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BIOGRAPHY OF W. D. AMARADEVA

In the little Sri Lankan coastal village of Koralawalla, Moratuwa, where fishermen sang as they went about their daily business, the boy who would become famous as Amaradeva was born on December 5, 1927. At birth, he was given the name Wannakuwattawaduge Don Albert Perera. He was the youngest of six children, four boys and two girls. His father, Wannakuwattawaduge Don Ginoris Perera, was a Buddhist, and his mother, Balapuwawaduge Maggie Wesliana Mendis, a Methodist. Although Maggie converted to Buddhism upon her marriage, she continued to attend church in the nearby village, often taking along the young Albert.

In this coastal village whose name means "seashore full of shells or corals," fishing and carpentry were the predominant occupations. The young Albert did his share of pulling fishing nets, while he listened to the songs of the fishermen. His father, though, was not a fisherman but the village's foremost carpenter and a skilled woodcarver.

W. D. Ginoris Perera also made violins and repaired them. All the music teachers in the village brought their damaged violins to him. On his youngest child's seventh birthday, he gifted the boy with a violin he himself had carved. It was Albert's first violin. W. D. Ginoris Perera was not content with making and repairing violins, however; he also taught himself to play the instrument. Although he had no training in classical music, he had a gift for playing songs of the native theater by ear.

Amaradeva recalls that his mother had a sweet and melodious voice and liked to sing or hum Christian hymns. Although she never taught him how to sing, he would listen to her as she sang. He learned more Christian hymns by going with his mother to her village and attending church there with her and his uncles and cousins.

In just a few years, Albert was not only singing Buddhist devotional songs and Christian hymns, he was also playing the violin. He expanded his repertoire of songs after his eldest brother, W. D. Charles Perera, a carpenter and music teacher, taught him what he had learned from M. G. Perera, who ran a music school in Colombo. M. G. Perera was then the foremost Sri Lankan exponent of the North Indian *ragadhari* tradition, the classical Indian music used in ancient times to entertain the royal court. He had brought books in Sanskrit from India to Sri Lanka and translated them into Sinhala and had also written books of his own on vocal technique.

In the 1930s, an operatic theater group known as the Baliwala Theater Company from Gujarat in India came to Sri Lanka for performances and left a tremendous impact, particularly on *nurthi,* or drama songs. It was the Baliwala that exposed Sri Lankans to beautiful melodies for the first time, says Amaradeva. Before the theater company came to his country, he explains, Sri Lankans had only "folk drama, folk songs, folklore and folk literature, workaday songs, fishermen's songs, and harvesting and cutting and all that. There was no system of music."

Sri Lankan playwrights such as John Silva and Charles Dias were inspired to write dramas themselves, but except for Vishwanath Lawji of the Baliwala Theater Company, there were no musicians to set them to music. Lawji composed melodies for Sinhala lyrics.

Amaradeva cites Bengali music—Bengali melodies with Sinhala lyrics—as another early influence on him.

Amaradeva had an early start as a musical performer. He joined two carol choruses, one Christian and the other Buddhist, and many local recitals. At the age of eight, as a pupil at the Sri Saddharmodaya Buddhist Mixed School, he debuted as a violinist at the Vag Vardhana Hall in his hometown. He rendered "Khamaj," a popular *raga* that Charles had taught him. In his school, there was a music teacher named W. J. Fernando who was so impressed with Amaradeva's talent that he would sometimes ask the boy to take over his class.

While at the Buddhist Mixed School, Amaradeva was exposed to various Indo-Aryan languages—Sanskrit, Pali, Sinhala—as well as to English, through the headmaster K. J. Perera, a disciple of Munidasa Kumaratunga, a great linguist and poet. Together, the headmaster and the thirteen-year-old boy would cross a river by boat to get to Kumaratunga's house. Once there, Amaradeva would listen to Sinhala poetry and other literary classics, and sometimes would be asked to sing some of the verses. Kumaratunga taught him the power of language and encouraged him to arrange melodies for some classical Sinhala poetry and for his own verses. Says Amaradeva today, "That is how, as a musician, I developed my sensitivity towards languages."

At the time, the department of education had recently introduced music to the curriculum and there was a dearth of music teachers. The nearby schools, hearing about Amaradeva's musical talent, enticed him with offers of scholarships. He chose Sri Sumangala College in the neighboring village of Panadura. The school was named after a Buddhist monk but the medium of instruction was English.

