



SAA-uk
SOUTH ASIAN PERFORMING ARTS

Impact Report 2024-2025

*Preserving the traditional,
facilitating the contemporary*

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ENGLAND

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Memberships

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Chair's Message

Building Futures Together...

It has been my great pleasure to serve as Chair of SAA-uk during this transformative year for the organisation. From expanding flagship events like our Summer Solstice Festival to commissioning new works like *Travel Light*, nurturing the youngest of artists through Chhotu to providing opportunities for our young students on the national stage, our growth has been rooted in our commitment to investing in people at every stage of their artistic journey, in the partnerships we have nurtured and by embracing the diverse and multi-faceted communities that we, and our artforms, are a part of.

We have built on our commitments outlined in 2023-24 to Talent Development and Community Engagement: our HeadStart, Sahara and Chai & Chats programmes are now embedded in the organisation, playing our part in Leeds' Best City ambition. This, coupled with our passion to deliver artistic experiences of the highest-quality, online and in person, has meant an outstanding cultural offer which continues to represent some of the best of traditional and contemporary South Asian arts in the UK today.

Behind the scenes, as the organisation and its ambitions have grown, our job as trustees has been to ensure our governance and decision-making processes develop in tandem so that SAA-uk remains resilient, responsive and reflective of the shifting sands of our times, whilst retaining our core mission at heart. To this end, our "Step Change" Away Day was a highlight for me, and I wish to sincerely thank everybody who took part - staff, trustees, artists, participants, partners, funders and audience members - for their passion and insight, and their commitment to ensuring the future of SAA-uk is a bright one.

And finally, if you are reading this as a potential funder, donor or partner: join us. SAA-uk is an organisation like no other. The cultural experiences we create for and with communities, the legacy our education and talent development programmes are having on generations of artists and the UK's creative sector more broadly, the ways in which the organisation grows and thrives - all of these are a beacon of hope in what continue to be challenging times. With your support, we can go even further, together.

Inés Soria-Donlan
Chair of Trustees



CEO & Artistic Director's Message

...For a collaborative, agile and dynamic South Asian Arts UK

This year, SAA-uk has been a story of transformation – where creativity met community, and ambition turned into impact. Across 18 vibrant events, we celebrated the boundless possibilities of South Asian music and dance, from the spiritual resonance of *Sacred Music: Celebrate the Spirit* to the empowering energy of our 13th Summer Solstice Festival. New works like *Travel Light* and *Melodies of Love* reminded us that art is not just performance – it's dialogue, innovation, and hope.

We deepened our roots in Leeds while opening new doors for inclusivity: through offering free events and discounted pricing we ensured that art remained accessible during challenging times. Our HeadStart programme reignited opportunities for young people from global majority backgrounds, while Sahara supported 17 artists to break barriers and share original works with live audiences.

Listening became our compass. Through nine Chai & Chats, we heard the voices of communities shaping our first Pop-up Culture series in South Asian Heritage Month 2025. Education flourished with 125 learners, at our thriving Music and Dance Academy. SAA-Sanskars Summer School featured international musicians to inspire another generation, while bold initiatives such as the *Chhotu Early Years* project, *Serendipity*, and *YCC: Bradford & Leeds* gave young musicians the opportunity to express themselves both individually and collectively through new music performed in Yorkshire. We believe every child deserves the joy of music and dance. Thanks to our funders, partners, and supporters, that belief is becoming a legacy.

From crowdfunding success that took our students to The Roundhouse and present Hindustani Classical Music to 1,500 audience members, to strengthening governance with new trustees and a collaborative "Step Change" Away Day, this year has been about building futures together.

Sincere gratitude to our principal funders, taxpayers, donors, trusts and foundation for their support, plus Chair and Board of Trustees, staff and volunteers. Without your guidance, expertise and generosity it would be impossible to have achieved all the has been achieved in 2024-2025.

Keranjeet Kaur Virdee MBE
CEO and Artistic Director



80

Freelance Artists employed by SAA-uk during 2024-25 throughout our programmes of work, strengthening our commitment to UK and local talent.

4

International visiting artists. Their visits brought unique learning opportunities for our students during Summer School and fostered collaborations with UK artists.

33%

Proportion of our events in Leeds that was completely free. We achieved this through strategic partnerships and continued support from our funders.

