

Inauguration and Festival

(October 11-19, 1980)

Bhaskar Chandavarkar

The Tata Theatre was inaugurated on Saturday, October 11, 1980, by the Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi. In his speech of welcome, Shri J. R. D. Tata, Chairman, National Centre for the Performing Arts, remarked that Smt. Gandhi's presence had a special significance because eleven years ago she had come to Bombay to inaugurate the modest beginnings of the Centre and had ever since extended to it her moral support and that of her government.

Shri Jamshed Bhabha, Vice-Chairman and Trustee-in-Charge, National Centre for the Performing Arts, spoke of the role of the Project's Consulting Architect, Mr. Philip Johnson, and its Acoustic Consultant, Prof. Cyril Harris, in the construction of a theatre conceived, designed and built to serve the acoustic and visual requirements of Indian music, dance and related art forms. He mentioned, too, India's traditional hand-skills that were harnessed with success to build the Theatre. He thanked all those responsible for the actual execution of the concept.

Shri Jamshed Bhabha expressed gratitude to the Government of Maharashtra, which had generously leased eight acres of reclaimable shore at Nariman Point to the Centre for ninety-nine years at a token lease rent of Re. 1 per annum and to the principal Tata Companies and other benefactors who had liberally financed the activities of the Centre. He also thanked the Ford Foundation, UNESCO, and the JDR 3rd Fund for their handsome contribution to the Project.

In conclusion, Shri Jamshed Bhabha outlined the activities that the Centre intended to undertake in the near future and read out the fine words of the great artiste and lover of India, Yehudi Menuhin: "It is good to know that in the midst of so many disastrous events there are few projects which aim at the realisation of ideals which refuse to be drowned or destroyed." He also read a message from Mr. Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, Director-General of UNESCO, who congratulated the Centre for what it had done and was doing "for the preservation and promotion of the country's enormously rich and varied heritage of music, dance, and drama."

Shri Sadiq Ali, the Governor of Maharashtra, who presided over the Inaugural Function, referred to the Centre's efforts as "an example of the happy fusion of the old and new, our ancient arts being preserved with the most modern techniques."

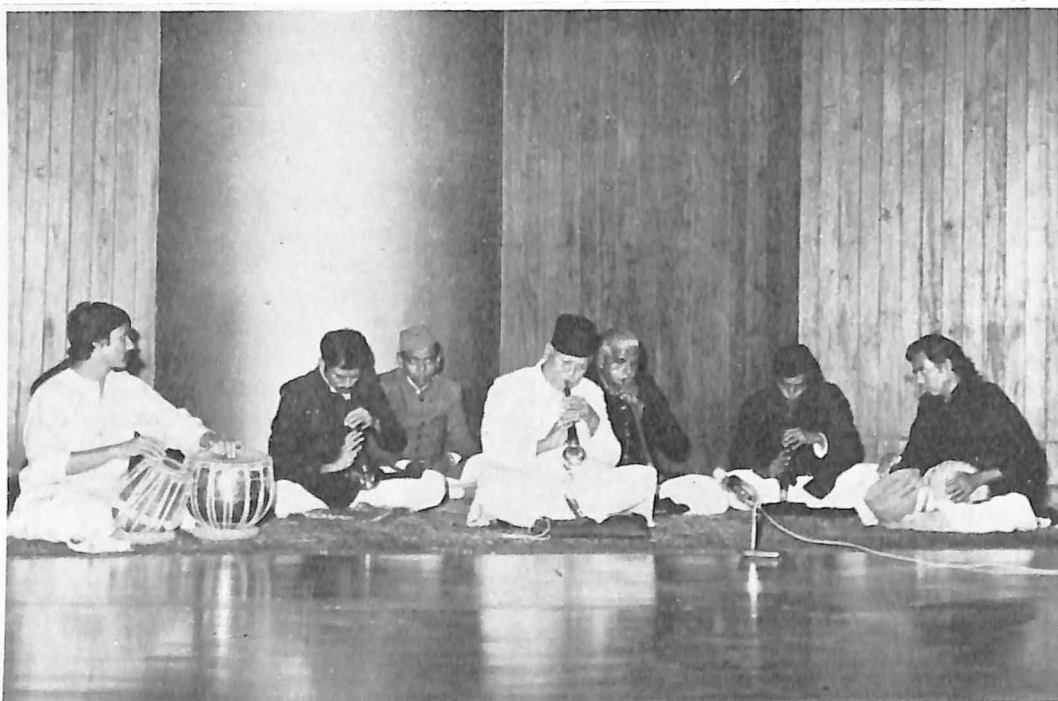
The Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Shri A. R. Antulay, praised the significant contribution made by the house of Tatas to the development of

