

Music as a bridge

Research Trip Sri Lanka

Exploring resolution and reconciliation efforts



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January 6th – Arrival in Sri Lanka

I arrived in Sri Lanka and had my first real taste of the local cultural tapestry right from my taxi ride. The driver was incredibly friendly and shared some fascinating insights about the island's diversity. He explained that Sri Lanka is home to diverse ethnic groups, including the Sinhalese in the south and the Tamils in the north, as well as a mix of religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. The official languages are Sinhalese, Tamil, and English; Hindi and Arabic are also present through media, education, and specific communities.

What stood out to me was how he described everyone listening to music from all kinds of regions. Even if each culture has its own traditions, there's this beautiful blend of musical tastes crossing over from north to south. It was a lovely introduction to the island's interconnected and diverse musical landscape.



January 7th

Today was a day full of flavours and new friendships. It started with a breakfast that woke up my taste buds—spicy and delicious, with a friendly introduction to something called “boori,” a crispy fried bread that just made the morning. The locals’ warmth and friendliness were like a constant companion throughout the day.

In the afternoon, I took a walk by the ocean near the Galle Face Hotel, and the air was filled with music. It’s this beautiful blend of sounds, maybe influenced by Indian music, maybe purely Sri Lankan, but absolutely inspiring.

The highlight was meeting **Pamalka Manjitha Karunanayake**. We dove into deep musical discussions, comparing the nuances of microtones—22 in Indian scales versus 24 in Arabic music. It was a meeting not just of minds, but of musical worlds, and it feels like the start of something really special.

We ended the day with a delicious dinner at a local spot, tasting jackfruit curry and sipping coconut water straight from the shell. It’s been a day of new tastes, heartfelt conversations, and the beginning of new friendships.

January 8th

Meeting with **Haadia Galeley** (Voices for Peace)

Ashan (Road to Rights initiator)

<https://www.roadtorights.org/>

Dinali David (opera singer and artistic director of Voices for Peace)

I began the day around 9:30 with my first meeting with **Haadia Galeley**. She's organising a festival that brings together choirs and interreligious, intercultural musicians from all over the world. We had a really pleasant breakfast meeting in a nice little restaurant. Later, **Pamalka Manjitha Karunanayake** joined us, and the conversation really took off as the three of us explored possible ways to collaborate.

To add even more flavour to the day, a wonderful Sri Lankan opera singer named **Dinali David** joined us. She brought up a fascinating idea for a future project that we might dive into on my next visit. So the whole morning was this really fruitful exchange of ideas, not just musically, but also socially and even politically. I got a deeper glimpse into the artistic scene here in Sri Lanka, and it's clear that artists everywhere face their own struggles—especially when they're pushing unusual or innovative ideas that might challenge the norm.

But with people like Haadia, who are passionate about supporting independent artists, the whole scene can really stay vibrant and fresh. Overall, it was a day full of learning and really promising conversations that I'm looking forward to building on.

Oh, and there was one more interesting highlight from the breakfast venue. Haadia introduced me to the owner, **Ashan**, who turned out to be a really fascinating person. He's not just running the place; he's also an activist and the founder of an organisation called Road to Rights.

We're planning to catch up again so he can show me around and we can chat more about the work he's doing. It definitely sounds like it'll be another layer of insight into the social landscape here.

In the evening, I had my first taste of a really special Sri Lankan dish: the hopper. It's kind of like a delicate, bowl-shaped pancake, and you can add things like egg, coconut, or curry to it. Honestly, it was delicious and a fun little culinary adventure. After that nice dinner, I took a peaceful walk down to Galle Face and then headed back to the hotel, wrapping up the day on a calm note. And now, it's time to get some rest.



January 9th

I received a lovely invitation from **Pamalka** to watch a theatre performance of the legend of Kuweni. This was my first real artistic exchange here, and it gave me a lot to reflect on.

First, the show itself was a reinterpretation of this Sri Lankan legend, and it was packed with elements. Musically, I noticed this really fascinating blend of modern, almost experimental sounds—dissonances, unfamiliar instruments, and recorded rather than live music. At the same time, it was layered with these very familiar, almost Hollywood-like samples that felt a bit disconnected to me.

Second, in terms of the overall aesthetic, I found myself feeling that there was just a lot of material—maybe too much. The gestures were big, the acting quite dramatic, and it felt like the performance piled many layers on the table without a clear dramatic through-line. But I realise this is also my perspective, coming from a different cultural background, and I'm really curious to discuss with Pamalka how local aesthetics shape these kinds of performances.

In the end, it was a rich experience and a great starting point for understanding the art scene here.

And then there was this really touching moment after the show ended. **Thelma Deepika Madis**, the main actress, who is also the producer of the piece, actually asked the audience to stop clapping because she wanted to speak. Even though I didn't understand the words, I could feel how deeply personal it was for her. And later, Pamalka told me that she had written the piece and that this performance was a kind of dream or mission for her.

What really struck me was how, at the end, they didn't close the curtains. Instead, all the performers stayed on stage, and the audience just came right up onto the stage to congratulate them. It felt so unusual to me because I've always seen the stage as a space for the performers. I was almost shy or hesitant to step on it, like it was sacred ground that wasn't mine. But they were so kind, and they even asked me to share a comment on the video, which was really touching.

It's something I'm still reflecting on—how I instinctively felt distant from stepping into that space and what that means in terms of how different cultures see that boundary between performer and audience.

Pamalka also introduced me to **Dr. Ravibandu Vidyapathy**, a choreographer and composer. And I had the chance to meet **Dr. Ankuran Dutta**, the former director of the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre. Dr. Dutta kindly invited me to visit India at his place. It's a two-and-a-half-hour flight from Delhi. That's a plan to be considered in the future.



January 10th

Today unfolded into a deeply insightful and truly memorable day. I began the morning meeting with **Pamalka**, who had arranged a discussion for us at **Alliance Française de Colombo**. Together, we explored the possibility of holding a concert there and settled on a tentative date in February, likely around the 10th, when we'll perform alongside a pianist.

