

Finzi Trust Report: Studying Carnatic Flute and Bharatanatyam Dance in Chennai

Having spent the past four years grappling with a PhD on Balinese gamelan music, and having heard about the opportunity offered by the Finzi Trust to explore a different avenue in music, I was hungry to try something new. I wanted to study something that had some connection with my Indonesian studies but which also charged off in a new direction. More importantly, I wanted to learn something for its own sake and for a practical purpose: music and movement that I would study to perform and teach, and not to write about. An encounter with a Bharatanatyam dancer and accompanying Carnatic music ensemble at an Indian Cultural event at Asia House in London introduced me to the warm and vital music and movement of South India, and my course was set.

A note on Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam dance

Carnatic music, commonly associated with the South of India, is said to be some of the oldest music of the Subcontinent. It is usually played by small groups of musicians, customarily featuring a *mridangam* (two-headed drum), a *tambura* (a strummed string instrument that produces a drone) plus a combination of a singer, violin (played sitting down and with the scroll or tip of the violin resting on the floor), wooden flute (*venu*), *veena* (a large, plucked instrument lain horizontally on the floor) and *ghatam* (an earthenware water pot, struck to produce a range of sounds). While distinct in many ways from North Indian (or Hindustani) classical music, the Carnatic tradition shares much in terms of the melodic system of *raga* (collections of tones with prescribed internal relationships) and of *tala* (metric arrangement). However, particular to Carnatic music is the emphasis on vocal music, where every melodic instrument (be it flute, violin or *veena*) aims to re-recreate the expression of the human voice, a style known as *gayaki*.

The Carnatic flute (or *venu*) is a transverse flute made of bamboo and played by blowing across a hole at the instrument's end and covering various combinations of the flute's eight carved holes with the fingers. The flute is a flexible and expressive member of the Carnatic ensemble, allowing the production of different tone qualities and varying articulation, as well as slides and ornamentation between tones. It is sometimes performed as the principal melodic instrument of the Carnatic ensemble, with the player leading the group in tempo and musical structure through improvisation. Alternatively, the flute supports a vocalist, interchanging passages of melodic improvisation and imitation with the singer.

Bharatanatyam is a genre of temple dance which originates from Tamil Nadu, an Eastern province of South India. It is said to be very old, one of the oldest of Indian performance genres and many claim its origins to be in the stone carvings lining the walls of the ancient temple of Chidambaram. Various revisionist accounts have suggested that Bharatanatyam as a 'classical' form may not be so old as often held. Certainly, its popularity today is due principally to the Bharatanatyam 'revival' which took place in the 1930s, led by dancers E. Krishna and Ayer Rukmini Devi Arundale who raised (or created) the dance's profile and developed the idea of the Bharatanatyam dance drama or ballet. Rukmini Devi Arundal also founded the now world-famous dance school of Kalekshetra in Chennai. Whether ancient or more modern, Bharatanatyam is an extraordinary dance form full of grace and energy. It is comprised of a series of expressive hand gestures (*hastas*) which may serve narrative or descriptive functions, showing flowers, tears, insects or demons. Meanwhile, Bharatanatyam feet stamp, tap and flex in complex accord with the music's rhythm

accompaniment as beaten out on the drum and rung on brass cymbals played by the dancer's teacher, who also calls out a distinctive series of sung-spoken syllables with which the dancer must align.

A note on Chennai

Chennai (formerly Madras) is the capital of the southeastern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. A large, industrial city of over 4 million people, Chennai is also the centre of Carnatic arts and the region boasts a long history of performers, composers, dancers and choreographers born there. The city has hosted the famous 'Music Season' each December-January since 1927. The festival was originally held to celebrate the opening of the Madras Music Academy, but the Season now stands as a showcase of Carnatic performing arts in general and draws a huge international following. The city also boasts a large number of music and dance schools (including the world famous Kalekshetra school of dance, as mentioned above) and is an ideal location to study Carnatic performing arts.

