

Yasotha Somasundram: Breaking Boundaries

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A pioneer in many aspects of classical Indian music, Yasotha Somasundram has been first many times throughout her music career – from incorporating the organ into Indian music, to transitioning from classical to popular genres, to making a name for herself as a female Indian musician who composed and performed her own music.

Attributing her love and talent for music to her father, Kannan Neelakantan, Somasundram said: “I inherited my musical knowledge from my father and began learning at a very tender age. Music is a part of my DNA, it is part of my essence, it is like my breath.”

Born in Singapore in 1930, she began the study of Carnatic music – a Southern Indian variation of classical Indian music at the age of three. She gave her first public vocal performance when she was five.

Circumstances changed when World War II came. “My father, who had no intention of making a living out of teaching classical music, was forced to do so out of necessity during the Japanese Occupation which began in 1942. His students were mostly well-to-do Indian adults who wanted to keep in touch with their roots. I was about 13 and would accompany him and serve as his pupil-assistant by singing and demonstrating while he explained and provided back-up on the harmonium.”

The end of the war in 1945 saw Somasundram secure regular singing jobs at the British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation, which was located at the Cathay Building.

“I was encouraged by a Mr. A.K. Isaac to sing on radio and to sing Carnatic songs. In those days, all transmission was ‘live’. I got the job of announcer/producer later and purely by chance. Once, possibly in 1946, when I went to the station to sing, the announcer of the day had to go on urgent leave. The producer asked me to do the announcements myself, and that was how I came to be offered a job as an announcer and producer of children’s programmes.” She remained in this role for three years until she got married in 1948.

While becoming a housewife was at that time the expected path for women to take after marriage, Somasundram’s passion for music and her husband’s encouragement kept her close to what she loved doing, singing for family gatherings and devoting time to listening to music on the radio and discussing its subtleties with her father.

It was after attending Western musicals organised by the British Army (which her husband was a part of) that she became keen to obtain an organ and delve into popular Indian music.

“It certainly was not easy making the transition from classical to popular music in the 1960s when there was much resistance and scorn from classical music purists. I also had to face another form of stigma at that time – public performances by Indian women were frowned upon by the

largely conservative Indian community. But encouragement from my husband and my love for music kept me going.”

The arrival of television in Singapore opened yet another opportunity for Somasundram, who formed an Indian music band with her children to perform on radio and TV. With her husband as manager, Somasundram and her five children formed KN 5, named after her father. The band later expanded and came to be known as KN Music Party, and was featured regularly on Tamil radio and TV stations, going on to win several competitions.

To cater to Singapore’s multi-ethnic audience, the band occasionally sang popular songs in English, Malay, and Chinese as well. “I found music a great way of bonding with my children. I am not sure they shared my sentiments at that time, but I know they all love music today even though only one of them, my eldest son, Ravi, has been able to combine work with performance.”

Incorporating the organ into Indian music was another first by Somasundram. The inclusion of the organ in Indian music was very revolutionary in the 1960s, even in India. The piano and accordion had already been incorporated into Indian popular music by some notable composers then but there was resistance to the use of the electone organ. “It was a time when there was resistance to any form of electronic, as opposed to acoustic, instruments. As far as I was concerned, I wasn’t doing anything revolutionary.

“In Carnatic music it is common to use the harmonium, a musical instrument that is actually of European origin but had long been incorporated into Indian music, and the organ is very similar to it, except that it has no bellows. So what I was doing was merely adopting a new medium – the organ – to an old musical form. In fact, I continue to use the organ to teach Carnatic music to my students.

“One big breakthrough for me was in 1971, when I won second prize (there was no first prize) in an Indian music competition. I played a challenging classical number popularised in the Tamil film *Thillana Mohanambal*. I selected an organ tone that somewhat replicated a classical wind instrument, the *nadhaswaram*. I was accompanied by my cousin, M.S. Maniam, who replicated the Indian percussion instrument, the *tavil*, on the bongo. The response from the audience, friends and associates was very encouraging and I became more sought after on Tamil radio and TV after that.”

Since improvisation is a key aspect of classical Indian music, composing her own pieces was a natural next step for Somasundram. “In my early years, I was mainly a performer. Composing was something I started doing seriously only later. But composing comes naturally for Indian classical musicians since improvisation is an integral part of Indian classical.”

She went on to establish a successful career as a composer, and one of her compositions was adopted by the Ministry of Community Development as a national song - *Arivu Thellivu*, which roughly translates to Knowledge and Determination. Its lyrics were written by Mr Illamaram and it was an inspirational song with a peppy tempo that was easy for a non-Indian audience to appreciate as well. It was also used by a Swiss composer, Heinrich Schweizer, for a symphony he

wrote for the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in 1998.

