

# THE MELODIES OF SUNIL SANTA<sup>1</sup>

The object of this paper is to attempt an aesthetic appreciation of the melodies of Sunil Santa (1915-1981), the great composer who was one of the pioneers of modern music in Sri Lanka.<sup>2</sup> After a brief outline of the historical background, I propose to touch on the relation of the melodies to the language and poetry of their lyrics, the impact of various musical traditions, including folk-song, and their salient features.

## I. Sources and Historical Background

Among the sources for a study of Sunil Santa's music, first in importance are the songs themselves. Most of these were published by the composer in book form with music notation, and all these have been reprinted by Mrs. Sunil Santa, who has also brought out posthumously four collections of works which remained largely unprinted during the composer's lifetime. The music is generally in Sinhala letter format, but there are two collections in staff notation,<sup>3</sup> to which must be added the first two books of Christian lyrics by Fr. Moses Perera which include a number of Sunil Santa's melodies.<sup>4</sup>

Many of these songs were recorded for broadcast either by the composer himself or by other singers who were his pupils or associates. Unfortunately, these recordings have not been preserved properly and are rarely heard nowadays. However, the S.L.B.C. has issued one LP, one EP<sup>5</sup>, and two cassettes of his songs,<sup>6</sup> and a third cassette, *Guvan*

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1. This paper was read before the Royal Asiatic Society (Sri Lanka Branch) on 31st January 1994, and is now published with a few emendations.

2. The origin of this study was an invitation extended to me by the Sunil Santa Appreciation Society to speak at the twelfth commemoration of the composer, held in Kandy on June 13th 1993. I wish to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to Mrs. Sunil Santa for her generosity in providing me with relevant documents; to Mr. Ivor Dennis for his constant encouragement; to Messrs. Anil Mihiripenna, B. Victor Perera, Nimal Ariyaratne, K.V.A. Wijesiriwardhana and Gnanasiri Gunaratne for valuable advice; Messrs. U.L.R.A. Perera and Arjuna Balasuriya, Mrs. B. Grero, Ms. Yamuna Ranasinghe, Ms. Madhavi Ariyaratne, Ms. Chandrika Ratnayake, Ms. Priyanga Fernando and Ms. Sashikala Jayasinghe for their generous assistance in conducting the research.

3. Sunil Santa: 1948a, 1950a.

4. Perera, M.: 1964, 1969.

5. This EP consists of his settings of Sigiriya Graffiti.

6. The second of these includes the tracks from two EP's made in 1962. These, I believe, were his only commercial recordings.

*Totilla*, has been issued by Mrs. Sunil Santa.

Sunil Santa held clear and logical views regarding music and its aims, the need for a national music and music education.<sup>7</sup> These views were systematically expressed in the introductions and prefatory notes to his song books, in numerous newspaper articles and in educational and polemical publications such as *Sangeetayehi Attiwarama* (1944) and *Desiya Sangeetaya* (1953).<sup>8</sup>

Over the years, the popular Sinhala and English press has carried countless contributions by the musical public about Sunil Santa and his music. Almost all of them represent him as a man of exemplary moral and intellectual courage, principle, independence, honesty, patriotism and altruism. All these writings have been carefully and diligently collected and preserved by Mrs. Sunil Santa, who has very kindly allowed me to consult them for this study. A convenient biography of the composer in Sinhala by Dharmasiri Gamage can be found in the third volume of the *Pujita Jivita* series.<sup>9</sup>

Sunil Santa<sup>10</sup> was born in 1915 on the 14th of April, the traditional New Year Day in Sri Lanka. While yet an infant, he lost both parents, a calamity to which his response was later epitomized in the song "*Netivu Mihira*".<sup>11</sup> Brought up by his grand mother, he pursued his education at a number of schools with the help of his elder brother and relatives, and won the Weeraratne medal in 1931 for best performance at the School Leaving Certificate Examination. In 1933 he entered the Teacher Training College at Maggona and at the end of three years took his appointment as a teacher.<sup>12</sup>

Before long, however, he gave up teaching to pursue a musical career, and in 1939 left for India where he studied music, first at Shanti Niketan and then at the Bhatkande Sangeeth Vidyapeeth. In 1944 he obtained the best results in Asia at the Visarad examination and returned to Sri Lanka.

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7. Dissanayake: 1981; Iriyagolla: 1983, 1989.

8. All quotations from Sinhala publications are translated by the present writer unless otherwise stated.

9. Gamage: 1990.

10. His original name was Baddaliyanage Don Joseph John, which he changed, first to Sunil Shanti and then to Sunil Santa, during his years as a student of music in India.

11. Sunil Santa: 1950 p. 17.

12. The statement of E. Wijetunga that Sunil Santa entered the Sinhala Training College Nittambuwa and there came under the influence of Munidasa Kumaratunga is, as far as I know, incorrect - cf. E. Wijetunga: 1981.

He did not, however, succeed in obtaining a government appointment commensurate with his qualifications, and decided to go his way as a free lance musician. He made his public debut singing at the Kumaratunga commemoration on March 2, 1946, and before long his concerts became extremely popular throughout the country. The first song to be recorded on disk by Radio Ceylon in 1948 was his "*Olu Pipeela*".<sup>13</sup>

Sunil Santa was disgusted with the musical trends that prevailed on the island at the time. This was the post-*Nurti* period when cheap songs were being produced by forcing distorted Sinhala words into popular melodies stolen from India and elsewhere. The Sinhala film, which emerged within a year after Sunil Santa's return to the island, also presented for the most part meaningless songs sung to Indian tunes. The music directors, assuming local singers to be incapable of rendering them, employed Indian singers who invariably distorted the pronunciation of Sinhala words.

