

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC SCHOOL

By Neelika Goonetilleka

Australia's first Indian classical music school, *Sangeet Manjari* established by Sri Lankan born Ranjith Madurapperuma, is attracting students from all walks of life in the Canberra suburb of Kambah. The school which combines a unique blend of eastern and western music is the first of its kind in Australia and is to date an outstanding success.

The name '*Sangeet Manjari*' is Sanskrit and was given by *Narayanchi*, an Indian High Priest residing in Sydney. "Sangeet means music," explains Madurapperuma, "and Manjari is the pollen in the flower which is compared to me the teacher, or the school, from which the students or the bees gather their knowledge."

Sangeet Manjari is being supported by the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Eastern & Western Music. The Association was formed five years ago to integrate eastern and western music and promote it in the community. Instruments as diverse as violin, cello, guitar, esraj harmonium, sitar, keyboard, tabla and flute are taught at the school. Students will also be able to learn North Indian voice training, composition, ensemble and concert practice.

Indian classical music is an ancient art with a history extending over 2000 years. It began in the "beautiful and fanciful legends of gods and goddesses, who were supposed to be its authors and patrons," wrote Dr Swatantra Sharma in his book *Fundamentals of Indian Music*. It is said by Sharma that the music of Northern India has been subject to Persian and Arabic influence.

The most important feature in Indian classical music are the melody forms known as '*ragas*'. India's foremost sitarist Pandit Ravi Shankar in his book *My Music, My Life* describes a '*raga*' as, "the melodic basis of Indian Classical music on which the musicians improvise. Each *raga* has definite melodic qualities that distinguish it from all other *ragas*. It is assumed that *ragas* create an emotional impact on the listener".

It is an Indian classical student's ultimate accomplishment to be able to master 150 to 200 *ragas*, says Madurapperuma, although there are many more *ragas* than this. "There are over 4000 *ragas* and it is not possible to master all these in one lifetime," he says.

Madurapperuma's interest in music began in Sri Lanka, his motherland, when he was 10 years old. One of his school teachers had played the violin for a school concert and it was at this point in time that he felt inexplicably drawn to this particular instrument.

"My teacher was at the time staying at our neighbour's house and I could hear him playing the violin day after day, so I used to sneak over there while my mother was asleep in the afternoon, because she didn't approve of music, and only wanted me to study science," says Madurapperuma.

"I would listen for hours and finally thought I too would give it a try although I had never touched the instrument before," he laughs. "My teacher told me however that it wasn't easy to play, but I insisted. Almost magically I was able to play the next few bars of music that he had been playing, it was unbelievable."

When Ranjith got home his mother was waiting and he was reprimanded thoroughly for going next door which he says made him all the more determined to study music.

From there on it was just a matter of going where his heart led him. By the eighth grade Madurapperuma was able to play the violin, flute,

sitar, tabla, esraj and the *jalatharanga* (three octaves or 36 water-filled ceramic bowls in varying sizes producing different tones when played with a cane stick).

Later in life, Madurapperuma completed a Bachelor of Arts in Music at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. He also has degrees in Indian classical music from The University of Lucknow, in India, and Kelaniya University in Sri Lanka.

Today, Madurapperuma is a well-known musician in Sri Lanka. He has worked as a visiting lecturer in violin at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies in Colombo where he once studied himself. He has also represented Sri Lanka by performing abroad and was master in charge of the Sri Lanka Cadet Corps Oriental Band in 1984.

Madurapperuma came to Australia in 1993 to complete an Associate Diploma of Arts in Western Music at the Goulburn TAFE. It was a huge life change which required him to cash up all his life savings and move to a country where he knew no one. Madurapperuma did it because he needed a course which would lead to a Bachelor's Degree in Western Music. The decision to move has since payed off, with Madurapperuma gaining the knowledge he required in western music and founding *Sangeet Manjari*.

Mrs Farah Khan from Calcutta, is one of Madurapperuma's current students and also the Public Officer of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Western and Eastern Music in Canberra. "I actually learn Indian classical singing from him. I have been studying with Ranjith for about a year now and I thoroughly enjoy his classes. He is such a gifted teacher," says Khan.

Madurapperuma's expertise extends beyond Canberra and he says his pure love for what he teaches carries him through each day. "I teach in Sydney and the Blue Mountains as well," he says. "I have many students. In Sydney I visit homes and give individual classes as well as some group classes and in the Mountains I hold classes at the Christian Women's Association where I give individual tuition. At both places I teach a combination of voice, sitar, tabla and the flute amongst others."

One of Madurapperuma's admirers is Dr David Kelly, a senior lecturer in politics at the University of New South

Wales: "...he has got enormous cultural capital, he's a goldmine of knowledge," says Kelly. "Ranjith [Madurapperuma] represents an absolute bedrock of musical values, I just hope that he stays and continues to teach." ○

