Music is an intimate part of my life, because it exists within me. It is something that is beyond my control. I had my first exposure to devotional music through my mother at St Mary’s forane Church, Palliparam. As a boy I used to stand near Sylae singers. I made my debut singing a Sylae chant for the feast of Assumption in my parish. So, somehow music has been a part of me. It is beyond music emerges.

Music, like languages, originate from the depth of silence; how do you relate silence and music?

I am so happy that you brought up this point. Silence is the soul of music. When we listen to a piece of music, there exists a thirty-seconds impact after the very last note. It happens in the interior of the person, where music becomes animals have the gift of music, which they use to communicate with each other. It is a part of our genetic makeup.

The opening words of the Book of Genesis is: God saw everything was good. The same sentence is repeated after every act of creation by God. What does the creation narrative of Genesis proclaim by that?

That God saw everything was good conveys self-appreciated referred to as consonance. So also there is harmony when so resonates with pa. If you listen carefully you’ll hear sa, ga, pa, three notes at the same time. It is built in nature. It is based on physics, because ultimately music is a wave. So this harmony is essential to music. Without it we cannot have music. God has built that harmony into us. That is why when we sing together, when ten girls sing together in the Church in one pen when two strings match in their vibration, creating perfect harmony. When the tone of one string is slightly lowered, it creates dissonance. So looking back indicates lack of resonance. We can translate it into Christian theology and say you are not perfectly tuned with God and so is in a state of sin.

What is the importance of singing and chanting in

Silence is the soul of music. When we listen to a piece of music, after the very last note, there exists thirty seconds impact. It happens in the interior of the person.

Silence is a canvas, sound is the picture. Harmony is essential to music without that we cannot have music and God has built that harmony into us.

The connection between music and mathematics comes from proportions. When we sing za, when you strike a note on particular instrument, its fifth note is already heard based on the principle of physics. When we listen to the timing of a grandpa clock in our old monasteries, we can hear two or three notes at the same time: its fifth and third. There is a conglomeration of sounds produced from that grandfather clock. Mathematics is inherent in music, because each note is connected with its fifth on the Thamburin. The ultimate thing in music is om, which is beyond language. Sound is a medium, but music is beyond sound. It is from the soundless om that truly effective. In India we call it shruti, meaning the distance between C and D, between one note and the other. In western music they have divided the scale into twelve semi tones. In India we are capable of listening to the tones in between the semi tones. In order to listen to shruti, we need an interior silence. So music has been built in silence. Silence is the canvas, sound is the picture.

Man sings at certain moments of life. There is nobody on earth who is not attuned to some sort of singing. Why does man sing, why is man attuned to song and music?

Man cannot but sing. The two most important components of music are rhythm and sound. Both are built into us. Rhythm is built into our heart beat, the way we walk, and we recognize people even when we see them from far, from behind. And we use different impressions of sound to communicate our emotions. It is built into the universal system that God created. Even by God after creating man in his own image. God saw his own image in man and he saw everything that was created was good. Probably, the Rig-veda hymns are as powerful as this chapter in the Bible. But when entered the picture, creation was pure and simple. So God said ‘it was good.’ And man resonated – the term is from physics – with God because of that sameness of image. It is easy for him to look at God and see himself in God; it is easy for God to look at man and see Himself in man. That was the natural state of grace. It was perfect consonant and perfect resonance.

If you read the Fathers of the Church, you find that they always refer to harmony. That is what music is, that is what life is. What is the importance of harmony in human life?

Harmony is consonance. When one note matches the other, as C with the middle C, as sa with upper sa, you get a king of harmony which is voice, we feel good. If one person sings in a wrong pitch, we get agitated and disturbed. Consonance is harmony. In the ultimate analysis, religion is a harmonious relationship with God and resonance with God. God’s vibration hits us and we feel the presence of God within us. There is harmony, that is music.

In the myth of Orpheus, the legendary Greek musician, his wife died of snake bite. To get her back alive, he went into the land of Hades, a forbidden place. Moved by a melodious elegy he sang there, Hades agreed to restore life back to his wife on one condition: ‘Your wife will walk behind you. Until you reach the earth, you shall never look back.’ But the urge to look back was so strong that he succumbed to it and lost his wife forever. This is the myth of Orpheus. What does it tell you about music, about life?

Looking back denotes lack of resonance. Resonance happens...
We Sing from the Divine Music Built in Us

It is an aberration of the text. Everybody has the right to sing Our Father. We are taking away the privilege of the congregation to articulate that prayer. The pitch for it should be accessible to the entire congregation.

In Syriac chants, the range is five or six notes and the melodic expression is quite simple. People learn it by heart by practice. The early fathers designed music in a way that everybody can sing together. Everybody thus becomes part of the prayer.

There are two strands in the tradition of the holy Qurhana as far as the Syrian Church is concerned; one strand is the Chaldean tradition and the other is the Indian traditional music. How do we merge these two traditions?

Experiments to merge the two were made in the 17th, 18th or 19th century. When the missionaries wanted us to change Syriac into Latin, we resisted. Then they translated Latin texts into Syriac instead of Malayalam and composed hymns accordingly. Those hymns took elements from the local tradition. For example, the hymn used for benediction was translated into Syriac and the melody used a local rhythm. We have a Syriac text, but the rhythm is purely South Indian. We thus had a mingling of Syriac tradition with Kerala tradition.

Father Abel merged poetry with music, especially in the breviary. You do not find such poetic rhythm and richness in other versions. Very often poetry finds no place in our culture. The liturgical texts are mostly very prosaic. Don’t you think so?

I am so happy that you brought Fr Abel into this conversation. Fr Abel was a gift from God to the Syro-Malabar Church. He was a gift like Mozart and Beethoven. He was a God-given gift to us. We didn’t recognize and utilize his last ten or fifteen years of creative life. We cannot create such geniuses. They have to happen. He just happened. In his creations, melody and the text blended so well and smoothly. We thank God for him. Now people do not critic low level compositions. They just take and sing them. Another trend that has happened in the Syro-Malabar Church is just using tuyo tune (very simple tune in Syriac) in every sacrament. Every song is sung in that simple tune. We need to have more variety. We need to challenge our young writers and encourage them and critique them so that they think twice before they compose something.

As a musician and a singer, what unfulfilled aspirations do you still have?

I wish I could sing more songs with texts that touch the heart of the people. Songs like “life is bubble in whose span is a moment” are resonate with our heart, it touches many aspects of life. I wish I had more such songs. I made an experiment with Jerry Annaldev to create such songs, but unfortunately it was a commercial flop. People did not take them up. They either wanted film style devotional songs or folk songs. They couldn’t appreciate thematic songs or lyrics. I was slightly disappointed. My desire is to get lyrics that are deep in meaning, lyrics that have layers of meanings.