

THE MANDOHARP OF AMARADHEVA AND ITS USE IN THE 1980S AND 1990S

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Abstract

The discrimination of instrumental sound in the evaluation and appreciation of Amaradheva's (born in 1927, passed away in 2016) performances lead to a big gap between praising vocal achievements and using his unique musical instrument that he created out of two, as he stated.

This paper is to analyse this instrumental creation and the way how he used it. The reasons for its decline will also play a role. He could have used another musical instrument, the Indian svarmandal, but he preferred his own creation. The sound he tried to produce should sound well in the context of his singing. His popularity was based on his deep knowledge of Indian classical music, mainly light classical music. As a violinist, he tried to idealize a specific sound to be fitting in his time, voice, and social environment.

For this small research, I consult his as an inheritor, read evaluations given in the literature and other shapes of documents, and I analyse the musical ergology of the instrument. It can be found that all parts of the instrument play an important role in achieving the desired sound. This study can give an insight into media reflections on musical instruments in Sri Lanka.

Keywords

Sri Lanka, Mandoharp, Amaradheva, Manipulation of sound, Music shows

INTRODUCTION

Mandoharp is a music instrument created according to a concept of a renowned musician in Sri Lanka. He is Amaradheva who learned Hindustani music in Lucknow from Vishnu Govinda Jog, a pioneering violinist in his time. Amaradheva has been improving his vocal skills though he preferred learning violin as his main area of expertise. He has been flourished as a popular singer in Sri Lanka since 1950s. He preferred to play mandolin while composing and singing in casual

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settings. He felt playing mandolin is much convenient for him as it is tuned as similar to the tuning of Hindustani violin of his tradition. Therefore, he thought about a new music instrument that fits to his look and music style so that he can play while singing in public performances as well. That new instrument came out to be the mandoharp which is the main area of my focus in this presentation.

QUESTIONS

In relation to mandoharp and its creators, I attempted to find answers to the following questions:

1. How was this instrument created?
2. Why Amaradheva preferred playing mandoharp while singing?
3. Why he did not promote the instrument or recommended it to his followers?

There are some writings about Amaradheva's biography and his contribution as a singer and a composer. However, it can be observed that written accounts on mandoharp and its use are hardly found. There is a five minutes documentary about the mandoharp created by Rasanjana Weerasingha and he has shared it on YouTube.

HOW WAS THIS INSTRUMENT CREATED?

In a personal conversation, Ranjana Amaradheva informed why and how this instrument was created.

Amaradheva had to resign from the government job for some unknown reason. Then he was short in money and therefore planned a one man show like *Sa Prasangaya* of Viktor Ratnayaka. Amaradheva initiated his first show in 1978 which is the year he was turning 50. He named it *Shrawana Ramani*. Nearly 25 songs that included duets and solos were presented. The picture depicts that Amaradheva is singing while playing mandoharp.

The set of the stage was designed and constructed by Somabandhu Vidyapathi, father of Ravibandu Vidrapathy. Since, Amaradheva had the habit of playing mandolin while singing, he wanted to do the same on the stage. The designer, Somabandu found that the English mandolin is not looking well matching with the style of his singing, and

therefore Somabandu designed a new music instrument that is attractive and corresponded to the theme according to his view. However, the idea of joining two music instrument is expressed by Amaradheva and Somabandu did the designing part and Peterson did the crafting part. Somabandu studied Amaradheva's sitting postures, and drew this music instrument. Ranjana Amaradheva said that an 'eastern shape' was added to the English mandolin by attaching a part of a harp. According to Ranjana, it was successful and continued in later shows.

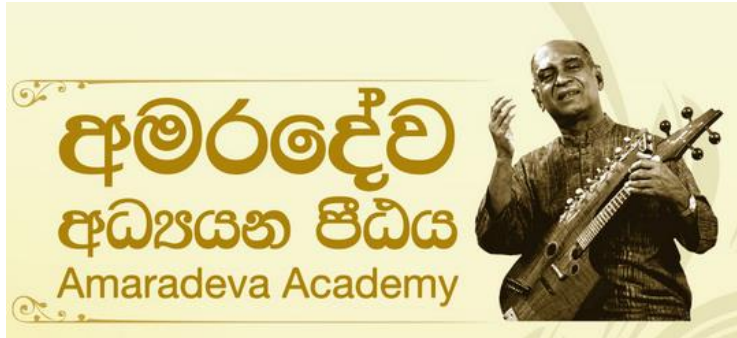


Figure 1: A picture of Amaradheva used to attract students into a newly established music school named after Amaradheva. He is holding the said mandoharp in his left hand. Advertisement printed with permission.