First Impressions

I arrived in Chennai in the middle of the night. I was scooped up from the airport by a driver from the hotel where I would spend the first few nights, and driven across the city. Chennai was far from asleep. Traffic screeched past on the highway and street sellers stood by their stalls, while groups of men sat out on the pavements, deep in conversation. The next morning, following breakfast and a hard look at the map, I set out to explore the streets before classes began the next day. I was struck by the city as lively, dusty, friendly and entirely unglamorous. A place long-bound to practices of art and devotion, Chennai's colours were initially concealed by congested traffic and faded shopping centres. As I gradually discovered from the many kind friends who later took me about, and from my own stumbling adventures through the city, Chennai's colour often lies behind tall dusty walls - in temples, homes and on hidden theatre stages.

What I did discover on my first day's walking was food and music: both of which were cheap, wonderful and in magnificent abundance. First was lunch. Chennai is a culinary centre. I sat down in the Savana Bhavan, the celebrated canteen chain found all over South India and made what looked like a reasonable order of a 'standard set menu'. Two women sitting opposite smiled briefly at my choice. What followed was an extraordinary burst of flavours, textures, temperatures and colours. While the two women opposite me picked elegantly at their single *masala dosa* (a thin rice pancake stuffed with vegetable curry), I was presented with over twenty dishes of pickles, sauces and curries, some exploding with spice, some cool and refreshing, some sweet, some sharp. This was accompanied by heaps of rice and breads, followed by a substantial dish of ice cream and a bundle of *paan* - betel nut chew, famous for turning the chewers' teeth bright red. Having only been able to make my way through a third of the delicious food in front of me before surrendering, I was gently advised my fellow diners to order on the conservative side in Chennai, unless extravagantly hungry.

Still in awe at my lunch, I turned out of the canteen and found myself facing Chennai's own Music Academy. I had timed my trip to coincide with the annual Chennai 'Season' of Music and Dance, but had been warned that attendance at performances was highly sought after, and tickets could be scarce and expensive. Wandering into the foyer and asking at the ticket desk I was assured that no spaces remained for any of the performances at the main hall over the next few days.

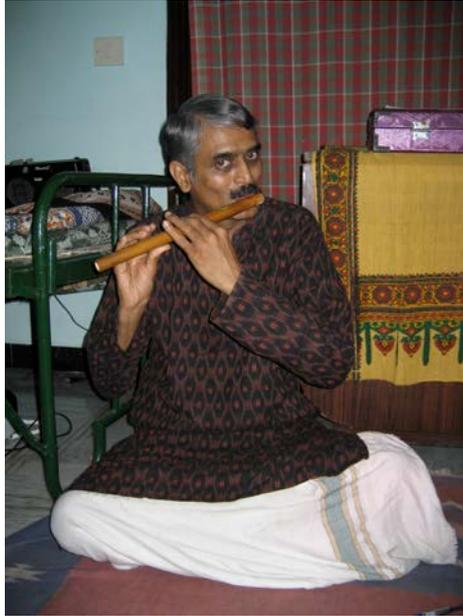
Disappointed but resigned, I wandered out of the building to look round the Academy's complex. Finding my way into another building to escape the sun, I was immediately ushered into another smaller concert hall where a performance was in progress, featuring a singer plus full Carnatic ensemble and apparently open to the public. Looking at a notice pinned to the hall, it appeared a series of free performances, open to all, were to run throughout the next few weeks of the festival, from morning to evening. I was able to spend the rest of afternoon watching an array of performers, occasionally wandering outside for tea before I would return to another hour of music.

I was also subject to another piece of serendipity at the Music Academy. I found myself sitting next to an Indian gentleman who had lived in America for the last forty years and who was delighted to have a chance to explain more about the performance to the wide-eyed alien sitting next to him. Now retired as an astrophysicist, having worked for many years at the Las Alamos National Laboratory, Dr V. K. Viswanathan (or VKV as he was known) turned out to be an extraordinary patron of the Indian arts - particularly music - and was acquainted with all of Chennai's finest artists. VKV was closely associated with the Cleveland Thyagaraja Aradhana (a huge festival of Indian performance which takes place annually in Ohio) and returned to his hometown in Tamil Nadu most years to enjoy the Chennai festival and to liaise with Indian artists who may perform at Cleveland. We struck up a friendship and from that day, VKV introduced me to dozens of musicians and dancers, found me invitations to attend performances and chaperoned my attendance at evening after evening of music and dance. With an enthusiasm to show me what Chennai had to offer that bordered on the unmanageable (from then on, VKV would telephone me at 6am every morning to keep me informed of what performances would be taking place during the coming day), VKV became my friend and guide throughout my stay. He introduced me to a warm circle of friends who likewise took me under their wing, and supported me in my new studies with much earnest enthusiasm.

