



CULTURAL MEDALLION 2024

GHANAVENTHAN RETNAM



Duo flute recital with Ghanavenothan's student, Pushpa Rani, who performed her first solo *arangetram* in 1994.

GHANAVENTHAN RETNAM (b. 1961), a Singapore-born Indian classical flautist, music composer and conductor, embodies the harmonious fusion of tradition and innovation in the global arts landscape.

With a career spanning five decades, the musician has made an indelible mark on Indian classical music through a dedication to cross-cultural collaborations and nurturing future generations. Ghanavenothan's musical education encompasses Indian, Thai, Chinese, and Indonesian traditions – a diverse background involving composing and arranging music for the ASEAN region, where the artist often leads the Singapore delegations.

Excelling in multiple instruments and vocal techniques, Ghanavenothan has performed as a soloist, accompanist, composer, arranger, and conductor on countless stages. The resident music director at Bhaskar's Arts Academy (BAA) has written innovative compositions for music ensembles and dance productions which have received critical acclaim, bridging cultural boundaries and captivating audiences worldwide.

Ghanavenothan is deeply committed to arts education and community engagement, sharing valuable knowledge through talks, masterclasses and workshops and fostering a greater appreciation for Indian classical music among students of all ages. Besides lecturing at institutes of higher learning, the mentor also co-taught music as part of Ministry of Education's Artist-Mentor Scheme. Contributing to the professional development of music teachers, the composer has been commissioned to write original scores for Singapore's school music syllabus. Ghanavenothan's involvement in signature community platforms and philanthropic endeavours highlight the transformative power of music in everyday life.

The education advocate's notable achievement is coming up with specialised training for students, as well as conducting 14 flute *arangetrams* and creating Singapore's first-ever Carnatic Flute Ensemble. The dedication to the arts has led to numerous accolades, including the Young Artist Award (1995), the Lifetime Achievement and Humanitarian Medallion from the World Peace and Harmony Organisation (2003), and the prestigious titles *Sangitha Kala Bushana* (2015) and *Natya Sangeetha Choodamani* (2018).

Ghanavenothan stands as a beacon of artistic excellence and cultural diplomacy, inspiring generations of artists and audiences with undiminished creativity and commitment to the arts.



A BREATH OF LIFE

BY KAVITHA KARUUM

How wonderfully serendipitous it is to see the connection between Ghanavenothan Retnam's birth name, career and passion towards the arts. The word *Ghana* is a variation of the Tamil word *Ghanam*, which means "song," and *Venothan*, which means "unique." Ghanavenothan is also another name for the Hindu deity Lord Krishna, who is depicted as a master of the flute.

It's a perfect moniker for a distinctive musician who has left an indelible mark on Singapore's multicultural music scene. In a five-decade-long career, he has risen to become the nation's most renowned *Carnatic*ⁱ flautist and one of the region's most eminent and prolific musicians.

"It wasn't my parents who named me Ghanavenothan. It was Pandit M Ramalingam, my father's good friend, who became my guru," he says. The Pandit – who founded The Sri Ram Orchestra, the country's first Indian classical music group, in 1958 – was a pioneer of the Indian classical music scene in post-war Singapore.

"When the Pandit carried me in his arms, he felt my crying sounded like music, and named me Ghanavenothan. The name has since defined my life," he recalls his parents telling him the origin story.

Ghanavenothan's musical journey mirrors the evolution of the Indian classical performing arts in Singapore in the last 100 years, and it is therefore befitting that the home-grown talent was featured in 'Singapore Tamils 200,' published by Singapore Tamils Youths' Club in 2023, as



Bhaskar's Arts Academy at the Ramayana Festival, India, 1996.

one of the Tamils who have contributed to Singapore's growth in various fields. Despite having limited resources and few avenues for formal learning, Ghana has developed a strong and distinctive foundation in his craft through practice and performance. He collaborates and experiments with other musical traditions, forging a unique Singaporean musical identity and achieving international renown.

Born in 1961, Ghana, as he is fondly known in the arts circle and among friends, was the eighth of nine siblings in a working-class Singaporean family. His father, R Retnam, was known for playing the *bulbulthara*ⁱⁱ. His mother sold *kuih-kuih* to supplement the family income.