Later on, Peterson has tried making a mandoharp of fiber glass, but it was not successful since it was rather bulky and heavier than the former version.



Figure 2: The construction as it was used. Re-printed with permission.

Then, Tennyson Fernando recreated the mandoharp without joining the readymade mandolin. He rather created the shape with new material, in the 1990s. He added a guitar tuning. It is extremely different from the previous version as this is completely built without joining parts of the typical readymade mandolin. The wooden pegs fixed on the mandolin part are not for tuning but for a decoration. The instrument is tuned using the guitar tuning pegs in their modern machine view attached to the instrument. There are eight strings fixed on the part of the zither and the mandolin part consists of four strings which are tuned to the same tones as Amaradheva tuned his violin.

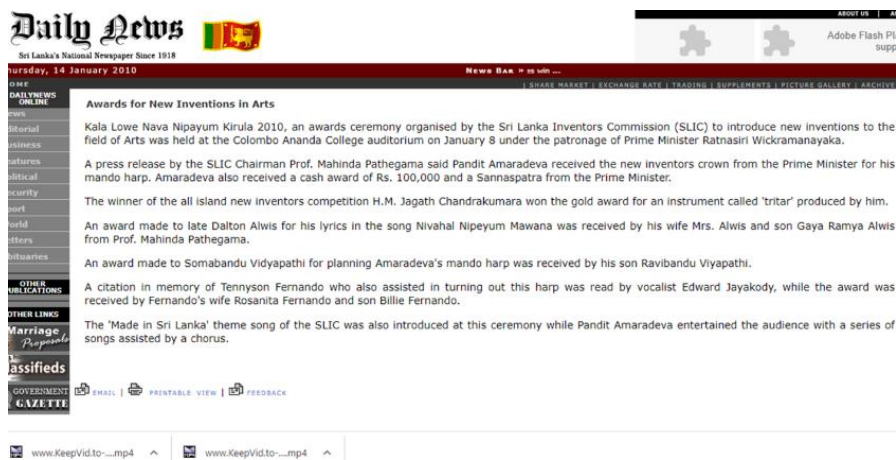


Figure 3: Webpage screenshot of the Daily News, distributed in Sri Lanka. There is an awarding ceremony mentioning the creation of that musical instrument. The webpage screenshot was reprinted with permission.

He used to bring this instrument along with him in his local and foreign shows. He could manage to build a case for this instrument to ease carrying the instrument. Amaradheva, Somabandu and Tennyson Fernando received awards from the government for their creation (Figure 3).

Amaradheva passed away on 3rd November, 2016. His expressions on mandoharp are neither recorded nor informed to anyone. Information on his views about this instrument is rare. Ranjana Amaradheva² says that he was an expert in violin playing. While he is singing, he used to play violin by plucking the strings like a mandolin. He had an English

² Amaradheva, Ranjana and Chinthaka P. Meddegoda (2023). Talk about inherited views. Unpubl. ms. According to audio recording in personal collection.

mandolin that he used more often when composing. After the mandoharp was invented, he started using it and rarely played harmonium or mandolin or violin for composing, and also it depended on his mood. When someone came to meet him, he used to bring the mandoharp to the visiting area and talk with the guest while gently plucking that instrument. Any discussion with the guest mostly included some links to music, so he needed the instrument ready in his hands.

Most probably, he enjoyed the background sound of the mandoharp so that he is not quickly bored and tired answering the typical questions that he has been asked. Tonality of his speaking sound is not average, rather like a part of a song. There is a video available on YouTube where one can observe that he uses a mandoharp while speaking. Another video clip is showing how he used to sing while playing mandoharp³.

Amaradheva needed an instrument in his hands while singing not because it looks adequate to the audience, but needed it to support his renderings. He used to sing while playing a few instruments depending on his mood and other factors. Other than mandoharp, he is comfortable with using harmonium, tanpura, svarmandal, violin, and mandolin.⁴

He is trained in India as an instrumentalist rather than a singer. He preferred the direction as a singer since his singing is well received by the Sri Lankan audience than his violin playing. The case is different when he was in India. He received the first prize for his violin playing at the all-India violin competition held in 1955. Perhaps, he would have flourished in India as a violinist if he would not have returned to Ceylon. However, his returning became a turning point to the field of Sri Lankan Sarala Gee (often translated as light songs⁵).

³ Amaradheva, Ranjana and Chinthaka P. Meddegoda (2023). Talk about inherited views. And audio recording in personal collection. Timecode of the personal collection: 26:23. Unpubl. ms.