It was an auspicious start and I very much hoped my own studies of music and dance in Chennai would be as warm and rewarding as my entry into Chennai cultural life.

Learning the Flute

My flute teacher, Bhaskaran Krishnamurthi, was a thin, lively man. Having arranged a meeting by email through his son, Bhaskaran considered me with some skepticism as we spoke before my first lesson and was keen to hear about my other musical experience, particularly my flute studies. Sitting in his living room, we talked for some time and I met Bhaskaran's wife and sons, who were anxious to find out about my family and home. Entering the music room at the back of the flat, I was directed to sit and Bhaskaran carefully unwrapped a wooden flute in front of me. With some relief on both sides of the carpet, it emerged that the embouchure and arrangement of fingers along the instrument bore close relation to the Western flute. While this immediate connection was reassuring and meant that it was possible to cover a substantial amount of repertoire during my stay, it would also yield some difficulties. Certain elements of Western technique - for instance, left-hand position and how high the fingers are to be lifted from the fingers holes - were quite different in Carnatic playing and I realised adjusting a learnt technique was in many ways more challenging than learning a new one.



Carnatic flute player and teacher, Bhaskaran Krishnamurthi

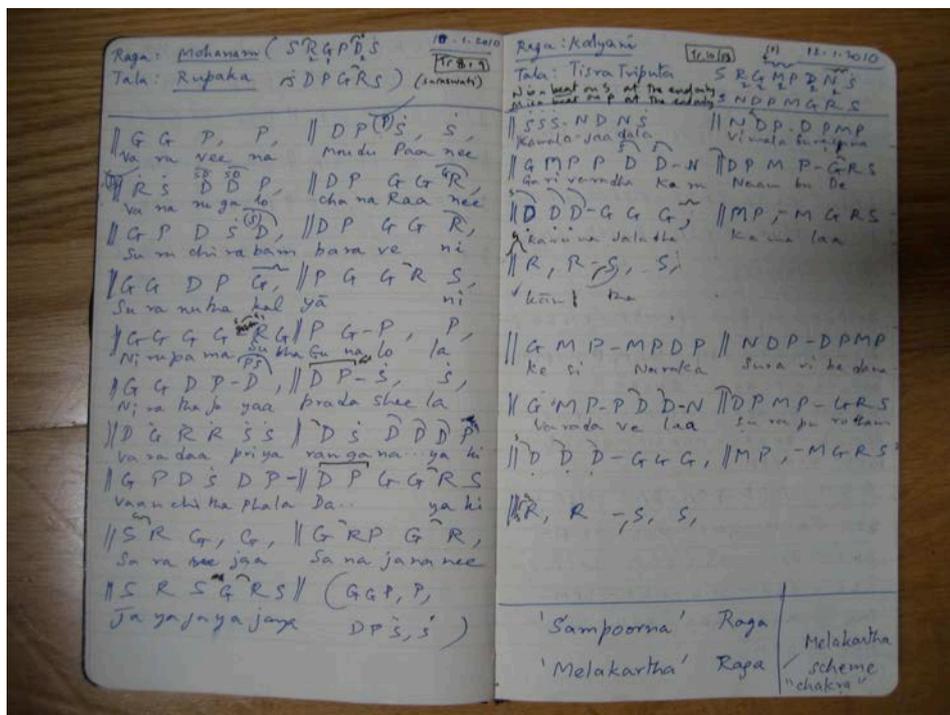
From then on, my flute lessons took place most mornings and began with learning *varisa* ('exercises') in various *raga*. The first and most simple *raga*, *hari kamboja*, corresponded with Western flute fingering and was relatively straightforward to grasp. The first exercises were designed to build finger agility and also to develop my familiarity with Indian 'sol fa' (which runs: sa-ri-ga-ma-pa-da-ni-[sa]). Written out as a series of letters: S R G M P D N, these tones can be used for notation, using dashes and dots to indicate rhythm and octave displacement. The tones can also be sung and, alongside mastering fingerings, it was soon clear that being able to sing each new piece with the correct syllables was fundamental to learning.