Bombay City and assured the Centre all help and co-operation from his government for the realisation of its objectives.

Formally inaugurating the Tata Theatre, the Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi, defined her concept of what a National Centre should be and urged the working out of a new concept of protocol, where the great creative artistes of India would feel that the Centre belonged to them and they to the Centre. (*The full text of the speech is published on pp. 1-3*).

Dr. Narayana Menon, Executive Director of the National Centre for the Performing Arts, thanked the Prime Minister, and promised that the Centre would try hard to ensure that artistes in all disciplines would cherish the Tata Theatre, this little area of excellence, strengthen it and make it, in the process, a meaningful area of work and creativity. The Centre, he emphasised, was grateful to everyone who had helped in this endeavour, and, in particular, "the many workmen, and artisans, young architects, electricians, carpenters, plumbers, engravers, stone-masons—the list is endless—who worked unceasingly to give shape to Philip Johnson's brilliant concept."

At the close of the function, two invocatory compositions were sung by Smt. M. S. Subbulakshmi. Then Ustad Bismillah Khan played an evening melody on the *shehnai* and Yamini Krishnamurti presented a *Varnam* in Khamaj from the Bharat Natyam repertoire.



The programme at night began with a *shehnai* recital by Ustad Bismillah Khan, the 64 year-old maestro, who is perhaps the most widely heard *shehnai* player in the world. In his usual impeccable manner, he began with the evening *raga* Marubihag. The slow unfolding of the *raga* had a soothing effect on the audience and the very tone of the *shehnai*, with its rich and auspicious colour, seemed appropriate for the occasion. When he began the *drut* composition, the magic of the familiar, yet sweet, melody enraptured the listeners. The item was followed by a *dhun*, based on a folk tune from Uttar Pradesh. The *meend-s* and the dynamics which marked its rendering brought the concert to a close on a pleasing and happy note.

Then the stage rotated—and to the audience, this smooth rotation of the stage, with its walls, its hooded ceiling, seemed absolutely spectacular. And Yamini Krishnamurti made her entry, with characteristic grace and poise. She presented the traditional repertoire (*Alarippu*, *Varnam*, *Javali*, *Padam* and *Tillana*) with rare precision, combined with sculpturesque and eloquent stances. The proceeds from the sale of tickets, for the night concert on October 11, went to the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund, ear-marked for Orissa Flood Relief.





The Marathi version of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, produced by the Goa Hindu Association and directed by Vijaya Mehta, was presented on the second day of the Inaugural Festival. The scenic design, based on the concepts outlined in Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, included a raised platform, with steps on three sides, at the centre of the stage, where the musicians were seated. The open space in front served as an arena for the main action. The square platforms on the two sides, decorated with carvings, helped to demarcate the stage into various areas of performance. The scenery remained unchanged through the two hours of the play, but, as the play progressed, it became elastic and fluid, denoting at times a shady tree or a pillar, or a chariot. The illusion of a chariot-chase through the forest, or the King's journey across the sky came alive with varied rhythms and simple lyrical melodies, played and sung by the musicians, to which the actors lent their bodies with grace and movement. The play, with action in all parts of the semi-circular stage and a fair amount of variation in the pitch, strength and colour of sound, proved to be a very good test for the acoustics of the auditorium. What an acoustic marvel this theatre is, was probably recognised for the first time by the audience, who could hear the softest whisper on the stage with equal clarity in every part of the auditorium. The clash of cymbals and the roll of drums were carefully balanced with speech, while a variety of human voices and the notes of flutes were heard in their natural contours. Those who believed that sound perspective could only be achieved by placement and control of microphones were pleasantly surprised to find that none were used. The standing ovation at the end of the performance obviously overwhelmed the cast and there were many who felt that the Tata Theatre was the best venue for such a play.



