

The heritage of Banaras presented at the Cincinnati Art Museum

By a correspondent

A curated presentation of the influence of the ancient city of Banaras on the music and culture of India was presented by the American School of Indian Art, Cincinnati Ohio at the Cincinnati Art Museum on Sunday the 7th of November, 2010.

A near capacity audience was held spellbound by the visual narrative presented by Kanniks Kannikeswaran.

“Kashi is a pan-Indian center that is held in high regard all over the country. Many visionaries have been touched by it. Kabir’s and Tulsi Das’s hymns are revered widely. In fact, Tulsi Ramayan has been an integral element of the Indian diaspora who left India as indentured laborers to the Caribbean in the mid 1800s. Adi Sankara, composer Muthuswami Dikshitar and Mahakavi Subramanya Bharati all from South India were influenced by Banaras’, says Kanniks Kannikeswaran.

The presentation delved into the core of commonalities between the Northern and Southern Indian musical traditions. Verses from the 9th century works Kashi Panchakam and the Nirvanashtakam and the 13th century work Sangita Ratnakara were presented along with solo and duet performances of selected compositions of Muthuswami Dikshitar.

The event was a tribute to the music of Muthuswami Dikshitar, whose musical repertoire is said to have been influenced by his stay in Banaras. This event coincided with the 175th death anniversary of Dikshitar. The entire multimedia presentation included solos, duets and choral renditions and chants performed by a cast of over 30 and created the ambience of Banaras in the auditorium. Performers spanned a wide range of demographics.

“The Sanskrit compositions of South Indian composer Dikshitar have no regional barriers and they are truly a pan-Indian legacy. It was heartwarming to see them being performed by people of North Indian origin in this forum”, said an audience member who was moved deeply by the presentation.

The presentation also highlighted the brief tryst that Dikshitar (1775-1835) had with western music, where he wrote Sanskrit lyrics to Celtic and other tunes that arrived in India with the East India company. The result is a new genre of music, the nottusvara sahityas, 39 in number that are both Indian and western at the same time that was born in the orthodox composer’s hands.

Emily Holtrope, Director of Learning and Interpretation at the Cincinnati Art Museum complimented the event on its success and on the educative aspect of the presentation. She also stressed the importance of celebrating the vast cultures that make up the Greater Cincinnati area at the Cincinnati Art Museum.

‘Banaras – Timeless Musical Traditions’ was written and produced by Kanniks Kannikeswaran (www.kanniks.com), a visionary musician, composer and music educator based in Cincinnati Ohio. He is the founder/director of the American School of Indian Art founded with the vision of bringing the timeless musical and cultural traditions of India to the world community.