

Saved by a terracotta pot

Ghatam artist RAVI BALASUBRAMANIAN, narrates an interesting story of how presence of mind averted a catastrophe.

I thank my lucky stars for my escape from a nightmare in the United States, where I frequently perform as a ghatam artist. Transporting a ghatam in a plane is always a challenge – it is too big to carry as hand-baggage and too fragile to check in without extreme care. My worst fear is to commit to a concert and end up at the destination with a broken ghatam!

It was April 2006. I was thrilled to receive a call from Beth Bullard, a professor in George Mason University, to play at the 35th annual meeting of the American Musical Instrument Society in Vermillion, SD, on 21st May. Beth was in charge of arranging a Carnatic music concert for the event. The other artists were Mala Chandrasekhar (flute), Jay Balan (violin), and Vinod Seetharaman (mridanga). I was very keen to perform with this excellent team, and Beth eager to showcase the ghatam as a percussion instrument at the conference. On 21st May, I left eagerly for the airport with my ghatam packed in my travel case.

I must tell you how meticulously I pack my ghatam. I place it in a bag lined with a cushion and keep it in a snug hard-case lined with styrofoam, bubble wrap, and air-filled pouches. In addition, I stick “Fragile” signs all over the box, indicating to the airline that the box must be handled with care. This had worked perfectly in the past.

The journey from Pittsburgh to Sioux Falls – about forty five minutes of driving from Vermillion, was



Ravi Balasubramanian

uneventful and included a stop-over and pizza lunch at Minnesota. I was happy to find my friends at the baggage belts. After exchanging pleasantries, we waited for my ghatam case to arrive. When it did, I went about my standard practice of checking if the ghatam had arrived in “safe” condition – in one piece. As I carefully opened the box and the bag inside, my worst fears had come true – the ghatam was broken!

When I slowly explained my predicament to my friends, they first thought I was joking. When I showed them the ghatam, they realised the seriousness of the problem – one side of the ghatam was broken into as many as forty pieces! And I had to perform in a concert in less than four hours in front of top American musicians. We were dumbstruck. But I must give credit to all of us for not panicking.

With a prayer to Vighneswara, we started listing the options available, however outlandish. Could I play on the same ghatam on the side not broken? Could we glue back the broken portions? Could we find a replacement ghatam in Sioux Falls?

There was no way I could play on

the same ghatam, because it did not have any hollow to produce sound and also the structure was too weak to withstand any impact. Hoping to mend the ghatam using superglue and sticky tape, we rushed to a hardware store and bought adhesives worth forty dollars. The store-owner had never had sold so much superglue in one shot and was curious to know why we were doing what we were doing. He was surprised when we explained we were trying to fix an earthenware percussion instrument for a concert that evening! Perplexed, he wished us good luck.

We definitely needed all the luck and all the blessings in the world. While I have successfully mended hairline cracks in ghatam-s using superglue, I have never attempted fixing broken pottery. It definitely needed a specialist, and even an experienced archaeologist may fail to fix broken pottery in one sitting!

So we decided to search for a ghatam in Sioux Falls, SD. Finding a concert-quality ghatam even in Chennai – the world’s Carnatic music capital, is a challenge, and we were ready to accept any pot that looked remotely like a ghatam. So we asked the hardware store owner if he knew of any pottery store in the vicinity. He mentioned two pottery stores, but one of them was closed because it was Sunday. What luck! We were then left with only one store to try and find a ghatam.

World Imports was a nice showroom, with fine art pieces from the world over. But our needs were very specific – a clay pot that resembled a ghatam and which produced some sound when tapped. So we asked the attendant to show us all the pots he had. He

showed metal pots with handles and oval glass vases, but nothing that suited our need. Finally, he took us to an aisle that housed some terracotta pottery, where we saw two pots that might work. As both were flower pots they had a wide mouth and were short, but could still pass off as ghatam. The shop-owner thought we were crazy when we started tapping one of them, fearing that the pot would break! The first pot did not sound good, but we were stunned to hear a nice treble tone when the second was tapped on the sides and a nice bass sound when I banged on the open mouth. This was incredible – to find a replacement ghatam in a small town like Sioux Falls in such a short time!

Happy with the “ghatam” we found, we started our 45-minute journey to Vermillion, enjoying the lush South Dakota prairie grass. I also practised on the ghatam on the way to get used to the bounce of the instrument and also to give my fellow musicians a feel for the sound. This is when I realised another problem. Since the clay pot was a decorative piece, its surface was covered with small bamboo strips. Splinters from the bamboo could badly hurt my hand when I played! The only solution was to wrap my entire hand in “band-aid”-like plaster.

I have in the past wrapped portions of my finger in plaster to cover small cuts during concerts, but not my entire hand. Preparing myself for this further complication, we reached our hosts home and decided to take a nap before the concert.

After a quick shower we reached the concert hall, a 30 by 20 feet auditorium built for microphone-free live music. The beautiful natural sound of the mridanga, flute, and violin rang in our ears during the sound check. I would have loved to play in this hall with my original ghatam, but alas it lay in pieces. When I played on my new “ghatam”, I was shocked to find the sound was hardly audible beyond the stage. The ghatam needed sound amplification! The hall curator said that there were no sound amplification devices available, because the hall was not built for such concerts. When I pressed him one more time, he scoured the building and found one microphone and one amplifier. The system seemed to provide just enough amplification in this hall for my new ghatam. What luck!

All this time, we never mentioned to the organiser any of these happenings, in order to save her from panicking. But now that we had a reasonable back-up plan, we had to inform her

and the audience of all the trouble we went through to ready a ghatam for the concert. Beth Bullard, the organiser, related the story to the audience, who were very supportive.

I was still apprehensive about playing a two-hour concert on this pot covered with bamboo strips. Also, the pot could break during the tani avartanam. So I told Vinod that I would let him know how I felt during the concert. If I was uncomfortable, we could skip the solo percussion bits and play together.

But as the concert progressed, I felt increasingly comfortable playing on this ‘ghatam’, and I grew confident enough to play a solo bit for the tani avartanam. And so, after Vinod finished his solo, I belted out a high-speed percussion number and received thunderous applause. After the concert, Beth was amazed that I could perform so well on an off-the-shelf pot, and she requested me to donate the pot to the concert-hall museum in remembrance of the day and the bizarre sequence of events. So to this day, the “special” pot sits in the museum, showcasing how it stood up and got noticed as a “ghatam”. Also, I was fortunate that no splinters pricked my hands. I thank Lord Vighneswara for saving me that day! ■

Ravi Balasubramanian and his makeshift ghatam, in concert with Mala Chandrasekhar (flute), Jay Balan (violin) and Vinod Seetharaman (mridanga)

