

Esplanade Presents

A Tapestry of Sacred Music 2025

4 – 6 Apr 2025

www.esplanade.com/tapestry



Welcome once again to *A Tapestry of Sacred Music*, a unique three-day festival happening from 4 – 6 Apr 2025, presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. Now in its 16th edition, the festival highlights the artistry of sounds in houses of worship—gurdwaras, mosques, temples and cathedrals—giving our audiences here a glimpse into distant eras and rarified spaces.

Have you wondered what it would be like to see the ancestral ritual sounds of the Korean royal courts? Or to witness the night ceremonies of a Turkish Sufi brotherhood? How would it feel to be immersed within the vibrancy of a Taoist festival procession? Or hear Byzantine prayers sung in the language that Jesus spoke? These are just some of the experiences that you will encounter at this year's festival.

There is much to appreciate in this rich diversity of sounds. The nature of these sounds also expresses something deeply human because they were never intended for mere consumption. Rather, they are unfiltered supplications and calls directed towards higher powers. Rooted in the universality of the human experience—our needs, fears and joys—these sounds have the power to resonate within all of us, if we open our hearts to them.

In this fractious world that we live in, the coming-together of people from different faith communities to share their sacred songs and music is a precious one. As conflict and polarisation continue to divide people, the need to acknowledge and celebrate our common humanity is now greater than ever.

We hope that through the performances at *A Tapestry of Sacred Music*, you will find moments of comfort, connection and rejuvenation—experiences that help us to momentarily zoom out from worldly anxieties and remind us of our universal kinship.

Tan Xianghui

Senior Producer

The Esplanade Co Ltd

About Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

Esplanade is Singapore's national performing arts centre. It hosts a year-round line-up of about 4,000 live performances and activities presented by Esplanade, its partners and hirers. As an arts centre for everyone, Esplanade also creates opportunities for seniors, youth, children and underserved communities to experience the arts. More than 70% of the shows that take place each year at the centre are free for all to enjoy.

Esplanade also brings the arts virtually to audiences in Singapore and beyond, through its diverse range of digital programmes on [Esplanade Offstage](#), an all-access backstage pass to the performing arts and guide to Singapore and Asian arts and culture, with videos, podcasts, articles, quizzes and resources.

The centre works in close partnership with local, regional and international artists to develop artistic capabilities and content, push artistic boundaries and engage audiences. Esplanade supports the creation of artistic content by commissioning and producing new Singapore and Asian work for the international stage. It also develops technical capabilities for the industry nationally.

Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay is operated by The Esplanade Co Ltd (TECL), which is a not-for-profit organisation, a registered Charity and an Institution of a Public Character. TECL received the Charity Governance Award – Special Commendation for Clarity of Strategy in 2016 and 2022, the Charity Transparency Award from 2016 – 2023, and the Charity Transparency Dedication Award in 2024. Esplanade is Singapore's first Dementia-Friendly Arts Venue and a certified Dementia Go-To Point, as well as a guide/assistance dog friendly centre.

TECL receives funding support from Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and its Community Programmes are supported by Tote Board Family, comprising Tote Board, Singapore Pools and Singapore Turf Club.

Visit [Esplanade.com](#) for more information.

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Issued by *The Esplanade Co Ltd*.

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Annexe

Esplanade Presents

A Tapestry of Sacred Music 2025

4 – 6 Apr 2025

www.esplanade.com/tapestry

A Tapestry of Sacred Music was launched by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in 2009. The festival offers the rare opportunity for everyone to encounter the beauty of these varied cultural expressions practised by communities all over the world, in a secular setting. Over the years, we have presented more than 36 religious denominations, as well as the sacred art forms of 56 different communities, creating a rich tapestry of some of humanity's most affecting and powerful musical expressions.

Since 2017, we have gone a step further and made this festival a completely free one for all to enjoy, so that there are no barriers to this aural and visual celebration. Esplanade is a charity and not-for-profit organisation. Help keep this festival free by making a contribution at donation boxes placed around Esplanade, or donate online through Giving.sg.

Free admission, registration is required for selected programmes.

Esplanade&Me Priority Booking from 20 – 24 Mar 2025.

Public registration starts from 25 Mar 2025.

More information about the festival's full list of programmes will be announced later.

Jongmyo Jeryeak: Rituals for Royal Ancestors

National Gugak Center (South Korea)

4 Apr 2025, Fri, 8pm

5 Apr 2025, Sat, 3pm

Esplanade Theatre



Once a year, on the first Sunday in May, the Jongmyo Shrine in Seoul comes alive with activity. The event begins with a grand procession involving over 1,000 participants, who journey from the Royal Palace to Jongmyo. Priests dressed in ritual costumes make offerings of food and wine to the spirits of deceased kings and queens in ceremonial vessels.

