

Friday Review Chennai and Tamil Nadu

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It is more an exploration of sound

LALITHASAI

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

Photos: T. Singaravelou



Therapeutic: The chimes and (right) the 'singing' stones at Svaram, Auroville, in Puducherry.

With the aim of bridging ancient local traditions and modern culture, the Svaram Musical Instruments Research Station was established in 2003 at 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 exercise is Aurelio, director, Svaram 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 Svaram 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 every child to explore sound freely," says Aurelio.

The flute

At Svaram instruments such as flutes are made of bamboo, clay and copper. The over-tune 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 metallophone, tubulophone, lithophone, bamboo phone and glassophone.

The metallophone is made of aluminium. One can play ragas such as Sivaranjani and Bhairavi on it and also set it to specific tune and pitch arrangements. The lithophone, made of black-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 'Nidra Anantar,' which has 50 strings. When it is strung, 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, Svaram has chosen a series of five carefully tuned models of wind chimes. These chimes are linked to vastu-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, Hindolam, Sivaranjani, Danni and Sarangi. 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 vastu and provide consultation about requirements and harmonious 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.

Svaram manufactures percussion instruments too. For the traditional folk artists there is a variety to choose from. Rattlers - body rattle, rain rattle, shakers, scrapers, slit drums, ocean drum, bamboo shakers, wooden bells and earth-sound. There are also simple ones for children - in the shape of a fish, tortoise or butterfly - which are easy to handle.

In all, Svaram 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 establish a balanced lifestyle.

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Archives

- [Datewise](#)

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- [Lead](#)
- [Cinema](#)
- [Film Review](#)
- [Music](#)
- [Dance](#)
- [Theatre](#)
- [Arts & Crafts](#)
- [Heritage](#)
- [Miscellany](#)

News

[News Update](#)

[Front Page](#)

[National](#)

[States:](#)

- [Tamil Nadu](#)
- [Andhra Pradesh](#)
- [Karnataka](#)
- [Kerala](#)
- [New Delhi](#)
- [Other States](#)

[International](#)

[Opinion](#)

[Business](#)

[Sport](#)

[Miscellaneous](#)

[Index](#)

Advt

[Retail Plus](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Obituary](#)