

**Grant Number: 1998-1-003**

**Grantee** : Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Art Research, Pondicherry

**Collaborators:** Veenapani Chawla, theatre director, Pondicherry  
Hariharan, musician, Kerala  
Vinay Kumar, actor, Pondicherry

**Grant amount:** Rs.4,43,000/-

**Grant period** : One year beginning January 16, 1999

### **Precis**

This grant supports a collaborative project on the role of music as text in theatre. The collaborators intend, through their examination of the textual nature of Koodiyuttam music, as represented by the mizhavu, to evolve an aesthetic suited to an enhanced, contemporary form of Koodiyattam theatre, which would have implications for the creative concerns of contemporary theatre in general. A new theatre piece that consciously uses music as text and a reworked version of an earlier production, are two proposed outcomes of this venture. Funds will go towards professional fees, travel and living expenses, documentation expenses, and musical instruments.

## Grant Description

Ms. Veenapani Chawla and the Adishakti Laboratory for the Arts in collaboration with Nangiari Koothu performer, Usha Nangiari had, in an earlier project supported by IFA, studied the possibilities of mutual enhancement between Koodiyattam and contemporary theatre, through two new productions – **Khandava Prastha Agnihooti** (KPA) and **Brhanalla**. It is while working on these pieces that the team began to realise the importance of music in shaping the content of Koodiyattam theatre. They gradually became aware of how music here, because it signifies not only rhythm and sound, but also movement and emotion, actually functions as text in a Koodiyattam performance.

Adishakti represented by Ms. Veenapani Chawla and Vinay Kumar, and musician Hariharan seek through the present project to study how the concepts inherent in Koodiyattam music can make a meaningful contribution to theatre and theatre music. They intend, through their examination of the textual nature of the Koodiyattam music to evolve an aesthetic suited to an enhanced, contemporary form of Koodiyattam theatre, which would have implications for the creative concerns of contemporary theatre in general.

There are several aspects concerning an understanding of music as text in a Koodiyattam performance. The first is the importance of rhythm. Music in Koodiyattam functions less as an extraneous accompaniment and more as a sustained rhythm that takes on different structures to correspond to the many emotions that an actor portrays through it. For instance, facial movements are enhanced by shifts in the rhythmic patterns of music; they acquire greater vitality through sound, which enlarges them, so to speak and makes them more distinct.

Linked to this understanding of rhythm is an awareness of the role played by breath in Koodiyattam. Breath here is a kind of primordial rhythm. It is because of the fact that the way an actor breathes is basic to his sense of his own rhythm, and because music likewise creates the fundamental rhythmic pattern that orders the entire performance, that an understanding of music as text was reached. “As breath behind the abhinaya”, writes Ms. Chawla in the proposal, “is the physical expression of thought and emotion, in the same manner the rhythm in Koodiyattam is behind the performer as an unwritten or unspoken text.”

Vinay Kumar, in a letter describing his views on the collaborative project and his role in it, talks about certain scenes in **Brhanalla** where the music, and more particularly, Hariharan on the mizhavu, enters the performance most dramatically. “In (one) scene we done (sic) a super experience of Time when I shoot an arrow and Hari played on his mizhavu showing that the arrow is flying and then he stops and I continue that flying arrow with my breath and then Hari hits the mizhavu to show that the arrow reached its target.”

Another aspect of music as text is the relationship between the vocal sound or vachika and music. Music does not provide the background for the vachika, which largely fulfils a narrative function. Instead, the music comes in between the vachika (which is usually brief and emerges after long stretches of time) to provide the actor with a means of carrying the narration forward. On the other hand, the vachika falls into the pattern provided by the music so that the musical instruments fall silent, without creating a sense of dissonance, when the vocal expression

begins. "The vachika or vocal expression," says Ms. Chawla, "seems to be an extension of the music – not because it is musical in melodious sense, but because it takes over from the music and fulfills its function of providing rhythm and emotional colour to the expression."

A query raised by advisory panel members and programme staff concerned the choice of the mizhavu as the instrument whose music would be explored to study music as text in Koodiyattam. Why, when Koodiyattam involves the use of three other instruments, was the mizhavu alone thought significant? The final proposal introduced a distinction between the two kinds of musical instruments used in Koodiyattam: those that fulfill the function of music as text, and those that contribute to its vocabulary of sound. Only the mizhavu, said the collaborators, belonged to the first category because while it is possible to have a performance without any of the other three instruments it is not possible to have a performance without the mizhavu. This idea reinforces the textual role of mizhavu, for it is possible for it to take on the aural functions of the other three instruments in the same way that it enters into other aspects of the performance like vocal sound and movement.

The musician Hariharan in his note on this collaborative project further explained the choice of the mizhavu. According to Hariharan, if the revitalisation of Koodiyattam through contact with modern theatre techniques is to be achieved the relevance of the mizhavu would first have to be acknowledged. The many possibilities for creative interaction with other art forms that confront a contemporary mizhavu artist can be explored only if he is given the freedom to experiment with his medium. This, in turn, is possible only if, as much as a Koodiyattam performer, the Koodiyattam musician is accorded the space and recognition he deserves.

Adishakti has been engaged in creating a new aesthetic for theatre, and has towards this end been exploring the principles of forms like dance, martial arts, classical theatre, and cinema. The present project seeks through the metaphorical, multi-layered, textured nature of Koodiyattam music to see how it can be used to add to the vocabulary of a Koodiyattam performance. The fundamental idea underlying this project is that music in Koodiyattam functions according to certain principles that give it its central, textual nature. The performance, therefore, becomes a set of external physical manifestations of this text, and it becomes possible to experiment with these manifestations, by altering the principles underlying Koodiyattam music, in ways that might contribute towards creating a new aesthetic for total theatre.

The collaborators propose, during the course of the project, to study all the musical devices in Koodiyattam under the guidance of Hariharan, re-examine earlier Adishakti productions for possibilities of applying new musical devices to them, study the sources of both vocal and non-vocal sound to better their understanding of the nature of sound, and interact with several musicians from different backgrounds. Hariharan will be in Pondicherry where Adishakti is based, for twenty days a month, while the Adishakti team will visit Kerala three times a year to witness Koodiyattam performances. There will also be a monthly interaction with Aurelio, a musician and instrument maker from Auroville who participates in this project as a resource person.

Finally, it is proposed that a new theatre piece with music as text would be created, and **KPA** also reworked in keeping with this new conception of music. Both these would be performed at Pondicherry and Auroville before being taken on a countrywide performance tour.

### **Budget**

Professional fees	Rs.3,00,000
Travel and living expenses	1,20,000
Documentation expenses	12,400
Musical instruments	<u>11,000</u>
Total	<u>Rs.4,43,400</u>