Originally constructed in the 14th century, Jongmyo Shrine embodies Confucian ideals of ancestral veneration, harmony, and the connection between the past and the present. It houses the ancestral tablets of deceased kings and queens of the Joseon Dynasty, where traditional rituals of ancestral worship known as *Jongmyo jeryeak* were once conducted five times a year (once during each season with an additional one in December). Today, the rites honouring the royal ancestors take place annually.

Though the ritual has its roots in Confucianism from China, it was discontinued after the abolition of the monarchy there. In contrast, the ritual practices have been faithfully upheld in Korea since the 15th century.

Accompanying the ritual is a musical and dance performance known as *Jongmyo jeryeak* (pron. *che-ryeh-ak*), featuring an orchestra divided into two equal sections alongside 64 dancers arranged in lines and rows of eight. The music is performed on traditional Korean instruments, including the *piri* (double-reed flute), *daegeum* (bamboo flute), *haegeum* (two-stringed bowed fiddle) and *jangu* (hourglass drum).

The performance consists of two parts that symbolise the opposing yet complementary forces of Yin and Yang.

In the first part, a civil dance known as *munmu* begins with a step to the left. The music, *botaepyong*, is soft and gentle, with lyrics extolling the civil virtues of the ancestors. Dancers execute slow, controlled movements, holding a *jeok* (a device decorated with a dragon head or, at times, with pheasant feathers) in their right hand and a *yak* (small notched vertical flute) in the left. The dance serves to welcome the spirits, and occurs during the offering of gifts and the first wine offering.

The second part, *mumu*, is performed during the second and third wine offerings, beginning with a step to the right. This military dance features dancers holding wooden swords or spears, moving with sharper, more dynamic actions. The lively music, *jongdaepyeong*, reflects the military prowess of the ancestor kings and celebrates their contributions.

Come witness *Jongmyo jeryeak*, a spiritual and cultural expression of Korea's Confucian heritage. This UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage has been preserved by the National Gugak Centre.

About National Gugak Centre

The National Gugak Center is Korea's representative national arts institution for traditional performing arts, established in 1951 in Busan during the Korean War. It upholds the traditions of the royal music institutions from the Silla Dynasty (*Eumseongseo*), Goryeo Dynasty (*Daeakseo*), and Joseon Dynasty (*Jangakwon*), preserving ancient music and dance that have been passed down for generations.

After the restoration of Seoul, the center relocated from Unni-dong to Jongno-gu, to its current site in Seocho-dong in 1987. Led by the Director-General, it comprises several divisions and four performing groups, dedicated to the preservation and creative succession of traditional performing arts. It also operates three regional centers—Namwon National Gugak Center, Jindo National Gugak Center, Busan National Gugak Center—that reflect regional characteristics.

The national music performing groups include the Court Music Orchestra, Folk Music Group, Dance Theater, and Contemporary Gugak Orchestra. These highly talented groups continue to inherit and evolve the music, songs, dances, and performances enjoyed in the past by the royal courts and the public, while also promoting contemporary and everyday music that resonate with modern audiences, interpreting long standing traditions and performances into new forms that connect the past, present, and future.

In addition to performances infused with the Korean spirit, the center offers diverse educational programs that promote traditional music both domestically and internationally, encompassing online and offline spaces. It also carries out projects to study and systematize traditional music through Gugak Museum, Gugak Archive, and Gugak Library.

These efforts aim to enhance the appreciation and understanding of Korea's rich performing arts heritage not only by Koreans but also people around the world.

Advisory: Due to the deliberative nature of this ceremony and as a courtesy to the artists and fellow audiences, we strongly encourage attendees to experience the 90-minute performance in its entirety. Thank you!

Free admission, registration is required.

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Night Devotions of a Sufi Lodge

Konya Metropolitan Municipality Turkish Tasavvuf Music and Sema Ensemble (Türkiye)

4 Apr 2025, Fri, 10pm

5 Apr 2025, Sat, 9pm

Esplanade Concert Hall



The significance and symbolism of the whirling dervish

A plaintive song, accompanied by a drum and flute, starts up. Wearing a tall hat (*sikke*) to represent the tombstone of his ego, and dressed in a flowing robe symbolising the ego's shroud, the Sufi whirling dervish starts to spin around meditatively, his robe fanning out like a flower. As the music progresses, the dervish removes his cloak, symbolising a spiritual rebirth. Crossing his hands over his shoulders, he embodies the image of unity with God.

Sufism is an aspect of Islam that emphasises the emotional experience of God's presence. Its followers believe that these experiences of divine truth and love can be attained through personal encounters with God. The earliest form of Sufism can be traced back to the Umayyad Dynasty in the 7th century. Later on, numerous preachers who built communities established orders (*tarikât*) named after them, such as the Qadiris from Sheikh Abdülkadir al-Jilânî in the 11th century and the Naqshbandis from Bahâ'uddîn Naqshband in the 14th century.

