

Aravinth Kumarasamy: In Quest of the Full Picture

by Perera, Audrey, written in September, 2010

National Library Board, Singapore

He is a conductor, in a literal sense when he leads an orchestra, and in a metaphorical sense, is a consummate artiste who seeks every perspective of his art, all the better to shape the outcome.

Aravinth Kumarasamy has performed in most of the world's major cities in a variety of capacities, and his performances always centre on Indian classical music and dance. The list of his works is long – hundreds of performances both solo and in groups on the *veena* (an Indian stringed instrument), in about 40 major productions and more than 20 original songs composed and produced.

But it is not the length of the list that makes Aravinth a trailblazer in Singapore's Indian classical music scene. It is his combination of talents, honed over three decades. He fits many descriptions: performer, composer, conductor, collaborator, producer, artistic director, student of history, to teacher...and more.

He has asked himself the obvious question. "Am I doing the right thing by being involved in dance, research, composition, direction, programming, so many aspects of music? Which do I choose to focus on? Should I choose at all?"

On the other hand, he says, by doing it all, he is able to see "the full picture".

"I can see from the point of view of the script, from the musicians' perspectives and the audiences', and so on. The way I work – I have to know all facets of everything, to come up with anything.

"I am no longer keen to do just one thing, for example, play the *veena*. I can't do things in isolation, for example, produce two minutes of music for someone to use. I must be involved in the whole thing.

"Have I created a limitation for myself? Yes, but the output is more comprehensive and engaging for everyone involved...the multi-disciplinary feel is there, always," he explains.

Beginnings

His parents were always interested in the arts and followed the scene, and his grandmother was a singer. "My mother was especially interested in literature, and the connection between literature and the performing arts. Even now she helps me with scripts and research. We often work as a team – sometimes she takes my concept and develops it, sometimes she does the research. It's a very bonding experience, sharing the appreciation of art," he says.

Indian classical vocal training began for him at the age of five, but was not welcomed by him at that time. "I would run off to the football field to play. My mother did not know this until she came to pay the fees, and then the vocal lessons ended."

“Mum had a *veena* and I used to play around with it, so she sent me for lessons. From there I began training in *Bharathanatyam*, and then took vocal lessons again. These are the arts in which I trained formally, each for eight to nine years. It was a lot of work for my mother, ferrying me around.”

Aravinth’s training was at the feet of legendary practitioners such as Brinda Jeganathan, Ravindrakumari Samivel, and Kalpakam Swaminathan, who inducted him into the *veena*; and the Srikantham Sisters and Vazhuvoor Ramaiya Pillai who taught him *Bharathanatyam*.

Being born and brought up in Sri Lanka meant that Aravinth was exposed to music at school in a significant way. “Music was taught from Primary Two, and students could take it up to ‘A’ Level. Music was part of the curriculum, and this gave students lots of opportunities to perform, and I was given many chances to compose. There were annual music exams too, all the way up to degree level. This is why performers everywhere love to perform for a Sri Lankan audience - it is a cultivated audience which knows music.

“I learnt Carnatic music, *Bharathanatyam*, and was exposed to Kandyan dance, and toured all over Sri Lanka from the time I was 10 years old. I loved it, composing, performing, scripting for school shows and then TV shows. This taught me the art of balancing the different parts of my life. There was never a time when my parents asked me not to dance because of an exam the next day.”

Not Going Home

Sweeping changes and tragedy were waiting in the wings, though. The civil war in Sri Lanka reached a pitch in the 1980s, and as the only Sri Lankan Tamil family living on a particular street, his family’s home was burnt down following a raid by security forces in 1983.

“We got to a refugee camp in Colombo where we lived for more than two months. Then we moved to the eastern part of Sri Lanka to live with people we knew. My *Bharathanatyam arangetram* (debut) was here in 1984, held in a town hall in a place called Batticaloa, the eastern province of Sri Lanka. Music and dance got me quickly into the community, and it healed me. My sister was 13 and she sang accompaniment. Eventually we got our own home, but that was bombed in 1985 by the Indian Peace-Keeping Forces. Then we went to Chennai, India.”