What truly made the day special was the long, heartfelt conversation over lunch. Pamalka opened up about his musical journey, the strong influence of Indian music on Sri Lanka's scene, and his own studies in India. He shared how he's become a master of the esraj, even though he initially disliked the instrument. We also delved into the realities of the local music education system—how many students graduate each year but struggle to find jobs, and how sometimes music studies are chosen simply because they're more affordable.

He gave me a deeper look into the caste system in Sri Lanka, which still holds a strong influence, and the role of monks in political and social hierarchies. It was eye-opening and a bit sobering to hear how these layers of identity—caste, religion, ethnicity—shape people's roles and opportunities.

To wrap up this full day, we had dinner with **Haadia Galely**, and I was introduced to **Alireza Shahini** from the Iranian Culture Centre. It looks like there might be a future jam session on the horizon too.

All in all, it was a day rich with music, cultural insights, and meaningful conversations. It's all part of this growing tapestry of experiences here in Sri Lanka.

January 11th

It was indeed a marvellous day, even if the morning started quietly with just a bit of practice. The real highlight was when we had our first session with the Voices for Peace choir—**Haadia Galely's** group. It was a really special gathering.

Pamalka was there with his esraj, and **Alireza Shahini** joined us, bringing both a tombak and an Iranian setar. We started gently, with some breathing exercises and a few pointers on using the voice and supporting it with the diaphragm, just to help everyone get comfortable. After a round of introductions, I noticed a bit of struggle in the higher registers, so we worked on that and then moved into some improvisation. It was lovely to see them open up, even though they were a bit hesitant at first.

The standout moments included Pamalka's improvisation on a traditional raga. He explained to the choir a bit about Indian scales and the sacredness of not altering these old melodies, which fascinated everyone. There was a beautiful sense of connection. And of course, we ended on a high note with a Fairuz song that everyone loved.



In the end, the choir members shared their own experiences, talking about ghazal and qawwali traditions, and it was really enriching. Each of them brought something unique—whether it was a Tamil praise song, a Pakistani ghazal piece, or a bit of Arabic singing. It was a rich evening full of cultural exchange and a perfect first step into our collaboration.

January 12th

Today was a day full of discovery and cultural layers. I began by visiting the Faculty of Music at the **University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA)** in Colombo. There, I had the chance to interview **Professor Chinthaka Meddegoda**. We talked through all those questions we prepared about Sri Lanka's music education system, the career paths of music students, and the influences shaping the local music scene. It was fascinating to learn how much Indian (Hindi) music really shapes what's popular here, while traditional Sri Lankan music is deeply rooted in these intricate drumming patterns, often passed down orally rather than written down.

[Link to the Interview](#)

In the evening, **Pamalka** invited me to one of his concerts. The journey there was an adventure in itself: we took a minibus, gathered a whole ensemble of musicians—drummers, tabla players, a harmonium, and even a small choir—and off we went. Before the concert, we stopped at a Hindu temple for a traditional puja blessing, which was incredibly moving. Then we continued to a Buddhist temple where the actual performance took place. Seeing how these religious communities respected and collaborated was really eye-opening.



By the end of the night, after all this music and cultural blending, I felt so grateful and full of inspiration.

January 14th

After a rest day on the 13th due to feeling a bit under the weather, the evening of the 14th turned into a real highlight. I had the pleasure of giving a session for the Voices for Peace choir. With a small but eager group of about four singers—two men and two women—we dove into vocal techniques, especially focusing on breathing and using the diaphragm to hit those high notes safely. They seemed genuinely happy with the advice and the improvements we made together.

We then worked on an Islamic hymn they already knew, giving it a fresh arrangement that turned out beautifully. Everyone was really impressed, and I felt so glad to contribute something meaningful. We're planning a follow-up session on January 22nd, and they're really looking forward to it.

After arriving at the apartment, I had a call—very sad news: my cat had passed away back home in Switzerland.

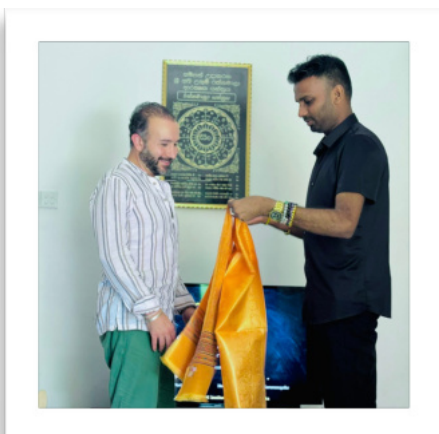
January 15th

The day was much quieter. I spent some time just walking around the city, enjoying the gardens, and visiting a beautiful ancient Buddhist temple. It brought a sense of peace and calm, which was a nice contrast to the busy days before.

January 16th & 17th

On the 16th, my journey took me from Colombo to Kegalle, though it was quite a challenging day. I was dealing with a sore throat and felt extremely tired, my voice nearly gone. But I pushed through and met a really kind driver who brought me safely to Kegalle. By evening, I connected with **Pamalka**, and he noticed I wasn't in great shape. We visited a local doctor in a peaceful, unique setting—there was even a dog lying calmly next to him. The doctor prescribed me quite a few medicines, which was a bit of a surprise, and after that I just went home, had a bite with Pamalka and our driver, and finally got some much-needed rest. It felt like I was just floating through the day until I could reach my bed.

The next morning, on the 17th, I woke up with absolutely no voice at all. I had to let Pamalka know that I wouldn't be able to sing in the workshop we had planned at the **Sasani Institute**. It was a bit disheartening because I had come there to share something special, but sometimes things just don't go as planned. Instead, we adapted. I stayed with my oud, talked about the maqamat, and kept everything in a low speaking range. Surprisingly, it turned into a really beautiful and deeply musical exchange. Pamalka translated my explanations of Arabic music theory, and we explored the parallels between the Indian raga system and the maqam system. We even did a lovely improvisation together—oud and esraj—which was all professionally recorded by one of Pamalka's friends.