Each brotherhood carries a lineage of spiritual poetry, which is combined with music for use in prayer ceremonies. Among these, the most frequently represented are the Mevlevi whirling dervish ceremonies (*sema*) which originated from the famous Sufi mystic and poet Jalaluddin Rumi in the 13th century. He was known to fast, meditate, and dance to reach a state of transcendent enlightenment.

Integral to the music is the Turkish *ney* (a vertical or end-blown flute). With its mournful sound, it is said to represent the intense longing of the human soul and body for the love of God. Master of traditional Mevlevi Sufi music Kudsi Erguner described it in an interview with J.Y. Atlas:

"The importance of the *ney* lies in the fact that it is made from hollow reeds. The metaphor is that those who want to be open to the high inspiration, need to be clean and empty like the

insides of the reed flute. You have to become like the *ney*. You have to let God blow through you.

As such, if there is no *ney*, you cannot properly perform the ceremony because when the *ney* is not played, there is separation; when the *ney* is played, there is unity. Separation is the life of this world. Since we are here, we are in separation, but we have this innate yearning for unity.”

Free admission, registration is required.

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Public registration starts from 25 Mar 2025.

Sacred Organ Works: A Tribute to the Life

Thomas Ospital (France)

6 Apr 2025, Sun, 2pm

Esplanade Concert Hall



Photo Credit: Marie Rolland

With one of the largest solo repertoire of any musical instrument, the organ has traditionally accompanied voices in praise of God, drawing from a rich body of music inspired by or written for the Christian church. In its earliest Grecian form dating back to 300 BC, it began as a water-powered instrument that channelled air through pipes. Over the centuries, its design evolved in size and complexity, influenced by its status as a musical symbol among the wealthy and powerful Greeks and Romans, among other factors. Notably, the court of Byzantine Emperor Constantine V gifted an organ to France in 757 AD, leading to the instrument's growth in popularity among churches of Western Europe.

By the 15th century, innovations such as pedals, ebony keys, and new components were introduced, allowing for the performance of polyphonic choral pieces that were popular at the time. Tones that emulated other orchestral instruments and emphasised bass became possible, while the stacking of multiple keyboards enabled the organist to reach and play them all. Builders created instruments that leveraged on the acoustic properties within grand cathedrals. Aesthetically, pipe organs grew more elaborate and richly adorned, and by the 20th century, the organ's full power was evident.

With so much of its repertoire composed to induce a meditative state, or communicate grandeur and power, the sound of a pipe organ is best described as majestic, moving and profound—music that is inspired by and aspires to reach the heights of religious fervour. As such, it has long been acknowledged for its ability to deepen worshippers' sense of connection with God.

Immerse yourself in sacred organ works themed around tribute, performed by acclaimed French organist Thomas Ospital. This recital features masterpieces by some of the most influential composers, dating back as early as the 17th century. Experience the grandeur of Singapore's largest pipe organ—all 4,470 pipes and 61 stops—as its rich harmonics and commanding presence fill the Esplanade Concert Hall.

Programme

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685–1750)
Sinfonia de la cantate 29 (transcription by Marcel Dupré)
Choral: O mensch beweine dein Sünde gross BWV 622

Franz LISZT (1811–1886)
Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen

César FRANCK (1822–1890)
Prière

Charles-Marie WIDOR (1844–1937)
Allegro vivace extrait de la Cinquième symphonie Op. 42 N°5

Camille SAINT-SAËNS (1835–1921)
Danse Macabre (transcription by Louis Robilliard)

Thomas OSPITAL (1990)
Improvisation

About Thomas Ospital

Titulaire of the grand organ at Saint-Eustache Church in Paris since 2015 and Organ Professor at the Paris Conservatoire (CNSMDP) since 2021, Thomas Ospital has quickly earned a place amongst the world's finest concert organists.

The young artist is equally at home performing as a solo recitalist or with choirs and orchestras. He is passionate about perpetuating the art of improvisation in all of its forms, including the accompaniment of silent films.

Born in 1990, Thomas Ospital began his musical studies at the Conservatoire Maurice Ravel in Bayonne. From 2008 to 2015, he attended the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris, where he earned five First Place prizes in organ, improvisation, harmony, counterpoint, and fugue. His teachers at the Paris Conservatoire included Olivier Latry, Michel Bouvard, Thierry Escaich, Philippe Lefebvre, László Fassang, Isabelle Duha, and Pierre Pincemaille.

Mr Ospital was also the Organist in Residence at the Maison de la Radio from 2015 to 2018.

Free admission, registration is required.
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Chanting in the Language of Christ

Father Seraphim Bit-Kharibi (Georgia)

6 Apr 2025, Sun, 8pm

Esplanade Concert Hall



Aramaic is one of the oldest continuously spoken and written languages known to Man, with a rich history dating back to the 12th century BCE. It was first spoken by the Arameans, an ancient Semitic people who inhabited regions now known as modern-day Syria. Following their defeat by the Assyrian Empire in the eighth century BCE, Aramaic was adopted as the Empire's common language due to its simple phonetic alphabet, grammatical clarity, and practicality.

