

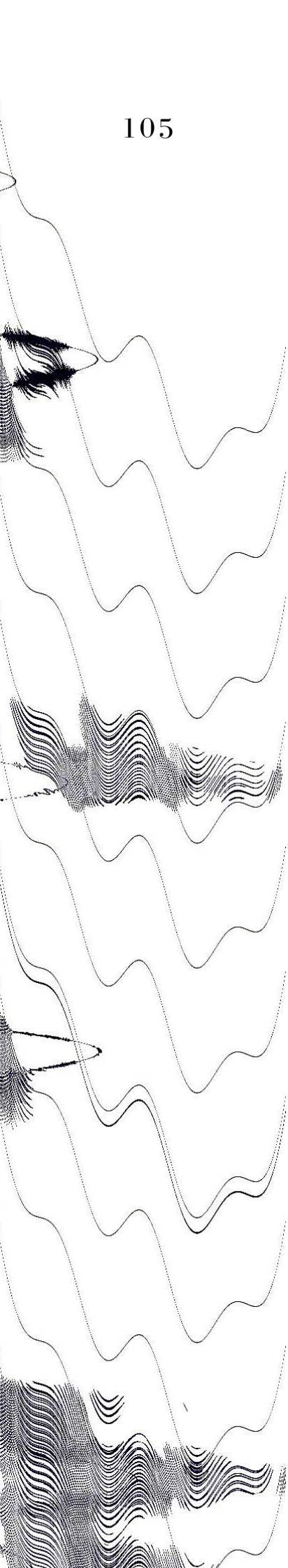


LULLABY-SONIC CRADLE

Supriya Nagarajan

Background

Lullabies have fascinated me; the pulse, melodies and the restful mood they evoke. In South India where I hail from, lullabies play an important role in both families and in the wider society through religious practices. I grew up in Mumbai where I had access to multiple languages and musical traditions. Therefore, I had access to traditional lullabies from different parts of India and they held a special place in my heart. Throughout my classical musical training in India, I would try to capture the nuances of lullabies sung in a variety of languages and I was always fascinated by the varied textures that different languages brought to the singing. Every time I visited rural South India, one of the important rituals every night at our family temple was “Shayanam”. During this ritual, lullabies are sung in order to complete temple activities and to shut the temple doors for that day. Symbolically, this meant that the gods had retired for the night. I was obsessed with the nature of scales (or ragas) used during this process, which to my ears did seem highly soporific. These interludes planted the first seeds of the Lullaby project.



Much later, in 2014, it was during a visit to my ancestral temple in a village in South India that I had the opportunity to spend an evening in the very rural, lush agricultural farmlands. I was once again inspired to revisit the lullaby effect. I was passing by some paddy fields where the women were at work, while children played and infants slept in makeshift cradles tied on trees as slings. As dusk approached, the women continued to work, but as the children began to get restless I noticed they would take it in turns to sing lullabies. I watched and listened for almost two hours, captivated by the way the women used their voices in soothing, repetitive rhythms to guide the behaviour of their children who were comforted by the sounds.

What is it about lullabies that creates this bond? Is it the sound of the mother's voice or is it the rhythm? This was my primary inquiry that formed the beginnings of my journey into creating *Lullaby-Sonic Cradle*. The project is a study of lullabies across the world and an attempt to answer that question.

What is Lullaby-Sonic Cradle?

Lullaby-Sonic Cradle is an immersive audio-visual music/installation performance which aims to put the audience to sleep. The various elements of the performance include a soundscape created by sound artist Duncan Chapman that combines nighttime sounds from across the globe with our collection of over 300 lullabies, collected from various cities and countries. Collection of lullabies took place in "Lullaby booths" – cosy spaces set up in various locations as the project travelled. These included libraries, metro stations, shopping malls, schools, office blocks and music venues. Members of the public were invited to come and talk to the artists and share lullabies that they were familiar with. The stories and songs collected were then woven into the soundscape.



