

[Thiruvacakam](#) in symphony

Stephen Schwartz supplied some of the lyrics for Thiruvacakam in Symphony.

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Thiruvacakam and Indian music composer Ilaiyaraaja

Question:

Hi Stephen A very good morning. I heard that you met our beloved Indian music composer Ilaiyaraaja in USA last week. He is the greatest film music director India has ever produced and was the first Asian to compose a symphony for Royal Philharmonic, UK. I heard that he is busy making arrangements for his next symphony to be released this year. Hope he would have definitely updated you regarding the same. I as well as other fans of his music are just curious to know how the meeting went on and was your impressions about the project and in general about his music. Hope you would respond and brief us in detail about the experience you shared with the Indian maestro. Regards, Sathish

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Sathish: I met with Mr. Raaja (and a small group of his associates) to discuss my providing contemporary and colloquial English lyrics to two songs for an upcoming album that he is planning. One of the songs will be based on passages from the Tiruvacakam by the Tamil poet and sage, Manikka-Vacagar. These passages were specifically selected by Mr. Raaja, and my task will be to adapt them into a more accessible English. The other song will be original, based on a conception of Mr. Raaja's. I enjoyed the meeting very much, and found Mr. Raaja to be a gentle, creative, and inspiring presence. I expect to begin working on these two pieces shortly. Thank you for your interest. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Thiruvacakam in symphony.

Question:

Hi, I know you are writing lyrics for ilaiyaraaja's new album Thiruvacakam in symphony. Could you please share the experience ?? Adhi

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Adhi: I have had the great pleasure this week of hearing some of the recording of Ilaiyaraaja's wonderful new work. He is in New York City working on finishing the album, and I was able to be there when some of the vocals were being recorded. I think it is going to be an amazing piece, blending ancient Tamil poetry and contemporary English texts, Western music and Indian music, and superb singing. I became very excited about it and very proud to be a part of it. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Comment from a Forum visitor:

Now that the Oratorio is released and is very popular in India (the people seem to especially love the interspersing of English verses), are there any efforts from the team to get this unique attempt popular across the globe (U.S., Europe etc.?)

Dr. Ilaiyaraaja

Question:

Dear SSchwartz, Can you please brief on your experiences with Dr.Ilayaraja who is considered god of music by millions of fans like me in South India

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Last night, at Sony Studios in New York City, I had the pleasure of hearing the almost-finished mix of Ilayaraaja's amazing work. It is unlike anything I've ever heard before, a stunning blend of Indian and Western music and instruments. I asked Mr. Raaja if this was something different for him too, and he said he had never done anything like this piece before. I don't know if anyone has. So I believe those of you looking forward to this are in for a great treat. The section to which I contributed English words is about twenty minutes long and dovetails back and forth between Mr. Raaja singing in Tamil and an American singer singing in English, plus there is a large and beautifully produced chorus. Mr. Raaja's orchestrations are superb, and the recording engineer, Richard King, has done a spectacular job sonically. I felt so very proud to be a small part of this project. Mr. Raaja is a pleasure to work with, in answer to your question. He is a quiet and gentle personality, always smiling and encouraging, which can make one forget what a musical genius he is. He was extremely clear with me about what he wanted me to do in translating/paraphrasing the Tamil text, what portions of Manikka-Vacagar's poem he wished me to emphasize, and what the deeper meanings were. When he wanted revisions, he was again very clear and helpful as to what adjustments he felt needed to be made to accomplish his vision. The people Mr. Raaja surrounds himself with, at least those it was my pleasure to meet, are also unfailingly positive personalities. The entire project for me has been an enjoyable and fascinating experience from beginning to end, and I feel extremely lucky to have been asked by Mr. Raaja to participate. I hope this answers some of your questions, and I believe I can promise you with confidence you are in for a major treat when you hear Thiruvvasakam in Symphony. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Comment from a visitor:

Dear Mr. Stephen Schwartz: It is humbling and exhilarating to read about your own experiences on working with Mr. Ilayaraja. In fact, I cannot stop reading it! For faithful fans of the Maestro like myself, this is one very exhausting trip since the news of this effort last year. However, we hope to see more joint projects between Western and Indian composers, especially with major major whiz kids like Karthik Raaja, Rahman, Harris Jayaraj among others. Earnestly, I feel more collaboration must arise between Indian film musicals and Broadway musicals, now that Mr. Rahman and Mr. Webber have pioneered such an effort. Wishing you all the best with further success with Wicked and other future ventures, Sincerely,(Gyan)

Responses to Stephen Schwartz's translation of Thiruvvasagam:

"I heard Thiruvvasagam by Ilayaraaja recently. Your translation of the verses in to English was brilliant. That entire piece was haunting. I am so immersed in the album. But I wanted to thank you and congratulate you on the English verses. So well written to convey the meaning in a few short sentences. Infact, despite Tamil being my mother tongue, the original tamil that was used in Thiruvvasagam is so advanced that I am able to appreciate the meaning better with your translation. Thanks and congratulations again."

"We listened to the album and are very much into a transcendental state. we have no words to describe the album. One word to describe the album - 'phenomenal'. As You said its indeed a stunning blend of West and east. This is new kind of music for all of us.

I appreciate your work. You have given your best in interpreting 'Thiruvvasagam' and giving apt lyrics for the no. that you wrote lyrics for.

'I am just a man
imperfect lowly
how can I reach the holy.....'
'my eyes were set on
on my own great deeds
my ears heard only praise
the words of praise
tasting smelling touching
only what is here and gone
and wondering why the
hunger thirst and longing went on....
lost in vanity and pretense
my five senses made no sense
and then to this man
so blind and base
to him you granted
you granted a glimpse of grace.....

Great lyrics. you have encapsulated the essence of thiruvvasagam excellently. Thanks for giving us this.

BTW the album sales over here in India is overwhelming and all stores have sold out their first batch of stocks in the first week of release itself the sales is astounding for many, as on the whole, music industry is not doing well all over the world, due to Audio Piracy and MP3's.

Please do convey your thoughts about this album to other friends of yours in USA and make aware of Dr. Ilaiyaraaja - a genius from India."

Stephen Schwartz responds: To the many people who have written with such wonderful comments about the new recording of the Thiruvvasagam by Ilaiyaraaja: Thank you so much for taking the time to let me know of your enthusiasm for my work. It was a great privilege for me to work with Dr. Ilaiyaraaja, and needless to say, I had some trepidation about doing such a free "translation" or interpretation of such a classic work of Tamil literature. It has been extremely gratifying to know that listeners are approving of what I wrote. Some have asked about a release in the West, possible Grammy consideration, etc; that is not something I have to do with, but I know Dr. Ilaiyaraaja and his excellent partners and staff are working on it. This project was a pleasure and, as I said, a privilege for me, and again, I thank you for expressing your positive responses to my contribution to Dr. Ilaiyaraaja's amazing and beautiful recording. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Thiruvvasagam CD

Question:

Dear Stephen, Please describe your experience working on Thiruvvasagam by Ilaiyaraaja. Did you listen to the completed album, what is your view on that. I am also interested to know how your experience was working with Ilaiyaraaja. I read about how he tried to explain the mood of the song and suddenly walked up to a piano and played it out for you.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I am thrilled with the final CD, as I knew I would be when I listened at Sony Studios during the mix, and immensely proud to have been a small part of this project. To work with someone as gifted and renowned as Ilaiyaraaja, and to learn just a little about his music and culture was a great experience for me. Thank you for your interest. Best, Stephen Schwartz

Question:

Sir, Translating from any lang. to any lang. is difficult, particularly when the original has deep meaning. It is even daunting when the source language is rich such that there may be 30~40 words to describe one thing. What is your experience in translating Thiruvacakam for TIS ? Thank you, Thayalan UK