On the third day of the Festival, the 20-member troupe from the Azerbaijan State Puppet Theatre presented two plays: *Djungush* and *Me-shadi Ibad*. The Tata Theatre was packed, with both adults and children. The music, in its melodic contours, had a good deal of similarity with the folk music of North-West India and a live rendering would certainly have had a better impact. There were moments (during the 90-minute performance) which brought delight to children and adults alike. They obviously enjoyed the slapstick that formed part of the wedding feasts and spring dances.

An American group, coming right after the Soviet production, certainly gave the whole festival an international slant. On October 14, the fourth day of the Festival, Southern Music, USA, was presented by Buck



White and the Down Home Folk, D. L. Menard and the Louisiana Aces, John Jackson and Ricky Skaggs. The show, like most modern American performances, was slick in its planning; racy, with the right amount of humour, and sparkled right through. The performers and audience both seemed to enjoy everything that was being presented. Perhaps, the most favoured numbers were those that had a resemblance to Indian popular music. Accordion, guitar, fiddle, piano — all the instruments used on that evening — are familiar to Indian listeners and most people are going to remember Southern Music, USA, as a lively show with a lot of spontaneity.

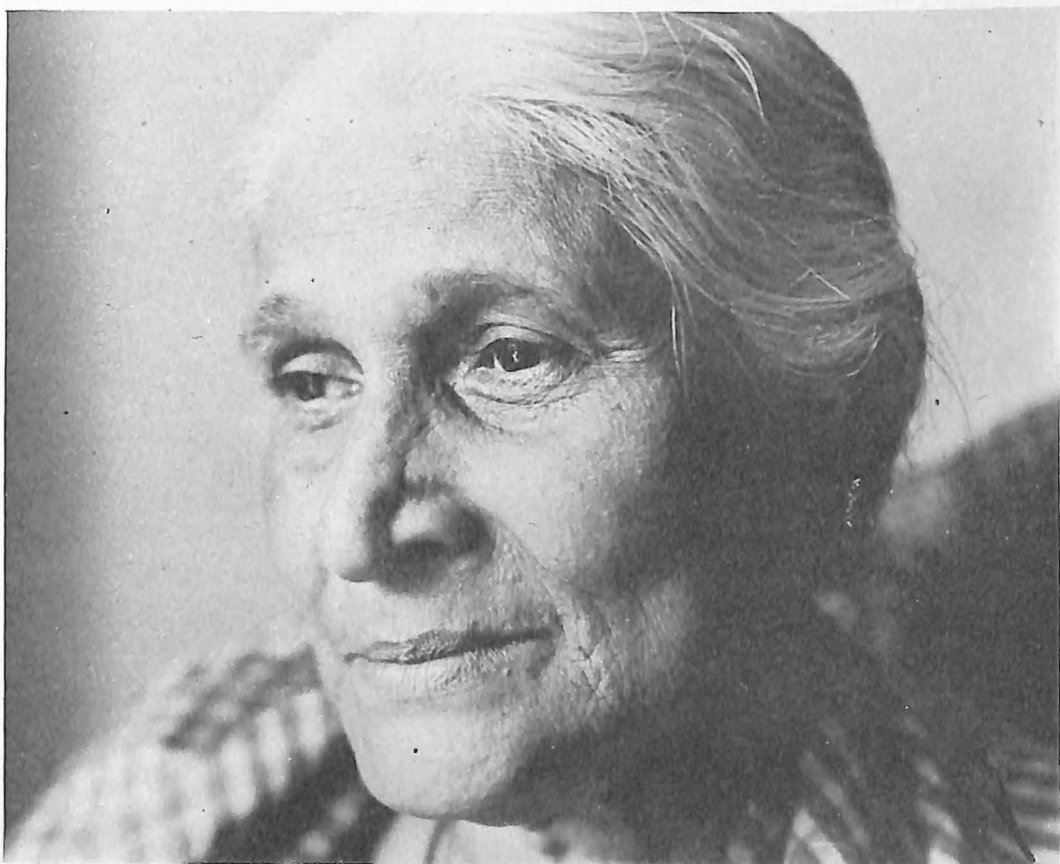


The Bombay Bandh threat, of 15th October, caused a postponement of the evening concert by an hour. But people had patiently looked forward to this evening, because for most of the thousand and odd listeners, who finally did reach the Tata Theatre, there was a unique experience in store. They were going to listen to M. S. Subbulakshmi, without the