Even after it fell to the Babylonians, Aramaic thrived, evolving into various dialects as it spread across the Eastern Mediterranean region. Its prominence is often attributed to three significant turning points: the expansions of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires and their adoption of the language.

The language of Christ

While Aramaic was present in Israel and Judah before these empires, the rise of the Assyrians significantly shifted their cultural and linguistic landscapes, particularly in trade, diplomacy and administration. The Babylonian Exile in the sixth century further led to Aramaic replacing Hebrew among the Jewish people. Although Hebrew remained important for religious texts, Aramaic became the common tongue. This shift is reflected in the Bible—notably in the books of Daniel and Ezra—and in foundational texts like the Talmud.

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, despite the dominance of Greek and Latin, Aramaic endured, particularly in rural areas and local communities where the language, according to scholars, was spoken by Jesus of Nazareth and his Apostles.

From the Middle East to Georgia

The history of Aramaic in Georgia is closely tied to the spread of Christianity, as Assyrians were among the first to embrace the faith. From as early as the first century BCE, missionaries carried their language and culture as far as India and China. By the sixth century CE, the Thirteen Assyrian Fathers—monks instrumental in spreading Christianity—had already established some of the first monasteries in Georgia.

Many Assyrians also settled in Georgia, often involuntarily, fleeing their homelands due to religious persecution and genocide by the Ottomans in the 19th century and during World War I, as well as conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

Today, more than 3,000 Assyrians call Georgia home, where they speak Neo-Aramaic. Many are part of the Georgian Orthodox Church, where liturgical chants were traditionally sung in Georgian. 2008 marked a significant shift when the church appointed Archimandrite Seraphim Bit-Kharibi, an Assyrian-Georgian priest, to minister to the Assyrian community, allowing liturgy to be celebrated in Aramaic.

This decision has helped maintain the language and cultural practices of the Assyrians in Georgia, playing a pivotal role in the establishment of the Monastery of the 13 Holy Assyrian Fathers Choir, led by Father Seraphim. Renowned for his close replication of ancient liturgical music, he is one of only two priests in the world who celebrate the Divine Liturgy in Aramaic—the language of Jesus Christ.

Free admission, registration is required.

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Workshop: Maracatu de Baque Virado

Alexandre Garnize, Nyandra Fernandes, Syed Ahmad and Bloco Singapura (Brazil, Singapore)

5 Apr 2025, Sat, 2pm

Esplanade White Room



Alexandre Garnizé and Nyandra Fernandes, in collaboration with Bloco Singapura, share the richness of Afro-Brazilian music, focusing on *Maracatu de Baque Virado*. The workshop promotes the development of rhythmic sense and musical expression through unique percussion instruments while exploring *maracatu's* history and social context, strengthening black identity and respect for ethnic and cultural diversity.

Free admission, registration is required.

Esplanade&Me Priority Booking from 20 – 24 Mar 2025.

Public registration starts from 25 Mar 2025.

Talk: Introduction to the Nine Emperors Gods Festival

Dr Koh Keng We and Dr Lin Chia-Tsun

5 Apr 2025, Sat, 5pm

Esplanade Recital Studio



The Nine Emperor Gods Festival is a major Taoist religious celebration for the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. Held over the first nine days of the ninth lunar month, devotees practise abstinence and vegetarianism for ritual purification, welcoming the Nine Emperor Gods who are believed to arrive in the mortal world via coastal waters. Followers then carry the deities aboard grand palanquins in procession—one of the signature sights of the festival—kicking off a series of prayers, ceremonies and festivities.

Before experiencing a re-creation of the processions and cultural showcases at *Festivities of the Nine Emperor Gods*, join Dr Koh Keng We and Dr Lin Chia-Tsun as they share about the local histories and cultural practices related to the festival. Learn more about the significance and symbolism found in the celebrations.

Free admission, registration is required.

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Public registration starts from 25 Mar 2025.

Pipe Organ Tour

Dr Evelyn Lim

5 Apr 2025, Sat, 2.30pm, 3.30pm & 4.30pm

30mins per session

Esplanade Concert Hall

(Meet at Concert Hall entrance, 15mins before start time.)



Join us for an exclusive backstage tour to see Singapore's largest pipe organ up close. Towering three storeys high in the Esplanade Concert Hall, this magnificent Klais organ boasts 4,740 pipes and weighs around 25 tonnes—about the same as five elephants! Don't miss your chance to explore the intricate pipes and mechanisms of this magnificent instrument. Discover how it creates a stunning range of sounds, from a delicate whistle to a powerful growl.

[Find out more about Esplanade's pipe organ >](#)

Free admission, registration is required.

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Festival Opening: Namaskaraya & Magul Bera

Buddhika Ranaweera & Company

4 Apr 2025, Fri, 7pm

Esplanade Courtyard



The blowing of a conch shell and drumming of barrel drums signal the beginning of the *Magul Bera* and *Namaskaraya*—two auspicious performances that mark the commencement of ceremonies in southern Sri Lanka. Dancers and drummers chant and pay obeisance to the gods, cleansing the space with fire and holy water. This is followed by a masked performance that invites the gods to preside over the ceremony.