Throughout these two days, the warmth and hospitality of Pamalka's family were just incredible. His mother's delicious meals—milk rice, roti, and those spicy sauces—and his father's tour of their garden, full of herbs and vegetables, made everything feel like a high-quality, simple, and truly heartwarming way of living. In the end, even though I couldn't sing, the experience was full of connection and meaning, and I'm just going to rest up and see what the next days bring.

January 18th

On the 18th, still in Kegalle after the discussion at the **Sasani Institute** with **Pamalka Manjitha Karunanayake**, we took a breather—literally. Pamalka's friend Arun, his band's keyboardist, joined us as we drove out to the province to visit the zoo. Before diving into nature, we savoured a proper Sri Lankan breakfast—roti, curry, and those divine spring hoppers filled with sweet coconut mousse. Walking through the zoo, watching crocodiles, birds, and diverse wildlife, was a perfect reset. After days of battling the flu, that day of nature, fresh air, and camaraderie was a needed pause, calming me down and resetting my energy.

January 19th

On the 19th, I had a rich dialogue with **Dr. Nishadh Handunpathirana**. His work spans different regions, bringing music to schools and anchoring it as a fundamental pillar of education. For him, music is not just about creating musicians but about building mentally resilient, spiritually healthy individuals. We also explored obstacles to preserving local music and how to empower it to foster community identity. **Pamalka Manjitha Karunanayake**, one of Dr. Nishadh's students, was present and is applying the same philosophy in his teaching. This holistic approach to music education was a cornerstone of the discussion and sets a precedent for future collaboration.

[Link to the Interview](#)



January 20th

The 20th was a full-spectrum day of cultural alignment. I started as usual, then headed with **Pamalka** to the **University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA)** to formalise a jam session with a traditional Sri Lankan drummer. From there, we moved to **Alliance Française de Colombo** for rehearsal, where we met **Vidura Rodrigo**, a pianist. Improvising together—my oud, Pamalka's esraj, and Vidura's piano—we envisioned a concert blending Satie, Debussy, and our own improvisations, one breath of global diversity. Later, over dinner at Fika Deli, Pamalka and I dove into raga traditions. By chance, we ran into **Alireza Shahini**, sparking spontaneous plans for an Iranian Culture Centre jam. I toured the venue with Alireza, closed the day, and felt truly grateful.

January 21st

The 21st was a quieter, reflective day. I spent much of it preparing, reviewing what I've experienced so far, jotting down notes, and organising my thoughts. Later, I met **Pamalka** at the Fika Deli Café, where we planned our next steps. By chance, **Alireza Shahini** from the Iranian Cultural Centre dropped by. We ended up discussing the concert we're planning there. After Pamalka left, Alireza and I went to the venue to check out the space, microphones, atmosphere, and all the little details. It was a thoughtful day of preparation before the next big steps.

January 22nd

On the 22nd of January, my attention turned toward a major cultural institution in Sri Lanka: the Amaradeva Academy. The Academy stands as a living continuation of the legacy of Pandith Amaradeva, not merely preserving repertoire but actively cultivating singers, composers, and audiences around a shared musical memory. What struck me was how the Academy functions less as a school in the narrow sense and more as a cultural meeting point—where tradition, education, and public life intersect.



This became tangible during the live concert held at the Auditorium of Sri Sambuddhatva Jayanti Mandiraya. The scale of the auditorium and the presence of a full audience immediately set the tone. This was not an exclusive or elite gathering, but a collective one—families, elders, young listeners, and devoted music lovers sharing the same space.

The concert brought together a group of prominent singers—Sanuka, Ridma, Suneera, and Ashka—under the musical direction of composer and conductor Mahinda Bandara. What was most striking was not individual virtuosity, but the way the repertoire invited participation through listening, recognition, and emotional resonance. The audience was deeply attentive, visibly moved, and at moments almost singing inwardly with the performers. This was music as a shared social act rather than a one-directional performance.

Experiencing this concert reinforced a central idea of my research in Sri Lanka: that music here still operates as a binding force. In this hall, people did not merely consume music; they gathered around it. The concert became a space of collective listening, memory, and belonging—demonstrating how institutional frameworks like the Amaradeva Academy, combined with meaningful venues, can sustain music as a unifying cultural practice rather than a fragmented or purely commercial one.

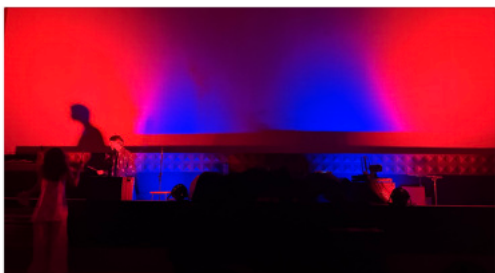
January 23rd

On January 23rd, I had a highlight lunch meeting with **Dr. Siri Walt**, the Swiss Ambassador, and the Swiss Embassy team. It was also a wonderful opportunity to meet the Pro Helvetia Delhi team, Sadaf and Sedon, as well as Reina, who now leads all global offices. I reconnected with her from my Schlachthaus Theatre days. I got to know **Stefan Winkler**, the director of Colomboscope, along with his assistant Jan. I also met **Thomas Burkhalter** (Norient), my Atelier neighbour in PROGR, who's here to perform at Colomboscope. The discussions were rich; I shared my current projects and made some tentative plans with Olivier from the embassy, as well as with Leena, who manages the social media for the embassy in Sri Lanka. The idea is to keep them updated for future collaborations. All in all, a truly inspiring and productive day.