But it was Ananda Samarakoon who attempted to develop an appropriate musical style for Sri Lanka taking for his model the musical corpus of Rabindranath Tagore. Samarakoon's efforts won Sunil Santa's approbation and encouragement.<sup>14</sup> He paid him tribute not only in words but even in music by an occasional quotation, as when in his "*Ada-yi Vesak Po Da*"<sup>15</sup> he echoed two lines from Samarakoon's "*Poson Poho Dina*". Such quotations are sometimes misrepresented as plagiarisms which militate against an artist's claim to originality. However, Sunil Santa's integrity in this matter has been amply vindicated by E.R. Sarachchandra:

"I knew Sunil Santa personally and intimately, both at Shanti Niketan and back in Sri Lanka... He was a sensitive young man with a high moral sense, and he would never stoop to dishonesty deliberately. In the field of creative literature as well as creative music, it is possible that some reminiscence of a master's thought, or, in music, a phrase, could creep into the work of an artist in the early stages of his development."<sup>16</sup>

Sunil Santa's aim was to create a musical tradition intrinsic to Sri Lanka. This is evident from the notice to his first song book, *Hela Ridee Valava*, published in 1947:

"Ever since I left for India to study music, I began to realize the tremendous gap in not having a music that belongs only to our country and is at home only in the *Hela* land. On returning to this country the

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<sup>13</sup>. Sunil Santa: 1947, p. 5, 1948a p. 3.

<sup>14</sup>. Sunil Santa: 1948.

<sup>15</sup>. Sunil Santa: 1947 p. 19.

<sup>16</sup>. Sarachchandra: 1992.

idea of filling that gap to the best of my ability grew stronger in my mind. I therefore began the course of action that I now follow."<sup>17</sup>

Unlike later day musicians, Sunil Santa did not attempt to create a national music by forcing new scales or systems of music theory out of folk-songs. Instead he created original compositions which have the power to speak to the hearts of the people. The *Desiya Sangeetaya* sets forth his motives very clearly:

"If our aim is to produce a music to be deposited in the museum so that we can pull out and show it at any time saying 'this is our national music', then we should rather not think of a national music at all, but idle away. What we need is not an antique, but something that we can use in our daily life. Therefore our task should be to develop not a type of music that would be overwhelmed by a music system found in our country today, but one that would always stand out. It is with this idea that I embarked on my contribution towards national music."<sup>18</sup>

"A special feature of a national music should be the capacity to appeal to all sections of the land - educated and uneducated, young and old. I embarked on a course of action whose goal was to develop a national music with such a quality."<sup>19</sup>

In order to propagate his new national music, Sunil Santa adopted three principal strategies: the publication of song books with notation, the conducting of music classes, and the presenting of radio programs. All three were, however, frustrated: his musical scores were pirated and reproduced in unauthorized publications; the classes suffered owing to unfavourable competition from rival institutions; and his broadcasting career was terminated abruptly in 1952 as a result of his campaign against the auditioning of Sinhala artistes by an Indian musician, S.N. Ratanjankar.<sup>20</sup> He was effectively barred from broadcasting for some fifteen years except for a few rare appearances. It was during this time that he composed the songs for the two films *Rekhava* and *Sandesaya*.

In 1967, he was invited by Neville Jayaweera, who was then Director General of Broadcasting, to serve on an auditioning panel together with W.D. Amaradeva and

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<sup>17</sup>. Sunil Santa: 1947 p. ix.

<sup>18</sup>. Sunil Santa: 1953 p. 9.

<sup>19</sup>. *ibid.* p. 19.

<sup>20</sup>. Ranasinghe, S.: 1977. This was, in fact, Ratanjankar's second audition, the first being in November 1949.

H.W. Rupasinghe.<sup>21</sup> Thereafter he presented a number of broadcasts of creative and experimental music including the well known "*Madhura Madhu*" series. But it would be true to say that almost all his melodies which have captured the hearts of millions were composed during the period 1946-1952, when he was actively engaged in promoting the cause of national music.<sup>22</sup> His last days were saddened by a personal tragedy, the untimely death of a son, which too he epitomized in a song called "*Daru Viyova*".<sup>23</sup> He died on April 11th 1981 three days before his 66th birthday.

His songs embody a wide range of themes covering almost every aspect of the life and culture of Sri Lanka. They include Buddhist and Christian devotional songs, songs for children, patriotic philosophical and nature songs, laments, tributes, commemorations, festival songs and songs of love.

His achievements in the field of national music and poetry have been summarized by Arisen Ahubudu as follows: the creation of song out of poetry, the invention of a national melodic style, the composition of a melody to suit the lyric rather than the other way round, the correct pronunciation of words, singing in a manner which brings out the thought and feeling of the lyric, the composition and performance of melodies for films, the discriminate utilization of elements from Western music and the creation of a truly indigenous musical tradition for posterity.<sup>24</sup>

According to Jayantha Aravinda, the commonest features of Sunil Santa's melodies are "simplicity, western melodic style, the predominance of natural notes, fullness of feeling, straightness of notes, attractive rhythm, etc."<sup>25</sup> Some of these opinions will receive consideration in what follows.

## II. The Melodies and their Lyrics

Almost all of Sunil Santa's compositions are songs; that is to say, they are closely bound up with words and are meant to be sung. He was also well known in his time as an accomplished instrumental performer, but few, if any, of his instrumental and orchestral works appear to have survived. Thus his extant compositions support the prevailing view in this country that music is primarily vocal.

Not only is his music closely linked to words, but it is also intimately bound up

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<sup>21</sup>. Ranasinghe, S. 1977.

<sup>22</sup>. Gunawardena, 1993.

<sup>23</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1948b, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup>. Ahubudu, 1982, 1985.

<sup>25</sup>. Aravinda, 1992.

with the Sinhala language, and can therefore be described as a truly Sinhala music. Apart from his recording of the Indian patriotic song "*Vande Mataram*", the Bengali boat-song "*Bondure*", his musical setting of Sanskrit verses from Jayadeva's *Geeta Govinda* and the English song "My Dreams are Roses" which he recorded for the film *Romeo Juliet*, all his songs had Sinhala lyrics.

