

SVARAM's New Milestone

On 29th February 2024, Svaram inaugurated its new Sound Garden at the allocated 2-acre site for its projected campus in the Industrial Zone of Auroville, in the presence of Special Guests of Honour, Thiru R.N. Ravi, Governor of Tamil Nadu and Chairman of the Governing Board, and Dr. Tamilisai Soundararajan, the Governor of Telangana and Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry and member of the Governing Board. The colourful opening was also attended by Dr. Jayanti S. Ravi, IAS, Secretary of the Auroville Foundation. This marked another milestone in the development of Svaram which, for over 20 years, has been creating musical instruments and conducting sound research, as well as running cultural programmes and personal growth/wellbeing trainings.

Aurelio, the founder of Svaram, along with co-executives Karthik and Shankar, spoke about this new milestone as well as the earlier days of the project (Aurovilian Jan and Magesh, who are also part of the core leading team, could not be present).



Sound or Sonic Stone

Aurelio grew up in Austria,

where for some time he studied music, philology and ethnology and attended courses at the Orff Institute, Salzburg. "It was set up by the composer Carl Orff after the Second World War because he said we cannot go through another of those disasters: the children of the world should play music together. So he started with something everybody could play, universal instruments like the African xylophone and percussions. Orff's idea was that that everyone can make music and benefit from its personality-building gifts."

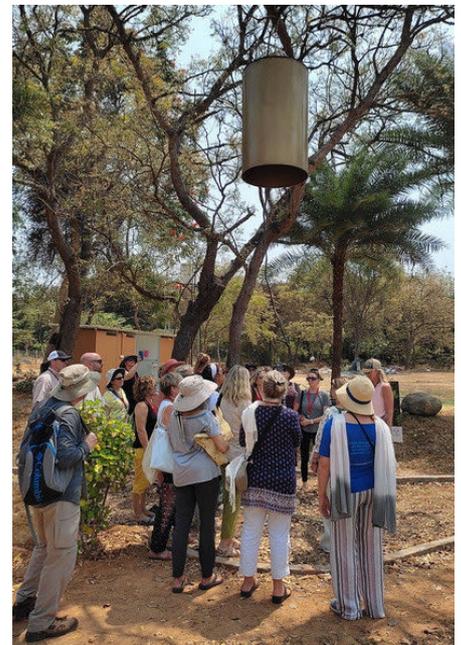


Metallophone

After his studies Aurelio travelled for five years around the world, absorbing different musical traditions, including those of indigenous people for whom music was an intrinsic part of life. "Whether they soothed their children, or planted crops or were out fishing, there was always song, often accompanied by simple percussions and handmade instruments."

After an initial visit in 1986 Aurelio joined Auroville in 1991. Having worked in the cultural field and the AV Dance Lab he joined Adishakti of the late Veenapani Chawla, one of India's foremost experimental theatre exponents, providing 'soundscapes' - sound backgrounds - to her theatre

productions, and toured with them through Indian cities." The instruments often needed repair, and that's how a workshop at Mohanam Cultural Centre in Sanjeevinagar got started," he explains. "After a year, we moved to the old Decauram carpentry workshop, where the Svaram development project began in 2003. We initiated a training course for a group of unemployed youth from the local villages who were eager to learn a new skill. I taught them basic music and tuning systems, Jan taught them carpentry and basic mathematical skills, and together we explored how to repair and make new instruments."



Storm Drum

"We began with seven people," remembers Karthik. "We selected anybody with a musical interest and who wanted a job because at that time youth unemployment was very high in the villages. None of the original seven had any training in this work; I was a painter, there were also carpenters, mechanics and electricians. When we started, my village friends, who knew nothing about musical crafts, said 'Why are you wasting your time like this? There's no future

in this'. Now they come to my house asking for support!"

Shankar experienced the same skepticism at first. "But now everybody looks up to me and respects our hard work."



Sound Vortex

Aurelio mentions that this is one of the most important aspects of Svaram's success. "I think we were the first outreach project that focused on life skills coupled with income generation in the villages, because we understood that once people earn their own money they acquire a certain dignity, there is empowerment, independence and sustainability."

Today Svaram has 86 employees and sells its many products in over 30 countries, in addition to running courses and trainings, and every month around 2,000 people visit its workshop, showroom and sound garden.

Svaram was not an overnight success, however. The first recruits had to learn the basics of music from Aurelio and from local teachers with knowledge of Indian classical music. "So for the first three years it was like college for us," says Karthik. The making of instruments began when Svaram received an initial grant from SAIER for a project called 'instruments for a new music

pedagogy'. "There was my research as well as volunteers coming from all over the world who brought knowledge and artisanal skills of different musical traditions. This is why we call what we make 'world music instruments', reflecting a common source of human heritage", says Aurelio.

In 2009, after a catastrophic fire, they created the actual production unit. Today, the products include a huge array of 'sound sources': wind, strings, skins and percussion instruments. There are also the famous 'sound stones', carefully cut stones which emit musical tones when rubbed with moistened hands.



From left: Shankar, Karthik and Aurelio

The sound stones were a chance discovery of a German sculptor, further developed by a professor from Mozarteum University, but some of the other instruments are creations of the employees. "When people ask who designed an instrument because they like it so much, we have to explain it's actually the work of many people", says Karthik. "Sometimes I come with an idea and they laugh at it," says Aurelio, "so I have to secretly work on it with Jan before bringing it back to them. Then they say, 'Why did you make it in this complicated way?' and they change it around, and finally we have a special product. It's really co-created. I can show you unique instruments that came out of this shared process. We are also working with co-

management principles in action, and make all important decisions together."