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Thayalan: Because I do not know any Tamil, I didn't attempt to "translate" the Thiruvacakam. I used Dr. Raaja's interpretation of the specific portions of Hymn I that he wanted to set, and then, as he requested of me, I wrote my own modern English version of the ideas and feelings expressed. So the relatively small amounts of English used are interpretations of the original, rather than translations per se. Nevertheless, I think you will enjoy the piece when you hear it; I was extremely impressed, as I have said, by what I have heard of the entire project. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Thiruvacakam in Symphony

Below are two sets of lyrics: The full lyric that Stephen Schwartz sent to Maestro Ilaiyaraaja for his consideration and the final version which is included on the recording.

TIRUVACAGAM HYMN

English lyrics by Stephen Schwartz

For Ilaiyaraaja

I'm just a man
Imperfect, lowly
How can I reach
For something holy?

So many forms I must wear --
Grass and shrub and stone and tree
So many lives I must bear --
Worm and bird and beast and demon
Learn the sky and turn the earth
How long till I am fin'ly worthy?

I'm just a man
Imperfect, lowly
And yet I long
For something holy ...

And now, in a flash of light and heat
Like the white hot flare that began Creation
Comes a fleeting glimpse of your golden feet
With the stunning force of revelation
There is peace
And release
In an endless song of celebration:

Hail, hail
I sing hail, joyful hail
Hail, hail, hail

This body which obscures the truth
This body which encrusts the soul
This prison of flesh
Encumbers and enmeshes me
I was under its control

My eyes were set on my own great deeds
My ears heard only words of praise
Tasting, smelling, touching only what is here and gone
And wond'ring why the hunger, thirst, and longing went on

Lost in vanity and pretense
My five senses made no sense
And then to this man, so blind and base
To him, you granted a glimpse of grace

As if after rain -- no, years of rain
The sun -- no, a thousand suns break through
Like cool fresh water on a parched, cracked plain
Like noise resolving into music
Like nectar flowing from barren rock
Like rubies shining in a dank dark cave
To this lost sailor, you show the dock
And light the pathway that can save me

Hail, I sing hail
Joyous hail, hail, hail

Deep in my soul, there now abides
Someone who is not me
Who breaks the bonds of caring for
The things we own and see
I'm just a man
Imperfect, lowly
Yet beginning to be free

Hail, I sing hail
Grateful hail, hail, hail
I sing hail, endless hail
Hail, hail, hail ...

Final Version:

I'm just a man
Imperfect, lowly
How can I reach
How can I reach for something holy?

I'm just a man
Imperfect, lowly
How can I reach for something holy?

I'm just a man
Imperfect, lowly
How can I reach for something holy?

So many forms I must wear
So many lives I must bear
So many lives I must bear -- I must bear

Worm and bird and beast and demon
Learn the sky and turn the earth
How long till I am fin'ly worthy?

Hail, hail. I sing hail
Hail, hail. Joyful hail

This body which obscures the truth
This body which encrusts the soul
This prison of flesh! Encumbers and enmeshes me

I was in its control
I was in its control

My eyes were set on my own great deeds
My ears heard only words of praise
Tasting, smelling, touching only what is here and gone
And wond'ring why the hunger, thirst, and longing went on
Lost in vanity and pretense
My five senses made no sense
And then to this man, so blind and base
To him, you granted a glimpse of grace
A glimpse of grace
Oh oh oh!

Deep in my soul, there now abides
Someone who is not me
Who breaks the bonds of caring for
The things we own and see
I'm just a man
Imperfect, lowly
Yet beginning to be free

Hail, hail! I sing hail!
Hail, hail! Joyful hail!

Hail, hail! I sing hail!
Hail, hail! Grateful hail!

Hail, hail! I sing hail!
Hail, hail! Grateful hail!
Hail, hail! Joyous hail!
Hail, hail! Endless hail!

Hail, hail! Hail, hail!
Joyous hail!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<http://www.musicalschwartz.com/more.htm#thiruvakam>