

Ganga Pravaham — An Unforgettable Evening with Sangita Kalanidhi A. Kanyakumari

Melodic. Synchronized. Authentic. Traditional yet modern. Vibrant. Powerful. Swift. Rhythmic. Spiritual. These are only some of the adjectives that have been floating through my mind as I try to describe the extraordinary concert by Sangita Kalanidhi Smt. A. Kanyakumari Ma'am.

Through meticulous bowing, lightning-fast brigas and deeply bhakti-laden, voice-based interpretations of the sahityam, she keeps the timeless traditions of Carnatic compositions vibrantly alive. Her unparalleled command over the violin transforms every concert into a profound—almost spiritual—experience.

I had heard Ma'am perform several years ago and remember wondering then how she could play with such brilliance and energy at her age. Listening to her again, nearly a decade later, was simply beyond comprehension. Her precision, melodic clarity and ability to sustain—and seemingly increase—the tempo at every stage were mind-boggling. She is a violinist par excellence who never compromises on laya, bhava or samskara. Her long career accompanying many of Carnatic music's greatest musicians is itself a testament to her dedication to the tradition for more than six decades.

At one point during the concert, I stopped trying to analyze the music. I simply sat with my hands folded in Namasthe.

Beside her was Sri L. Ramakrishnan, her distinguished disciple and an outstanding musician in his own right. He played with remarkable humility, sensitivity and command, following the great maestro while matching her speed, precision and musical fervor.

And who else could accompany such a concert on the mridangam but Sri Patri Satish Kumar, with Sri K.V. Gopalakrishnan on the kanjira?

This legendary performance will surely be remembered as one of the finest Carnatic concerts ever presented in Chicago.

A Blessed Beginning

The program, organized by Anushruthi Arts and other partnering organizations from the Chicago suburbs, began with felicitations by SAPNA and the Chicago Andhra Association, followed by an invocation presented by approximately thirty-six children from across the Chicagoland area.

The opening itself reflected the mission of Anushruthi Arts – to inspire learners, nurture young talent, and connect them directly with living legends of the tradition.

The children sang “Mēlu Lēdu Tēlu Lēdu,” an Annamacharya composition set to music by Kanyakumari Ma’am in Narayanadri—one of the seven special ragas she created and named after the Saptagiris, the seven sacred hills of Tirumala.

Sri Aravind Sundar, one of the principal visionaries behind this program, had asked me to send a few students for the invocation. Since it was summertime, I managed to gather eight or nine of them. All the children sang in unison, and they sounded lovely. Afterward, Ma’am said that the children had sung well and added: “Nannā solli kuduthirukkēl.” That felt like an Oscar to me! The credit belongs equally to the other teachers who prepared the children—Sri Aravind Sundar, Smt. Minu Pasupathi and Smt. Sangeetha Menon.

When Ma’am was invited to sit in front of the children for a group photograph, she declined and said that she wished to stand with them and graciously stood amidst them. Blessed are those young musicians. Hopefully, one day, they will fully understand the magnitude of that moment and the extraordinary honor they received. Ma’am’s gesture revealed not merely her stature, but also her magnanimity, humility and simplicity.

Ganga Pravaham

I would like to call this concert **Ganga Pravaham**. That is exactly what it felt like. At times, the music flowed serenely and effortlessly. At other moments, it surged and roared with a garjanai powerful enough to cleanse the soul.

Ma’am opened the concert with Papanasam Sivan’s “Sri Ganesha Sharanam” in Tilang, set to Adi tala. One might expect a gentle and relatively simple opening piece—but not in Ma’am’s hands. The swift kalpana swaras toward the end, combined with the thunderous percussion accompaniment, immediately lifted the concert to another plane. The audience responded with resounding applause. The very first composition established what we could expect from the evening.

Ma’am then asked the audience what kind of concert we preferred: purely classical, lighter selections or a mixture of both. Naturally, the audience left the choice to her.

She announced that the next piece would be one of Tyagaraja’s Pancharatna kritis. Some of us suggested “Jagadanandakaraka,” but she chose “Sadhinchene” in Arabhi because she had

planned a composition in a self-created raga related to Nattai later in the concert.

I requested “Om Namo Narayana,” as requests began pouring in from every direction.

“Sadhinchene” was far from an ordinary rendition. Ma’am embellished the charanams with beautiful sangatis, bringing freshness and distinction to a composition we have all heard countless times.

Next came “Edutanunnadu Vide,” an Annamacharya composition in Bhujangini, set to music by Sri Nedunuri Krishnamurthy. Some of its sancharas reminded me of Bindumalini. Ma’am explained that Bhujangini is essentially Chakravakam without the panchamam. It was an exquisite, melodious, “Aahaa!” kriti.