Within this soundscape is live singing and instrumentation. During live performances of the project, I usually sing Indian lullabies, with an occasional Norwegian or Japanese one thrown in. The flexibility of this performance means we have worked with a wide range of instrumental artists from across the world playing saxophone, violin, harp, piano, flute, cello and even the Theremin. We have also invited local artists in every country to join us, and have had the pleasure of performing with French horn players, Kantele artists from Finland, and singers in Oslo and Portugal. Accompanying the audio is a special program called Lumisonic, created by Prof Mick Grierson (University of Arts, London) which provides a visual focus. Concentric circles form and grow with the music. Lumisonic was created by Dr Grierson initially for children with hearing disabilities so they could experience music, and this program was later adapted for our project. After performing over forty shows across the world, we can say that the combination of the audio and Lumisonic has resulted in over sixty percent of our audiences falling asleep. These figures have been

compiled from the photographs and audience feedback obtained at the performance venues.

Audiences have ranged from 0 -100 years of age. We have performed to both family audiences as well as completely adult audiences, and the performance has had a similar impact on all age groups which has been a surprising result.

The Journey

There have been two elements to the journey of the project. Firstly, the performative element and secondly the outreach element. One is closely linked with the other as our outreach feeds into the performance through the soundscape.

Reflecting upon the project, I discovered that the tonality and rhythmic structures in Scandinavian lullabies mirrored what I'd heard in the paddy fields in India. This inspired me to consider and investigate how lullabies can connect people across the world. The first part of my journey took me to Finland, where I worked closely with the Metropolia University to incorporate lullabies into the Early Years teacher training curriculum. The work comprised workshops during which we explored the intercultural musical language of lullabies from the point of view of communities resident in Helsinki, and walking that bridge as teacher trainees to facilitate the travel of music backwards and forwards between cultures.

For the next phase of the journey, which mainly involved installation performances, I devised the concept of "lullaby booths". These booths were located in prominent locations around the area where any performance was scheduled, and sometimes well in advance



Excerpt from *Lullaby Live* album



Helsinki 2016

of the show dates. For example, one of my earliest commissions was from the Ultima Festival in Oslo. I visited Oslo eight times in the twelve months leading up to the festival where I interacted with members of the public in “lullaby booths”, inviting them to donate and share lullaby and related memories which would potentially go into the soundscape that framed the installation/performance. The booths attracted over 200 lullabies from the twenty-six distinct cultural communities who have made their lives in Oslo.

The installation/performance was unveiled in September 2016 to an audience of over 350 children under the age of five and their families. This was the first time the multifaceted aspect of the show came to life. Family and adult audiences were equally enthusiastic in their reception of the show. An audience member who was a kindergarten teacher noted that the performance offered: “One hour of quiet in my very busy life. Enchanting” An accompanying grandmother said: “I loved the calm soothing tones of the songs and it didn’t matter that I didn’t understand the lyrics”.

The show has since travelled to eleven countries in a variety of settings. From composing two lullabies for the Iceland Symphony Orchestra and performing with them, to staging the show in the Salmon Bothy in the furthest corner of Scotland, the show has travelled widely. York Minster (UK), Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (UK), Casa da Música in Porto and Riverside Theatre in Parramatta in Sydney (Australia) are just some of the locales to which we have ventured. The younger audiences have always been absorbed by the Lumisonic



Oslo 2016

circles, and I have therefore begun to research the phenomenon of “unconscious listening”. At the start of every concert we see the younger audience members moving around and “listening” to the music physically, but as the performance progresses we have noticed them settle into a quieter mode and on many occasions fall asleep. The South Indian classical music which forms the core of the performance is of a complex nature, but combined with the visuals it has the capacity to reach out to our youngest and oldest members of the audience in a similar fashion.