January 24th

In the morning, I took a walk in a beautiful, expansive park near the Trizen Towers—peaceful and refreshing. The evening brought two Colomboscope performances. The first was “Dum Tak Tak Dum Tak S” by **Imaad Majeed**, a Muslim LGBTQ artist exploring Sufi music in Sri Lanka. It combined a lecture style with performative aspects, a dark atmosphere, minimal playing, and long pauses. While conceptually interesting, I felt it lacked a dramatic arc and deeper insight into the rhythms. Imaad referenced groups like Naqshbandi and Mufliheen, who are practising Sufi rituals. I briefly spoke to Imaad afterwards, but I hope to continue the conversation another time.

The evening continued with a standout second performance, “Melodies in My Head” by my colleague **Thomas Burkhalter** and **Daniel Jakob**. They presented a film reflecting global artists' creativity amid crises, part of Thomas's Norient project. The mix of cinematic storytelling, electronic rhythms, and poetic fragments was impressive. Though it stretched a bit at the end, the audience was deeply engaged. The overarching message—supporting artists worldwide and sustaining creativity—was powerful and left me fully satisfied by night's end.



January 25th & 26th

I had the 25th as a day of peaceful rehearsal, refining texts and storytelling strategy for the next day's performance at the Colomboscope festival.

On the 26th, it was a quiet morning of reflection, followed by a soundcheck at MusicMatters, meeting Dylan and Denham, the team responsible for sound and stage at the venue. In the next room, I had a look at a rehearsal by a master Sri Lankan drummer, dancer, drummer on a Western drum set, and a guitarist. The combination was fascinating.

After the soundcheck, I had a fascinating chat with Dylan. He explained how Sri Lankan drumming and dance form a kind of live conversation. In both northern and southern traditions, the dancer and drummer react to each other, like a dialogue. The dancer's footwork and the drummer's rhythms create a mutual understanding in the moment—an improvisational exchange that I found truly captivating.

On the evening of the 26th, I arrived about an hour before my performance. The audience was diverse and warm, and I felt truly honoured to welcome the Swiss Ambassador, **Dr. Siri Walt**, along with the embassy team, my colleagues **Thomas Burkhalter** and **Daniel Jakob**, and **Stefan Winkler**. Surrounded by these wonderful people, the performance was truly special. The audience was engaged, laughing, and enjoying every moment, whether in song or oud playing. Afterwards, I thanked the ambassador and my colleagues for their support. I ended the night feeling truly happy.

January 27th

I spent the day slowing down, resting, and reflecting. I listened extensively to Sri Lankan music, allowing myself to absorb its textures and moods, preparing inwardly for the intensive days ahead.

January 28th

The first recording session with **Pamalka** took place today. We arrived at the 2020 Project Recording Studio around 4 p.m., where I had the pleasure of meeting the talented sound engineer **Dewin De Elwis**.

What followed was a deeply intuitive session: oud, esraj, and voice flowing without premeditation. We trusted momentum and inspiration, and within this organic process, we recorded two pieces. The results were captivating—honest, raw, and alive.

We immediately scheduled two additional recording sessions for the coming week.



January 29th

Today was dedicated to the jam session at the **University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA)**, specifically at the Department of Instrumental Music, Faculty of Dance and Drama. This special encounter was beautifully coordinated by **Pamalka Manjitha Karunanayake**.

It was a genuine pleasure to share music across cultures—an inspiring collaboration with Sri Lankan traditional drummers. We explored indigenous musical languages while opening space for new sonic possibilities through improvisation and dialogue. This exchange felt essential, both artistically and socially.

We extend our gratitude to the Head of Department, **Jayantha Pushpakumara**, as well as **Indika Tikiribandara**, the lecturers, staff, and all participating undergraduates. Filming this collaboration was an important decision, ensuring proper documentation of this rare and meaningful exchange.

[Link to videos](#)



January 30th

I started the day with a rehearsal at the Iranian Cultural Centre with the remarkable percussionist **Alireza Shahini**. In the afternoon, **Pamalka** joined us, and the trio dynamic began to take shape.

Around 3 p.m., Pamalka and I left to attend the launch concert of the Nocturne String Ensemble at the Department of Western Music of the **University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA)**. I was kindly invited by the Head of Department, **Manoj Sanjeeva**.

The concert was enriching and thoughtfully curated. The young musicians performed works ranging from Mahler to Sri Lankan film music, ghazal, and Hindi repertoire—which was a highlight—and concluded with a contemporary classical piece. The speech by the Vice Chancellor, **Rohan Nethsinghe**, was particularly moving. He emphasised the multicultural identity of the ensemble and its commitment to crossover and diversity, marking this initiative as a seed for future artistic growth.



It was also meaningful to witness the honouring of **Dr. Ankuran Dutta**, former Director of the Indian Cultural Centre in Colombo, ahead of his departure to India—acknowledging the vital role Indian cultural institutions have played in supporting the university through funding and scholarships. Indian culture continues to play a significant role in Sri Lanka's cultural and social landscape.

I had the pleasure of greeting Prof. Nethsinghe, Dr. Dutta, and Mr. Sanjeeva personally.

After these rich moments, Pamalka and I hurried back to the Iranian Cultural Centre for final preparations before the concert.

Our performance—**Alireza Shahini, Pamalka Manjitha Karunanayake**, and I—was a true collaboration. Under the title *Three Modes, One Breath*, we connected deeply with the audience. The feedback was overwhelming; one listener described the concert as “deeply compelling.”

A performance that gathered many worlds into a single experience, despite politics and polarisation.

What a day.



January 31st

I spent the day in Colombo without a fixed agenda, simply observing the city's pulse. The clear highlight came in the evening, when I attended the Navam Maha Procession. It began at 7:30 pm at Gangaramaya Temple, winding through the surrounding streets and unfolding over nearly two hours.

Those two hours were an intense sensory experience. Dances from different regions of the country followed one another in a rich sequence, carried by complex drumming patterns and framed by strikingly colourful costumes. Hundreds of performers took part—dancers, drummers, and players of double-reed oboes—moving with precision and collective energy.