Somasundram was invited to become a co-leader of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) Indian Orchestra in 1981. “The concept of a conductor is alien to Indian music and during performances a leader simply gives the start cue and sets the tempo of the music. But I had additional responsibilities. The orchestra played mainly Indian film music for which no written scores existed, so I had to listen to the songs and transcribe them into musical scores for the other performers.

“I could do this as I am able to sight-read and did not have to work at an instrument for writing out the notation. I also had to oversee rehearsals and ensure that the music was well coordinated. I had the assistance of my son Ravi who helped write out guitar chords, drawing on his training in Western music.”

Authentic India was an album commissioned by Gerhard Narholz from the German music production company Sonoton in 1984. Described by Somasundram as “a collection of mood music that I wrote as well as traditional folk songs that I arranged”, tracks from the album have been featured in documentaries and productions around the world. The album reached mainstream international audiences with the use of *Madhuvanti*, one of its tracks, in the film *Keeping the Faith*, which starred Ben Stiller. Her own favourite track from the album is *Bombay by Night*, which she wrote to capture the bustling Bombay nightlife, using an Indian core infused with elements of Western pop and jazz.

Somasundram has retired as a performer and composer, but remains involved in music by giving music lessons.

Quote

“I would like to be remembered as one of the first few Indian female musicians to publicly perform on Singapore television, as a pioneer in the use of the organ in Indian music in Singapore, and probably one of the few Indian female musicians around the world who played the organ, and as someone who did not always accept the OB (out of bounds) markers set by society.”

Awards

1970: Radio Television Singapore Song-writing Competition

1992: *Kala Ratna*, Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society

2006: 11th Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, *Top Local Serious Music*, for *Karma*

2007: 12th Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, *Top Local Serious Music*, for *Nirvana*

2008: 13th Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, *Top Local Serious Music*, for *Ajanta*

2009: 14th Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, *Top Local Serious Music*, for *Sitar Romance*

2010: 15th Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) Annual Awards, *Top Local Serious Music*, for *Karma*

Works

Music commissioned by and aired over Radio Television Singapore or its successor Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (not a complete list):

	TITLE	LYRICS
1.	<i>Nammarum naadallavoh</i>	Iqbal
2.	<i>Neelavaanam</i>	Iqbal
3.	<i>Thamarai malareh</i>	Iqbal
4.	<i>Iyarkai devi</i>	Iqbal
5.	<i>Anbeh enadhanbeh</i>	Iqbal
6.	<i>Kavalai marandhu</i>	Iqbal
7.	<i>Kaviya thamizh</i>	Iqbal
8.	<i>Mohana nilavil</i>	Iqbal
9.	<i>Endrumeh pazhagi</i>	Iqbal
10.	<i>Porulladhara mayyam idhu</i>	Iqbal
11.	<i>Singai nagarvaazhum</i>	Mrs Samuel Doraisingham
12.	<i>Singai ennum</i>	C. T. Pazhanisamy
13.	<i>Sangedutthu oothuvohm</i>	Mutthumanickam
14.	<i>Malar soodi pohttugindrom</i>	A. M. Thalib
15.	<i>Vaanibathhil vallarum</i>	Murugadason
16.	<i>Uyarntha manam</i>	Mutthamizhan
17.	<i>Kalai ennum pozhudhu</i>	Baranan
18.	<i>Arumbugalleh karumbugalleh</i>	Murugadason
19.	<i>Alli malareh nee</i>	Murugadason
20.	<i>Megangalleh pozhuyungall</i>	Murugadason
21.	<i>Pallingu chilai ondru</i>	Feroz Khan
22.	<i>Iyandhira paravaigall</i>	Iqbal
23.	<i>Engum thooymaidhaan</i>	Iqbal
24.	<i>Avalloru azhagiya poongaattru</i>	Baranan
25.	<i>Naalai malarum vaazhvukaaga</i>	Iqbal
26.	<i>Munnettram enbathu</i>	Iqbal
27.	<i>Singai thirunaadeh</i>	Iqbal
28.	<i>Mutthu chirikkum</i>	Iqbal
29.	<i>Kaanum idamelaam</i>	Iqbal
30.	<i>Vaasa mullai poovil vandu</i>	Iqbal