mediation of electronics. The pure, liquid, golden voice of one of the greatest singers of our times! Many would have braved even bigger hurdles than a 'bandh' to listen to her. She began her concert at 8 o'clock and sang for the next three hours with absolute dedication and unparalleled mastery. There were compositions, new and old, *raga*-s from the North and South, songs in Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati, Malyalam, Hindi and Sanskrit, set in various *tala*-s. One

might say, with pride, that one heard and watched Subbulakshmi transform the Tata Theatre into a National Theatre in the truest sense of the word. A singer who has been heard so often through disc-records and tape-recordings would perhaps not hold many surprises musically. But it must be a very reassuring thought for dedicated listeners of M. S. Subbulakshmi that, even at sixty-four, she has the charm and grace to captivate listeners of all ages and tastes. Those who came that day left with a deep sense of gratitude.

When they are seventy-seven, most people prefer not to venture out of their homes or meet people. Singers, in their mid-sixties, often become recluses. In India, however, we have had great musicians and singers who have retained their poise even at the octogenerian stage. We have before us, among others, the examples of Mushtak Hussein Khan, Alladiya Khan, Ahmed Jan Thirakwa and Allauddin Khan.

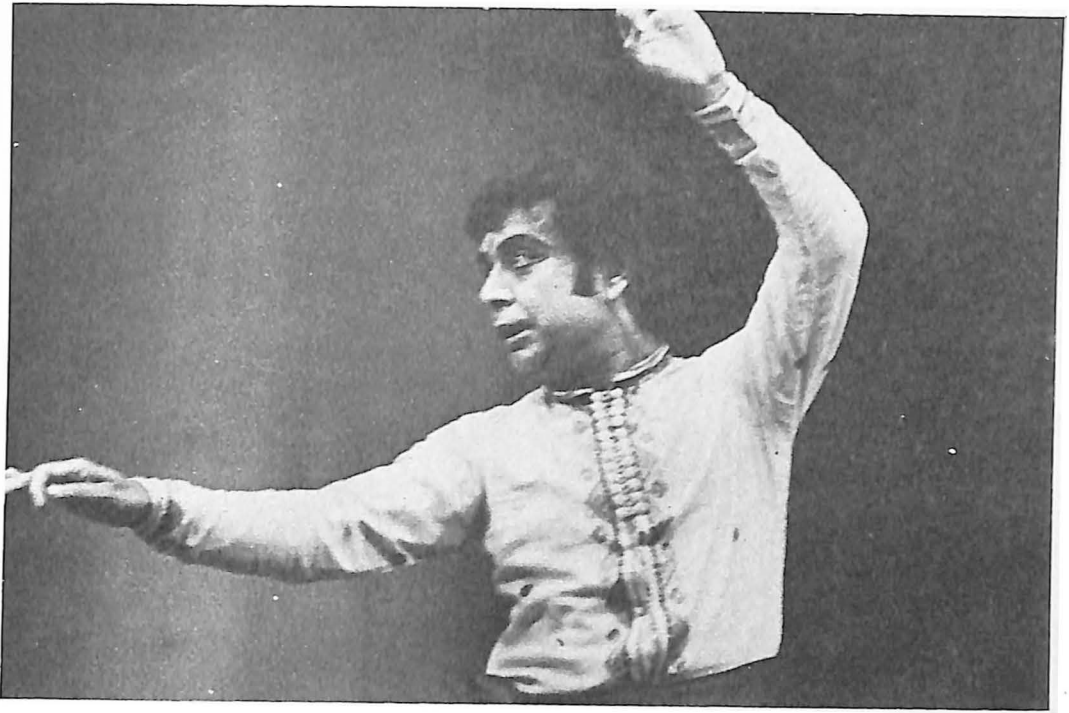
Mogubai Kurdikar belongs to this vintage generation of musicians who matured infinitely with age; whose music, like rare wines, acquired a very special quality for connoisseurs. She was featured on 16th October, the sixth evening of the Inaugural Festival. The concert commenced with a *khayal* in *raga* Yaman. The unfolding of this evening *raga* was slow and