The event was impressively organised, carefully protected by the police, and marked by a remarkable atmosphere of calm. Despite its scale, the procession felt deeply peaceful and joyful, more celebratory than spectacular, rooted in shared rhythm, devotion, and communal presence.

https://hirunews.lk/en/443659/colombo-prepares-for-grand-navam-maha-procession#google_vignette

[Link to videos](#)



February 1st to 5th

On the 1st of February, I travelled to Balapitiya during the week of Sri Lanka's National Day (4 February), where the core idea of my research project was born. The precise moment of its emergence came during a fishing activity, accompanied by a communal hymn.

I witnessed similar activities by fishermen. I spent this time reflecting, observing, and preparing mentally and artistically for the following weeks.



February 6th

I returned to Colombo and attended a beautiful classical piano concert at **Alliance Française de Colombo**. The evening was dedicated to French music, featuring pianist Maxime Zecchini with the Symphony Orchestra of Sri Lanka, in celebration of the 160th birth anniversary of Erik Satie, a key figure of the fin-de-siècle and early modernist period.

The program explored the colours and elegance of French music, presenting piano works by Satie, Poulenc, Fauré, Saint-Saëns, Bizet, Massenet, and Delibes, alongside chamber music performed by musicians of the Symphony Orchestra of Sri Lanka.

This concert was an important moment for me: listening to Sri Lankan classical musicians interpret this repertoire revealed both their deep admiration for Western classical music and their high artistic level. The sold-out hall and the remarkably attentive audience further underlined the strong presence and appreciation of classical music in Colombo.

Despite the presence of music in both contexts, I could not identify an authentic continuity between them. The musical languages, social functions, and listening conditions were fundamentally different. The concert at the Alliance Française unfolded within a clearly defined cultural and social framework: an educated, urban audience, deeply familiar with Western aesthetics, including many non-Sri Lankans—often Europeans living in Colombo with Sri Lankan partners. The setting revealed a distinct social stratification, where access to and familiarity with Western classical music functioned as markers of class, education, and cultural capital.

In contrast, the music I encountered on the coast was inseparable from daily life, labour, and collective memory. It did not aim at aesthetic refinement or concertised listening, but at coordination, belonging, and shared survival. This contrast made visible not a bridge, but a gap—one that reflects broader social divisions within Sri Lankan society rather than a unified musical landscape.

A remarkable gesture concluded the concert. At the end of the program, the pianist stepped outside the French classical repertoire and played a well-known Sri Lankan song in Sinhala. The effect was immediate: the audience joined in, singing together and sharing the moment collectively. This act did not erase the social and aesthetic boundaries present throughout the evening, but it briefly suspended them. Rather than an organic intercultural synthesis, the moment functioned as a symbolic opening—Western classical authority making space for local musical memory.

What struck me was that this shared moment emerged not from a convergence of traditions, but from a conscious, deliberate gesture. The connection was not embedded in the concert's structure; it was added at the end. This highlighted how inclusion, in this context, required intention and agency rather than existing naturally within the institutional framework itself.

February 7th & 8th

I spent these two days outside Colombo at the Pegasus Reef Hotel. What I did not expect was that this short stay would turn into a small ethnographic observation. Within two days, I witnessed two weddings in the same hotel, each one shaped by a completely different musical and cultural atmosphere.

The first wedding was musically grounded in Western pop. A live band performed European cover songs, occasionally mixed with Sri Lankan pop repertoire. The setup was familiar: drum set, bass, guitar, keyboard, and a lead singer. The structure of the event felt almost like a church ceremony. There were several speeches from friends and relatives of the bride and groom. The mood was formal but warm, carefully organised, and clearly structured. The guests wore a variety of European-style outfits, and the aesthetic leaned toward a cosmopolitan, internationally oriented atmosphere.

The second wedding could not have been more different. The music consisted almost entirely of Indian pop in a strong Bollywood style. Instead of a live band, a DJ controlled the sound, which was significantly louder and more continuous. The focus was less on speeches and narrative moments, and more on collective celebration and dance. The guests wore traditional Sri Lankan dress styles—colourful, richly decorated, and adorned with noticeable jewellery. The visual presence was dense and vibrant, matching the intensity of the music.

What struck me most was that both events took place in the same architectural space—the same hotel, the same halls, the same surroundings—yet two distinct cultural worlds unfolded within it. Through music, clothing, sound level, and structure, each wedding expressed a different social and cultural orientation.

These two days became another reminder that Sri Lanka contains multiple parallel identities. Music here is not only entertainment; it is a marker of belonging, aspiration, and collective self-definition.

February 9th

I moved back to Colombo. I met **Pamalka**, and we headed to the studio for our recording session. The plan was clear: continue building the material we had started. Reality had other ideas.

Dewin De Elwis, the sound engineer, informed us that there was a power problem. He was waiting for the technical team. The electricity supplier is private, and although the technical fix would have been simple—just connecting a cable—it would have been illegal. So we waited. No recording. Just suspended time in a studio filled with instruments and silence.

Out of that silence came a revealing discussion.

Sri Lanka is still buying gas and oil to produce electricity. There are eco-projects aiming at clean energy, but according to Dewin, many of them face obstacles. Economic interests tied to oil and gas companies slow things down. It is the same structural pattern seen across much of the Global South: dependency, delayed transition, profit chains protected at the top while the system below struggles.

From energy politics, we moved naturally to the music industry.

The structural logic felt eerily similar. Big names, producers, and companies often take advantage of young musicians for minimal payment. Copyright awareness is weak. There is no functioning equivalent to organisations like SUIISA or similar rights-collecting societies that effectively protect authors and performers. Royalties are rarely transparent. Recognition is inconsistent.

Then came the numbers.

Large pop concerts take place frequently across the country. These events are often based on Western cover music mixed with Sri Lankan pop. A single concert can present up to ten singers. Payment for a main act ranges between 100,000 and 500,000 LKR.

In contrast, a young professional musician may work an entire day in a studio for around 3,000 LKR. No copyright protection. No publishing commission. No long-term revenue stream. Pure one-time compensation.