The distinctly local touch of his music stems primarily from the inherent qualities of the Sinhala language. Although Vincent Somapala had already composed the music for Kumaratunga's *Hela Miyesiya*, it was Sunil Santa who created a musical style to complement the pure verbal style of the *Hela Havla*. The intrinsic qualities of this verbal style were, in fact, the foundation of his musical style.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, as Nandadasa Kodagoda has observed,

"It was very likely this inspiration he drew from Munidasa Kumaratunga, whose sayings, writings and the very life he lived epitomized learning, rationality and love for the country, that formed his nationalistic fervour. Sunil's ability for simple and poetic composition of lyrics was also enriched by the same source."<sup>27</sup>

Both his singing and his composition were founded on his extraordinary command of the Sinhala language and his exemplary and unparalleled love for it. He paid scrupulous attention to correct use of language and, in particular, strictly observed the quantitative character of Sinhala syllables in setting them to music. He would not sacrifice the natural quantity (i.e. long or short) of a syllable except on rare occasions when he had to yield to the just demands of the music.<sup>28</sup> The "School Mistress" is the example that readily comes to mind.<sup>29</sup>

Sunil Santa was influenced not only by Kumaratunga's linguistic style and philosophy but also by his views on music. Although at a late date he criticized the limitations of the *Hela Miyesiya*,<sup>30</sup> initially it appears to have made some impact on him. According to Jayantha Aravinda, (who is, by the way, the son of Kumaratunga's collaborator Vincent Somapala) this impact explains the simplicity of many of Sunil

<sup>26</sup>. Abeysekara, 1991 (3). Sunil Santa was, however, equally at home in the Sanskritized style. The best proof of this is the devotional song he recorded for the film *Ambapali*.

<sup>27</sup>. Kodagoda, 1987.

<sup>28</sup>. On this account I feel that, in rendering his melodies, it is improper to introduce syncope of the type found in western popular music.

<sup>29</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1950 p. 3, 1950a p. 4-5.

<sup>30</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1942a.

Santa's melodies and the predominance of natural notes in them. In his opinion, Sunil Santa's melodies represent a poignant and more aesthetic vocal presentation of the melodic style of the *Hela Miyesiya* which had been designed as a system of exercises employing the natural octave for the purpose of training beginners in the art of playing the violin.<sup>31</sup>

As a lyricist, Sunil Santa's achievement is outstanding.<sup>32</sup> His lyrics reveal his powerful imagination as well as his phenomenal command of language. He realized that language was the soul of Sinhala vocal music and carefully chose the most appropriate words to convey his thoughts and emotions. In his lyrics he employed the genuine Sinhala idiom. As Aravinda has observed, "his lyrics well reflect his extreme sensitivity to correct and erudite language. Correct and erudite language was prominent even in the very simple lyrics that Sunil sang."<sup>33</sup> He paid equal attention to the structure, theme and language of a song and succeeded in maintaining a unity and balance among these elements in his compositions. As a result his songs were highly effective in registering the intended meaning and emotion in the listener.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, as Sunil Ariyaratne has pointed out,

"it was Sunil Santa who first realized the nature of the contribution of a creative literary writer towards the success of a light song. Although he possessed the ability to create lyrics, Sunil Santa was not satisfied with it, but went further in search of pure literature. The scholars of the *Hela Havla* who rallied round him provided aesthetic nourishment for his creations. That corpus of lyrics contributed towards the establishment of a good song literature."<sup>35</sup>

Thus Sunil Santa's songs are equally rich in melody, lyricism and meaning. He took great care in grasping the obvious sense and deeper significance of his lyrics and in communicating them to his listeners through his sonorous voice and style of singing. The most important consequence of this was that the Sinhala song attracted the serious attention of the intelligentsia in general and of poets, writers and scholars in particular. At the same time, thanks to his efforts, the musician came to be accepted as a learned artist

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<sup>31</sup>. Aravinda, 1990.

<sup>32</sup>. In 1952 he published a collection of his own lyrics (words only) entitled *Sunil Gee*.

<sup>33</sup>. Aravinda, 1990.

<sup>34</sup>. Perera, S.S., 1988.

<sup>35</sup>. Ariyaratne, 1985.

commanding the respect of society.<sup>36</sup> The interaction and collaboration between musical and literary personalities which originated with Sunil Santa has continued to enrich our music down to the present day.

In the serious tradition of Western music, a song is usually a musical setting of an existing poem. But once set to music it is published and known as a work of the composer. Almost all the well-loved songs of the great composers are settings of already existing texts by various poets. But our experience has been quite otherwise. Our folk-songs *nurti* and *nadagam* songs, as well as the songs in many of our films are sung to already existing melodies. Hence the creation of a melody for an existing text is something of a novelty for many of us. That this attitude is not confined to the layman may be seen from Amaradeva's remarks on song production:

"The birth of a song happens in two ways. One is the creation of a melodic pattern based on a poetic composition. The other is to create the form of the melody from a purely musical subject and then superimpose an appropriate lyric. Whichever process is adopted in the creation, it is useful for the composer to know that what affects the listener is the end result of the work. Even so, it should be said that it is the second method that gives rise to a creation of a song replete with musical merit. Here the composer's medium receives priority. His independent stream of thought is not confused by the impact of an external medium. Thus there is room for the creation of a veritable song that is original in melodic quality and beautiful in form."<sup>37</sup>

Sunil Santa, on the other hand, insisted that the melody should follow the text:

"While every other nation has prepared the way for the enjoyment of literature and music by singing their songs and poems to musical settings, the work of our *Hela* poets belongs only to the book. It is a tremendous shortcoming that our singers do not have the ability to delight their listeners by the sweet rendering of *Hela* songs. They are still unable to decide whether the thought follows the tune or whether the tune follows the thought: The lyric itself comes first. The tune follows its thought. What prevails among us is the opposite."<sup>38</sup>

This is borne out by Hubert Disanayake and Gunapala Senadheera who describe their experience as Sunil Santa's lyricists:

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<sup>36</sup>. In 1950 Sunil Santa signed the Stockholm Peace Appeal along with Chitrasena, George Keyt and Martin Wickramasinghe (Anon. 1950).

<sup>37</sup>. Amaradeva, 1989, p. 50.

<sup>38</sup>. Sunil Santa in *Subasa* vol. 5.