I have recently worked with senior members of the community in Batley in West Yorkshire. They could clearly recall lullabies from their childhood, and the depth of their bond with the lullaby was clear. I have informally liaised with neuroscientists in the University of Brisbane (Australia), where I have explored the phenomenon of lullabies evoking memories in people suffering final stages of dementia, and have conducted



Hepworth 2017

few workshops in Brisbane working with people in care homes. The initial findings from these various projects indicate that recall of lullabies is one of the strongest of childhood memories. Another incidental finding (which is being investigated further) is the extended lucidity period caused by the singing of lullabies in particular. All this work has informed both the main show as well as our extended outreach and engagement activities. Some of the most poignant moments have been the stories shared in the lullaby booths by people from all corners of the world, many of whom having either migrated or been forced to leave their homes. Participants have crossed boundaries to listen to each other and in doing so have become united under a common, shared memory – that of being a carefree child somewhere, sometime. My overall aim is to find new

routes to engage with families and communities, and to find out how lullabies connect people in different communities across Europe and around the world. I believe lullabies can help build a cultural bridge that unites communities.

Future Plans

Lullaby-Sonic Cradle has recently toured the UK with the assistance of Arts Council England and reached into communities all over the North of England, partnering with venues like The Sage Gateshead (Newcastle), National Centre for Early Music (York), Settle Victoria Hall and Middlesbrough Town Hall, as well as The Point in Eastleigh.



Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival

Lullaby is intended for a longer tour in 2020/21, both nationally and internationally. The shows in the pipeline include a day at the Imagine Festival at the Southbank Centre (London) followed by a tour in the UK, currently being put together. International festivals in Greece, a return to Portugal and an extension of the work in India are being planned. An album is also due to be released in September 2020, capturing the essence of our lullaby work so far and including some of the artists who have worked with me on the show.

The most important revelation has been the intergenerational nature of the project. Having the presence of an audience from the ages of 0 to 100 plus in the same space enjoying the same music has been truly liberating. As a musician I am keen to explore this aspect of music that transcends age, gender, ethnicity and cultures.

Supriya Nagarajan is a South Indian classical Carnatic vocalist/composer based in the UK who has performed internationally. She collaborates with artists from other genres creating new musical vocabulary & constantly widening musical boundaries.

Key successes:

Nov 2006: Commissioned by Yorkshire Sculpture Park to create music responses to sculptors **Andy Goldsworthy, David Nash & Peter Randall-Page**.

2009: Cultural Olympiad project exploring the poetry of Simon Armitage through Indian classical music.

2011: "Shivoham" a multi-sensory experimental music work in collaboration with acclaimed artists **Shri Sriram and Ben Castle**.

2015 : Multi-faceted exploration of the theme "Lullaby" initially funded by PRS Foundation later working with Ultima Festival, Norway; Metropolia University of Applied Sciences Helsinki , Vuotalo Cultural centre Helsinki, Casa Da Musica Portugal, Riverside theatres Sydney and Jaipur literature festival, India.

Nov 2016: Composed an evensong for the prestigious choir at York Minster using Indian music which is a first for the Minster resulting in an invited performance at Lambeth Palace in the presence of the **Archbishop of Canterbury**.

April 2017: Commissioned to compose & perform two lullabies by the **Iceland Symphony Orchestra**.

Aug 2017: Invited to a residency at New Brunswick, Canada as part of an exploratory Project working with bees and artificial intelligence.

Sep 2017: Devised a participative installation using human voices titled "Festival of Conversations" which toured at the BEAST Festival in Birmingham.

Oct 2017: toured a brand new music work fusing Bollywood and Jazz which was a resounding success with appearances on BBC Look North and received several accolades from music critics.

Nov 2018: Composed a large scale experimental choir work presented at the prestigious **Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival**.

June 2019: Commissioned by **Jarvis Cocker and Jeremy Deller** to compose a piece to launch their National Trust "Be Kinder" project.

2020:: Currently touring a large immersive music performance/.installation "Sound of Tea" across the UK.

Supriya also is a keen mentor of emerging musicians and one of the directors of the Yorkshire Sound Women Network. She was nominated for the Diversity award by Microsoft in 2012.

