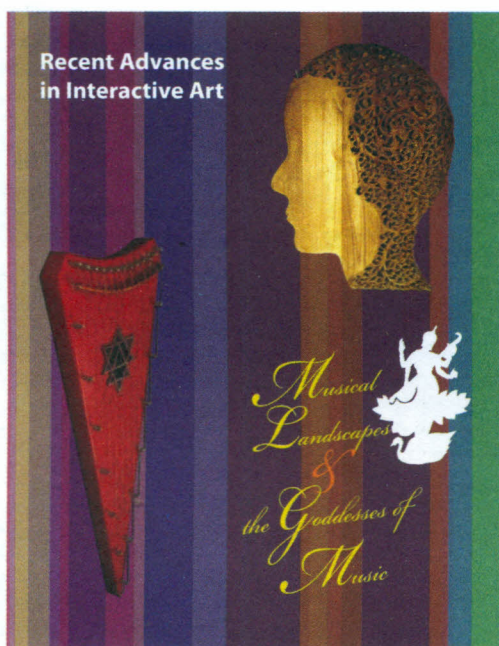




Artworks on display

AN ODE TO THE GODDESS OF MUSIC



It isn't often that one would find an exhibition at the National Museum which explores the marriage of technology and culture. But the strains of Beethoven's composition from a hollow piano offers a unique multimedia interactive exhibition which seeks to unravel the mystique of music by exploring its scientific, artistic and spiritual dimensions and its reflections in the Goddess images across Asian cultures.

"Musical Landscapes & The Goddess of Music: Recent Advances in Interactive Art", mounted by Ranjit Makkuni, a celebrated technical wizard and an accomplished musician, sounded somewhat long and convoluted at first. But one step inside and you forgot the outer world of frenzy and here was a multiple sensory dynamism that quite drew you into its maw.

Back in the day, Makkuni the veritable music and design genius had stated: "The exhibition presents advances in interactive art through an exploration of the science, art and spirituality of Music, and its reflections in the Goddess images across Asian cultures. It provides viewers an opportunity to enter the world of Asian music through electronic installations, digital images and recordings of performances by maestros."

Makkuni considers music essential to the ritual of temples and has this uncanny understanding of all kinds of wind as well as stringed and primitive instruments bringing his epicurean eye to the mood of meandering momentousness. While it is the 2nd and 3rd rooms that present both traditional and new instruments based on the Indian Sitar, Burmese Saung Harp, Thai Xylophone, Korean Kayagum, Chinese Guzheng and Pipa, Vietnamese Dan Tranh, and Javanese & Balinese Gamelan, what is most fascinating is the viewer-friendly interactive resonance that takes place while we breathe into the Flute Tree or the series of little trumpets kept as installations atop many instruments. Quaint is the



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feeling of listening to little snatches of music, even more curious is the feeling that music isn't about the complete raga or the vilambit or the antaraa. Its about a small melody that can touch a chord.

Even more intriguing is the little techno savvy gadgets that Makkuni uses to allow us to invade his mind's maze of recesses. One couldn't imagine that new instruments with embedded computation could demonstrate interactions through gesture, touch, pull, movement and gaze. How meticulous is his translation of responsive computing, how he is able to embrace the public by tapping the primary and personal power of gesture and movements even as he has the control of musical events in the exhibition environment - because it is all programmed through his vision. But I was also very stirred by Makkuni the artist/sculptor - his torso, *Abstract Woman* is an invitation to femininity. Embedded in the waist of the sculpture is a representation of Sri Yantra, which, upon touch, plays back the 1000 names of Goddess Lalita. It isn't the music that struck a chord this time, it was the little sensory plug in the navel that seemed tactile as well as sensual. The act of touching a woman's navel to emanate a Yantra seemed rather mischievously esoteric.

"People spend so much time interacting with the dull computer. I find it so passive. But I was trying to create a richer experience so that the modern society still has culture in its life. By putting culture back onto your desktop, you get to interact with beautiful objects, and that helps you remember your inner God," says Makkuni professing to be a monk who belongs to God.

The project demonstrates the marvel of an engineering mind



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that also bows down to the sacred resonance of music - in many ways it is a perfect synthesis of technology and culture, of modern and traditional, of celestial and mundane, of physical and virtual. It shows that it is possible to develop culture-friendly technologies and how technology can become a vehicle for preserving cultural identity, not replacing it.

The exhibition comprises several sections, showing Goddesses of Music and their Iconic Transformations; forms and sculptures suggestive of the scientific and mythological imagery of sound; and the compassionate Goddesses who listen to people's prayers. There are sections on Goddess Sarasvati, the goddess of wisdom and music; Kinayi, the Angels of Music, from Burma; and The Compassionate figure of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara from Japan. There is also a section on Breath, Voice and Healing, which explores the healing properties of singing and its relationship to breath. Here is a deeply spiritual mind that delves knee deep into the shastras.

"I have tried to explore innovative ways of building bridges between techno and traditional cultures. I believe engagement with culture is a valuable process to spark off technological innovation. My works show that the wisdom of traditional communities can positively negate the homogenizing aesthetics of modern media technology and help inspire new forms of indigenous information access devices," he says. At the National Museum thronged by visitors, everyone walks away with a spring in his/her step and a song in their hearts. I guess only Goddess Sarasvati could echo such an enduring entendre.