"Sunil never asked the lyricist to write some words to a certain tune. ... If he needed a lyric on a specific topic, he would explain it and ask for a verse composition about it, and I would comply. ... When there was no such special occasion, I would create themes and compose lyrics purely according to my own poetic concepts and hand them over to him. ... But I cannot help saying that it must be through some strange grace that Sunil Santa turned those lyrics into captivating and immortal songs by setting them to music that matched in every way their poetic concepts and poetic images."<sup>39</sup>

"Every time he invited me to compose a lyric for him I would request him to furnish a suitable tune. But on every occasion he would smile and tell me in his accustomed high voice, 'write a song anyway you like. Leave it to me to compose a melody to it.' I think that this was the experience of every lyricist who wrote songs for Sunil Santa. Herein, I feel, lies the secret of Sunil's songs not becoming puppets enslaved by the melody."<sup>40</sup>

According to Sunil Ariyaratne the first composer to utilize a verse text by a Sinhala poet may well be Ananda Samarakoon who set to music a poem by the poet known as Doonagaha Kiviyara.<sup>41</sup> Sunil Santa also composed musical settings of poems by well known poets present and past, including Kumaratunga,<sup>42</sup> Rayifiyel Tennakoon,<sup>43</sup> P.B. Alwis Perera,<sup>44</sup> Jayadeva<sup>45</sup> and the Sigiri Graffiti.

Occasionally the same lyrics have been set to music by other composers as well. These include the songs from Kumaratunga's *Hela Miyesiya* (which were originally set by Vincent Somapala) and some of Fr. Moses Perera's Christian lyrics (which have been also set by Ivor Dennis, J.K.S. Perera and others). Arisen Ahubudu's "*Vasanta Geetaya* ("Spring song") has been set by both Amaradeva and Sunil Santa,<sup>46</sup> and it may be

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<sup>39</sup>. Disanayake, 1981.

<sup>40</sup>. Senadheera, 1981.

<sup>41</sup>. Ariyaratne, 1988 p. 186.

<sup>42</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1947 p. 3 & 11, 1949 p. 11 & 16, Sunil Santa-Dennis, 1993 p. 11.

<sup>43</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1949 p. 9, Sunil Santa-Dennis, 1993 p. 41.

<sup>44</sup>. Sunil Santa (ed. Lila Santa), 1990 p. 29.

<sup>45</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1948b p. 33.

<sup>46</sup>. Sunil Santa-Dennis, 1992 p. 35.

instructive to compare them.

Once he had decided on a lyric to set to music, Sunil Santa paid meticulous attention to its language, meaning, sound and emotional content. I have heard Arisen Ahubudu describe over the air how Sunil Santa made a long journey to meet him just to get his permission to drop one word from the lyric of "*Lanka Geeya*". Gnanasiri Gunaratne informs me that the composer made some six changes in the two lyrics supplied by him, namely "*Sata Sata Vehi Bindu*"<sup>47</sup> and "*Reye Souduru Reye*",<sup>48</sup> so as to make them more suitable for singing.<sup>49</sup> How seriously he approached his task as a composer can be realized from the following statement of Fr. Moses Perera:

"My loving friend Sunil Santa, once these lyrics were handed over to him, considered them, was pleased with them, took interest in them, and with care, thought, diligence and discrimination, he endowed each lyric with fresh and appropriate original melody, decked it out by enlivening the language, enhancing the meaning, making it appeal to the heart so as to direct the mind along religious sentiment and made it beam with a serene joy that induces concentration of mind and awakening of heart."<sup>50</sup>

It is this serious attitude to his work, I feel, that accounts for the enduring quality of many of his melodies. His exquisite melodies served to invest the lyrics with an unprecedented beauty and appeal. The lyric was never a hindrance to his creative impulse. Those who complain of monotony in his music are prejudiced from lack of familiarity. Variety is, in fact, the hallmark of his style.

Let me take one example. In his book *Sunil Handa* the composer says that Hubert Disanayake wrote the lyrics to metres suggested by him.<sup>51</sup> In three of Disanayake's love lyrics, viz, "*Kele Handa*",<sup>52</sup> "*Kele Mala*"<sup>53</sup> and "*Verale Mihira*"<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1990 p. 14-15.

<sup>48</sup>. Sunil Santa-Dennis, 1993 p. 22-24.

<sup>49</sup>. Gunaratne, 1994.

<sup>50</sup>. Perera, M. 1964 Introduction p. 1.

<sup>51</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1947a. I should perhaps point out here that Sunil Santa, an artist who sincerely appreciated the work of other artists, was extremely generous in remunerating his lyricists. Thus, for the eighteen songs in this book he paid Rs. 900.00 to Hubert Disanayake, i.e. Rs. 50.00 per song (Sunil Santa: 1950 p. vii). That must have been a princely sum in those days.

<sup>52</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1950 p. 7, 1950a p. 10-11.

the verses follow an almost identical rhythmic pattern. But the three melodies that Sunil Santa composed for them have each an unmistakable individuality of its own.

In the setting of poetry to music, Sunil Santa's greatest achievement is, no doubt, the "*Kukulu Hevilla*" based on a poem by Rafiyel Tennakoon.<sup>55</sup> This work has been highly acclaimed by both fellow musicians and music lovers.<sup>56</sup> According to the composer himself, the melody was suggested to him by the vocal pattern of rural women who, on losing anything valuable, invoke the gods for redress.<sup>57</sup> According to Kodagoda "the lyric was enhanced by Sunil's music where the rustic reverberations of a desperate but believing rural woman's lament are cleverly incorporated into a very original musical composition and rendered in a style which is likely to be that woman's very own."<sup>58</sup> The poem on its own is perhaps satirical of a society that is only too ready to invoke what is sacred for the slightest thing without any sense of proportion. But all that is suppressed once the music is added, and our sympathy is directed towards the deprived woman as her malediction gradually softens to a prayer for help. Such is the power of his music.

