

# Best of Benares

**MUSIC** Pandit Channulal Mishra adds elements from other schools to develop an eclectic and audience-friendly style

**DATE:**  
November 18, 7.15p.m.  
**VENUE:**  
The Music Academy

His first performance as a young artist was for Maharaja Kumar Shyamanand Singh, Champanagar. The Raja said: "Leave the boy here. I will make him my court musician." But father Badri Prasad Mishra, a noted tabla player, politely refused. Not could son Channulal Mishra contemplate life without his father, his first guru.

Grandfather Santa Prasad, the tabla maestro known as 'Guda Mahuraj', accompanied the boy. Was the child scared of his accompanist's eminence? "No," answers Pandit Channulal Mishra, now a musician of high repute. "I've never been awed by anyone." He recalls how, after playing for him, Allah Rakha said: "Conference *ka ush mazaa abhi gata hai?*" (I'm really enjoying the recital now). Besides, Mishra is himself adept at the tabla. "I didn't learn formally, but a good singer must know about drumming. Do you know Pandit Jantaraj can play the tabla?"

Born in 1936 in Azamgarh district, U.P., in a family of percussionists, why did he want to sing? "Don't know. But I did." The father took the boy to Ustad Abdul Ghani Khan Sahab. He was a stalwart of the Kirana gharana, with a *mithas* (sweetness) absolutely untouched by *karkashita* (harshness).

Weren't gharanedar musicians stingy about sharing their secrets with anyone outside the family? "I know, but my Ustad taught me with complete *imandaari* (honesty). Many warned him not to reveal everything to an outsider, but my Ustad remained my *abba* *huzoor*, thought of me as his own son.



**A SHOW OF VARIETY** Pandit Channulal Mishra

He held nothing back, prepared me well, showed me the right way." Mishra also had the good fortune of studying under musicologist Tinkar Jaidev Singh.

Shifting to Benares was to be infused with its grand culture and aura of sanctity. He absorbed the special light classical genres of Benares — *kajri*, *chaiti*, *hoff*, *jhoola*, *dadra* and *tyappa*. He developed a penchant for the *parab* and *thumri*. This variety in his repertoire adds to his appeal. In the *shyad* singing too, Mishra has added elements from other schools to develop an eclectic style and audience-friendly flair.

Recognition came late, despite Sangeet Siromani, Siromani Award, Nussahad Award and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award... Why? "Jealousy? Destiny? Anyway it has come at last, thanks to Senkatmochan Hanumanaji whom I worship."

He was also in the news when invited to sing at the wedding of Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachchan. "I sang after the ceremony, not while rites and *karna-prenas* were going on." He does mention that Amitabh Bachchan called him to sing in his home three times "embraced me, sat and listened... he too can sing, you know! It's all in my website. Look it up". His pride seems to be more about Bachchan belonging to his native region of Allahabad than about being the Bigg Boss of Bollywood!

Finally, you ask Mishra how he feels about coming to Chennai for the first time to sing at the November Fest. "But I've been to Chennai before!" he exclaims. "Once long ago, my friend violinist N. Rajam sent me to do a *lec-dem*. Don't remember where. And 30 years ago I stayed for a whole year with a businessman from Azamgarh in Sowcarpet." Mystified, you ask — but what did Mishra do there? "I taught his wife music."

There is more. "I used to walk to the Marina, sit on the sands listening to music from a loudspeaker on a pole. I loved Subbulakshmi's '*Kausalya vaptava ramu*'. Listen," he says, and launches a full-throated '*Vatapi Gunapati*', missing no *angati* or *gamakani*.

When the *galla* is done, as you wonder whether to applaud or say "Wah!", he plunges into the *anupallavi*. Finally he says, like an excited child: "Wait. That's not all. I've composed my own song in this tune." We next hear his '*Janaki Ramana Rama...*' rendered with the same zest.

And then Mishra reassures you: "I'll sing both in your festival. Chennai people love music. How wonderful to be able to sing for you!"

GOWRI RAMNARAYAN