Come celebrate the opening of *A Tapestry of Sacred Music 2025* and welcome positive energy as you join Buddhika Ranaweera & Company in an auspicious ritual of fire and purification.

The Sacred Art of Sikh Music

Gurmat Sangeet Academy at the Sikh Centre

4 Apr 2025, Fri, 7.15pm

DBS Foundation Outdoor Theatre at Esplanade

6 Apr 2025, Sat, 3.15pm

Esplanade Concourse



“Whosoever listens to kirtan or sings kirtan of Hari shall be free of all ills.”

– *Guru Granth Shahib*

In Sikh tradition, no ceremony, occasion or event is complete without the singing of *kirtan*—a devotional hymn in praise of God. A cherished form of congregational prayer, it has, according to scripture, the ability to cleanse the mind of impurities, both physical and sensual; liberate one from the burdens of time and death; dispel disease, sorrow and suffering; and usher in peace and bliss.

Understanding the Sikh religion

In Punjabi, the word “sikh” means “disciple”, and central to the faith is the relationship between the Sikh and his master, who guides him through the teachings and writings of the 10 Gurus. Sikhism is rooted in the principles of oneness and love, encouraging a life of servitude and spirituality. It is believed that to lead a good life, one must work diligently, live honestly, treat everyone equally, serve others, be generous to the less fortunate, and keep God close to the heart and mind at all times.

Hymns of Praise

Music is a central part of worship, with the religion’s 16th century founders being skilled poets, composers and musicians. Foremost among them was Guru Nanak, who expressed his teachings and revelations through poetry, which he sang alongside his companion Bhai Mardana, a bard who played the *rabab*—a plucked string instrument.

Over time, Guru Nanak's hymns, along with those of his nine successors, were compiled into what is now known as the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs. Within this revered text, the hymns of the Gurus are organised under 31 *raags* or *ragas*—modes characterised by a specific series of notes and path melodies. Each *raga* has a name, an associated time of day or year when it is best performed, and evokes specific emotions.

In the hands of his spiritual successors and devout Sikhs, this musical tradition has flourished as a powerful means of spiritual elevation. New *ragas*, styles and musical instruments have emerged, perpetuating the legacy of creativity and devotion. Today, the singing and contemplation of these hymns resonate day and night at Sikh temples all over the world.

About Gurmat Sangeet Academy at the Sikh Centre

Over two days, students and alumni from the Gurmat Sangeet (Sikh Music) Academy will perform compositions by academy instructors Arvinder Singh from Patiala, India, who has over 15 years of teaching experience, and Gurjit Singh from Chandigarh, India, who holds a master's degree in vocal music and is currently pursuing a PhD in music at Punjab University, Chandigarh.

On 4 Apr, academy students aged four and up will showcase their musical talent in a *kirtan* presentation featuring a diverse range of instruments, alongside music instructor and *tabla* maestro Harpreet Singh.

On 6 Apr, the performance will feature the GSA alumni along with music instructor and *tabla* maestro Pt Balvinder Singh.

Sampradaya Namasankeerthanam: Invocation of the Name

Sri Rajaraman Iyer and Party

4 Apr 2025, Fri, 7.30pm

Esplanade Concourse



The act of singing the name of God, or *namasankeerthanam*, is a vibrant form of musical worship that took root in southern India around two hundred years ago. The tradition is linked to *kirtanam* (the Sanskrit verb of *kirtan*), an earlier practice from the north that glorifies and describes the attributes of Hindu deities through chant and song.

In *namasankeerthanam*, a spirited congregation gathers, seated on the floor, led by a singer who calls out the name of their deity in short, melodic phrases. The devotees respond, singing the name back while clapping their hands to the beat of the *mridangam* (double-headed drum) and *kartal* (brass hand-cymbals) in a call-and-response format. Through this repetition of the divine name, the consciousness of the worshippers melds together, creating a profound spiritual connection.

This communal practice typically occurs on special occasions in the Hindu lunar calendar or on significant days dedicated to their religious leader or guru. *Namasankeerthanam* is also sung in processions, where worshippers travel on foot proclaiming sacred names, or by lone ascetics who sing as they seek alms for sustenance.

The melodies and lyrics, which revolve around invoking the deity's name, are intentionally simple, allowing all devotees to participate regardless of their musical abilities. The belief is that in this era of Kaliyuga, characterised by vice and spiritual decline, the sincere recitation of the deity's name serves as a powerful expression of devotion and a means of seeking salvation. The practice of *namasankeerthanam* thus allows worldly miseries and worries to fade away.