### III. Some External Influences

Any artist is inevitably influenced by his environment, education and the traditions that he has inherited. But a gifted artist knows how to use his discretion in rejecting what is not proper and absorbing whatever influence he needs to the required extent. Sunil Santa too understood the various influences that reached him and used them as appropriate in his works while maintaining his accustomed independence. As Senadheera has observed:

"Sunil Santa, who undertook to develop a *Hela* music style, did not look for it only in one direction. Nor was he indebted to only a single style. If there was anything to take, whether from the East or from the West, he absorbed all those things in order to give to the country a music with a new design and new aspect having infused it with qualities that suit his land and his music."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53.</sup> Sunil Santa, 1952 p. 3.

<sup>54.</sup> Sunil Santa, 1950 p. 15, 1950a p. 6.

<sup>55.</sup> Sunil Santa-Dennis, 1993 p. 41.

<sup>56.</sup> Cf. Amaradeva, 1989 p. 50; Senadheera, 1952; Witarana, 1988.

<sup>57.</sup> Sunil Santa, 1953 p. 11.

<sup>58.</sup> Kodagoda, 1987.

<sup>59.</sup> Senadheera, 1983.

Sunil Santa never allowed himself to be enslaved by the North Indian Ragadhari music that he had studied. But neither did he hesitate to adopt whatever it had to offer that was worth adopting. The result, as Gnanasiri Gunaratne has aptly pointed out, was the birth of a style of musical composition that was at once akin to ragadhari music and independent of it.<sup>60</sup>

To take a few examples: whether deliberately or by coincidence he employed freely the melodic patterns of Dhanasiri (a raga traditionally recommended for the afternoon according to the North Indian system) to create a beautiful song about sunset.<sup>61</sup> The midnight raga Malkauns was similarly used for a Christmas song describing the infant Jesus in the crib.<sup>62</sup> His Easter song echoes raga Pathadeep.<sup>63</sup> Raga Pahadi (the favourite of *thumri* singers) evokes the love of prince Saliya for Asokamala.<sup>64</sup> The patriotic sentiment of Kumaratunga's "*Hela Rana Geeya*" finds expression in strains akin to raga Khamaj,<sup>65</sup> while raga Bhairavi (a traditional medium for separated love) is used for Rama's lament, originally composed for Chitrasena's ballet Ramayana.<sup>66</sup> Two songs, "*Hela Bas Asiri Geeya*" and "*Sundara Himidiriye*" employ an exquisite blend of raga Durgha with the South Indian raga Arabi.<sup>67</sup>

Jayantha Aravinda has observed that Sunil Santa created ragadhari melodies especially when setting texts which were pathetic in mood.<sup>68</sup> This is generally true, and it can be observed further that for highly emotional melodies he particularly preferred a melodic pattern which could be described as a synthesis of ragas such as Bhimpalasi, Dhanasri and Dhani. Examples are "*Pemvatiyage Sohona*" ("Grave of the Beloved")<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>. Gunaratne, 1993a.

<sup>61</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1947 p. 15.

<sup>62</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1950 p. 12.

<sup>63</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1949 p. 12.

<sup>64</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1950 p. 4.

<sup>65</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1949 p. 10.

<sup>66</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1948b p. 34; Vitharana, 1988. For a completely different opinion cf. Nihal de Silva (1953) who maintains that all these songs are based on nothing but the metres of Sinhala folk verse.

<sup>67</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1949 p. 2 and 18.

<sup>68</sup>. Aravinda, 1990.

<sup>69</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1947a p. 14.

"The musical aspect of Sunil Santa's songs seems to have emerged from "kantaru" music. His melodies, which are often built on natural notes of the octave, are formed of monotonous sound patterns."<sup>77</sup>

It appears as though this eminent musician were under the impression that Christian song melodies were monotonous and largely limited to natural notes. That would be a serious mistake. It would be equally wrong to presume that Sunil Santa's melodies were monotonous. If some of them are confined to natural notes, Christian influence, even if it were admissible, would not be the only reason. I have already alluded to Jayantha Aravinda's attribution of this feature to the impact of Kumaratunga's *Hela Miyasiya*.

Be that as it may, I feel that what is common to Christian melodies and those of Sunil Santa is their simplicity, reflecting the fact that both are meant to be sung by everyone rather than by the pure professionals. Yet there was another reason for the simplicity of Sunil Santa's melodies.

Sunil Santa, who began his working life as a schoolmaster, always felt a deep affection for children. The company of these innocent children, free from the hypocrisy of adults, always brought him happiness.<sup>78</sup> Besides, he was convinced that through them a better world could be built in the future.<sup>79</sup> The same affection is also revealed in his photography, such as his study of the child lying on the ground and reading with the help of a lantern and that of the infant gazing through a window at the surroundings.<sup>80</sup> In fact some of his songs were first sung to children at various schools.<sup>81</sup> It is no surprise therefore that many of his songs are composed in such a way as to be easily sung and enjoyed by children. The more complicated melodies are generally reserved for love songs, laments, commemorations and other compositions for adults.

At the time when Sunil Santa embarked on his musical career, the old Christian songs of Fr. Jacome Gonsalvez and others, with their Eastern tunes, had fallen out of use. The churches echoed to Western melodies to which Sinhala words had been forced to fit without any regard for quantity or sense. Fr. Mercelline Jayakody and others had attempted to create original hymns, but in their earliest efforts they did not break away

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<sup>77</sup>. Kapuge, 1990 p. 37.

<sup>78</sup>. Anonymous, 1955.

<sup>79</sup>. Iriyagolla, 1983.

<sup>80</sup>. Samarasinghe, N. 1983.

<sup>81</sup>. Perera, B.C. 1981.

completely from Western influence.<sup>82</sup> Against this background, Sunil Santa, a Catholic Christian himself, composed in his accustomed style a number of original melodies for Christian songs of high linguistic and literary merit by himself as well as by Fr. Moses Perera, Hubert Disanayake and others.<sup>83</sup>

These Christian songs attained tremendous popularity and many other composers imitated their style with regard both to lyric and melody. His style has thus become the prevalent style of Sinhala Christian music. Thus it would not be true to say that he adopted the style of Christian music.