Krishna Our Guide, a devotional organisation dedicated to the teachings of the deity Ghana was named after, played a key role in propelling him towards the flute.

"It held religious classes on Sundays for young people. Flute music was played on the bus and at the centre every week. Its soulfulness and sweetness drew me in," he says. Ghana was also influenced by Mali (T.R. Mahalingam) and Dr N Ramani, great masters from India, who played in Singapore when he was young.

Ghana is also trained in Carnatic singing and playing instruments like the harmonium and the sitar, but the Carnatic flute was not an easy instrument to learn. The Carnatic flute, also called the *venu* (bamboo flute), is a transverse flute. "You can't see it as you are playing it sideways. It's an instrument you must feel and experience," he says.

There were no proper classes for Carnatic flute music in Singapore in the late 1960s. Pandit Ramalingam recognised Ghana's potential and decided to teach the child.

The boy, about seven then, faced the challenge of how to use one's breath. "I fainted in the beginning, and no sound came out when I played," Ghana reminisces. His tenacity won, and his stamina and craft improved. "I became the Pandit's favourite student because he liked my musicality."

Working with the late dance doyenne Santha Bhaskar, a Cultural Medallion recipient herself, unearthed one of Ghana's most celebrated abilities as a musician: improvising and weaving intricate music in response to the dancers' movements. Mrs Bhaskar encouraged Ghana to push his boundaries by being an accompanist for classical dancers and composing for dance music.

"Dance music is the most difficult to play as it is very fluid. You have to be attuned to the dancer's movements, anticipate them and adapt," explains Ghana. Apart from playing the flute for legendary dance exponents, he has also played for over 400 classical dance *arangetrams*ⁱⁱⁱ or stage debuts in Singapore and around 100 more internationally. Ghana is also a prolific orchestral and music composer, with about 10 dance music ballets, 50 dance compositions, and 100 music compositions. He has



Ghanavenothan receiving his first golden robe award, Sangitha Kala Nipuna, 1994.

worked closely with several Indian fine arts organisations, including Bhaskar's Arts Academy (BAA) and Kalamandhir, now known as the Temple of Fine Arts Singapore.

Meenakshy Bhaskar, artistic director of BAA, pin-points Ghana's popularity: "He is sought after by many dancers and musicians for their *arangetrams* and concerts because he complements their movements with his musical prowess. He guides them closely, sharing his knowledge and organisational skills with them selflessly."

Ghana's association with BAA spans over 30 years, and he rose to become its resident music director, a position he still holds. Mrs Bhaskar's influence steered him towards cross-cultural music: 'Manohra' (Attractive), first staged by BAA in 1996, was a key milestone in his career. Ghana composed the music for the Thai dance-drama inspired by the Jataka tales and spent time in Thailand for research. Ghana, who was awarded the Young Artist Award by National Arts Council the year before for his outstanding contribution to the arts sector, used his award grant for this project.

"Ghana learnt South-east Asian music, such as Thai music and music structures, for the dance drama. Though he had composed before, his music reached another dimension in 'Manohra.' He fused Thai musical elements with Indian classical music seamlessly," recollects Meenakshy. She also notes that Ghana's compositions have a timeless quality, "a sense of purity and innocence" which reflects his personality.

Ghana's work has been vital in building bridges between Indian classical music and other forms of music, especially South-east Asian music: "We have shared heritage, reflected in music through the rhythms and themes." In works like 'Vinayaka' (another name for the Hindu deity Ganesha), a dance production which premiered at the Bali Arts Festival in 2010, and in the 2023 dance-drama 'Radin Mas,' Ghana collaborated with other composers to bring Indian classical and folk music and Javanese, Kelantan and Balinese music together.

That openness is rooted in his deep connection to nature and the environment. "Birds responding to dawn with their calls, echoes that ring in valleys, the rattling of the joss sticks in the containers at the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, the bells of the Sri Krishnan Temple in Waterloo Street... each sound is music to my ears, and I experiment with it," Ghana rhapsodises.