Amaradeva later attended Siddhartha College in the coastal village of Balapitiya. In the next two years, he won prizes at the annual Samastha Lanka Kala Tharangaya competition for chanting Buddhist *gatha* (chants) and for singing. Two years later, when he was seventeen, he gave a solo violin recital in Moratuwa and won a gold medal. An observer commented that the violin had become almost like a toy in the teenager's hands. In 1945, he impressed the panel that conducted the first examination of the Lanka Ghandarva Sabha, the music society that pioneered *ragadhari* music in Sri Lanka. That same year, he began a career as a radio broadcaster, sometimes playing his own compositions.

Young Amaradeva also found his way into the film industry. The famous Sri Lankan director Lester James Peiris commissioned him to compose the theme song for the movie *Ran Salu* (*The Yellow Robes*). Albert came up with "Siripa Piyume" (Lord Buddha's Feet Are Like a Lotus), a meditative song that won for him an award for best music. He also composed the musical score for the film, which to this day is remembered as a landmark in both devotional and film music. Peiris subsequently collaborated with Amaradeva on several other films. In an article titled "Our Country's Gift to the World of Music," Peiris wrote that their collaboration "has been among the happier experiences in an industry where fractured relationships, smoldering animosities, and imaginary conflicts are so common."

Here is Peiris's "snapshot" of Amaradeva at work, from the same article: "He would sit quietly in a corner watching you and listening to you with intense concentration. You as the director would discuss the story of your film, expatiate on its theme and characters, give indications of where you felt music would help most. There he would sit, a gentle smile on his face, the flicker of irony lighting up the eyes, but the gaze would be focused somewhere slightly off you . . . as though he was looking at something else, wrapped up in his own private dream, concentrating on an inner vision to which you had no access, hearing melodies and patterns of sound which he was, at least for the moment, unwilling to share."

Of Amaradeva's personal qualities, what Peiris admired most was "his great, unflappable, unruffled equanimity, serene almost to a point where you begin to wonder whether he quite belongs to our other more mundane world of petty squabbles over fees, contracts, deadlines, recording schedules, etc."

Amaradeva's work caught the attention of Mohamed Ghouse, a musical maestro from Bangalore with a gift for spotting young talent. Ghouse was the music director of the Columbia Recording Orchestra. He had come to Sri Lanka as part of a drama company and decided to make his home there. Before long, Amaradeva was playing for Ghouse's orchestra, which was recording for Columbia. It was Ghouse who gave young Albert Perera a break as a vocalist, and quite by accident. Ghouse was supervising the recording of "Rasai Kiri" (Pure Tasty Milk), a popular Bengali duet. Albert was the violinist. When the male singer repeatedly fumbled his part, the recording technician threatened to quit, forcing Ghouse to replace the singer with Albert. He got the song right on the very first take. It was Amaradeva's first recording.

In 1946, Ghouse invited Albert to go with him to India and be the violinist of his orchestra for the first Sinhala movie, *Asokamala,* a production of the Ceylon Theater Company. (Asokamala is the name of the film's heroine.) The film marked Amaradeva's debut as a singer and composer, and as an actor as well. He was assigned a minor role as a hermit. He not only sang two songs, he also assisted Ghouse in composing the interludes and introductions for the songs in the movie. To his great delight, his name appeared in the credits as assistant music director. He was nineteen years old.

Following the making of *Asokamala,* Amaradeva returned to school, but left again shortly afterward to pursue a career in music. He joined other, older artists who had flocked to the house of a well-known choreographer and dancer named Chitrasena, who had studied under Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore. Chitrasena had a large house with a garden, a gift from a wealthy philanthropist and art lover named E. P. A. Fernando. In that artistic haven, where people who were unrelated to one another lived like family, guests constantly arrived to join the residents at mealtime.

Amaradeva, the youngest of the group, basked in the company of pioneer musicians like Ananda Samarakoon, Sunil Santha, Prema Kumar, and Shesha Palihakkara. They would all leave their mark on the music he would subsequently create. Samarakoon, a well-known painter and musician who was inspired by Tagore, composed the Sri Lankan national anthem. Sunil Santha, a popular vocalist and composer of beautiful melodies, would invite Amaradeva to accompany him on his violin. It was also at Chitrasena's house that Amaradeva was introduced to South Asian dance.