While the songs invite participation from everyone, worship leaders are often formally trained in classical Carnatic vocals. In recent times, the practice has evolved into more performative presentations. From humble tents and function halls in temples, *namasankeerthanam* has now graced larger auditoriums that can accommodate thousands of devotees. Occasionally, a percussion solo showcasing the virtuosity of the *mridangam* or *tabla* player—a feature of Carnatic concerts—is also incorporated. Nonetheless, the essence of the practice remains deeply devotional, aiming to bring worshippers closer to the divine regardless of format.

Sacred Love in Earthly Songs

La Voix Médiévale

4 & 6 Apr 2025, Fri & Sun

Fri, 8.45pm

Sun, 5pm

Esplanade Concourse



The Middle Ages spanned hundreds of years, encompassing multiple languages and geographies. This was not the Dark Ages with strict divisions between the sacred and secular that people today often imagine. To medieval philosophers, poets and musicians, Nature was written—like a book to be read—by the Creator; one could discover the world in a drop of water or the Divine in the eyes of a beloved. The sacred could be seen in the devotion of a sister who tread the earth in bare feet, or in the way the world springs back to life despite harsh winters of time and history. Deep correspondences flourished between divine and human love, prayer and longing, songs of praise and communion with the natural world. What was real was sacred, and what was sacred could be expressed through the human ability to recognise divinity in the world, and to create and sing about these experiences straight from the heart's mind.

This programme features selected lyrical gems that express a sacred quality of Man's profound connection to nature and one another. These songs span five centuries, many languages and cultures, but they are all stories and cries from the heart. When we encounter this music, we can feel we are in the presence of fellow voices from the past.

Qasidah: Islamic Devotional Poetry

Maadehul Mustafa

4 Apr 2025, Fri, 9.15pm

DBS Foundation Outdoor Theatre at Esplanade

5 Apr 2025, Sat, 7.45pm

Esplanade Concourse



Not much is known about the origins of *qasidah*, yet it is believed to be one of the oldest and most esteemed forms of poetry in the Islamic world. With roots in pre-Islamic tribal and court poetry, the term *qasidah*, derived from the verb *qasada*, means “to intend” or “to aim at”. These poems can extend to over 100 verses, meticulously arranged with a single rhythmic metre and rhyme scheme. Originating in Arabia, *qasidah* spread through religion, trade and conquests to Persia, North and East Africa, as well as Central and Southeast Asia.

Historically, *qasidah* was intended to be delivered in song. The oldest examples were crafted to reflect the poets’ circumstances, praise their tribe or patron, and carry a moral message. Over the centuries, *qasidah* evolved to express social ideals, political commentary and sometimes satire. Poems of religious praise also gained prominence, with the most renowned being the *Qasidah Al-Burdah* (*Qasidah of the Mantle*), written in the 11th century by Egyptian poet Imam Al-Busri.

The story of Imam Al-Busri

The story goes that Imam Al-Busri was struck by semi-paralysis after a stroke. In his despair, he composed the *Qasidah Al-Burdah* in honour of the Prophet Muhammad. While reciting the poem in sincerity and concentration, he fell asleep and dreamt of the Prophet, who gently covered him with his mantle. Upon waking, Imam Al-Busri found himself completely cured of his affliction. Since then, the poem has been venerated by many Sunni Muslims, recited in devotion, as well as used to decorate the walls of public buildings and mosques. Some believe

that reciting the poem confers blessings in life—removing difficulties, curing ailments, and aiding success in various endeavours.

From Arabia to Southeast Asia

In 1200CE, Islam and *qasidah* spread across Southeast Asia with the arrival of Arab traders. The poems were sung in Arabic, with more popular ones, such as the *Qasidah Al-Burdah*, translated into Malay even before the 1600s. Texts were sung in commemoration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday, during rites of passage as well as at weekly religious congregations. Shorter renditions, featuring verses taken from the original long-form *qasidahs*, also became popular. This sung poetry is usually accompanied by frame drums such as the Malay *rebana* (equivalent of the Arabic *daff*) and the pear-shape lute, *gambus*.

Malli-e-Rohi: Jasmine in the Desert

Shruthi Veena Vishwanath, Yuji Nakagawa and Shruteendra Katagade (India, Japan)

4 Apr 2025, Fri, 10.15pm

Esplanade Concourse

6 Apr, Sun, 9pm

DBS Foundation Outdoor Theatre at Esplanade



Photo Credit: Virginia Rodrigues

The Indian subcontinent is a crossroads of spiritual traditions, suspended between realms of Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Sufism. Within these religions, many sought transcendence and peace from their worldly circumstances, often through meditation and ascetic practices. For them, this journey led to a direct, personal experience with the divine, inspiring poems, songs, and sacred texts.

Even though much of Indian society was and remains staunchly patriarchal, revering male mystic poets, there existed many prominent female mystics whose narratives espoused struggles against gender-based oppression, personal liberation and a defiance of societal constraints—making their mysticism a form of empowerment and resistance.