£54,770

Individual donations and projects funding from trust and foundation. A huge thanks to everyone who invested and supported SAA-uk's mission, enabling us to deliver outstanding work.

18

Events delivered by SAA-uk and in partnership throughout this year's Performance Programme.

3187

The number of viewers on our online streamed events, allowing us to reach a wider audience for both SAA-uk and the artform.

17

Number of Global Majority artists supported to create and present live original music and dance pieces. This has been reflected in our Special Projects and Performance Programme.

519

Number of sessions in our Music and Dance Academies. Delivering a range of disciplines in South Asian Classical music and dance, both in person and online.



1.4M

YouTube views on our popular channel highlighting concert excerpts, as well as full performances.

The Case for SAA-uk

SAA-uk matters because Culture matters

SAA-uk exists because culture is not optional—it is essential. In a world where communities seek belonging and young people need opportunities to thrive, we create spaces where heritage meets innovation and creativity becomes a force for social change.

In 2024–25, we delivered 18 ambitious events that celebrated South Asian music and dance in all its richness—from the spiritual resonance of Sacred Music: Celebrate the Spirit to the empowering energy of our 13th Summer Solstice Festival. We premiered new works like Travel Light and Melodies of Love, proving that art is not static—it evolves, inspires, and connects.

Accessibility is at the heart of what we do. With 33% of our Leeds events being free and offering discounted pricing across the board, we ensure cultural experiences remain open to all, even during the cost-of-living crisis. For funders and donors, this means your investment directly removes barriers and creates inclusive spaces for thousands. Our call to action: continue to invest in equity and access, your support changes lives.

We are shaping futures. Through HeadStart, we offer paid training and mentoring for young people from global majority backgrounds. Our Sahara programme breaks down barriers for underrepresented artists, supporting 17 musicians and dancers to present original works. For corporate partners, this is an opportunity to champion diversity and talent development: partner with us to demonstrate your commitment to inclusion and innovation.

Our Music and Dance Academies nurture 125 learners, while initiatives like Sanskar Summer School, Yorkshire Young Musicians and Young Croydon Composers (Bradford and Leeds) are safe spaces for young musicians to develop and grow through opportunities to compose, perform, and dream big. For participants and communities, we are not just an organisation—we are a home for creativity, identity, and growth.

Every conversation we have—through our Chai & Chats and ongoing listening exercises—shapes programmes like Pop Up Culture, ensuring our work reflects real needs. For audiences, this means authentic, meaningful experiences. We look forward to joining forces in the year ahead to create together, experience, and share.

SAA-uk matters because culture matters. Together, we can keep inspiring, connecting, and transforming lives: locally, regionally, nationally, and globally in the years to come and positively contribute to creating a society where access to culturally relevant art is an equal right of people from all walks of life.

PERFORMANCE PROGRAMME

Emboldening our connections to local centres of culture and creativity, we maintained strong relationships with our long-term partners Seven Arts, Leeds International Concert Season, and Howard Assembly Room. Alongside this, bringing contemporary and classical Indian music to new venues has enabled us to diversify our audience and further imbed our inclusivity practices through a prism of excellence.

This year saw the emergence of exciting works that emphasised the value of collaboration, bold creativity, and Yorkshire-based talent.

Across an ambitious 18 events, we offered the stage generously to local, global, emerging and established artists, showcasing the endless possibilities of creativity.

While nurturing artist development was a key objective of the year, our commitment to the

audience was equally a priority. Committed to accessibility, several shows were free of charge. Where this was not possible, we offered discounted prices for all shows, in hopes of easing financial barriers to experiencing arts and cultural events in the present cost of living crisis.

The Spring/Summer season introduced a unique new project, *Sacred Music: Celebrate the Spirit*, presented in partnership with Howard Assembly Room and Leeds International Concert Season. At the conclusion of the season, SAA-uk's flagship event, *Summer Solstice Festival* returned, this time celebrating female creativity and empowerment, as well as the much-anticipated music.

Motivated by the same spirit of innovation, the Autumn/Winter season was bursting with works released to the world for the very first time. In October, 12 multi-disciplinary artists based in the

UK shared their new work, *Travel Light funded by PRS Foundation*. A poignant confluence of music, poetry, and visuals, the artists wielded their mix of creativity to share stories of people, power, and pepper.