Among the other artists he met at this time was Dr. Ediriwira Sarachchandra, who had started a revival of traditional music through research programs on radio and the stage. Sarachchandra liked to discover and develop talented young people, and he had already heard Amaradeva's radio performances. Known as the Father of Modern Sri Lankan Theater, Sarachchandra commissioned Amaradeva to compose music for his plays. He also asked him to be one of the music instructors of the Sarasavi Mela, an art society being organized at the University of Colombo. For a play produced by the university's Drama Circle, Amaradeva composed and sang "Shantha Me Re Yame" (Peaceful Moonlit Night), which became a big hit and started a trend for a new type of Sinhala song. His fame spread quickly and he became sought after as a composer and scorer for ballets. He also worked with Prema Kumar, a renowned dancer and choreographer who also lived at Chitrasena's home.

Sarachchandra soon found that he and Amaradeva worked well together. They went out to various parts of the country in search of inspiration for new theater songs. Amaradeva would jot down notes as they listened to *nurthi* songs, and Sarachchandra would fit them

into his dramas. Amaradeva wrote songs for many of Sarachchandra's plays, including *Vessanthara*, *Lomahamsa*, *Pabavathi*, and *Bhawakadaturawa*, all of which had Buddhist themes.

In 1952, Sri Krishna Narayan Ratanjankar, principal of the Bhathkande Institute of Music in Lucknow, came to Sri Lanka for Radio Ceylon's first serious audition of artists. Upon hearing Amaradeva, the professor rated him a super-grade, an honor bestowed on only one other artist in the entire country. Not only was the professor enthusiastic about admitting Amaradeva to his school, he also said that the young man would skip the first two years and go straight to the third year.

Amaradeva did not have to worry about finances. D. B. Dhanapala, an editor at the newspaper *Lanka Deepa,* launched an Amaradeva Scholarship Fund. He had heard Amaradeva recite a few poems and decided that the boy deserved further training. Like Sarachchandra, Dhanapala was convinced that exposure to Indian classical music and its discipline would help young Amaradeva realize his full potential. Amaradeva had earlier told Sarachchandra that his dream was to go to India to study its classical music but that his father could not afford to send him there.

The scholarship fund drew contributions from people all over Sri Lanka, even from those in remote villages. Ordinary folk sent in two rupees, while a woman named Somi Meegama, who admired Sarachchandra, contributed enough money to cover a full year's tuition.

The meaning of the scholarship fund was not lost on Amaradeva. Years later, he would say, "I would call myself truly a people's artist. Because when I went to India to study music, it was with the money of many people here that I could go, which made my education possible."

Amaradeva was popularly known as "Albert Perera," but shortly before he left for India, he received this advice from Sarachchandra: "You will have much to offer this country when you come back. Everything should be done towards that end. A name goes a long way in this country. Change yours. You will also be known outside the country as one who represents our culture. Change your name to Amaradeva (the god of immortality)." To his admirers, the new name symbolized his transition to immortality.

In 1953, Amaradeva enrolled at the Bhathkande Institute of Music for a five-year course leading to a bachelor's degree in vocal and instrumental music. Professor Ratanjankar made sure the new student would get the best violin teacher at the school, and so Amaradeva came under the tutelage of Padma Bhushan (Maestro) Vishnu Govinda Jog, who for over forty years had been the foremost performer of *raga*. Such was the Pandit's faith in his pupil that he made Amaradeva sit on the stage and accompany him during his recitals. Visharad P. Dunstan de Silva writes of one event: "Amaradeva did not let down his guru but demonstrated his class as an accomplished player. Occasionally, through youthful exuberance and lack of patience, he almost disturbed his master's planned exposition of the *raga* by flashes from the violin, but Jog Sahab, the great maestro that he was, tranquilized Amaradeva by replying in the same vein and brought the situation under control."

Amaradeva became Pandit Jog's favorite disciple. In addition to his formal classes, the maestro gave him private lessons. He even named one of his grandchildren after his student. Amaradeva recalls, "There is something I remember about my guru. When I visited his home for the first time, it was winter. I had only a cloth around my shoulders. When I sat in front of him to learn, he looked at me for a while, took off his coat and put it around my shoulders. It was only after that that he gave the violin to my hands."

As the principal had promised, Amaradeva skipped the first two years of college. He ranked first in order of merit and in 1955 won first place in a nationwide violin competition

in India. Although still a student, he performed at several Indian music festivals and was lavishly praised for both his vocal and instrumental performances. These activities, in addition to his studies, kept him so busy that he returned to Sri Lanka only during the summer.

In mid-1953, when Amaradeva's father died, the school's board of trustees decided against informing him because he was just then taking his first examinations. He missed the funeral. However, he had a premonition of his father's passing. The night before his father's death, he dreamed that his mother was taking the train but his father was going in the opposite direction.