Some of those who spread this view appear to consider "Western music" as synonymous with "Christian music" or "Roman Catholic music". They also seem to imply that the composer adopted this style purely for the sake of popularity. Consider the following statements:

"A number of songs that Sunil Santa composed recently reveal clearly on examination the existence of influence from Roman Catholic devotional songs. ... [The writer mentions a number of songs as showing western influence] ... The example of this Sunil Santa who went to India and returned after studying at a well known Indian musical institution, was followed by many other aspirants to music on the island who did not go to India."<sup>84</sup>

"What Sunil created as melodies for his series of songs were simple and delightful compositions. At times his compositions as well as his style of singing bore a musical style which reminded one of the style of Western hymns. He may have embraced this song style to comply either with the general trends of fashion of the time, or with an inherent tendency within himself. Anyhow, this song style met with immediate and favourable response from the music loving public of the time. Sunil became the Sinhala vocalist who attained the greatest popularity within a short time and who had the greatest number of fans."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup>. Thus the first original Sinhala hymn of Fr. Jayakody composed in 1934 follows the "A A B A" pattern of western melodies. Cf. Mercelline Jayakody, *Tun Kekula* (1965) p. 10.

<sup>83</sup>. Sunil Santa's song books often present Buddhist and Christian devotional lyrics side by side. This boldness and broadmindedness, I feel, he must have imbibed from, among others, Munidasa Kumaratunga who presented the new triple gem of "Land, Language and People".

<sup>84</sup>. Somapala, 1952.

<sup>85</sup>. Aravinda, 1990.

No one can deny the significant role of Christianity in the origin and development of Western music. But that does not justify the equation of Western music with Christian music. Besides, the so-called Western or Christian element would be evident, if at all, only in a small minority of his compositions. I may also add that the view that Sunil Santa adopted Christian musical elements had been successfully challenged recently by two eminent writers.<sup>86</sup>

However, one has to admit that, in a small number of his recordings, one is reminded of western choral singing. This is due to excessive reliance on Western techniques in vocal and instrumental accompaniment. The melody is occasionally confused rather than ornamented by Western harmony and orchestration. Well known examples are "*Siripa Namadu Geeya*",<sup>87</sup> "*Kurulu Adare*"<sup>88</sup> and "*Kavsilumina Geeya*".<sup>89</sup> Regarding the last mentioned song, Gnanasiri Gunaratne has correctly observed that the fault lay not in the singing or the employment of Western musical instruments, but in the music direction as a whole.<sup>90</sup> I feel that these songs would have fared better with a simpler accompaniment. I also feel that this style is particularly inappropriate for the "*Siripa Namadu Geeya*" which is a devotional song for Vesak.

Whenever Sunil Santa imbibed any influence, he did so deliberately and with a purpose. This is clear from the following statement in the *Desiya Sangeetaya*:

"Sometimes one has to employ various strategies to attract the attention of someone. The strategy I employed towards this end in my task was to present songs according to the musical systems favoured by the majority in this country. That is why my compositions include songs of diverse styles. What I gained from singing songs in those diverse styles was that all those who preferred the several styles were attracted towards me, and that they thus got to know me."<sup>91</sup>

Rarely did he sing a foreign tune. But even then his originality stood out. At a time when musicians took great pains to reproduce slavishly not only the sound pattern and pronunciation but even the background music of Indian songs, Sunil Santa was able to render an Indian melody in a way that highlighted his independence and originality:

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<sup>86</sup>. Perera S.S, 1988; Abeyseel a, 1991, (2).

<sup>87</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1952 p. 9.

<sup>88</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1947a p

<sup>89</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1952 |

<sup>90</sup>. Gunaratne, 1993.

<sup>91</sup>. Sunil Santa, 195

witness His "*Sumano, Sumano*," sung to a melody from the Hindi film *Kismet*.<sup>92</sup>

Whatever the influences, his compositions represent a style that is unmistakably his own. As Sarachchandra has remarked, what he attempted to create was "a style of music which has a character of its own, and which is not simply an echo of the music of other countries."<sup>93</sup> The originality of that style was reinforced by his unique voice and vocal manner which depended for its effectiveness above all on clear and correct pronunciation. Each syllable of every word was properly articulated, with the result that Sinhala came to be revealed as a glorious, lofty and highly musical language.<sup>94</sup>

#### IV. The Impact of Folk-Song

Apart from the Sinhala language, Sunil Santa's most significant source of inspiration was Sinhala folk-song and folklore. He was gifted with a lilting, mellifluous, open voice ideally suited to the rendering of folk-song. This magnificent voice, nurtured in a rural environment, was not distorted by his training in classical music.<sup>95</sup> For three years prior to his departure for India he had studied folk-songs and *vannam* under Urapola Banda Gurunnanse.<sup>96</sup> Writing to Arisen Ahubudu once he inquired whether it would be possible to create a music that can be called Sinhala by modernizing our ancient rural song rhythms and composing lyrics on their model. Ahubudu's answer was the lyric "*piyumo*" which the composer promptly set to music.<sup>97</sup>

Sunil Santa believed that musical works could be produced by absorbing the melodic patterns concealed in our folk-songs, and accordingly attempted to create something new. In his view, one could not create a Sinhala music to reflect our national characteristics by absorbing Indian influence.<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, the musical element of our traditional melodies would not be adequate for our purpose, and therefore he advocated the prudent admission of elements from the great systems of world music.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1948b p. 4.

<sup>93</sup>. Sarachchandra, 1950.

<sup>94</sup>. Cf. Senadheera, 1981.

<sup>95</sup>. Gunaratne, 1993.

<sup>96</sup>. Iriyagolla, 1983, 19'

<sup>97</sup>. Anonymous, 1955

<sup>98</sup>. Vitana, R. 1981

<sup>99</sup>. Sunil Santa, 19

Those who attempt to create a national Sinhala music from folk-song today generally follow one of several courses of action: They either create a new composition based on a particular folk-song; or create an "antara" section by expanding the range of the folk melody to cover the span of an octave; or cause the melody to be rendered simultaneously at different pitch levels producing a rudimental form of parallel harmony; or convert the folk verse into a light song by adding an orchestral prelude, interlude and coda; or attempt to build elaborate systems of scales and theories on folk-song and introduce them into the educational system.

