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The music maker

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STRUMMING ALONG Aurelio playing a svareveena Photo: T. Singaravelou

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Aurelio of Svaram, a vocational training centre that specialises in making musical instruments and researches on the healing power of sound. Priyadarshini Paitandy reports

There's the sound of gently swaying wind chimes, the distinct music of a xylophone accompanied by rhythmic beats from a drum. Just follow the source of the music and you'll find Aurelio, director and co-founder of Svaram, a vocational training centre for unemployed village youth. He's now playing a wind instrument which looks like a new-age flute. "It is called an ocarina...made of clay...not new-age," he says. "We have around 120 varieties of musical instruments here," he adds pointing to a room stocked with lithophones, psaltery, ocean drums, whistles, anantar, svaraveena...each made by members of Svaram.

Svaram was started in 2003 by Aurelio along with the Mohanam Cultural Centre. "I was doing social development work. In 2003, I noticed a lot of unemployment and started Svaram which is a source of livelihood for the men and women around here."

Aurelio shifted base from Austria to Auroville 20 years ago. Here, he trained in classical guitar and Hindustani vocal and studied the shastras. He then decided to impart what he knew to more people and Svaram seemed like the ideal way of doing so.

"Music for all is one of our key components. We also focus on social entrepreneurship and cultural heritage, and carry out research in sound healing and consciousness." Keeping that in mind the organisation creates musical instruments that are simple to use and learn. They also constantly research and come up with world music instruments. "We have archetypal instruments but we make our own improvisations on them," he says as he proudly displays some of the instruments made by his students. Excitedly tapping one of them he says, "This is a palmyra nut stick. It's made using palmyra nuts filled with some materials... I asked my students to come up with something using local items that they find around them and they came up with this."

Then there is the rain rattle, salangai stick and the salangai made of shells and seeds which has even caught the attention of a Kathak danseuse from Kolkata who is researching on Kathak and exploring the different sounds of the ghunghroo. Musicians and others from the film industry too often source their equipments from here. "We sell our instruments through Auroville and other hotel galleries across the country. Our members also perform in different states and this is how we earn our revenue," smiles Aurelio.

He believes that there is music in everything and that's why majority of their instruments are made of seeds, wood, coconut shells and industrial metal. Since wood is extensively used in making most musical instruments, Aurelio says that there is a shortage of wood as people cut trees but do not replant. That's why Aurelio and his team are experimenting with other materials, such as the latest in their collection, a sound stone, an 80-kilo stone with ridges cut into it. "I am working with a German professor on this project. On rubbing across the ridges with wet hands, it emits a sound, the vibration from which is therapeutic. It's used in the treatment of dementia, Parkinson's, nervous disorders. It helps relax the patient." Apart from the usual musical equipment, Svaram also focuses on the healing power of music. Its constant research on the subject has given shape to Svaram New Waves — equipment used in musical healing, the most popular being the Nidhranantar (sound healing table) which quite a few yoga, meditation and wellness centres have procured from here.

Aurelio is also worried about many traditional musical instruments dying out. "We are interested in collaborations. We are supporting a brass horn maker in Tirupur. He is one of the last horn makers."

The popularity of Svaram can be gauged from the fact that they now get researchers and students from across the country interning and collaborating with them. Just recently students from Pune and Bengaluru worked here and completed research on 'Designs of children's instruments' and 'Sound installations for school gardens and schools for visually-impaired'. Another student from a wellness centre in Yercaud is currently training here in the application of sound healing.

Besides, the Svaram team is busy with the inauguration of its new Svaram Sound Studio. And as the group gets back to practising, Aurelio joins them in singing, 'Iniyisai Yellorum Isaiku Varungal...'

Keywords: Svaram, Mohanam Cultural Centre, Aurelio

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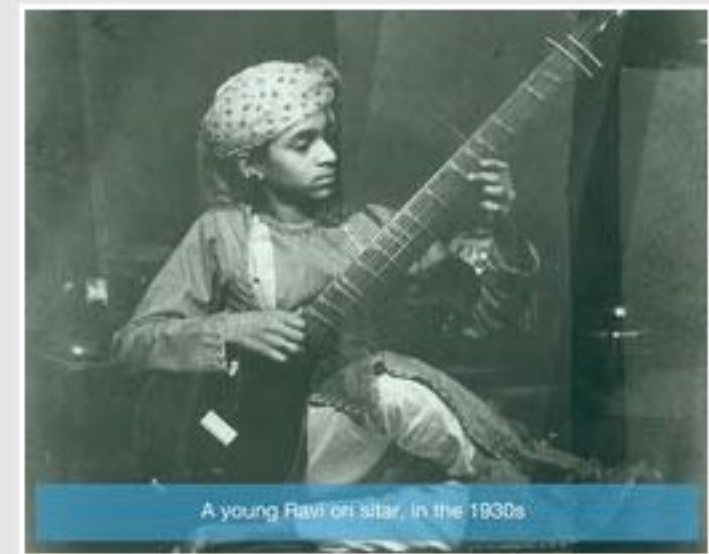
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