. Rajendra Nakod (tabla) accompanied the soloists. Nalini Ramanan ably compered the evening's events. The palpable sense of warmth and camaraderie that comes from students learning together and being mutually supportive permeated the gathering of friends, raskas and well-wishers.