31.	<i>Oru naal sirippu</i>	Baranan
32.	<i>Thendralil aadavandhaall</i>	Murugadason
33.	<i>Eedilladha ezhil naadu</i>	Iqbal
34.	<i>Poo manakkum singapur</i>	P. N. Pazhanivelu
35.	<i>Maragadha ilaividum</i>	Murugadason
36.	<i>Sengkathiron vaanatthai</i>	M. Illamaran
37.	<i>Chinnanjiru pinju ullam</i>	P. N. Pazhanivelu
38.	<i>Kondaaduvom</i>	Thangarasan
39.	<i>Kannan varugindraan</i>	Murugadason
40.	<i>Deepavalli</i>	M. Illamaran
41.	<i>Kalai pozhudu</i>	Murugadason
42.	<i>Kadhir mugam kaanum</i>	Iqbal
43.	<i>Poo pol malarndhadhu</i>	?
44.	<i>Megathiraiyinil</i>	M. Illamaran
45.	<i>Illayar samudhayam</i>	Iqbal
46.	<i>Seyarkkai elaam</i>	P. N. Pazhanivelu
47.	<i>Kanavil vandhu</i>	Iqbal
48.	<i>Engall thirunaadeh</i>	Iqbal
49.	<i>Kaatreh illangkaatreh</i>	Iqbal
50.	<i>Engengu paarthaalum</i>	M. Illamaran
51.	<i>Malargallileh</i>	Murugadason
52.	<i>Thesiya thirunaal</i>	M. Illamaran
53.	<i>Thaayeh singai thaayeh</i>	Murugadason
54.	<i>Arivu thellivu</i>	M. Illamaran
55.	<i>Malarum malargall</i>	Murugadason
56.	<i>Aha idhu enna viyappu</i>	M. Illamaran
57.	<i>Irubathi aiyndhandil (25 aandil)</i>	Murugadason
58.	<i>Arivu serindha illaya magal</i>	Iqbal
59.	<i>Naatiyam rasipadharkku</i>	Murugadason
60.	<i>Muthukall poothirukkum</i>	Murugadason
61.	<i>Azhagu pozhium</i>	Amaladasan
62.	<i>Anbukku ulagil</i>	Iqbal
63.	<i>Kadhiravan ezhundhaan</i>	Iqbal
64.	<i>Alai kadal valai veesi</i>	Mutthumanickam
65.	<i>Thaalaatum kadalalaigall</i>	Murugadason
66.	<i>Vanagam paadidum</i>	Murugadason
67.	<i>Vaanam vittu pohnadhadi</i>	Murugadason
68.	<i>Devi mugam malaroh</i>	Murugadason
69.	<i>Manamagalleh un manavarai kolam</i>	M. Illamaran
70.	<i>Vaan nilaavai naangu</i>	Murugadason
71.	<i>Ondreh ennam ondreh makkal</i>	Murugadason
72.	<i>Kaikai chiraginileh in Desh raga</i>	Subramanya Bharathi
73.	<i>Nallathor veenai in Saranga raga</i>	Subramanya Bharathi
74.	<i>Yaamarindha mozhigallileh in Gambira Naatai raga SSs</i>	Subramanya Bharathi
75.	<i>Varuvaai varuvaai in Shanmugapriya raga</i>	Subramanya Bharathi

Songs commissioned by UTV International, 1997

	TITLE	LYRICS
1.	<i>Alaiyai pohla aattam</i>	?
2.	<i>Kanji paanai sumandhu varum</i>	?
3.	<i>Pudhu chelai kattikittu</i>	?

Instrumental music album “Authentic India”, Sonoton Music Corporation, 1984, 1987

	TITLE
1.	<i>Garba</i>
2.	<i>Nirvana</i>
3.	<i>Madhuvanthi</i>
4.	Inner Harmony
5.	Ode to Nature
6.	<i>Kummi</i>
7.	Indian Reverie
8.	Wedding Bliss
9.	Fortune Teller
10.	<i>Karma</i>
11.	Naga Joys
12.	Indian Lullaby
13.	Penance
14.	Village Song
15.	Sunrise at Kanyakumari
16.	Harvest Joys
17.	<i>Muhurttham</i>
18.	Punjabi Love Song
19.	<i>Kathakalli</i>
20.	<i>Ajantha</i>
21.	Snake Charmer’s Tune 1
22.	Snake Charmer’s Tune 2
23.	Sitar Ecstasy
24.	Temple Music
25.	Sitar Romance
26.	Pipal Tree Romance
27.	Market Scene
28.	Fisherman’s Song
29.	Bullock Cart
30.	Contemplation
31.	Bombay by Night

References

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