Female mystics did not always come from the upper castes. The 13th century poet Janabai, for example, was a maidservant in Pandharpur to the household of Damasheti, the father of the renowned Bhakti saint Namdev. In her poems, she identified as “*dasi*” (which can mean both servant, or philosopher/sage), highlighting her household duties, her ardent devotion to Lord Vitthal (an avatar of Lord Krishna) and her employer Namdev, and finding spiritual liberation through her faith and service. In her poetry, she critiqued the caste system and the societal norms that marginalised communities like hers.

Another symbol of female empowerment is Akka Mahadevi, a 12th-century poet and mystic who referred to herself as a lover of Shiva. Her *vachanas* (poetic prose) reflected her quest

for inner purity and rejection of worldly attachments—even clothing—because she was clothed in “Mallikarjuna’s light” and hence had no reason to be ashamed, covering herself only with her long hair to prevent attracting male desire.

By breaking societal barriers, striving for equality and maintaining unwavering devotion to the divine, the works of these female mystics leave a legacy that continues to inspire. *Malli-e-Rohi* (Jasmine in the Desert) brings together the voices of these mystics from different regions of the Indian subcontinent. From Akka Mahadevi in the south to Janabai in the west, to the Sufis of the Thar to the mystics of Bengal, the performers move across language and form, unveiling surprising connections in the mystic songscapes of the land.

Festivities of the Nine Emperor Gods

Chua Chu Kang Tao Bu Keng Temple, Charn Mao Hern Kew Huang Keng Temple, Zhengyi Taoist Priests and Xin Xin Rong He Teochew Opera

5 Apr, Sat, 6.45pm – 9.35pm

Esplanade Forecourt Garden and DBS Foundation Outdoor Theatre at Esplanade



Photo Credit: Patrick Tan

The salty seaside air mingles with the heady scent of incense. Along the shore, offering tables are set up while candles line the nine palanquins, surrounded by kneeling devotees facing the sea, as they offer prayers to the gods. Bells ring, and with shouts of 'Huat ah!', the palanquins are lit, signalling the arrival of the gods from the sea.

Celebrated from the eve of the eighth lunar month and spanning nine days, the Nine Emperor Gods Festival is possibly the largest Chinese religious festival in Singapore, drawing thousands of devotees. The Nine Emperor Gods are believed to be the nine stars surrounding the Big Dipper constellation and the nine children of the Taoist goddess Doumu. Their temples, usually quiet throughout the year, come alive during this period as the community gathers.

Hundreds of volunteers come together for the preparations, which begin two to three months before the festival. During this time, temples undergo thorough cleaning, tents are erected, and decorations, lanterns and banners are hung. Atar tables are set up and draped in yellow cloth, while statues from prayer halls are shifted out to the tents. Elsewhere, the elaborately-decorated palanquins—nine sedan chairs, each carrying an urn representing a deity—are cleaned, restored, and adorned with lights. Devotees observe abstinence and vegetarianism to purify their bodies.

Throughout the nine days, the palanquins are brought from temple to temple, accompanied by processional Teochew percussion and welcomed with lion and dragon dances. Chinese opera is sometimes performed as entertainment for the gods, featuring the legendary Eight Immortals paying their respects and offering birthday wishes to the Nine Emperor Gods. Most

of these performative traditions and crafts are intrinsically linked to temple activities, with some being unique to this region, even to specific temples in Singapore. However, they often struggle with continuity as successive generations of youth feel increasingly disconnected from traditional culture and language.

In this collaboration between several local Nine Emperor Gods temples, immerse yourself in the atmosphere and heritage art forms surrounding this major Taoist festival. Experience southern Chinese temple traditions in this rare re-creation of the festival's processions and ceremonies.

Olokun's Drums: The Sea is the Way

Alexandre Garnize, Nyandra Fernandes, Syed Ahmad and Bloco Singapura (Brazil, Singapore)

5 Apr 2025, Sat, 9.45pm

Esplanade Forecourt Garden

6 Apr 2025, Sun, 6.15pm & 7.30pm

DBS Foundation Outdoor Theatre at Esplanade



Get ready for the explosive rhythms and colourful pageantry as the syncopated beats of *alfaias*, *caixas*, and *gonguês* reverberate through the air, channelling the *orixas* (deities) and embodying the royal and ancestral figures of Afro-Brazilian folklore.

Together, Alexandre Garnizé (director and founder), Nyandra Fernandes (dance director) of Tambores de Olokun in Rio de Janeiro, along with Syed Ahmad of Bloco Singapura weave a powerful narrative of resilience, identity, and joy, drawing from *candomblé*'s spiritual practices and *maracatu*'s rich street traditions. This performance is not just a show; it's a celebration of African roots, Brazilian culture, and the unity found in the shared language of rhythm, dance, and spirit.

Experience the magic of this international collaboration, where the sacred meets the celebratory, and witness a performance that transcends time, bringing the past to life in an explosion of sound, colour, and movement!