When overseas for concerts and *arangetrams*, he visits nature spots, playing for hours and recording. "The acoustics in these environments elevate the sound of my flute," he says. These sessions stimulate his creativity. In 2023, Ghana conceptualised a cross-cultural concert by BAA and Nanyang Arts Association based on nature. In 'Swarupaka (Beautiful Form) – the Imagery of Nature,' Ghana and his student Tan Qing Lun rearranged traditional and contemporary music pieces to "show a uniquely Singaporean music identity."



Ghanavenothan with Som Said at Music Academy, Chennai, 1997.

This stems from Ghana's strong belief that Singapore is ideal for the confluence of cultures. "We have distinctive music traditions which become more than their parts when coming together. The universality of emotions shows up in the harmony created," Ghana explains.

For Qing Lun, a celebrated flautist who learnt the Indian flute from Ghana in 2011, Ghana has "taught me to infuse Indian culture, spirituality and cultural nuances, and add these colours into my music." With the latter's mentorship, Qing Lun set up the multi-cultural fusion band yIN Harmony in 2014.

Ghana aims to take this genre of cross-cultural Singaporean music further. "Our rich Singaporean music heritage repertoire needs bigger stages. We have so much to share," he says.

To that end, creating a deep music lineage is among his greatest contributions to the arts. Whereas trained Carnatic flute players were once scarce, Ghana has trained hundreds of flute students in the past 30 years. He was the first in Singapore to present his students on stage for their flute *arangetrams*, with 15 of them having done so. Two of them have since become professional flautists. Ghana also created 'Venu Ghana Lahari' (Music Waves of the Bamboo Flute), Singapore's first Carnatic flute ensemble.

Pushpa Rani B, an educator in IT in her 50s, was Ghana's first student to do her *arangetram*, in 1994. Her four children are learning to play the flute from him. "Ghana Sir can bond with students of any age with his kindness and teach appropriately," she says.

Both Pushpa and Qing Lun describe Ghana as friendly and generous. "He motivates students to learn more about the technicalities and the cultural contexts. He teaches them to respect the music, fellow artistes and the audience," notes Pushpa.

For Ghana, his greatest pride lies in his service to the community. Experimentation is key. "I've used techniques in flute playing to non-Indian students to help them understand the Indian flute, and explain with Western notations, for example," he says.

"People inspire me. They give me energy, and I return it to them. I am grateful for the kindness people have shown me," Ghana reflects. "I live for music. Music is *prana*. Music is breath."

Life has indeed come full circle for the boy who once struggled to maintain his breath while playing his flute.

Kavitha Karuum is an ex-journalist currently living in Sydney. She is also a literary translator with a keen interest in bringing Singapore Tamil stories to other language communities.



Ghanavenothan with Mr Wu Tong, China Magpie, 1995.

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- i The *bulbulthara*, a stringed instrument from the North Indian Hindustani musical tradition, is alternately known as the Indian banjo.
 - ii Carnatic refers to the classical South Indian music tradition known as Carnatic music. Carnatic music is the Anglicised form for Karnataka Sangeetham, a Sanskrit term. This framework is based on *ragas* (melody) and *thalamus* (rhythmic patterns).
 - iii *Arangetram* refers to a debut stage performance of young Indian classical dance and music performers who are considered to have 'graduated' from their training. These artistes are presented to the public on stage by their teachers.



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

It is a great honour to receive the prestigious Cultural Medallion and I am humbled to receive the award from President Tharman Shanmugaratnam who has witnessed my performances and believes in my musicality. I am deeply grateful to the National Arts Council and the panelists for recognising me in the music industry.

Special mention to my parents Mr and Mrs R Retnam for their love and constant encouragement in my pursuit of music and my heartfelt gratitude goes to my Guru Pandit M Ramalingam who taught me the importance of devotion and passion to music. I am indebted to Mr K P Bhaskar and Mrs Santha Bhaskar for shaping my composition skills for dance, giving me the assurance for my early original works and treating me like their son. Bhaskar's Arts Academy has also been instrumental in all my achievements.

I would like to convey my appreciation to the Retnam family for their unwavering support till this day, and Swami Shantananda Sarasawathi of Temple of Fine Arts, for being the driving force behind my music career. I am grateful to all my local and international co-artists and arts organisations for allowing me to expand my musical knowledge. My senior students for spending countless hours towards their own success in music, making it an incredibly rewarding journey for me. To the infinite Lord for His blessings.