Majestic Bhairavi Swarajathi, Amba Kamakshi a composition by Sri Shyama Sastri, with a beautiful 3 minute “Masterclass Ragam of Bhairavi” as commented by Vikram Sundararaman was just perfect. Brief, complete and utterly perfect, the alapana revealed the essence of the raga without a single superfluous phrase. This piece was requested by Vikram himself.

Then came the true Ganga Pravaham.

Ma’am unfolded Ganga, a raga of her own creation, with music that was at once soothing and powerful—much like the magnificent river after which it is named. She followed it with Purandara Dasa’s “Bhagirathi Devi.” The raga seemed to flow gently at first, then gather force, grandeur and spiritual intensity. One could hear or feel the force of the river through music.

A Mallari Beyond Imagination

The main presentation of the evening was something no one could have predicted. It was a Mallari. For those less familiar with the form, a Mallari is traditionally played on the Nadaswaram during Hindu temple rituals and processions of the deity. Usually rendered in Gambhira Nattai and accompanied by the thavil, it is known for its brisk gait, rhythmic intricacy, variations in tempo and progressively increasing speeds.

Ma’am asked us to close our eyes and listen. The violins merged so perfectly with the mridangam and kanjira. The manodharma expanded through Todi, Kapi, Sahana, Shanmukhapriya, Mohanam, Shivananjani and Revathi before returning through other shades and phrases. I may well have missed a raga or two in that breathtaking cascade.

Then came the garjanai—the roaring tani avartanam by Sri Patri Satish Kumar and Sri K.V. Gopalakrishnan.

The moment Patri Sir rolled across the mridangam, the audience erupted, as though the instrument itself had declared: “Now it is my turn to roar!”

After the overwhelming power of the Mallari came “Raghuvamsa Sudha” in Kathanakuthuhalam. A series of beloved masterpieces followed, including “Krishna Nee Begane” and “Aarumo Aaval.”

Just as I began to think that my request for “Om Namo Narayana” would remain unanswered, Ma’am played: “S R G M G...” . We just gasped..

Ma’am looked up and asked, “What ragam?”

A little nervously, I answered, “Karnaranjani.”

She explained that the name itself suggests something pleasing to the ears—and the rendition was every bit as beautiful as expected. Her handling of the words “Kinkini Idaiyarpa” was filled with delicate and memorable nuances. “Om Namo Narayana,” composed by Smt. Ambujam Krishna in Karnaranjani and set to Khanda Chapu tala, was truly special.

Then Ma’am played, “G P P D... G P P D...” , paused, waiting to see whether we could identify it.

Both Shobha Sanatkumar and I immediately exclaimed, “Tandanana!”

Oh, my God—the audience’s response to that song was unbelievable! Without realizing it, my shoulders had begun dancing.

“Parulanna Mata,” a beautiful javali, followed. Then came several lively and captivating masterpieces like “Muddugare Yashoda,” “Venkatachala Nilayam” and “Bhagyada Lakshmi.”

The concert concluded with a Sindhubhairavi tillana composed by Ma’am herself.

Several of us were ready to continue listening.

It would be a grave injustice not to give Sri L. Ramakrishnan the recognition he deserves.

He played alongside Ma'am with equal fervor, extraordinary modesty, remarkable speed and impeccable accuracy. At times, the two violins sounded like one instrument. At other times, they emerged as distinct voices. The sound was rich, full and perfectly balanced. Their synchronization was so complete that I rarely stopped to remember that two musicians were playing. Guru and disciple appeared to breathe through a single musical consciousness.

Sri Patri Satish Kumar and Sri K.V. Gopalakrishnan elevated every composition with power, restraint and rhythmic brilliance. They did not merely accompany the violinists; they became essential forces within the musical current—sometimes guiding it, sometimes challenging it and, during the tani avartanam, unleashing its full majesty.

A Historic Honor

Toward the conclusion of the evening, Illinois State Senator Ram Villivalam spoke in honor of Sangita Kalanidhi Smt. A. Kanyakumari and presented her with a proclamation recognizing her extraordinary contributions to music.

August 2, 2026, was proclaimed "Avasarala Kanyakumari Day" in the State of Illinois—a fitting tribute to an artist whose music has inspired generations across continents.

This was not merely a concert. It was a confluence of vidwat, bhakti, laya, bhava, tradition, innovation, humility and spiritual power. It was Ganga Pravaham, - The flow of the Majestic sound, sometimes serene, sometimes playful, sometimes swift and sometimes roaring. And those of us who were present will remember for a very long time what it felt like to be carried away by its magnificent current.