

CHITRA POORNIMA SATHISH

CHITRA POORNIMA SATHISH (b. 1986) is a Carnatic musician who is deeply passionate about igniting a love for the arts in the young and to make the learning of Carnatic music more joyful and meaningful for them. Her artistic experiences sculpt her vision and inspire her to create music rooted in traditional values, and yet is constantly evolving.

Chitra's journey began when she was a student at the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA) Singapore, where she is now a teacher and valuable contributor to the institution's performances as well as academic and community endeavours. At TFA, Chitra's labour of love has been curating the Shantanjali Festival of Arts (SFA), from crafting the overall festival line-up to coordinating with artists and organising workshops. Since its inception in 2014, and completing four successful years, SFA has brought together diverse Singaporean artists and arts groups, providing them with a space for collaboration, dialogue and exchange.

Composing music for dance is Chitra's passion and a craft she has been honing consistently. She has created original music, co-composed or collaborated with both local and international artists, such as 'Agathi' (2017) by Apsaras Arts Dance Company, and 'I am Ravana' (2019), choreographed by artist Mavin Khoo for Akram Khan Company. She has also performed extensively in prestigious venues worldwide including The Esplanade, Singapore, The Music Academy and Mylapore Fine Arts Club, Chennai, Shanmukhananda Hall, Mumbai, and Sadler's Wells, London.

Chitra completed her Master in Education (Music) at the National Institute of Education (NIE) in 2021. She has been invited by NIE to teach Indian Classical music to graduate students. These opportunities are valuable to Chitra, allowing her to have a dialogue with music educators from varying backgrounds. This has helped deepen her inquiry into how she can contribute to Carnatic music education in Singapore.

Upon completing her graduation in Carnatic Music from TFA in 2001, Chitra was conferred the title "Ghaanavinodhini". Armed with the National Arts Council (NAC) Arts Scholarship in 2009, Chitra continued her training in India. She is the recipient of the Musiri Subramania Iyer Award for her performance at Sri Krishna Gana Sabha's Music Festival in Chennai in 2012.



Teaching children how to strum the tambura at the 'Music is Joy Workshop', Bangalore, 2012

Photo courtesy of Ranga Shankara



A CONVERSATION WITH CHITRA POORNIMA SATHISH

Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts. Who or what were your key influences in Carnatic music?

The hymns of my spiritual guru were my very first encounter with music, and they continue to be a repository of music and knowledge for me.

I started learning Carnatic music formally at Temple of Fine Arts (TFA) Singapore. Growing up in a space that reverberates with art, music, dance, and rhythm has left a lasting imprint on me. My first teacher, Rajalakshmi Sekar, was so patient in helping me absorb the intricate nuances of Carnatic music. I used to go to class directly after school, and knowing this, she would always have some food for me so that I could energise myself before commencing lessons. Her kindness and thoughtfulness moved me, and allowed me to embrace music.



Solo concert at Mylapore Fine Arts, Chennai, India, 2013
Photo courtesy of Swathi Sathish

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in your artistic journey, and how did you overcome them?

The biggest challenge is that the more I learn, the larger the music seems, and the more I feel I do not know much. It is daunting at every stage, but my teachers have held my hand and helped me shed any fear. My teacher Bombay Jayashri would say, “Take music as a friend, and spend time with it. Invest in it. It would give back to you many times over.” Her words have always given me strength.

Another challenge has been finding my own voice and honouring my distinct identity. It is easier to follow the crowd or pursue a more attractive path. The road less travelled is scary. I also find social media often misleading and pressurising. The voices of so many, though well intended, are also difficult to navigate. It is always more rewarding to follow one’s own calling. I continue to work at trying to align with my intuition.

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

The people I meet and interact with is the best part of what I do – brilliant humans who pour their heart and soul into their craft and who serve tirelessly. My journey in the arts has led me to meet many amazing people from different walks of life – their simplicity, authenticity, and passion, all serve as lessons for me. Each one brings a different attitude and perspective to art and life, and their unique work ethic. There are always valuable takeaways from these interactions.

As a teacher, I love my time with my students – their eagerness and fresh thought processes help me expand myself. Their questions give me new ideas. I see deeper nuances of my music when I break down musical phrases for them. They propel me to adapt and improve myself consistently.

What do you want the audience to experience through your works?

When I create music, I connect to a place deep within me. Music helps me release emotions and communicate ideas. I am always hopeful that even just one person in the audience would resonate with what I am trying to express – that they would feel heard, comforted or uplifted.

Please share what a typical day in your life as a Carnatic vocalist/composer/educator is like.

Each day is unique, but it is usually a combination of the following activities: some exercise, back-to-basics practice, warming up my voice, singing, listening to music, working on projects, composing, teaching students, dreaming, and writing down ideas and inspirations.



Music Workshop at Bamboola Play School, Chennai, 2011
Photo courtesy of Eshita Prasanna

What are your vision and hopes for Singapore's Carnatic music scene?

I would love for more young people to learn Carnatic music, stay longer on the learning course, and have a sustained relationship with the music. I would love for the appreciation for Carnatic music to grow, and for the music to be made accessible through teaching and performance.

What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in your field?

I would tell students to have faith in the learning process. Acceptance of both compliments and criticism is essential in this journey. We need to invest time consistently, work hard, and cultivate a lot of patience.

How does receiving the Young Artist Award from the National Arts Council change things for you? Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.

I would make Carnatic music education more meaningful and joyful for the younger generation, and create learning experiences that enrich and empower individuals from diverse backgrounds.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

My deepest gratitude to...

My first teacher, Rajalakshmi Sekar, a mother-figure, who gives abundantly

My teacher and mentor, Bombay Jayashri, who has lovingly given me an artistic lens to experience life

Teachers Gowri Gokul, Kedar Kharat, Guruvayur Usha Dorai, Sujatha Rajagopalan, and Lakshmi Krishnan, for kindling in me a love for the arts

My parents, for their unwavering belief in me

My sister Swathi, for her wisdom

My best friend and partner, Karthik, for inspiring me to be a better musician and person every day

My son, for being my biggest teacher

My extended family in Singapore and India for their invaluable encouragement

My Temple of Fine Arts (TFA) family for being the roots of my growth

The National Arts Council, for their support

Artist Roshni Pillai, for this nomination

Arts professionals Aravinth Kumarasamy, Shanta Ratii, Dr Uma Rajan, Ghanavenothan Retnam, Mavin Khoo, Dr Lum Chee Hoo, Jyotsna Prakash, and Sukhi Shetty, for placing their faith in me

Friends who have stood by me

Uncle Ramesh and Aunty Devi, whose love I am indebted to

Swami Govindanand and Maa Indira, for their guidance

Swami Shantanand Saraswati, the founder of TFA, who has been instrumental in setting me on this path, and whose vision "Art, just for the love of it" is an inspiration behind my every endeavour.