In Lucknow, Amaradeva learned the different schools and styles of *raga*. His teachers taught him various techniques of singing it and improvising on it. The Indian *raga* system is unique in the history of music because, as Sarachchandra explained in a lecture years ago, "It exploits the entire potential of melody, enriching it with complex rhythms so that we are provided with an area of musical experience unlike any other." Unlike the Western scale that has twelve tones—seven pure tones and five semitones—the Indian scale has twenty-two quarter tones in addition to the semitones in the Western octave. "At some point in history," Sarachchandra concluded, "the West decided to go along the path of harmony while the Indian chose melody."

In the 1940s, before Sri Lanka (or Ceylon, as it was then known) became an independent state, there was no distinction between purely Sri Lankan, or Sinhalese music, and Indian music. The former was thought of as part of Greater Indian culture, drawing heavily from India, where most Sri Lankan musicians had been educated and trained. New art forms subsequently came in from the West, and so Portuguese lullabies and Christian hymns joined North Indian *raga*s and Buddhist *gatha*s as part of the island's musical heritage.

After independence, however, Sri Lankan artists began to agitate for their own distinct form of music and the revival of their indigenous traditions. The clamor for the preservation of Sinhalese folk songs peaked in the late 1940s, a period sometimes referred to as the cultural renaissance of Sri Lanka. In their search for the country's authentic music, the artists went back to the music of their fisherfolk, miners, and farmers—songs sung at harvest time or at sea and during rituals and dances.

Amaradeva recalls that the kind of music being broadcast at the time was mostly Bengali songs with Sinhala lyrics. At first, according to Sarachchandra, Amaradeva himself sang in the Bengali style, but later on he absorbed folk music and began to experiment with it. It was Pandit Ratanjankar who led Sri Lanka's musical artists to turn to Buddhist chants and popular folk songs and encouraged them to experiment. Doing so, they realized that, indeed, embedded in their native culture, was a wealth of authentic Sri Lankan music going back some two thousand years.

As the movement toward authentic Sri Lankan music intensified, Amaradeva was quoted as saying, "It is here that our roots lie and we must go back to our roots, to the village and the hamlet, in search of evolving songs and music in keeping with our culture and our ethos." He composed his own songs and sang them. He wrote *vannam*s, or songs to accompany dances that imitate the movement of animals, such as the rabbit, and birds, such as the hawk. Eventually, however, he returned to classical *raga*s but was not enslaved by them. In fact, said Sarachchandra, "he had so much mastery over them that he was able to make the *raga* system his slave."

Two years before his graduation from Bhathkande Institute of Music, Amaradeva joined the poet and lyricist Madawela Ratnayake in producing for Radio Ceylon a series of programs aimed at recovering the national idiom of Sri Lankan music. The two men visited remote villages in search of authentic folksongs. "It was an exciting period of experimentation and innovation," says Amaradeva. The series, dubbed *Jana Gayana* (Songs

of the People), represented the first creative attempts by Sri Lankans to develop an indigenous musical structure based on folk music. It proved to be a successful experiment. One critic praised it as “the first attempt at bringing the Sinhala folk song to the Sinhala drawing room,” meaning to the private homes of Sri Lanka’s elite in the capital city of Colombo. Music that had never been heard outside the village was now being broadcast for the entire country to hear. Amaradeva recalls: “Melodies I created began coming over the air to the homes of the country’s intellectuals. The learned community began to realize that something was happening with the music.”

In 1957, while on holiday from the institute, Amaradeva joined Chitrasena in the production of a ballet, *Saama Vijaya* (Triumph of Peace), and then proceeded to Moscow and Prague for performances of the ballet sponsored by the World Peace Council. Upon returning to Chitrasena’s studio, he became involved in another Chitrasena production, *Karadiya* (Ocean), a ballet about a fisherman. Having grown up in a fishing village, Amaradeva had only to recall the folk songs of the fisherfolk from his childhood. Mahagama Sekera, the brilliant Sinhala poet, wrote the lyrics for the ballet’s theme song, which Amaradeva composed. Their collaboration, according to one critic, was “a unique landmark in the media history of our country. [It] elevated the plane of music from a state of denatured banality to a sublime superior plane of aesthetic significance.”

Karadiya won international acclaim, and Amaradeva was widely praised for having captured the “symphony of the ocean” in his music for the ballet. A leading authority in Sri Lankan music called it the greatest score ever written in the country.