gradual and it was only in the *taan* section that Mogubai really appeared her own self and began to warm up. After a *drut khayal* in the same *raga*, came a composition in medium tempo (*Jhaptal*) in that rare *raga* Khokar, a special favourite of the Jaipur *gharana*, of which Mogubai is today the seniormost exponent. Following a brief intermission, she concluded her recital with a detailed delineation of the *raga* Sampoorana Malkaunsa. The post-intermission fare was more gratifying to her listeners for Mogubai unleashed in this *raga* her *taan* repertoire, the like of which may not be heard again, her public appearances being now progressively rare.



Lovers of Kathak were pleasantly surprised on the 17th of October (courtesy: Indian Airlines). Birju Maharaj, who was scheduled to dance that evening, had to postpone his departure from Delhi to Bombay due to the cancellation of his IA flight. The audience earned a bonus: two performers instead of one on the same ticket! An opportunity to watch one of our senior Kathak exponents, Damayanti Joshi, precede Birju Maharaj. She received repeated rounds of applause for her excellent footwork and good execution of rhythm patterns. She had agreed without hesitation to dance at very short notice and with a smaller than usual orchestra. Even so, she proved to be the right substitute for the early part of the evening.



Birju Maharaj began his recital at nine-thirty at night, but the audience that had assembled since seven was still asking for more when he finished a little after eleven. They loved all his items, which were danced to perfection in rhythm, gesture, line and form. He sang a *thumri*, or more appropriately a *dadra*, a creation of Bindadin Maharaj and received encores. One did have the feeling that the popular appeal for his *Adakari (Abhinaya)* in this *dadra* stemmed from a certain amount of dilution, and a more traditional and slower *thumri* might have worked better for the discerning section of the audience. The recital was, however, made worth-waiting-for by his *Nritta* and *Kavitta* pieces. Many left the auditorium that night hoping to watch the Kathak exponent once again at the same venue.

The Gulbenkian Orchestra, which played on the last two evenings, is a forty-piece orchestra which can perform most symphonic works, except a few of the nineteenth century. The audience did really enjoy their music because the programme chiefly consisted, on both the evenings, of tried old favourites. There was, however, one exception. The first evening's programme included a work by Joly Braga Santos, the Portuguese composer. This piece had a very good sound to it. The Haydn *Symphonie Concertante* for oboe, bassoon, violin and cello revealed the potential of the group. The post-intermission Beethoven's First was received so well that there had to be two encores. Arthur Fagen and his orchestra had an equally enthusiastic



reception on the second evening. The programme was slightly altered so that they played the Haydn Symphony in the post-intermission session. The inclusion of an orchestra from Portugal along with the ensembles from the U. S. A. and Azerbaijan (USSR) did make the Festival an international event.

It was Birju Maharaj, who said, at the end of his performance, that in the Tata Theatre, a temple had been built for performing artistes. It would not be wrong to say that the glory of this "temple" was matched by the devotion and dedication offered by the artistes at the Inaugural Festival.