From here, I progressed through a range of *varisa* in different *raga*, and began to learn the subtle system of rules and relationships and that govern each individual *raga*. Rather than learning a *raga* as a single set of fingerings, it emerged that each is composed of a series of relationships and ornaments between notes, dependent on the precise approach to any given tone. Mastering the next set of *raga* - *Malaharai*, *Kalyani* and *Mohanani* - proved a substantial challenge and Bhaskaran was firm in his expectation that each set of exercises be played precisely and fluently. I was also expected to be able to play each exercise at three varying tempo 'levels' one after the other (slow - medium - fast) and to be able to sing each exercise with the correct syllables and vocal ornamentation. Early mornings at my guest house were soon given over to practice and I would carry my notebook of exercises when attending evening performances, working through the passages in my head during any gaps in the concert. Bhaskaran also suggested that I purchase my own instrument, having borrowed a spare flute from him for the first week of my stay. Bringing a set of flutes to a class, we tried them out until settling on with the just right tone and tuning. I was relieved to discover that my new and princely wooden flute would cost me only £3.

After working on these *raga* throughout the first week (although my performances at the fast level tended to substantially less than precise), Bhaskaran introduced to my first *gita* or short piece, 'Sri Gananadha', which is devoted to the elephant god Ganesha and customarily played at the opening of every Carnatic music performance. The intricacies of the *raga* I had been learning began to make more sense in context, the relationships between tones suddenly coming alive as they

shaped the line of the melody. It was also a relief to be able to work on memorising something with a more musical shape, rather than the abstract patterns of the *varisa*.

I learnt through a combination of repetition (both singing and on the flute); recording Bhaskaran and practising with these sound files; or from the notation which Bhaskaran would draw into my notebook at the close of each class. I found this variety of methods to learning extremely helpful. My experiences of studying drumming in Bali had often been quite frustrating, where no technical exercises and where learning takes place only by memory and usually up-to-tempo from the very first class. The opportunity to learn pieces initially at a slower tempo and with the aid of notation meant it was possible to progress more quickly and I went on to learn a number of other *gita* including *Kunda Gowra*, *Vara Veena* and *Kamala Jaadala*, each pieces putting one of the ragas I had learnt into practice, and each including increasingly complicated ornamentation.



Some of Bhaskaran’s notation, including the raga tones written out at the top of each gita and the song texts for each gita written below the melody.

Bhaskaran was keen to promote himself as an international teacher and wanted to film my classes to post on youtube. I found this sudden public quality to my lessons unnerving and was initially a little reluctant to participate. However, I realised that taking part was an important way to show my appreciation to Bhasakaran for all his help, and I also reflected on the many musicians who had assisted me in my PhD research, allowing themselves to be recorded, interviewed and photographed without knowing quite where their words, music and image would end up: the tables had turned and it was my turn to join in. So, here’s a link to a clip from one of my lessons:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXoIBiildWM>

[Or else please search for “Bhaskaran flute lessons” in youtube]

Spending time with Bhaskaran and his family was not only an amazing musical education, but presented much wider possibilities of learning. Bhaskaran's wife showed me the best of South Indian food. I ate delicious sweet porridge, flavoured with ginger and cardamon, before classes. On festival days, I ate mounds of vegetarian food from green banana leaves: spinach dal, curd rice and lime pickle. I was gently instructed where and how to buy clothes: where to buy the cheapest, quality *salware kameeze* (as worn for my dance classes- baggy cotton trousers, a long tunic and a scarf to be draped across the collar bones to drift behind); where to find the most beautiful saris; how to tie a sari; where to have the sari blouse tailored to fit.