The imbalance is striking.

We did not record that day. But we spent a different kind of productive time—an intense exchange about musicians' conditions here and elsewhere. The power outage became a metaphor: creative energy is present, talent is present, but the infrastructure—legal, economic, institutional—is unstable.

It turned out to be an unexpected but valuable interview. Through a simple technical delay, I gained a closer and more realistic view of the Sri Lankan music scene. The conversation revealed structural challenges—from energy politics to the absence of copyright protection—that shape the everyday reality of musicians here. In that sense, the failed recording session became a successful moment of research.

Sometimes the absence of electricity illuminates more than a spotlight.

February 10th

The day of the concert at **Alliance Française de Colombo**

I allowed myself a quiet morning. No overthinking. No strategising. Just breathing. After weeks of research, interviews, jam sessions, and institutional meetings, this day needed inner stillness. Performance is not only the preparation of sound. It is the preparation for presence.

Around 4 pm, I arrived at the Alliance Française. The hall was still empty, holding that beautiful tension before transformation. I ran through the program with the pianist and the event manager, **Vidura Rodrigo**, and coordinated details with him. **Pamalka** joined around 5 pm, and we moved into soundcheck mode—adjusting balances between oud, esraj, piano, and our voices. The trio setup required precision. Three traditions. Three timbres. One breath.

At 7 pm, the concert began. Sold out.

From the first notes, the audience was attentive—curious, open, alert. The program moved from solo pieces to duets: sometimes Pamalka and I in dialogue between oud and esraj, sometimes with Vidura on the piano. Then the trio moments.

One highlight was *Gnossienne No. 1* by Erik Satie—a minimalist French piano meditation that blends modal ornamentation and microtonal inflections. That piece already carries ambiguity in its DNA. We expanded its borders.



The final piece was pure improvisation. No safety net. Oud, esraj, piano, and our two voices. Western harmonic architecture met Arabic maqam logic and the fluid grammar of raga. No one tried to dominate. Each tradition stretched without collapsing into cliché. The result was not fusion in the commercial sense. It was coexistence under pressure.

The audience entered a kind of collective suspension. Silence became thick. After the last tone faded, there was that rare pause—the one performers live for—before the applause arrived.

The feedback afterwards was overwhelming, especially regarding the final improvisation. People spoke of trance, of emotional travel, of something they could not categorise. That is usually a good sign. When the brain fails politely, the heart takes over.

What a night.

February 11th

I spent a relaxing morning that day, still carrying the resonance of the concert at Alliance Française de Colombo from the night before. I walked along the ocean, reflecting. There is always something very particular about the morning after a strong performance. The adrenaline is gone, but the inner vibration remains. I let that settle.

Sajeda from the Muslim Choral Ensemble picked me up, and we headed to the second choir session. I began with breathing exercises, focusing on properly activating the diaphragm. For me, everything in singing begins there. No control without breath. From there, I introduced a small three-voice fragment and worked with them on harmonies and simple contrapuntal lines. They were genuinely interested and very focused. I could feel how new some of these harmonic movements were for them, and that made the process even more exciting.

After that, **Pamalka Manjitha Karunanayake** took the lead. He worked with them on listening exercises, especially identifying the tonic and the fifth within different scales. It was very precise ear training, building musical awareness from the foundation. I enjoyed seeing how attentive they were. It was a pleasure to close this chapter with them and say goodbye to all the members.

At 9 pm, I arrived at Fika Deli to meet **Vidura Rodrigo**. It was important for me to exchange with him on a more human level. During rehearsals, we had not really had the chance to speak deeply.

He was very interested in my journey, both musically and personally. He is a wonderful listener. When he told me that I inspired him, it gave me a lot of energy. That kind of recognition from a serious artist is not something I take lightly.

He shared his own path with me. He started playing piano at the age of eleven and has travelled to India, Pakistan, Italy, France, and Poland—especially to visit Żelazowa Wola, the birthplace of Frédéric Chopin. He is a true admirer of Chopin. Beyond music, he studied English literature, writes himself, and is also a dancer in the traditional Sri Lankan style. A very layered personality.

Our conversation became deeper when he spoke about the limitations he perceives in Sri Lankan music regarding melodic development. He reflected that within Buddhist contexts, melodic music historically plays a smaller role, with ritual drumming and instruments like the *Horanewa* dominating, while much of the richer melodic tradition was influenced by Hindustani music. He made an interesting analogy: comparing the visual austerity of a Buddhist temple with the colourful ornamentation of a Hindu temple—and seeing a similar contrast in the music. Whether one agrees fully or not, it was a striking observation.

He also expressed frustration about the artistic scene in Sri Lanka and his wish to move to Paris. For a creative artist like him, he feels the need for new impulses, new ideas, and more freedom of expression—especially as an LGBTQ artist searching for a space where art can breathe without restriction.

It was a deep and honest discussion—a strong way to end the day.

February 12th

The day began with uncertainty. The electricity problem at the studio still wasn't solved, and for a moment, it felt like the same story repeating itself. Waiting. Depending on forces you cannot control. Frustrating, yes—but part of the rhythm of this place.

Around 1 pm, **Dewin De Elwis** finally confirmed that the power issue had been fixed. Green light. We headed to the 2020 Project Recording Studio and stepped back into the work.

I had already prepared the stems of a song I was working on—*Fear Me Not*. My intention was clear: I wanted to open space for esraj passages from **Pamalka Manjitha Karunanayake** and enrich the piece with a Hindi tabla layer from **Lakpiya Abesinghe**. The idea was not decoration, but dialogue—to let the song breathe in another dimension of pulse and texture. And it worked. The piece expanded without losing its core.

After that, we moved to two more recordings.