In my opinion, however, the best way to create a truly national music out of folk-songs is to listen to them as often as possible, study them as much as possible and, once they have been completely absorbed into one's system, to forget them altogether and create original compositions. Such creations will inevitably embody the national characteristics of our folk-songs.

I feel that Sunil Santa's music is truly national in this sense. In a piece called "Tanuvaka Upata" (Birth of a Melody)<sup>100</sup> written for Ivor Dennis, the composer has demonstrated how his "Ganga Geeya" and the lullaby from *Rekhava* originated from the traditional melody to which we sing verses from the *Lo Veda Sangarava*. One cannot help wondering just how many of his other melodies conceal disguised or transformed folk-song motifs.

The impact of folk melody becomes increasingly evident in his later compositions. Concurrently with this increasing impact, and no doubt as its inevitable consequence, we observe a progressive departure from Indian musical usage. This departure is particularly evident in three areas: Rhythm, Melody and musical Form.

(1) *Rhythm*: An Indian musical composition is generally set to a single rhythm or *tala* and changes of rhythm within a composition are not frequent. Our traditional melodies are not thus confined to a single rhythm. Each verse in a string of metrically identical verses may be sung to a different rhythm: witness the *Asne* of the *Kohomba Kankariya* ritual where the same metre is presented in five different rhythms and melodies. Not only that; our rhythms change even within a single verse, as in the "Musaladi Vannama" and the verses in honour of Dedimunda. Now, Sunil Santa too does not confine his melodies to a single rhythm as in Indian music, but lends them colour and interest by combining different rhythms. "Sinhala Avurudde",<sup>101</sup> "Tel Gala Hisa"<sup>102</sup> and "Ko Haturo" from *Sandesay* are well known examples.

(2) *Melody*: In India theory *raga* is a series of notes (*svara*) capable of

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<sup>100</sup>. Sunil Santa-Dennis 7-29.

<sup>101</sup>. Sunil Santa 1948!

<sup>102</sup>. Sunil Santa, 196

generating aesthetic delight. However, it is also stipulated that a *rāga* must employ at least five notes of the scale from which it is derived. But Sunil Santa not only created melodies employing four, three, two notes and even one note,<sup>103</sup> but endowed them with the capacity for incomparable aesthetic delight. Although critics are inclined to dismiss them as mere experiments, their indigenous flavour and freshness can hardly be missed.

One limitation, however, has to be pointed out. Many of these tunes are hard to enjoy as pure music once they are separated from their lyrics. Nevertheless, as Abeysekara has observed, "These melodies combine bare simplicity and expressive power to a degree unparalleled in Sinhala music. I think in these compositions, baffling to some and infuriating to others, Sunil Santa's quest for a musical idiom which would avoid the exuberance and rhetoric of the *ragadhari* tradition and reach a naked austerity in keeping with the lucid economy of Elu was practically near-fulfilled."<sup>104</sup>

This development reached its climax in the 1970's in the musical settings of the Sigiri graffiti. Every one of these melodies is confined to four notes, but, given the composer's instinct for rhythm and colour, they are anything but monotonous.

(3) *Musical form*: As with Mohammed Ghouse, Ananda Samarakoon and Amaradeva, one observes in Sunil Santa the attempt to liberate Sinhala song from the *sthayi-antara* structure of Hindustani music to which it had been confined since the days of the *nurti*. This is already evident in the opening song of his first published collection which also gave the book its title: "*Ridi Valava*".<sup>105</sup> It was followed by others: "*Kokila Nade*",<sup>106</sup> "*Guvan Totilla*",<sup>107</sup> "*Oru Pedeema*",<sup>108</sup> "*Kukulu Hevilla*".<sup>109</sup> "*Lene*",<sup>110</sup> "*Simhala Avurudde*",<sup>111</sup> "*Handa Pane (2)*"<sup>112</sup> and "*Komala Deta*

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<sup>103</sup>. Sunil Santa-Dennis, 1993 p. 31-33.

<sup>104</sup>. Abeysekara, 1991 (4).

<sup>105</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1947 p. 1.

<sup>106</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1947a p. 1, 1<sup>c</sup> 8a p. 12.

<sup>107</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1948b p. 2

<sup>108</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1948b p

<sup>109</sup>. Sunil Santa-Dennis

<sup>110</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1949

<sup>111</sup>. Sunil Santa, 194

upon hearing a line once, the listener is encouraged to join the singer the second time.<sup>120</sup> This is because the melodies have what Abeysekera has appropriately called the "air of inevitability": "Each note is unerringly in the right place. There can be no improvement of the structure; no rearrangement of the sequence of notes. The melody seems to have evolved naturally like a tree growing."<sup>121</sup>

Sunil Santa was capable of developing the simplest musical concept into an outstanding melody, and it is worth analyzing some of his techniques of composition, in order to be able to appreciate his music better. Whether in setting forth his views in prose, or in expressing his feelings in lyrics, his thoughts unfold systematically, one step at a time. The same is true of his melodies. More often than not, they gradually build up towards a climax.

Take, for instance, the well known melody of his "*Olu Pipeela*". The first pause is on the tonic; the next is on the second note of the scale; this is followed by a pause on the third, and then another on the fifth. From here the melody soars beyond the upper tonic to its climax, and then, instead of descending directly, follows an undulating movement until it reaches the middle tonic which was its starting point.<sup>122</sup>

He had a fine sense of melodic balance. He would often arrange a pair of musical phrases like a question and answer. An interesting instance occurs in the verse of "*Kurulu Adare*". Here the first line rises gradually but ends by falling two steps, while the second line falls gradually but ends by rising two steps.<sup>123</sup>

Imitative sequences figure prominently in his melodies. The second phrase is often a mere repetition of the first, but shifted to a different, and usually higher, degree of the scale.<sup>124</sup> Sometimes the second phrase is slightly modified in order to accommodate it to the shape of the melody.<sup>125</sup>

One device seems to have been a particular favourite with him. After repeating a melodic figure sequentially three times in the same direction (usually descending) he

<sup>120</sup>. Aravinda, 1990.