Dinner during Pongal, the Tamil harvest festival, at Bhaskaran's house

I also had an introduction to Ayurvedic medicine which proved a cautious revelation. Before I flew out to India, I'd experienced increasing soreness in my wrists and hands. Uncertain if it was from typing, or from too much Balinese dancing in London, I had hoped that the pain would ease on arriving in a warm climate away from computer. As I began my studies, this proved partially true, but I soon began to struggle with the difficult grip required by the Carnatic flute. With the Western flute, the instrument may rest on the side of the hand between the left-hand thumb and forefinger, but here, the Carnatic flute must be pressed by the fingers alone onto the jaw without using the side of the hand - a position which initially required considerably more tension and strength in my fingers than I was used to.

As the problem developed, Bhaskaran showed great kindness and concern. He suggested a range of breathing exercises to relax the muscles and was insistent on always playing with the greatest possible softness in the fingers. However, as the pain in my wrist increased, Bhaskaran suggested I visit his Ayurvedic doctor for medication and a massage. Having already had several Ayurvedic massages since my arrival, which had proved relaxing but not particularly healing, I was skeptical. They were also relatively expensive. Bhaskaran's recommendation was quite different. I was seen by a doctor at Chennai's official Ayurvedic health centre and given a prescription for a selection of oils to heat up each evening and morning and then apply to my wrists and forearms. I was also given a Ayurvedic massage at the clinic, which included the application of great quantities of

special oils to my body, and a strange 'patting down' with collection of leaves wrapped up in oil-coated cloth and heated to scorching point on a frying pan. While at first uncertain, following the massage and a week of applying the oils, my wrists were much improved and by the time I left India at the end of the month there was no pain remaining. The entire treatment had also cost less than £2. Whether or not it as the good weather, a month's escape from the computer keyboard or the Ayurvedic treatment, I was hugely relieved and extremely grateful to Bhaskaran for his help.



Last class with K Bhaskaran at his home in Mylapore, Chennai

Learning Bharatanatyam dance

Having studied Balinese dance intensively for three years, I was eager to try out a different style of Asian dance and confident that I was in good condition to try Bharatanatyam. I was however unprepared for the sheer physical strength and endurance required for this dance - but once I got through the initial shock to the system of three-hour classes in the baking heat, I found the process of learning Bharatanatyam one of the most rewarding, exciting and satisfying experiences of my life. It was also a brilliant companion to my flute classes, which required such a different type of concentration. Although combining both sets of studies proved a challenge, particularly as both required substantial private practice, I felt it made a huge difference to learn about both these aspects of South Indian performance in conjunction.

Fixing the dance classes initially proved tricky. While musicians during the Chennai 'Season' are involved in numerous performances, their time commitments are not too onerous as ensembles usually work together throughout the year and the majority of repertoire is already well established. For dancers, particularly for the heads of dance schools who also act as choreographers, preparing new works for performance at the festival is tremendously demanding and requires hours of rehearsal to teach and polish all the movements. From here, directors must then coordinate the dancers with the musical accompaniment and arrange costumes, sets and publicity. It was a few days into my stay before I was even able to meet with my teacher, Kanchana Janardhanan, and she appeared deeply concerned that she would have sufficient free time to

teach me after all. It was agreed that we would have one class together and she would then consult her schedule to see if it was possible to make time or not. It was with some trepidation that I set out for my first class, aware that if I did not show enough concentration and commitment, I may not be able to continue classes.



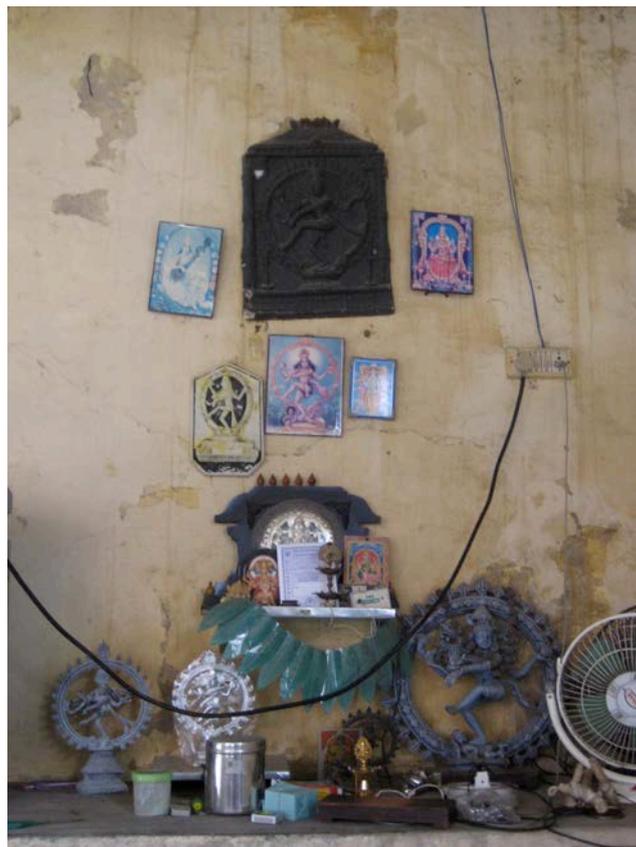
Bharatanatyam dancer, choreographer and teacher, Kanchana Janardhanan

