

Sumitra Guha brings to music a rare stream of singing that aspires her listeners to a better quality of life. Her concerts are counted as 'experiences' that bear the stamp of exclusive musical devotion.

Sumitra strides the two schools of Indian classical music, viz. Carnatic and Hindustani due to her unique upbringing. Her first tutor was her mother, who imbued music with a religious fervour, which justified single-minded pursuit and devotion. At the age of 11, she began her formal education in music under the acclaimed S. R. Janakiraman (Sangeetha Vidwan). The following years found Sumitra consolidating her grasp and mastery over Carnatic vocal, to become considerably conversant with the finer nuances of the métier.

After completing her pre-university course, Sumitra went to Viswa Bharati University in Shantiniketan to do her graduation in Philosophy. It is here that she found herself getting drawn to Hindustani music. It had the stability of swaras, the depth of the alaap and the slow elaboration of notes in the Vistara that attracted her. In 1964, Sumitra started learning Hindustani Classical music under none other than Pt. A. Kanan and Vidushi Malavika Kanan. She assimilated both of their styles in her music, and later received instruction from Sushil Kumar Bose, the accomplished disciple of Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan.

Sumitra got married at an early age of 19. The years following her marriage were a test of fortitude and devotion. Women of the era did not have the luxury to pursue music unhindered. But she made time for her passion by waking up as early as 4 a.m. and this dedication paid off when her husband, who often found her practising in the wee hours of the morning was conclusively convinced that music was no passing whim of hers, promised her his unconditional support.

With the encouragement of her husband and her father's continued support, Sumitra began her gradual ascent in the world of professional music. In 1972, she became a B-grade artist under the AIR classification and by 1995, she attained the top grade of "Vidushi". She participated in chain concerts for AIR in 1982, 1985, 1989 and 1990. Her voice has been broadcast live nationwide during four Radio Sangeet Sammelans in 1988 (Mathura), 1994 (Bangalore), 1998 (Mumbai) and 2001 (Raipur). Sumitra made her first National programme on Doordarshan in 1985, Sumitra's first public performance, at the Thirumala temple in Tirupati during the Brahmotsav in 1972, earned her a gold medal, and she has never looked back since then.

A marked feature of Sumitra's entire career has been her recitals at various temples. She was awarded a gold medal from one such performance at the All India Vaggeyakar Utsavams at Bhadrachalam in 1984.

Sumitra continued to make steady progress Through the 1980s and 1990s, reaching out to wider and wider audiences. In 1991, Dishari, the West Bengal Journalists Association, conferred on her the Best vocalist of the Year for 1990. She was awarded the Sangeet Kala Ratna by the Sangeet Kala Kendra, Agra, at the Vishnu Digambar Samaroh in October 97. And in 1995, the Central Production Centre made a documentary, called Ek Mulakat on her evolution as a musician.

Melody is Sumitra's forte, and this is no surprise, considering that she belongs to the Kirana Gharana. However, she is no fundamentalist when it comes to gharanas. She draws from each what appeals to her, one of her favourites being the taans of the Patiala Gharana. Her rendition of murkis and gamaks has especially impressed the discerning among her audiences. And the imaginativeness with which she weaves together clusters of notes holds her listeners spellbound.

Technical mastery apart, it is the quality of her voice that has stolen the hearts of her audiences, and reviewers alike. Many a paeans have been sung to the texture of her voice, but perhaps she received the best review of her life for her show at the Vishakha Music Academy in Vishakhapatnam. The daily 'Enadu', said of her voice: "Not only human hearts, but stones could also melt".

Sumitra's felicity with both the Hindustani and Carnatic styles made her one of the artistes chosen by the Thirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) for the Annamacharya project. This project, sponsored by the Andhra Pradesh government, sought to popularize in North India the Sankirtans written by Saint Annamacharya in the fifteenth century. Sumitra has set eight of these Sankirtans to tune, drawing from ragas (Malkauns, Hindol, Bhoopali, Todi, Pahari and Bhairavi) to suit the mood and theme of each composition.

Sumitra has also recorded for the Sangeet Natak Academy and the national channels of AIR. Her cassettes in India have been distributed by the Atlantis Co. and HMV. She has also brought out several CDs abroad for the Indian Archives in New York as well as for the MMY Music foundation.