Aravinth was 19 years old at that time, and continued his studies there, including a degree in music. Eventually his father was posted to Jakarta by the World Bank, and Aravinth gained admission into both Stanford and Berkeley universities in the US.

The thrill of being accepted into two Ivy League universities was soon snatched away. “When I applied for my US visa, I was honest in telling them that I had no real home country, no money, and so on. Visa denied,” says Aravinth. His father had a colleague with family in Singapore, and since the family could not see themselves settling as Sri Lankan migrants in Chennai – there were too many restrictions – they came to Singapore. That was in 1988, by which time Aravinth

had finished IT and BA Arts degrees. Throughout those difficult years, he had continued performing.

“Looking back now, I believe that having my US visa denied and then coming to Singapore was destiny,” he says, describing the opportunities he has had and what he loves to do because he was in Singapore.

The Present

Aravinth is closely associated with the *veena*, which he has been performing with for more than 30 years in hundreds of stage performances all over the world.

As a composer of music for orchestras, dance and theatre, his compositions have been performed by several international artistes, theatre groups, and dance companies. He has also conducted orchestras and performed in the role of *nattuvangam* for many reputed dance companies.

The *nattuvangam* is the conductor of a dance orchestra. He sets the tempo, the cues, the sequence of instrumentation, and his skill is critical because of the improvisational nature of Indian classical music. For example, during a dance solo, the dancer may do an extra movement. The *nattuvangam* must sense this in advance and cue the musicians so that they follow and keep the music going. “It’s about knowing each other, knowing the artistes’ moods, and responding instinctively to the performers.”

Since 1997, Aravinth has been working very closely with S. Sathyalingam, a leading senior musician and his wife, Singapore Cultural Medallion awardee Neila Sathyalingam, a legendary choreographer and dance director of international repute. The Sathyalingams are the founders of Apsaras Arts, Singapore. Aravinth has worked with Apsaras Arts on many projects as a creative director, composer, and conductor. Today, he is the company’s Creative and Managing Director.

Firm in his belief that Singapore offers rare and unique opportunities for cultural cross-fertilisation, given its strategic location and its own multicultural mix, Aravinth is a committed trans-cultural collaborator, and has worked on several projects with artistes in Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, India, Sri Lanka, China, Vietnam, Spain, and Hungary.

Aravinth has represented Singapore in many festivals around the world and at several key ASEAN and international cultural events. These include five major productions of the Temple of Fine Arts which he composed and performed for in Malaysia, Australia, Thailand and Cambodia, composing and conducting works between 1998 and 2003 for the Indian Chamber Orchestra of London’s seasons, and composing the script, lyrics and music and conducting the orchestra of the Lingaliyam Dance Company based at the Sydney Opera House for six years until 2007.

For Talent to Grow

Among his passions is the development of young talent and the pathways on which it can grow for the future, and social awareness.

To this end, he formed and conducted Singapore's first Indian Youth Orchestra at the Kolam Ayer Community Club. "At the time, the PA (People's Association) realised that there were youth orchestras for Chinese and Malay but none for Indian youth. I was asked to conceptualise it, form it and conduct it."

This also came about because Aravinth had set up Singapore's first Indian school orchestra earlier, in Raffles Girls' School, which was well-received. "There was a realisation that there would not be anywhere for these school musicians to continue after they left school."

In 2005 he organised a music concert that included 23 Indian performing groups and more than 100 musicians in Singapore performing a benefit concert in aid of the Singapore International Foundation's (SIF) Tsunami Relief Fund for its aid projects in Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka.

"One of the greatest Indian musicians of all time, M. M. Subhalakshmi (MMS) died on the day of the tsunami which caused so much devastation. MMS sold the largest number of HMV recordings for Indian music, and all her earnings used to go to charity. The idea was to organise a tribute to her greatness, as a musician, and as the fact that she was a giver. The objective was to remember her through her compositions, to ensure every possible Indian musician and music school in Singapore could be a part of it, and raise funds for tsunami victims."

Almost every Indian dance school in Singapore performed. About \$30,000 was raised and given to the Singapore International Foundation to disburse.

The response from the artistes inspired yet another initiative, one which is in the making. "I am working on forming an association of independent *Bharathanatyam* dancers, who will come together purely as dancers without affiliations."