Maracatu de Baque Virado is a spiritual, traditional, musical and cultural expression that originates from the state of Pernambuco in northeastern Brazil. It combines Afro-Brazilian rhythms, vibrant dance, and theatrical elements.

The style is performed in public parades, often during Carnival in the centres of Recife and Olinda, Brazil. It features a large ensemble of percussion instruments such as *alfaias* (a large wooden rope-tuned drum), *gonguê* (a large metal cowbell), *tarols* (a shallow snare

drum), *caixas-de-guerra* ("war-snare"), *abê* (a gourd shaker enveloped in a net of beads), and *mineiro* (a metal cylindrical shaker filled with metal shot or small dried seeds). It focuses on strong, structured, and intense driving beats, emphasising the rhythm's power and complexity. Chants are sung as call-and-response between the soloist and the chorus of the drummers.

Maracatu has significant influences from *candomblé*, the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition that originated with enslaved African people, primarily from Yoruba, Bantu, and Ewe-Fon ethnic groups. *Candomblé* is a spiritual practice that involves rituals, music, and dance to honour *orixas* and ancestral spirits.

Music of the All Night Vigil

Father Seraphim Bit-Kharibi (Georgia)

5 Apr 2025, Sat, 10.45pm

Esplanade Concourse



During the All-night Vigil, members of the Eastern Orthodox Church reflect on the beauty of the setting sun, turning their thoughts toward the spiritual light of Christ. This sacred service also fosters a prayerful anticipation of the coming day and the eternal light of the Heavenly Kingdom. The Vigil marks a profound moment—the transition between the end of one day and the arrival of another—reminding participants of the passage from earthly time and the divine.

Experience the sublime liturgical music of the All-night Vigil, sung in Aramaic and led by Father Seraphim and the Monastery of the 13 Holy Assyrian Fathers Choir.

Food at the Foyer: A Langgar Experience

Central Sikh Gurdwara Board

6 Apr 2025, Sun, 4pm

Esplanade Theatre Foyer



Indulge in a soul-nourishing *langgar* experience, where every bite offers a taste of tradition, and each meal celebrates unity and compassion.

Langgar, a communal kitchen typically found in a *gurdwara* (place of worship), serves free meals to all visitors, regardless of background. This practice, which began in the 13th century, is rooted in Sikh teachings of equality and selfless service, symbolising the importance of sharing and caring for one another. The food served during *langgar* is usually vegetarian, featuring dishes such as lentil soups, *dal* and *chapati*.

After immersing yourself in the soulful hymns at *The Sacred Art of Sikh Music* at the concourse, we warmly welcome you to join us for the *langgar* experience happening right after.

Embark on this immersive journey and explore the rich tapestry of tradition, community, and culinary delights that embody the essence of visiting a *gurdwara*. As a symbol of hospitality and communal spirit, the food served during *langgar* is entirely free for everyone to enjoy!

Thovil: Healing Dances of the Sri Lankan Low Country

Buddhika Ranaweera & Company (Sri Lanka)

4 Apr, Fri, 8.20pm

6 Apr, Sun, 7pm & 8.15pm

Esplanade Courtyard



The patient sits in front of a table laden with offerings while friends, neighbours and relatives look on. It is believed that the patient's illness is caused by malignant entities, and only a Thovil ceremony can bring about healing. The Thovil dancer chants, recounting stories in song of those previously afflicted who were subsequently cured.

After the patient places offerings into the appropriate baskets, the Thovil dancer then fills the area with smoke, calling the demons to the area to receive their offering. The spirits are appeased, the patient is released from their afflictions, and all is well again.

Thovil, or devil dances, are ritualistic practices of healing aimed at exorcising demons that trouble a patient, whether through illness or misfortune. These rituals are believed to have originated from Southern India and were adapted by the Sinhalese.

Thovil ceremonies are broadly categorised into dances with and without masks. In masked dances, fearsome expressions are carved into wood—often with bulging eyes, a protruding nose and gaping mouth—representing both the curse and cure. Ancient chants and dances are typically passed down from father to son through generations, with training often beginning in childhood.

The offerings, percussion instrumentation, songs, dances and costumes worn for Thovil ceremonies differ by region and affliction. Different problems are thought to be caused by various malignant entities, requiring their own preparations of offerings, dances, and chants to appease the relevant spirits. Drumming plays a significant role in these rituals, with the vibrations aiding communication with supernatural beings. Buddhist influences are also woven

into these ceremonies, with verses referencing the religious precepts, and homages paid to the Buddha, his teachings, and followers.

The length of these ceremonies ranges from a few hours to overnight, with preparations and manpower varying from simple to elaborate, depending on the situation. Elaborate Thovil dances may also be employed for entire communities, such as villages affected by tsunamis with high death tolls, or fishermen experiencing significant declines in their catches.

Amidst the rhythmic beating of barrel drums, witness selected excerpts from Thovil ceremonies, from dramatic reenactments of local myths to evil-dispelling dances with whirling fire torches.