Pandit Jog wanted Amaradeva to remain in India after he completed his five-year course at Lucknow. Pandit Ratanjankar advised him to go to Nagpur and there earn a living teaching music. Amaradeva, however, insisted on going home, filled as he was by a sense of mission and gratitude to the people who had funded his education. He now knew much more about music—the theoretical and the practical, the classical and the popular.

In 1959, Sri Lanka’s new Ministry of Cultural Affairs sent the country’s first cultural delegation composed of dancers, singers, and musicians to India. Among its members was Amaradeva. He welcomed the challenge of going back to India, this time to represent “the music of my country.” Also part of the delegation was a young woman who sang and danced beautifully. Her name was Wimala Guneratne. Upon meeting her, Amaradeva exclaimed that he had found not only the most “skillful singer” but also that “authentic balance” that would give him the inspiration to compose the music he had been looking for. He was delighted to discover that they were born on the same date, she in 1934.

Wimala became his wife in 1962 and has been his constant companion since. They have two daughters, Priyanvada (meaning “sweet words”) and Subhanie (“beautiful voice”), and a son, Ranjana, all of whom have inherited their parents’ musical gifts. Today, Priyanvada is a *katak* dancer and guitar and sitar player; Subhanie, a singer; and Ranjana, a percussionist. Priyanvada is also a lecturer at the Alliance Française in Colombo.

Amaradeva resumed his career at Radio Ceylon in 1959. Accepting an invitation to lead its Sinhala Musical Orchestra, he wrote pieces that to this day are said to be unmatched for their sheer artistry and composition. An American composer and conductor who went to Sri Lanka and worked with Amaradeva was so impressed by the latter’s skill that he called him one of the fastest musical brains he had ever encountered. It was a pity, the American said, that Amaradeva was hidden away in a tiny corner of the world, with no opportunities to challenge him.

Amaradeva also resumed working with Mahagama Sekera upon his return to Sri Lanka. Following the advice of Sarachchandra, who was also at Radio Ceylon, Amaradeva and

Mahagama Sekera composed music for a number of programs. They also started a program called *Madhuvanthi,* named after a romantic *raga,* which allowed Amaradeva to be more creative with Sinhala music than he had been with *Jana Gayana.* As he explains, "If 'Jana Gayana' laid the foundation, 'Madhuvanthi' raised the superstructure for a national form of music." One music writer said of Amaradeva's work at the time, "Amaradeva continuously sought to bring a western elegance and finish to the treatment of Sinhala music."

Recalling *Jana Gayana* and this period in general, Amaradeva invokes Joseph Machlis's discussion of "national music" in his book, *Enjoyment of Music*: "Melodic line follows the natural inflexion of the language and the speech patterns of a nation. . . . It is for this reason that the vocal lines of Brahms seem so German, Steven Foster so American, Franz Lizst so Hungarian and Stravinsky so Russian." Similarly, says Amaradeva, "I thought, why not base my creations on Sinhala folk lyrics, in the search for an indigenous idiom of music for Sri Lanka?"

In this connection, he says, "I was fortunate to associate with the great poets of modern Sri Lanka—Munidasa Cumaratunge, Chandraratne Manavasinghe, Ediriweera [Ediriwira] Sarachchandra, Madawela S. Ratnayake, and Mahagama Sekera." It was with Mahagama Sekera in particular that Pandit Amaradeva says he enjoyed one of his most fruitful collaborations. (He speaks of "the great musicality of Mahagama Sekera's lyrics." Mahagama Sekera, in turn, said "Amaradeva's melodies take lyrics to the heart of the listener.") Amaradeva recalls how, together, they composed the theme song "Siripa Piyume" for the film *Ran Salu*. The two of them were on a hilltop near the village of Ambepussa. Mahagama Sekera suggested certain words, Amaradeva offered melodic lines; then Amaradeva suggested words and Mahagama Sekera modified the tune—and so on, back and forth, until the song was finally accomplished. People referred to the famous Mahagama Sekera–Amaradeva collaboration as "Gee Potha and Mee Witha," meaning a "book of poems and a glass of nectar."

Amaradeva's other significant collaborators included the filmmaker Lester James Peiris, the dramatist and poet Sarachchandra, and dancer-choreographer Chitrasena—each one a Sri Lankan pioneer during this period of national creative ferment.

The country's artists were divided about how to define exactly what Sri Lankan music should be. The purists wanted to promote Sinhala folk music, while the classicists preferred to uphold the classical Indian tradition. The melodic range of Sri Lankan folk music was limited; it really could not become the only basis for the building of a broad-based musical tradition. The question before them was: Should Sri Lanka blindly follow the Indian tradition and ignore its own folk music?