⁴ Napier, John (2005). The Svarmandal and Its 'Ancestors': From Organological to Aesthetic Continuity. *The Galpin Society Journal*: 124-131; Bandyopadhyaya, S. (1980). *Musical Instruments of India*. Chaukhamba Oriental Research Studies, 17. Varanasi: Chaukhamba Orientalia.

⁵ Meddegoda, Nishadi (2019). An Overview about Different Sources of Popular Sinhala Songs. *AEMR-EJ*, 3: 32.

The mandoharp was suitable for him in many ways, as it contained four strings with similar tuning as in the violin. The other part plays the role of Indian surmandal which is not a harp but a zither according to the instrument classification method introduced by von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs.⁶ It has a new shape which is not usual. It creates rather curiosity, astonishment and holiness in the audience since it is played by a person like Amaradheva who is known to the average Sri Lankan audience as 'the highly skilled classical singer of Sri Lanka'.⁷

As Amaradheva returned to Sri Lanka in 1956, he started music tuitions. He taught ragas and some Sinhala songs to his students. However, he was known to the public as a skillful artist rather than a good teacher. His singing has been followed by many artists thrived after him such as Sunil Edirisinghe, Edward Jayakody, and WD Ariyasinghe.⁸

Ranjana Amaradheva expressed: "I think playing a music instrument is rather more difficult than singing. My father was an expert on playing violin, and therefore he could play mandoharp while singing. The singers who imitate him cannot do that since they are not good instrumentalists. I think that can be one of the reasons, that this instrument has not been continued by others."

FINAL THOUGHTS

- Vocally dominated shows may have worked mainly only with an accompaniment, even if this is not continuously played.
- Inventions of hybrid musical instruments served the beautifying of the show rather than the true accompaniment of the singer.

⁶ von Hornbostel, Erich Moritz and Curt Sachs (1961). Classification of Musical Instruments: Translated from the Original German by Anthony Baines and Klaus P. Wachsmann. *The Galpin Society Journal*, 14: 3–29. DOI:/10.2307/842168.

⁷ Amaradheva, Ranjana and Chinthaka P. Meddegoda (2023). Talk about inherited views. Audio recording in personal collection. Unpubl. ms.

⁸ Amaradheva, Ranjana and Chinthaka P. Meddegoda (2023). Talk about inherited views. Audio recording in personal collection. Unpubl. ms.; Parliament of Sri Lanka (2010). *University of the Visual and Performing Arts - Annual Report*. 8. PDF last retrieved 9 February 2017.

- The musical instrument invention helped the singer to overcome distractive sounds and insecurities.

Amaradheva was a highly praised musician and his shows have had a strong impact on how shows were seen in general. He also was a typical result of his time. New instrument inventions or creations, new appearances on show stages, the gathering of as many as possible people in an audience hall and the introduction on National Television contributed to the distribution of his ideas and the way of using shows. Many students and staff members in National Schools felt a strong attachment and tried to follow his steps or started preparing their students to do so.

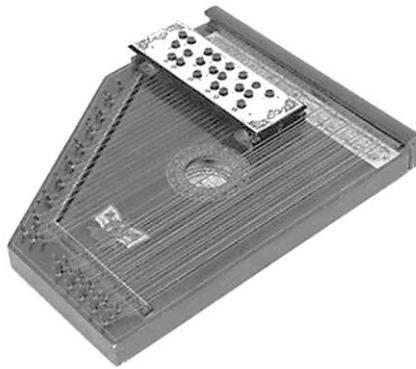


Figure 4: A Mandolin-Harp as produced in big numbers in Central Europe, during the early 20th century. These instruments had a device to stop unwanted strings from sounding and opposite. Musicians were better in focusing on singing rather than on playing. The production declined with the arrival of mass media⁹.

The outcomes are still present in some following shows and the interest in his instrumental creations will not cease as it was in some other places of the world, where similar results were created like the

⁹ Figure 4 can be studied under this link: https://cn.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&ccid=6QjhGAna&id=676EE800C58DA80168AA2D35156682C3B6250DA8&thid=OIP.6QjhGAnavYQ1qpF6wIXtegHaE7&mediaurl=https://cdn.antiquitymusic.com/media/catalog/product/cache/1/image/268799b913174d96793200b0c1a85997/i/m/img_6167.jpg&exph=315&expw=474&q=mandoharp&ck=71A6A4848C863BC58AC9C5DD32A16BEE&idpp=rc&idpview=singleimage&form=rc2idp&ajaxhist=0&ajaxserp=0, last accessed 3 October, 2023. This instrument was a zither with a limited repertoire.

different ways of using a zither and a mandolin in other parts of the world (Figure 4).

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