

Play it Again

With the launch of Raagam, a first of its kind digital classical music channel by Prasar Bharati, All India Radio is set to open its treasure trove of archival recordings



Illustration: CR Sasikumar

The spirited sound of Nadhaswaram, a double reed 13th century wind instrument from the “mangal vadya” (auspicious instrument) family, will be played by SP Palanivel and R Prabhavati Palanivel at Windsor Lodge in Bangalore today. Once Diwan Mirza Ismail’s residence, the Lodge now houses the local All India Radio (AIR) office. On January 26, 2015, when India celebrates its 67th Republic Day, the high-decibal tone of the instrument will reverberate not only in the corridors of this building but will also be heard around the world.

All India Radio, after years of having harboured a treasure trove of classical recordings, is likely to “fulfil a long-felt need of Indian classical music lovers” by kick starting Raagam — an exclusive 24-hour internet radio channel, which will represent a mosaic of Hindustani and Carnatic classical music through DTH facility. Apart from being available on allindiaradio.gov.in, Raagam will also be available through the All India Radio Mobile App for Windows, Android and iPhone users.

So if you are anywhere in the world and have some decent bandwidth, you can tune into an interview with Begum Akhtar followed by her rendition of Bol piya nahi aaye in Mishra Gara or a Guru Nanak bhajan sung by MS Subbulakshmi which may just be followed by Bade Ghulam Ali Khan’s famous Mishra Bhairavi thumri Bajubandh khul khul jaye or Pt Ahmad Jaan Thirakwa’s solo tabla recital with a lehra on the harmonium. AIR has over five thousand hours of musical recordings available with them, which comprise some of the rarest recordings with Pt Omkarnath Thakur, Pt DV Paluskar, Ut Allauddin Khan and Pt Bhimsen Joshi among others.

Obsolete terrestrial transmission by medium wave and short waves was one of the reasons this project was instituted.

“The valves used by these transmitters are not manufactured in agencies all over the world anymore. So the cost of a single valve is as much as the transmitter,” says F Sheheryar, DG, All India Radio. He also adds that Raagam is different from the current mode of broadcast, which will be a refreshing change for people.

“Audio live streaming through internet and mobile applications will make sure that it is available wherever you want it in the world and there’s no need to be dependent on radio transmitters,” he adds.

AIR may be a decade too late to the online radio revolution party but this effort by Prasar Bharti, of finally using internet as a medium and creating a combination of technology and keeping the charm and nostalgia of radio alive, may help in making Raagam a premier destination for classical music connoisseurs. While 52 per cent content will be Carnatic classical, 48 per cent of that will belong to Hindustani.

The programming of the shows will be in the same “Vividh Bharti style” and will feature a variety of sections including interviews, talks and conversations over classical music. A big band in these 24 hours will be earmarked for archival assets. Other day-today recordings done in different radio stations across the country will also be featured on the channel.

“We’ll be generating content at each studio based on the performances of the artistes who are living in various areas,” says Sheheryar.

A few years ago, filmmaker Saba Dewan had approached AIR for a famous 1976 recording of Siddheshwari Devi and Rasoolan Bai for a film on the latter. This

recording featured a conversation between the two legendary singers, in which they sang their favourite thumris for each other and had a fun conversation punctuated with laughter. But Dewan was foisted off and told that the recording had been erased in an attempt to record something else over the tape. The alarming bit about an incident such as this was that if this was the case with a rare recording such as this, then many precious archival musical recordings that were haboured by AIR could have been lost, because supply was more than the demand back then. There was fusty red tape all around these recordings which were so inaccessible for many years.

Efforts to digitise these analog recordings resulted in a few CDs that were sold at the kiosk outside AIR for a few years. But Raagam will bring to the fore the recordings as old as the 50s and 60s along with newer recordings by top grade AIR artistes, in turn putting the spotlight on lesser-known artistes too.

“The reach of FM is just 60 km. The best thing, we thought for classical music, is to reach the mobile without the transmitter. Also, India doesn’t have a single dedicated classical music channel. Mysore and Tiruchirappalli, historically, have been operating for Carnatic music.

This is likely to bring about an interesting presence of classical music on radio through the touch of a button. The idea was to reach the diaspora too. The investments in shortwave transmission were massive and the reach was just about 400 km-500 km that ended up gurgled. So I stopped shortwave and decided to do this through internet radio,” says Jawhar Sircar, CEO, Prasar Bharati, who is likely

to institute an advisory group to choose the recordings that will be played on the channel.