Amongst many inspiring projects was *YCC: Bradford and Leeds*. This was a showcase of dazzling young artists from Yorkshire who bravely stepped into the opportunity to be mentored by Dennis Rollins MBE and Sri Sairam, sharing their very own compositions at two live performances at Victoria Hall in Bradford and Leeds Conservatoire in Leeds. In the same month, Indian Classical musician, Kirpal Singh Panesar, successfully platformed his newly commissioned work, *Melodies of Love*, to an audience of 175 listeners.

Spring/Summer 2024

16th April 2024

Punjabi Proverbs

12th May 2024

Sacred Music: Celebrate the Spirit

16th May 2024

Niladri Kumar

20th June 2024

Struggles and Triumphs of South Asian Creative Women

21st June 2024

Midsummer's Night Music: Food for the Soul

29th July 2024

Baithak: Legacy

1st August 2024

Baithak: Viraasat

Autumn/Winter 2024-25

28th September 2024

Memories as Harmony

10th October 2024

Jasdeep Singh Degun

16th October 2024

Travel Light

18th October 2024

Strings Together

2nd November 2024

Māyā

30th November 2024

Mishra & Deepa Shakthi

14th February 2025

YCC: Bradford & Leeds

15th February 2025

YCC: Bradford & Leeds

26th February 2025

Winter's End: Melodies of Love

15th March 2025

Parivaar

20th March 2025

Jyotsna Srikanth



SPOTLIGHT 2024: Travel Light

The city of Leeds is built upon a sprawling legacy of history, heritage, and change makers. With that in mind, SAA-uk joined creative forces with Jane Earnshaw and Abby Dix-Mason of Foxglove. Together, we developed *Travel Light*, a confluence of music, poetry, and visuals that honoured the universal contributions of Leeds born Civil Engineer, John Smeaton. Like the oak tree that inspired John Smeaton's revolutionary lighthouse design, some ideas take years to take root and grow. The seed for this project was planted seven years ago. At the time, it was just a notion, a constellation of ideas waiting for the right moment to align. But as with the patient growth of an oak, people, places, and possibilities began to connect, and what once seemed distant or uncertain finally came into focus.

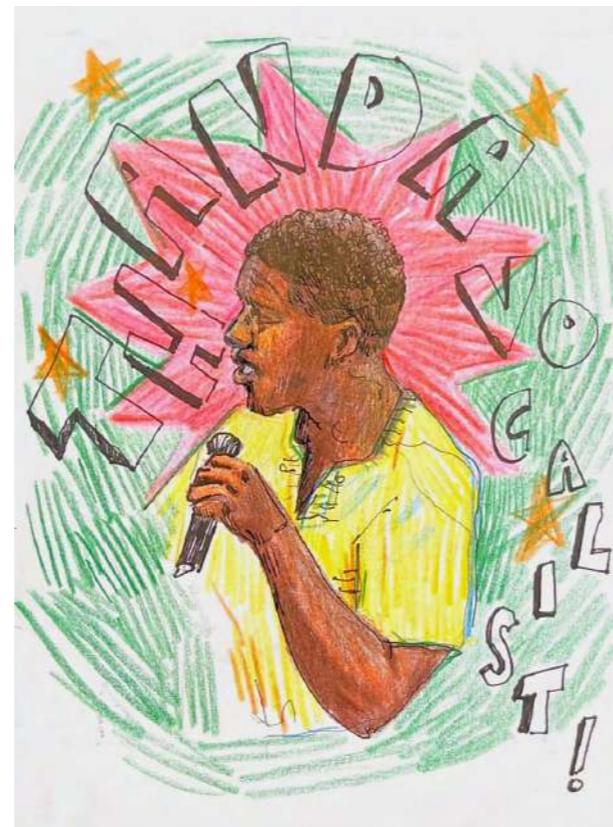
Fearlessly committed to working for the public good, Smeaton's groundbreaking work on lighthouses, bridges, canals, renewable energy sources and flight, to this day, exist as a blueprint for advancements. In 1756, 28-year-old John Smeaton built the legendary Eddystone Lighthouse, which became a mighty emblem in the history of maritime trade routes, connecting Great Britain to Europe, Africa, and India. Calling on the creativity of 12 UK-based artists with heritages that spoke closely to the countries that fell amongst the lighthouses' trade routes, *Travel Light* illuminated centuries' old stories of people, power, and hope that shaped the future we stand upon.