Amaradeva provided the answer. His music gave direction and vigor to the cultural renaissance of his country. He began to arrange and perform indigenous folk songs, fusing them with Indian *raga*s and elevating simple tunes to more sophisticated compositions. His experiments introduced a new dimension to the search for a national musical idiom in Sri Lanka and pleased both those who disliked folk songs and those who disliked Indian classical music: it was an original musical form. To his contemporary musicians, this was an eye-opener. Describing Amaradeva's creative process, Suwanda Sugunasiri has written that "he was fully aware that [Sinhala folk music such as *pirit*, *nadagam*, and *vannam*] was limited in its notational spectrum. . . . He would sing a Sinhala folk tune . . . but then would add a second section . . . based on a relevant and carefully chosen raga." But Amaradeva's accomplishment was much more than simply combining the two styles. In the words of musician and composer H. H. Bandara, what he achieved was a "synthesis—a fusion—of all the characteristics of Sinhala folk music on a much wider spectrum." In his hands, the *raga* itself was transformed to complement the Sinhala folk idiom. Sometimes he abandoned the *raga*s altogether. Moreover, Amaradeva's "fusion" also included Western influences,

both in composition and instrumentation. One example is his score for Chitrasena's ballet *Karadiya*.

Amaradeva was tireless in his experimentation and refused to define boundaries for his work. He worked with Western as well as South Indian and Tamil musical forms and mastered both folk music and the *raga*. He and Mahagama Sekera, then a scriptwriter for Radio Ceylon, explored ways to incorporate classical Sinhala poetry with the new music. Eventually, Amaradeva's music became a reflection of an entire spectrum of borrowed and indigenous influences—Buddhist chants and folk tunes and rhythms, songs associated with dance, drama, ritual, and social customs—a synthesis that was uniquely Sri Lankan and, at the same time, original and personal.

Amaradeva borrows from Mahatma Gandhi to explain the force that drove his musical experiments: "I want cultures of all lands to blow into my house as freely as possible but I refuse to be blown off my feet." He also heeded Rabindranath Tagore: "The greatness of the Genius is his amazing capacity to borrow, mostly being aware of it. He has unlimited credit in the world market of culture. It is the mediocre who is afraid and ashamed of borrowing for he cannot pay them back in his own coin."

"I have borrowed," Amaradeva says, "but I have paid back in my own coin. I have found through my own humble experiments and experiences that it is not difficult to retain one's individuality and national tradition while creatively assimilating various elements of other music systems."

In 1962, Amaradeva composed the music for yet another ballet by Chitrasena, *Nala Damayanthi,* which depicts a story from the *Mahabharata*. Again he worked with Mahagama Sekera on a theme song. A critic described Amaradeva's music for this ballet as "something out of this world." The ballet was shown in Australia and several other countries, giving Amaradeva and Chitrasena a chance to travel together. The international publicity generated by the tour led to an invitation from the government of the Maldives in 1971 for Amaradeva to compose that country's national anthem.

Mahagama Sekera was not the only influence on Amaradeva's work. Amaradeva credits India's Ali Akhbar Khan and the classical musician Ravi Shankar, to whom he is often compared, for helping him become a virtuoso.

In later years, critics showered Amaradeva with glowing praise. Said one: "The name of Amaradeva has become virtually synonymous with Sinhala music in the second half of the twentieth century. His songs occupy a position in Sinhala culture analogous to that held by Tagore in Bengali culture. He has inspired countless younger musicians and entertained a nation." Wrote another: "To speak of Amaradeva is to speak of an epoch in Sinhala music—an era that has witnessed, and some say, even heralded, the transition from Indian influence to the emergence of a robust music with distinctive national characteristics."

Once, at a private performance at the Indian high commissioner's residence, Amaradeva met Suchitra Mitra, a leading exponent of the songs of Rabindranath Tagore. They performed a few songs together at the guests' request and Mitra was so moved by his singing that she said, "Amaradeva just goes on singing in perfect 'Sur' and 'Tal' ('tone' and 'rhythm') and music gushes out of his throat like water from a fountain!"

At another private performance, a European couple was observed to have been so enchanted by Amaradeva's playing that they moved from the fringe of the audience to the front. At the end of the show, they were asked why there were watching his hands so keenly. They explained that they had seen and heard many brilliant players all over the world but this was the first time a violinist had so effectively combined the playing techniques of West and East.