<sup>121</sup>. Abeysekera, 1991 (1).

<sup>122</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1947 p. 5,            a p. 3.

<sup>123</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1947a p.

<sup>124</sup>. E.G., "May Song"            a 1947a p. 2 lines 1 - 2, 1948a p. 4 bars 1 - 8; "Munindu Vendun            ta-Dennis: 1992 p. 6. Cf. Also the first eight bars of "*Gayava*            rera, M. 1964 p. 14.

<sup>125</sup>. E.g., "*Ridee Se*            ul Santa, 1952 p. 18 lines 7 - 8.

would make the melody move in a different manner. I have counted some eighteen instances in his printed scores.<sup>126</sup>

As Aravinda has remarked, Sunil Santa was gifted with a golden voice full of refinement and highly listenable, which instinctively sought the correct notes and intervals. As the supreme reward of long and systematic practice this voice became cultivated and magnificent, amply fulfilling the expectation of music lovers. His voice was at home in both the high and the low, and agile in the rendering of vibrato and ornaments. He made his singing come alive by modulating his voice to suit the thought and feeling of his text.<sup>127</sup>

At a time when the Sinhala song is in danger of being fragmented and overwhelmed by seemingly endless orchestral introductions, interludes and codas, I feel that Sunil Santa's use of instrumental accompaniment embodies a salutary message. He never allowed his voice to be covered over by the accompaniment. Prominence was given to the melody while the accompaniment played a subsidiary and characteristically ornamental role. In general, his orchestra was not very large. It was usually restricted to a few instruments: often a violin, a guitar and a pair of Tablas would do; and they allowed his voice, which was free of any defects that a large orchestra might cover, to stand out in such a way as to allow due prominence to the words and the melody.<sup>128</sup> Among his later compositions, "*Ambalame Pina*"<sup>129</sup> and "*Tikiri Liya*"<sup>130</sup> only employed the udekki, while the song commemorating Mr. S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake was sung without any musical accompaniment whatsoever.<sup>131</sup>

Introductions were rare and, when present, confined to a few bars. Often only the *sruti* or tonic was heard before the song began. Interludes usually consisted of lines from the song itself, except in moments of intense feeling when the composer sought the power of pure music to express a thought that was too deep for words. The best example

<sup>126</sup>. E.g., Sunil Santa, 1952 p. 4, 1950 p. 6, 1949 p. 21; Sunil Santa-Dennis, 1992 p. 2, etc.

<sup>127</sup>. Aravinda, 1990.

<sup>128</sup>. Cf. Vitarana, 1988; Aravinda, 1990.

<sup>129</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1990 p. 32 -

<sup>130</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 16 - 17.

<sup>131</sup>. There is an often re engineer suggested from being heard people of this cor D., 1981; Porutu

dote to the effect that, at this recording, when the at least a tampura drone to prevent his breathing supposed to have replied: "It is good that the Sunil Santa is still breathing." Cf. Gunasinghe,

is the violin interlude in the "*Mituru Vijaya*".

Sunil Santa was no extremist restricting his accompaniments to eastern instruments. His broad attitude towards musical traditions enabled him to effect a judicious blend of instruments from different cultures both of the east and of the west. But he exercised due discretion and moderation in employing western instruments. As H.M. Gunasekera remembers, "his view was that, while the blending of different systems without due knowledge or understanding abused the artistic element, the judicious employment of different systems in a way appropriate to one's creation was not only right but was essential to the propagation of the art."<sup>132</sup> In particular, he emphatically maintained that brass instruments were detrimental to the intrinsic qualities of our music and hence should not be admitted.<sup>133</sup>

Accordingly, some of his earlier recordings employ a string orchestra in harmony, and the clarinet and piano are also heard occasionally. The two commercial recordings employed electric guitar, double bass and flute as well as violins and Tabla. But the greatest variety of orchestration is found in the "*Madhura Madhu*" series. I must admit, however, that I find the orchestration in "*Valakulen Besa*", "*Emba Ganga*" and, especially, "*Tel Gala Hisa*" too loud and uncharacteristic of the composer. On the other hand, the "*Ganga Geeya*", composed for Ivor Dennis, has a colourful interlude in which the instruments are employed in canonic imitation, while the "*Munudu Venduma*", for the same vocalist, presents a sensitive and highly aesthetic combination of the tone colours of different instruments. It is a pity indeed that these songs are rarely heard nowadays. On the whole, Sunil Santa's orchestration can be described as a model in restraint, appropriateness and moderation.

The tremendous popularity of Sunil Santa's melodies is beyond dispute. But the real nature of that popularity, I feel, has not always been rightly perceived. Much has been made of their vogue among the English speaking middle class both by the composer himself as well as by some of his admirers.<sup>134</sup> But, in truth, their popularity rests with the multitude of those who cherish a profound affection for the Sinhala language and song. One has only to think of the flood of letters to the press both when Sunil Santa stopped singing in 1955,<sup>135</sup> and when he passed away in 1981.

Sunil Santa firmly believed that, as an independent and sovereign nation, the people of Sri Lanka should possess a music that can truly be called our own. He therefore did whatever he could, not only to create such a music, but also to elevate it to

<sup>132</sup>. Gunasekera, 1990.

<sup>133</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1953

<sup>134</sup>. Sunil Santa, 1947; Vitana, R. 1978; Vitarana, W. 1990.

<sup>135</sup>. Cf. in particular, *Sinhala*, 1955, February 3, 4, 5, etc.

international level. Moreover, he encouraged others who aspired to these same objectives. He conducted numerous experiments with the object of presenting his listeners always with something original and meaningful. The results of such experiments were embodied in a musical idiom founded on the inherent characteristics of the Sinhala language and folk song, but with the judicious incorporation of elements from both East and West. The melodies in which this idiom found expression are perhaps unparalleled in Sinhala music for the balance between didactic and aesthetic value, and will doubtless be remembered and sung for many generations to come.

**D.P.M. WEERAKKODY**