The first was *The Second Meeting*, which Pamalka and I had initially recorded as a duet in the previous session. This time, I wanted to explore what would happen if we invited the tabla into the conversation. My thought was simple but conceptually precise: if the first meeting was about discovering a theme without a fixed idea, then the second meeting would be about developing that idea from a place of recognition. We now knew the motif. We carried memory. The question was how this known material would transform when a third musician entered—someone listening deeply and creating in real time. The dynamic shifted immediately. The improvisation gained another layer of awareness. It became less about searching and more about unfolding.

The third piece was *Momentum*. No plan. No structure. We began from silence and followed the current. The maqam Hijaz shaped the emotional colour, but nothing was forced. It was pure listening and response—breath to breath.

What struck me most was the absence of judgment in the room. No pressure to prove, no attempt to impress. It was a process of receiving and accepting. Each gesture was allowed to exist before being evaluated. That kind of atmosphere is rare. It is a blessing.

A frustrating start, yes—but it ended as a day of clarity, trust, and quiet joy.



February 13th

I spent the morning in a quiet rhythm—reflecting, recalibrating, and planning the next strategic steps of this residency. Space to think is oxygen.

The evening, however, was electric.

At 6 pm, **Pamalka** and I attended a panel discussion held at the home of the legendary Sri Lankan musician Pandith Amaradeva. Being invited by his family was a real honour. This was not just another event. It was a symbolic space—history, memory, and living discourse in one room.

The discussion gathered students, theatre practitioners, and figures from the pop scene. I gave a short introduction about the oud and the maqamat—the modal system of Arabic music. The questions quickly went deep. Participants were especially curious about microtonality: the comparison between the Arabic 24-division system and the Indian 22-shruti concept. I explained that microtones are not fixed mathematical fractions alone; in practice, a note in one maqam can be slightly different in another maqam. That subtle shift is not decorative—it defines character. Geography, era, and performance lineage all influence how these nuances are executed. Theory is a map; practice is the terrain.

Pamalka added clarifications about Indian ragas—their structure, hierarchy, and emotional grammar. It became a rich theoretical exchange.

Then something meaningful happened. Participants performed Sri Lankan theatre songs—accompanied by harmonium and traditional dance gestures. The melodies were expressive, direct, and almost narrative in their emotional clarity.

At that moment, I asked: “Is this Sri Lankan music?”

The host responded cautiously: “That’s a critical question. Can we even define what Sri Lankan music is?”

I replied: “Where was it written? And by whom?”

Answer: In Sri Lanka, by Sri Lankan artists.

I answered: “Then it is Sri Lankan music.” Influence does not cancel identity. Music is a living language. It evolves through exchange. It has no borders unless we build them out of fear.

That short exchange revealed something deeper—the tension between preservation and openness. The anxiety of losing heritage versus the necessity of cultural dialogue. The same societal undercurrent I have sensed across Sri Lanka: identity negotiating with modernity.



They introduced a traditional drummer, and we improvised together in 7/8—asymmetrical, alive, and breathing. They emphasised that they are trying to preserve this art because it is “typically Sri Lankan.” I asked whether he has students. He does—but not within a governmental institution. This drumming tradition is tied to theatre openings, yet the university structure does not actively integrate it. There is a Department of Drama, but mainly for spoken theatre. Music theatre seems marginal.

I suggested that if institutions fail to protect a tradition, private initiatives must step in. Heritage does not sustain itself by nostalgia. It requires infrastructure: composers, musicians, actors, dancers—trained practitioners who understand the tradition deeply enough to innovate responsibly. Preservation without renewal becomes a museum.

When the conversation shifted to pop music, I raised another observation: why are so many male singers using airy, whispering timbres? And why are so many songs in similar scales?

The answer was pragmatic and direct. Fast fame. Low investment in vocal development. Following trends rather than cultivating artistic identity. The same key because it aligns easily with mainstream formulas. Efficiency over depth.

There it was again—shortcut culture versus craftsmanship.

At the end of the evening, **Pamalka Manjitha Karunanayake**, **Lakpiya Abesinghe** (tabla), and I performed *The Second Meeting*. This was effectively its third version—and, of course, completely different. Improvisation refuses repetition. It documents the present.

Afterwards, our hostess served a homemade Sri Lankan dinner—string hoppers and curry—generous, warm, grounding. Hospitality here is not performative; it is embodied.

Before leaving, I visited the upper floor, where an impressive collection of instruments, awards, and photographs of Pandith Amaradeva is preserved—a tangible archive of a musical life that shaped a nation.

We took a photo, thanked the family and participants, and returned to the hotel.

I came back carrying more than memories. I came back with sharper questions about identity, institutions, preservation, and courage.

Cultural ecosystems either evolve consciously or drift into imitation. The work is not just artistic; it is structural.



February 14th & 15th

I spent a calm weekend. I needed it. I prepared mentally for the final stretch of the residency and allowed myself to breathe before the next encounters.

February 16th

Today, I finally met **Imaad Majeed**. I had contacted him at the beginning of my residency, but he was fully immersed in his preparations and performances at Colomboscope.

He invited Houaïda to join us—a German artist and performer who had also presented work at Colomboscope under the name *Hybrid Sonic Space*. The meeting turned into a dense and intense exchange.

Imaad spoke about his main artistic research project: documenting and collecting Sufi heritage on the island. He is a Muslim Tamil from the eastern side of Sri Lanka. His work focuses on recording rituals practised by Sufi communities and mapping the different Sufi paths present in the country—Qadereya, Shatheleya, Naqshabandy—and his particular admiration for the Refaeya direction.

He described a ritual he had been invited to attend. Participants enter a trance state while chanting and moving with large blades. They cut their bodies as an act of purification, and the morshid—the spiritual guide—is believed to heal the wounds afterwards. What struck me most was not only the intensity of the ritual, but the composition of its participants: Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. When it comes to ritual, Sri Lankans often move beyond religious boundaries.

This is not universalism. No one abandons their faith or merges doctrines. Rather, it reflects a lived pluralism—different identities remaining intact while sharing the same ritual space. The space becomes porous. If a ritual is believed to heal, people show up. In these moments, theology becomes secondary to embodied experience.