Kanchana's classes took place in a small shed-like space at the back of a grand Indian house owned by the family of one Kanchana's students on the other side of town. This was Kanchana's studio for her academy, the Mayura School of Dance, and I was soon to discover that her teaching and rehearsing schedule was indeed usually crammed full of work with enthusiastic pupils and hardworking professional dancers.



The Mayura dance studio where classes took place

Any Bharatanatyam lesson must begin with a prayer to the Hindu God Shiva, in the incarnation of Nataraja (lit. the Lord of the Dance). The prayer is in the form of foot stamps (*tattu*) on the ground, a series of hand gestures and touching the teacher's hands or wood block (on which the teacher beats the rhythm for the student to dance to throughout the class). My first lesson began with the very first of the postures (*karanas*) and hand gestures (*hastas*) which comprise Bharatanatyam. Kanchana was a warm but ferocious teacher, relentlessly beating the wood block with a smile as I would begin a tenth repeat of a sequence of steps, each a red hot crunch of the thighs. Whatever else, I was determined not to give up and Kanchana agreed to take me on as her pupil, fitting in classes between rehearsals for the Mayura School's own performance towards the end of the month, for which I had to promise to attend.



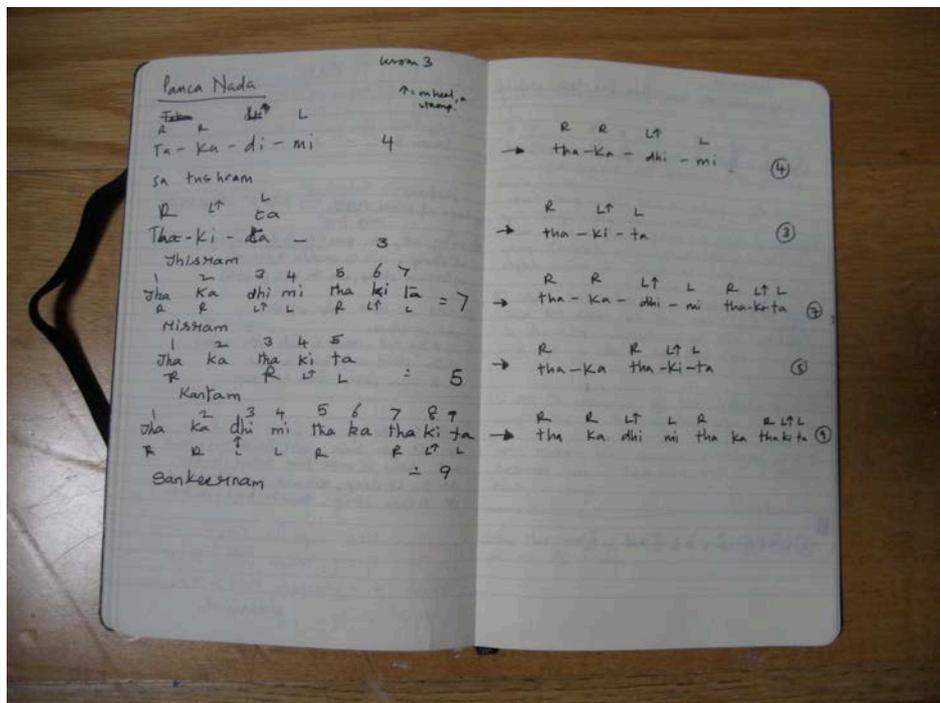
A shrine to Shiva in the Mayura dance studio

