

# Seeking the Auroville sound

An exhibition of 'sound instruments' at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture highlighted the achievements of eight years of craft development at Svaram workshop. Austrian-born Aurovillian Aurelio is the man behind the venture. Auroville Today asked him about the background to this work.

The great hall of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture is filled with instruments: drums, xylophones, vibraphones, stringed instruments, flutes, clappers, gongs ... "Most of them are entry points into the world of music," says Aurelio. "They produce sounds; but they are not musical instruments in the traditional sense of the word." He lightly taps a drum, strokes his fingers along a wind chime, and demonstrates a psaltery, an ancient string instrument, all of which are made by Svaram. "One of the prime purposes of these simple instruments is to raise sound awareness, especially as part of a child's sensory training. The idea is not only to 'hear' but also to 'feel' the vibrations."

A group of children enters the exhibition. The teacher tells them to sit down. Then one of them hammers a large gong. The sound floods the pavilion and her classmates experience the vibrations with closed eyes, long after the sound has gone. Then they test the wind chimes, each of which is tuned differently. "Listen to the diatonic scale, and now to a pentatonic scale," says their well-informed teacher.



Too loud!

PHOTO GIORGIO

in the South Pacific region: with Fijis, Aborigines, Maoris, Papuas and with tribals in Sulawesi – some of the people whom we consider to be still in the Stone Age. But for them, music is part of life. Whether they soothed their children or planted crops or were out fishing, there was always song, often accompanied by a simple drum or two-string lyre. Those people would ask me to sing music from my culture, and I painfully realised that I had nothing to offer. Our culture does not have songs like this. In our culture, we do not grow up with music as an intrinsic part of life!"

His travels brought him to China where he had a musical epiphany. "I was visiting the ancient town of Dali in southern China when, from a courtyard, I heard music. I peeked in and saw a funeral being conducted. The music was played on an Erhu, a Chinese two string fiddle. Though I was a complete stranger, I was invited in and seated in a corner. There, I burst into tears experiencing the intense mood and beauty of that music. It was a revelation and a confirmation that music was my



Experiencing the gong

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, where the Svaram development project began. We initiated a training course for a group of unemployed youth, who were eager to learn a new skill. I taught them basic tuning systems, Jan taught them carpentry skills and together we explored how to make the instruments. A few years later we got a grant from the Government of India, through SAIER, to make instruments for a new music pedagogy. Two years ago we created the production unit, which now employs 25 people." Is it successful? "We have learned to make quality and very beautiful products. But we still have a lot to learn about commerce and marketing. We sell through the Auroville boutiques and in exclusive hotels and spas in India and through some overseas contacts. But there is a lot of scope for progress."

If most of Svaram's instruments are 'sound producers', an exception is the Sound Stones. Some years ago the German pianist and composer Professor Klaus Fessmann of the Mozarteum in Salzburg, visited Auroville. "Fessmann was looking for new sounds, for more organic musical forms. He was drawn to the idea of sounding stone," says Aurelio. "He had discovered through the work of a sculptor that by cutting suitable types of stone to a particular comb-like form he could draw a clear tone from the stone with the friction of a moistened finger. He called this instrument *Klangsteine*, meaning: 'Sound Stones'. We met and discovered that a particular type of granite local to this area produced the best tone. With good stone cutters and the team of Svaram in place it was agreed that Svaram should manufacture the instruments. The production is overseen by Fessmann's son Hannes. That's how Svaram started making Sound Stones."

Another of Svaram's experiments is the *Nidhranantar*, a 'sound bed'. This instrument, which looks like a massage table, is in fact a resonating box with about 50 strings attached below. The person receiving the 'sound massage' lies on the box while a trained therapist softly plays the strings. "The bed provides an experience," says

Aurelio. "The recipient hears and feels the tones and overtones; the vibrations penetrate every cell of the body." The instrument is in use at the Quiet Healing Centre. "Those who have experienced it often say they got into an altered and intensified state of awareness."

Aurelio's personal growth, he says, "got a bit cramped" with all that production and business. "I've wanted to run away a few times. But I have a responsibility to the unit, the team and to myself." About himself, he says, "Running away wouldn't have helped me. Since I am doing yoga, or at least I'm supposed to be doing it, I realised I have to go deeper. But how? Then one day an instrument builder from Holland asked if Auroville had a unique sound. That question startled me! Then I realised that there is a truth to be found."



At the opening of the exhibition

"And now listen to how all these pipes sound together". Aurelio smiles. "These are the most common tunings. But we have quite a few chimes that have unusual tunings, such as those used by Indonesian gamelan orchestras or with 'harmonic just' intonations."

Aurelio grew up in Austria, where he received "some rather rigid classical guitar training". He didn't like it. "I felt I couldn't express myself. I would rather have played the Beatles' songs, or Cat Stevens, but they didn't teach me that." He dropped guitar studies, took up music ethnology, but dropped that as well as "it, too, was rigid and old." He then began a world journey. "For over 20 years I travelled, staying with indigenous people

path, my *svadharma*, food for my soul." When he came back to Austria he stayed some time in a simple farmhouse in the middle of the Carinthian Alps in the southern part of the country. "I reflected a lot and composed songs," he says. Did he learn to yodel? "No, I didn't learn yodelling – (laughing) actually I regret it, for I've been often asked to yodel!"

Aurelio joined Auroville in 1991. He worked at Adishakti with Veenapani Chawla, one of India's foremost experimental theatre exponents, providing 'soundscapes' – sound backgrounds – to her theatre productions. "The instruments

PHOTO GIORGIO



Aurelio playing the Sound Stone

Does he find any support in the works of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother? "One of my main inspirations in regard to the 'sound-work' comes from Sri Aurobindo's writings on linguistics and Mother's premise that new forms are needed to manifest the new force. But we don't have much from them on music. A few years ago I tried with a few other people to make a compilation of all

They have said on music, but this is still in the making. Someone else is working on a biography of the Ashram musician Sunil, which will contain his correspondence with The Mother on music which has never been published. I am eagerly awaiting the book."

And what about the unique Auroville sound? Aurelio smiles. "I am listening. Sometimes I receive a touch, a hint. It may take me another 20 years, but I have a feeling that this will be my life's work. I believe that it will require a different way of listening – rather 'sensing' pulsations, frequencies and energies, than 'hearing' sounds. To say it poetically, experiencing the sound behind the sound."

In conversation with Carel



Playing the Nidhranantar – the sound bed

PHOTO COURTESY SVARAM

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