In keeping with this ideal of using music as a vehicle for social awareness, Aravinth organised, in 2001, a benefit concert for earthquake victims of Gujarat, India, and has performed in other fund-raising capacities for senior citizen homes and orphanages in Singapore, India, and Sri Lanka.

Aravinth has served as a member of the teaching faculty at arts organisations in Singapore such as the Temple of Fine Arts, Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, and the People's Association of Singapore. He also served as a music examiner in Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and the UK.

His interest in music history led him to work with Singapore musicologist, Joe Peters, to document and publish material on the musical instruments of ASEAN. Aravinth is also a regular speaker at conferences and has published research articles on Indian dance and music. "My interest is anthropological – about the human element, and the human instinct for art," he says.

Aravinth is the member of the Advisory Board (Music) for National Arts Council, Singapore. He is also a Peace Ambassador for Café Diplo (<http://www.cafediplo.org>), an international organisation which subscribes to the notion of peace diplomacy as a people-driven movement, and constitutes all activities that build real and positive peace. Café Diplo launches projects together with appointed Peace Ambassadors to spread the message and culture of peace globally through the arts. In relation to this appointment, Aravinth organised a concert in Singapore to raise funds for Mercy Relief's humanitarian work in Sri Lanka in 2009.

Aravinth is an IT professional specialising in financial and banking technology.

Quote

“It’s not the actual content that I am proud of, as much as the fact that my productions bring people together, and for people who would never have come together otherwise. This means that people get to learn something new and both the audience and artistes take something away. It’s my KPI, and it comes naturally.”

Awards

1984: Vazhoovur Arts Academy, India, *Niruthiya Vaarithi*

1997: Apsaras Arts, Singapore, *Vaineeka Visharadha*

1999: National Arts Council, Singapore for *Singapore Young Artiste*

2003: Kalalaya Acedamy of Fine Arts, Sri Lanka for *Kala Award*

2006: Apsaras Arts, Singapore for *Bharatha Kala Mani*

List of Major Works

Music, Dance & Theatre

1997: Victoria Theatre, Sydney, *Kannagi*

1999: Newtown Theatre, Sydney, *Nitya Sumangali*

2000: Newtown Theatre, Sydney, *Serpent Woman*

2000: Singapore, Sydney, Chennai, Colombo, *Aarupadi Veedu*

2001: Sydney Opera House, *Kurngthohai*

2001: Seymour Theatre, Sydney, *Courtesan's Daughter*

2002: Seymour Theatre, Sydney, *Sthree*

- 2003:** Seymour Theatre, Sydney, *Earth & Fire*
- 2006:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Temple Dancer*
- 2006:** Victoria Theatre, Singapore, *Chidambara Rahasyam*
- 2007:** Victoria Theatre, Singapore, *Sivagami*
- 2008:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Love Poems*
- 2008:** Arts House, Singapore, *Raga Rasa*
- 2008:** Pan Pacific Theatre, Singapore, *Bharatham*
- 2009:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Apurva*
- 2009:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Strings in Harmony*
- 2009:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Aalam – The Banyan Tree of Bharathanatyam*
- 2009:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Memory of Times*
- 2010:** Asian Civilisation Museum, Singapore, *Aachaarya Devo Bhava*
- 2010:** Asian Civilisation Museum, Singapore, *Ramayana Geetham*
- 2010:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Nirmanika*
- 2010:** Tanjore Temple, India, *Rajarajaeswaram 1000*
- 2010:** NTUC Auditorium, Singapore, *Secret Garden*
- 2010:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Pancha Vadhyam*
- 2010:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Lalgudi Vaibhavam*
- 2010:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Behind the Mask*
- 2010:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Stree Katha Veena*
- 2010:** Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, *Ghanam*

References

Interviews with Aravinth Kumarasamy

National Arts Council (n.d.). *Home*. Retrieved from <http://www.nac.gov.sg>

Café Diplo (n.d.). *Peace Ambassadors*. Retrieved from http://www.cafediplo.org/pb/wp_04c3871a/wp_04c3871a.html.

Aravinth Kumarasamy (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.aravinthkumarasamy.com>.

Apsaras Arts (n.d.). *Who we are*. Retrieved from <http://www.apsarasarts.com/pages/theteam.html>