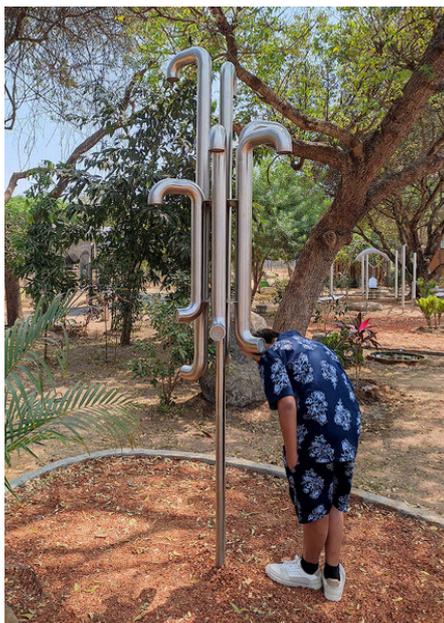
In 2014 they were awarded a big project for the new terminal of Mumbai airport, where they installed the largest tuned wind chimes in the world. A little later, they created a 'sound garden' for the Bangalore Music Experience Center, the first interactive music museum in India. "And that's when the outdoor installations started," says Aurelio. "But what really put us on the map was a sound discovery path we created for the top retreat in the Maldives. Within a few weeks, we had four top institutions in India coming to us interested in having such a space."



Bamboo Grove

"A sound garden," explains Shankar, "is a place for outdoor instruments, like sound stones or instruments activated by the wind, where you can feel the sound and you can play. Generally only people who have learned an instrument can play it, but there anyone can play our instruments. Some of the 'sound instruments' which we have created and feature there are unique: they don't exist anywhere else". The first sound garden started on the Svaram workshop grounds. "Many people came, but that place was not so good because of the

noise of machines from the workshops,” says Karthik. “This is why we moved to the new site. “It also marks the beginning of our campus, which has been fully planned and designed by the Pritzker Prize winner, the late B.V Doshi, and which we want to build in stages now as a fresh and dynamic impetus in the Industrial Zone of Auroville,” explains Aurelio.



Listening Ear

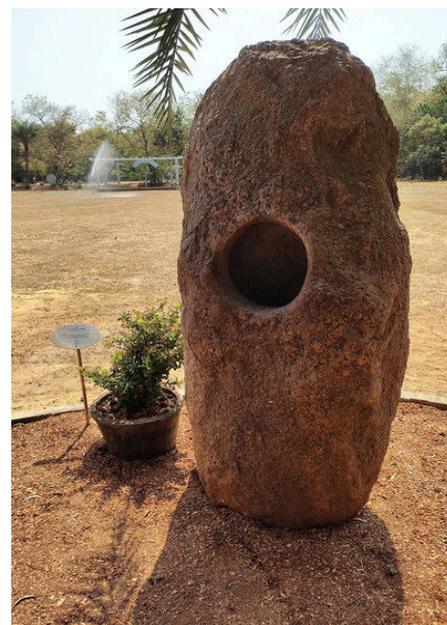
Today, Svaram also is involved in numerous projects being developed elsewhere in India and abroad, including in wellbeing, clinical and spiritual centres, schools and universities. “Now we are embarking on a very interesting project in Gujarat,” says Aurelio. “We are providing an early education in sound awareness and listening for young children. It’s about developing listening awareness, sensory experience at a young age, because if we were all better listening beings, the world would look different. Our motto at Svaram is to bring the joy of music and the magic touch of sound into everyone’s heart and hands.”

Another aspect of their work is therapeutic, healing. Some years ago, a guest mentioned

that she had had a wonderful experience in Europe with a ‘sound bed’ - a resonating bed with strings attached below - upon which she had experienced a ‘sound massage’, and asked if Svaram could make one. “My studies in music therapy resurfaced and we made the first one for Quiet Healing Centre,” says Aurelio. “Today, you can say that ‘sound healing’ is emerging everywhere, and our instruments are exported to sound therapy circles all over the world. However, we are known as pioneers in introducing Indian Shruti, harmonic, just intonation tuning systems for these specific applications, rather than the international standard, equal tempered tuning, which is most common.” It is perhaps not coincidental that at a time when there is much disharmony in Auroville, that a new sound garden has opened. “Music has this universal appeal, it can bring us together,” says Aurelio. “Sometimes in Svaram we get irritated because we are categorised as belonging to one side or another in the present dispute, and then we make clear we do not belong to anybody. We are in the creative centre; we are for harmonisation, not division. Often we have been trying to bring Aurovilians together for some event to cultivate communal coherence through a shared contemplative experience, where everybody can sing, play or listen to music together. We are providing a unifying cultural space; we don’t want to exclude anybody. And even if it’s a very difficult transition phase in Auroville at present, nothing will hold us back from the joy of creation and the gift of working happily together.”

“We are generating income for Auroville and for the bioregion,” says Karthik. “We are doing what is needed at present in Auroville, which is providing

positive creative energy and a good name, but we are not doing it for this group or that group: our appeal is universal.”



Humming Stone

Aurelio points out that Svaram, besides being inspired and embedded in the integral paradigm, is also on the cutting edge of explorations and research on music and its harmonizing potential, of sound and consciousness studies. “We are on the pioneering edge of a growing global network of new and evolutionary resonances and that’s really interesting; it’s dynamic and fulfilling. This might be one of the keys to our success. But it is also due to the amazing industriousness and inventiveness of the people and artisans from the local villages. Without them there is no Svaram, and I would still be in my ivory tower, theorising and researching this stuff. They grounded it, they anchored it.”

In conversation with Alan
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For more information visit
<https://svaram.org>
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