Classes were continuous and intense and for the first week, each class followed by considerable pain in my thighs and feet (a crucial move in Bharatanatyam is a sharp foot stamp, which must be audible to an audience, so requires considerable weight). Kanchana advised soaking my legs in hot water after classes and on returning to my room still burning with tiredness, I would sit my legs in the large plastic bucket installed in my guest house bathroom and wait for the heat to creep into my muscles. Gradually the pain began to subside, and I started to take an almost masochistic delight in these classes, working as hard as I could to maintain the postures and keep the movements crisp and strong.



A series of Bharatanatyam karanas or postures

After some initial frustration at not remembering what I had learnt in a class the day before, I established a way of notating any new moves so that I could practice more usefully at the hotel, and began to understand the real and practical connections between the music I was learning with Bhaskaran and the rhythmic patterns of Bharatanatyam.



Some impromptu Bharatanatyam notation

The one physical release in the class was learning the *hastas* or hand gestures, which are particularly descriptive and allow the Bharatanatyam to play different characters and tell intricate stories during a solo dance. After 40 minutes upright work, Kanchana would invite me to sit where

I may eat oranges or curd rice while catching my breath (I was not allowed to drink any water during a lesson as it bloats the stomach and makes it harder to continue). While sitting, we would work through the various *hastas*, learning the gestures for eating, crying, a king, a snake, a bumblebee and so on, before returning to work on the upright postures (*karanas*) and foot stamping patterns (*tattu*).

The last week of my time in Chennai coincided with the Mayura dance school performances which took place in one of the smaller stages at the Chennai Music Academy and at the Mylapore Fine Arts Club. It was fantastic to see Kanchana's students perform, from pupils who had been learning Bharatanatyam for just one year to highly advanced students who now worked as professional dancers and also shared in the school's teaching. The final evening included a premiere of Kanchana's new choreography which charted the trials of Rama and Sita from the Ranayana and featured her most skilled dancers, who had learnt the entire piece in just one week. I was honoured to attend and to have the chance to assist with preparations and costume changes. I was also helped into wearing a sari for the first time and festooned with borrowed jewellery before taking my seat in the auditorium. It was a brilliant end to my stay to be able to watch so much skill and hard work in action, and much of my final few lessons with Kanchana after the shows was spent discussing the performances and all that had gone into them. It was with much sadness that we parted at the end of my visit, and I very much hope to be able to continue my Bharatanatyam studies with Kanchana in future years, and perhaps one day have the opportunity to perform in India.



Last dance lesson with Kanchana

Return to the UK

I've been delighted to draw on my experiences in Tamil Nadu in a number of ways since returning to the UK. My Balinese dance teacher in London has worked on a number of projects involving Bharatanatyam and so we have enjoyed practising South Indian dance together and exploring the many connections in movement between Bharatanatyam and Balinese choreography. I'm also currently involved in two performance projects which draw directly on my studies in Chennai. I'm working with a London-based cellist on a dance interpretation of the Britten Cello Sonata in C, which will draw on both Indian and Balinese dance styles for a performance later this Autumn. This

is my first piece of choreography and feels like a daring venture, but also feels much supported by my work with Kanchana, particularly from watching her in action during rehearsals for the Mayura dance project. I am also working as a composer with director Katerina Pushkin on a theatre-in-education project sponsored by the Birmingham-based South Asian arts organisation, SAMPAD. The project will be a piece of storytelling, based on tales from the Ramayana for performance in schools across the West Midlands. I will be writing and performing all the music for the play, which will include a mixture of live and recorded performances of Carnatic flute.

I would like to extend my deepest thanks to the Finzi Trust for enabling me to carry out this project in Chennai. It was an amazing experience to be free to study Carnatic music and dance with such intensity and to be able to immerse myself in such an amazing performance tradition. I have very much enjoyed staying in touch with the teachers and friends I met in Chennai and I look forward to returning to Tamil Nadu as soon as I can to continue my studies.



Bharatanatyam posture of the Hindu god Vishnu - the flute player