At the same time, this shared participation does not automatically produce social equality. Structural divisions—particularly ethnic and caste hierarchies—continue to shape daily life. Ritual unity and social inequality coexist. That tension feels central to understanding Sri Lanka.

We also spoke about the protests of 2022—a moment when the population united around basic needs: electricity, gas, safety, and dignity. Imaad emphasised that beneath religious and ethnic tensions lies another deep structure—the caste system. It divides even within the same religion and ethnicity. Without addressing caste, he believes, sustainable peace remains fragile.

He mentioned that during Colomboscope in 2022, he was detained by authorities and could not complete his engagement until the final day of the festival. Political and social involvement still carries risk. The memory of disappearances has not vanished; it lingers quietly beneath public life.

Houaïda spoke about her frustration with the technical handling of her performance. She described encountering a toxic masculine attitude from members of the sound team,

which disrupted her ritual-oriented work. Her artistic approach is based on resonance and frequency fields. With a background in physics, she is researching what she calls “resonance catastrophe” —the idea that a room’s eigenfrequencies can align with sound and influence the collective state of the audience. It is a speculative theory, but conceptually compelling. Space itself becomes an active participant.

We walked through Colombo while speaking. At one point, Imaad said, “I am not an entertainer.”

I answered, “True. You are a researcher.”

His motivation is deeply personal—searching for roots, fighting for equality, archiving Sufi rhythms and chants, and transforming them into contemporary performance structures. His work is not aesthetic decoration; it is political memory work.

After this meeting, I felt something clearly: the conflict is not over. As long as Tamils do not experience full equality, tension remains. Yet many prefer silence. Avoidance feels safer than confrontation. The fear of reopening trauma often outweighs the will to resolve it.

This evening was not only enriching; it was clarifying.

After this evening, I felt a bit naive. I knew there were still tensions beneath the surface of this society, but I had hoped that there might be a space where people could gather simply on a human level—beyond politics, beyond history.

As an artist, perhaps I sometimes try to escape political and social suppression through music. I believe in sound as something that fills the soul and purifies the mind from the noise of the material world. After this conversation, I questioned myself. Am I a dreamer? Or worse—am I being delusional?

The reality is more complex. Music does not erase structural injustice. It does not dissolve caste systems or guarantee equality. But it creates a field where another form of relation becomes possible, even if temporarily.

February 17th

I spent the entire day at the 2020 Project Recording Studio, finalising the album *Presence – Meeting in Sound*. The idea from the beginning was simple: meet, improvise, capture the moment of inspiration. No ideological statement. Just listening.

Pamalka Manjitha Karunanayake, Lakpiya Abesinghe, and Dewin De Elwis, we are very different in background, education, religion, and temperament. Yet we share something precise: a commitment to sound, a respect for listening, and a willingness to enter uncertainty together.

While listening to the master, I noticed something striking. The music itself searches. Sometimes we find a shared pulse, and everything aligns. Sometimes we drift apart. Sometimes we almost meet and then lose each other again. The structure of the improvisation mirrors social reality.

Perhaps this is where the discussion about universalism and pluralism becomes embodied.

It is not universalism. We do not become one homogeneous sound. Each voice remains distinct—oud, esraj, tabla—with different tonal systems and rhythmic instincts.

But it is also more than simple pluralism, where differences just coexist side by side. In the improvisation, we actively search for alignment. We risk friction. We adjust. We listen. We fail. We try again.

The music becomes a practice of negotiating difference.

Listening to the master, I felt that the album itself speaks. It does not proclaim unity. It documents the attempt to reach a meeting point. Sometimes we catch it. Sometimes we lose it. That feels honest.

On the ground, society seems to search for the same thing: a space where everyone can stand, be recognised, accepted, and respected—not by dissolving into sameness, but by being part of a larger structure without losing identity.

Not becoming one—but belonging to one.

Perhaps I am not naive. Perhaps I am choosing to work in a different register. Politics addresses power structures. Music addresses perception and relation. One does not replace the other.

Later, Pamalka and I attempted to record a duet—only vocals and Indian harp. The idea was the same: pure improvisation, complete openness. It failed. Completely. We were sincere, but we were not aligned. Two voices searching in parallel without a shared centre. It felt scattered, almost chaotic.

Only when I decided to shorten it, to introduce one clear motive and repeat it five times—like offering a temple flower—did something shift. The structure gave us ground. The repetition created focus. We had to listen differently, breathe together, and practise alignment instead of assuming it.

The album title, *Presence*, suddenly feels less poetic and more accurate. Presence is not agreement. It is staying in the room, staying in the sound, staying with the difference long enough to see whether resonance can emerge.

And resonance, unlike ideology, cannot be forced. It either happens—or it doesn't.

It made me realise something simple and essential: resonance does not happen automatically just because intentions are good. It requires shared form, discipline, and time. Improvisation needs a frame. Freedom needs structure. Perhaps this small musical “failure” reflects the larger truth I have been sensing here—that meeting is not spontaneous harmony, but a practice. We do not become one; we learn how to move around a common centre. And sometimes, after repetition and patience, resonance appears. That's why I added to the album title—*Meeting in Sound*.

February 18th

I met **Pamalka** to say thank you and to reflect on the next steps. My residency is ending, but another movement is beginning for him. He has applied for the Artist-in-Residence program of Pro Helvetia. Now it is his turn to explore—to meet in a different place, under different conditions, within another cultural context.

There is something meaningful in that shift—the direction changes. The roles adjust. The encounter continues.

I hope he receives the opportunity. I am curious to witness what happens when he carries his sound into a new environment—how it will transform, what it will discover, and what it will challenge.

This is not a goodbye to Sri Lanka. It is a “see you soon.” The conversation is not finished. It has only changed location. The research—artistic and human—will continue.



Ommi Das Erste Stück vom Album
„Presence Meeting in Sound“