In 1977, a special concert was held in Colombo to mark Amaradeva's fiftieth birthday.

Judith Karp, a contributing editor of *Paris Metro*, sat in on one rehearsal and later wrote: "A violinist myself, I was enthralled by the personality he gave the instrument. In the West, the violin leads the orchestra: it is soloist, royalty. In Amaradeva's hands it became a confidante. He sat cross-legged and rested the scroll on his foot with his cheek on the instrument so it became almost an embrace." Karp noted further that Amaradeva invited his audience to come closer because he wanted to tell them about his feelings and he needed in turn to feel their response.

Another music critic, Anwar Iqbal, wrote of an Amaradeva performance: "Amaradeva was not merely playing, it seemed as if he was explaining to the audience what it was all about, with the help of his instrument (voice) without using a single word."

Interviewed on his fiftieth birthday, Amaradeva said:

> *True, people differ from each other in their respective ways of responding to music. But let me tell you that learning to appreciate music starts by listening to music itself. But knowledge alone in music is insufficient for one needs to understand the inner nature of allied subject areas. The appreciation of music can thus be trained scientifically and continuously. . . .*
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> *The appreciation of music does not merely mean the appreciation of words or the verbal patterns of a particular composition. This dissection is no good. The appreciation is a total experience. At a particular moment the appreciation of music may mean that it transcends the appreciation of words and commences to appreciate the higher form that transcends the mere word. Thus it would be fitting to say that music truly commences when the communication through the word ends.*

At the same time that he was performing and writing, Amaradeva was also teaching. He taught at the Sri Jawardhnapura University, the University of Peradeniya, and at the State College of Music, where he also served as principal. He was an effective lecturer who could command the attention of young musicians. At one point, his pupils paid tribute to him with a three-hour show during which they sang old songs, including some of his own compositions. Amaradeva gave up teaching only when it started to take too much time away from his creative work.

Amaradeva has also served at various times as controller of music research in the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (as Radio Ceylon has been renamed) and as a consultant to the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, the Ministry of Education, and the Mahaweli Authority.

Recognition has come often to Amaradeva. In 1986, he received the Kala Keerthi, a presidential award and one of Sri Lanka's highest prizes for achievement in the arts. In 1988, he was accorded the state's literary award for outstanding contributions to literature through music and, the following year, the best miscellaneous writing in music award. In 1995, the Sarvodaya Trust Fund honored him with the National Award for the Advancement of Humanity, Development, and Peace through Music and Art. In 1998, on the fiftieth anniversary of Sri Lanka's independence, he received the Bunka Award from the Japan-Sri Lanka Friendship Cultural Fund. That same year, he was given the title "Deshamanya," Sri Lanka's highest civilian award.

Amaradeva has three honorary degrees: doctor in philosophy (Fine Arts) from the University of Kelaniya, in 1991; doctor of literature from the University of Ruhuna, in 1993;

and doctor of letters from the University of Peradeniya, in 1998. It is this most recent honorary degree that Amaradeva values most, coming as it does from his country's first and leading university. It was a recognition not only of his stature as Sri Lanka's leading composer and vocalist but also of what a critic describes as "the intellectual richness and depth of his musical knowledge and how deftly he has applied this to produce a vast corpus of . . . outstandingly popular" art songs.

Over the years, three leaders of his country have honored Amaradeva. Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa conferred on him the title "Kalasuri," which means maestro of music or master of arts. J. R. Jayewardene gave him the title "Kalakirthi," meaning "famous in arts." State honors have also been awarded to him by President Chandrika Kumaratunga Bandaranaike.

Amaradeva is also the first Sri Lankan to be honored by his Indian alma mater, Bhathkande, with the title of "Pandit" for his outstanding contributions to the development of creative music in his country. The recognition was given to him following his performance at the institute, sponsored by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

Amaradeva continues to be an eager student who enhances his knowledge of music by studying, he says, the "various branches of music in Europe, China and Japan." As Lester James Peiris has noted: "Wide-eyed and fascinated by his surroundings, he finds inspiration in nature and people, yet he contains his thoughts until asked for them. Like a child, he prefers to ask questions and listens carefully to the answers. Amaradeva struck me less as a celebrated personality than as a poet sequestered in a world of dreams."

