It is more an exploration of sound

LALITHASAI

Swaranam, Auroville, showcases the power of music in the educative and therapeutic sense.

Therapeutic: The chimes and (right) the “singing” stones at Swaranam, Auroville, is Puduchery.

With the aim of bridging ancient local traditions and modern culture, the Swaranam Musical Instruments Research Station was established in 2003 in Auroville, Puducherry.

The research station provides vocational training opportunities to unemployed youth living in the villages around Auroville by producing and marketing musical instruments.

The guiding force behind the endeavor is Aurelio, director, Swaranam Musical Instruments Research Station. He is a musician/composer, sound healer and a therapist. According to him, some old folk instruments are not made anymore. The team at Swaranam has identified and reconstructed them. “We want to make people aware of these instruments and inspire them to use them through exhibitions and distribution,” says Aurelio.

The instruments made here are ideal for first-time explorations with sound and music. In contrast, to play classical instruments one needs years of rigorous training. “One of the objectives, is to create instruments for a new music education, which allows everyone to experience sound freely,” says Aurelio.

The flute

All Swaranam instruments such as flutes are made of bamboo, clay and copper. The open-flute flute made here can be played by anyone. The latest ones are as long as 34 inches. But the clay ones are much smaller at 2.5 inches.

The young workers turn wood and metal pipes into wonderful sound sources. The xylophone is a set of different-sized hardwood blocks tuned in diverse musical scales (mostly pentatonic). Then there are the metallophones, tubaphone, litaphone, bamboo phone and glesophone.

The metallophone is made of aluminium. One can play ragas such as Sivaranjani and Thiraiyar on it and also set it to specific tune and pitch arrangements. The litaphone, made of shakti granite stone, is one of the oldest instruments. It reflects the resonance of stones.

Music therapy has been integrated into certain instruments. An example is the ‘Nada Anavah’, which has 50 strings. When it is struck, it produces just three notes - sa, pa, sa. This is used in healing centres and wellness spas.

Having worked with diverse metals and their symbolic planetary correspondences, Swaranam has chosen a series of five correctly tuned models of wood chimes. These chimes are linked to various related energies, based on the five natural elements of space, air, fire, water and earth. The tubes or elements in the chimes are made of brass, aluminium, copper and nickel. The speciality of it is that they have been set in ragas such as Mohanam, Hindustani, Sivaranjani, Duni and Sargam. As many of the indigenous melodic structures of music are in pentatonic modes, these scales have been chosen. Aurelio says they are effective healers. “We manufacture customised wind chimes based on sound study and provide consultation about requirements and harmonic tunings for buildings, homes and rooms,” he adds. Penetrating deep into the bones is the vibration that is emitted by the ‘singing stones’, another special instrument, made of finely polished serpentine, marble and granite stones. It weighs anywhere between 20 and 200 kg and has a number of cuts in it. “It takes a few weeks to learn to play it but months to create it,” informs Aurelio.

According to him, it may not be used in music, but through it one can learn about the vibratory dimension of our existence.

Swaranam manufactures percussion instruments too. For the traditional folk artists there is a variety to choose from. Ramtals – body rattles, oh rathals, shakers, scrapers, all drums, ocean drum, bamboo shakers, wooden balls and earthbound. There are also simple ones for children – in the shape of a fish, turtle or butterfly – which are easy to handle. In all, Swaranam manufactures nearly 50 to 60 instruments. Aurelio says, “The basic idea is to provide relief from stress. There are many who are looking out for alternative and creative ways of relaxation and these instruments will definitely help them. It will also give them a holistic approach to existence and instil a balanced lifestyle.”