Besides raving about his gifts as a musical artist, people who meet and hear Amaradeva perform invariably remark on his humility and his ability to listen. Edwin Ariyadasa writes in an article titled "Amaradeva—Sri Lanka's Golden Voice": "With all this Amaradeva remains first and foremost a human being, though of extraordinary talents. The publicity, the general adulation, the limitless fan following, the praises, compliments and honors endlessly heaped upon him have not diminished his humanity a bit. Amaradeva the man is as impressive as Amaradeva the national musical genius. There is hardly any other person of eminence who is distinguished by as remarkable a discipline to listen, as Amaradeva is. In a world where everyone is in a hurry to speak his piece, Amaradeva is prepared to listen with more than two ears . . . this perhaps explains why he has been able to elevate the rhythms of common speech and folk recitals into sophisticated modern melodies."

Of his ability to listen well, Amaradeva once said: "In all creative activities, I believe, the creative genius always thinks of the presence of an ideal *rasika* . . . (or) in the case of music, 'the ideal listener.' No doubt an individual composer can create music for his own enjoyment, but always an idea of one or more listeners is hidden somewhere in his mind. In the activity of creation, therefore, we can see an element of communication."

At the age of seventy-nine, Amaradeva shows no sign of slowing down. Every morning, as soon as he awakes, his first instinct is to start practicing. Performing, he says, makes it easier for him to compose. He has invented an instrument called the *mandoharp,* a mandolin with eight strings. In April and May 2000, he performed in major cities of the United States. He followed up that U.S. tour with concerts in Canada in July, dubbed "Amara Gee Sara," meaning "immortal voice." These concerts were sponsored by such organizations as the Buddhist Vihara Society in British Columbia and the Sri Lanka–Canada Friendship Association of Edmonton in Canada. Two years earlier, the Sri Lankan Graduates' Forum organized a concert of his best-loved songs in London as part of the program of events in celebration of Sri Lanka's fiftieth year of independence in 1998.

Writing about the concert in London, a critic observed: "For thousands of Sri Lankans living abroad specially, his music has often brought nostalgic and often poignant memories

of the motherland. This son of the soil is truly a gift of the gods to the nation."

In an article in 1999 titled "Giving Tongue to a Nation's Soul," Ajith Samaranayake explained Amaradeva's appeal to both the ordinary school child and the most sophisticated listener: "He has discovered the golden mean between the two and, without breaching the walls of high culture so that the popular hordes would trample through the garden, has nevertheless been able to open up the enclosed garden so that the ordinary *rasika* can taste the sweetest fruits plucked from its trees."

Those who hope to find a social dimension in Amaradeva's music will be disappointed. He has stated that he does not believe it is the function of art to promote a social mission. Dr. Carlo Fonseka has said of Amaradeva: "He is an aesthete and concentrates on aesthetics. He does not believe that a song should enter the sphere of politics." The only ideology that Amaradeva wants to preach and practice is the appreciation of pure music. He says, "I consider music as the finest of the fine arts and the language of emotion—the art of combining sounds with a view to beauty of form and expression of emotion. The finest feeling that you grasp in your life, you express in music."

At the beginning of the new millennium, Amaradeva said, "I thought of rebuilding my image as a musician, mainly as a violinist. What I want to do is to guide the younger generation (to have) better taste. To guide them from the known to the unknown. Pure music is something unknown to our society. As a humanist, I think I can guide them from known songs to the unknown pure music." Goethe is right, he says. "Music begins where words end."

He clarifies that although he has become famous for his golden voice, he is first and foremost a violinist. The violin, he says, "is my first love." He is saddened that Sri Lanka lacks a strong tradition of instrumental music, which to him is the pure form of music. "It is not that songs are an inferior manifestation. A good song, with compatible words and music, could be eternal, as I think good music should be. It too can create an emotion, a particular nuance of feeling that can be created by pure music . . . [but] I feel that instrumental music is really the more sophisticated form and universal form of music."

Amaradeva has written more than a thousand songs, which are now on audiotapes and compact discs, a far cry from the gramophone records of his early years. He still performs on the radio and, today, also on television. He delights in helping to launch the careers of new artists and musicians and has started a foundation using as seed money a trust fund that the government opened in his name. He hopes, he says, to give scholarships to gifted students every year. Looking back at the path he has traveled, he muses, "I find that God has been watching my steps. He has seen the work I have been doing with much sacrifice. . . . It is Providence. It is the hand of God that is at work."

Lester James Peiris has written that Amaradeva's voice is "the greatest musical instrument we have in this country." Ediriwira Sarachchandra echoed that sentiment when he called his friend "Sri Lanka's most beloved singer . . . the voice that speaks to the very heart of the nation."

Lorna Kalaw-Tirol

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