With a surge of diverse traditions and artforms emerging from the ideating phases of the project, *Travel Light*'s Musical Director, Christella Liras, collected each element of the artists visions and voices, delicately piecing them together in a way that honoured individuality and collaborative expression. Across a 7-day creation period, the artists were encouraged to embrace the process of sharing, listening, and trust. In doing so, they stepped deep into reflection of their artform while meeting unfamiliar stories and traditions introduced by their co-creatives.

What emerged from the deep dive were 2 intimate and raw live performances at Chapel FM. Following this, a documentary was aired in December 2024 that took viewers behind the scenes for a closer look at the creation process, along with an article that spotlighted the musical journey of one *Travel Light* artist, Thanda Gumedé. Generously sharing his experience as a migrant worker striving to make music despite the limitations of a temporarily restricted Visa, he offered raw but hopeful insights that were documented in hopes of providing valuable learnings to creatives in similar contexts.

“Darkness is not real. Darkness is just the absence of light. The music we created was not accusatory, nor was it wallowing in self-pity. The music was one of recognising history with no delusion, whilst acknowledging we might not have crossed paths if it weren’t for this.”

Thanda Gumedé



“

“I got to meet musicians in my region whom I had never known before and it increased my awareness of what resources and opportunities exist around me; It reinforced in me the idea of the universality of music and how it crosses borders of race, language, religion, community, nation and creed.”

Deepa Shakthi

“

“Travel Light is a journey of musical cultures, amalgamating different styles from Asia, Africa and the Western world. When performed, the piece becomes a very spiritual experience, retracing the route that connects continents and showing how rhythms and melodies from across the world can be different and alike at the same time.”

Christella Liras



Scan to watch The Making of *Travel Light*, our behind-the-scenes documentary



Scan to read the full article and learn more about Thanda's story



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FOXGLOVE

Next Generation Talent: *Melodies of Love* *& Serendipity*

For over 27 years, SAA-uk has been dedicated to commissioning, producing, and championing new artistic expressions that proudly reflect the diversity of 21st Century Britain.

A key aspect of our work is to advocate for and share our expertise, whether as a co-commissioner, advisor, or programmer. We push boundaries, and embrace a wide range of influences and practices, creating an inclusive and safe space for both emerging and established artists to grow and experiment.

With funding from PPL Giving and support from Future Talent, we were thrilled to introduce our latest artist support scheme, *Talent NXGen*. Our goal was to select one artist or ensemble whose musical creations were rooted in the South Asian tradition, supporting them through the journey of concept creation and recording to potentially premiering their newly curated work. Following a national call-out with a focus on underrepresented music creators, the spotlight landed on Indian Classical musician, Kirpal Singh Panesar. To inspire a new generation and encourage them to consider careers in the music industry, we invited students from our SAA-uk Music Academy to shadow and follow Kirpal on his journey.

During this creative time, Kirpal stepped into the role of mentor and facilitator, guiding the 12 young musicians through the process of composing *Serendipity*, an original piece commissioned by Future Talent as part of their 20th anniversary album, *RISE: Past, Present and Future Talent*. The journey of composing *Serendipity* began in August 2024 at Linacre Studio, right in the heart of Leeds. For the young artists, this was a first look into the world of music creation, collaboration and recording, which is to be followed by a live performance at the iconic Roundhouse, London in April 2025.

While Kirpal's creative exploration continues to take shape in exciting ways, he has begun strikingly with the live premier of his newly commissioned work *Melodies of Love* at Leeds Conservatoire in February 2025. He has composed a total of 7 new compositions that are to be recorded in 2025-26.



“The piece we have created is unique to us. The experience is helping us to become better performers and gives insight into a new world of composing which we are grateful for.”

Young Composers' testimonial



Watch the video of *Serendipity*,
original composition part of Future
Talent's 20th-anniversary album,
RISE: Past, Present and Future Talent



Listen to *Melodies of Love*, live
recording from The Venue, Leeds
Conservatoire for the Leeds
International Concert Season 2025



LEEDS
INTERNATIONAL
CONCERT SEASON

Leeds Summer Solstice Festival 2024

Each year, the Summer Solstice Festival remains SAA-uk's most anticipated event. Marking a longstanding tradition, one that entered its 13th year, we visioned our boldest one yet.

For the first time in recent years, the festival ran across two days, beginning with an online panel that aimed to demystify the experiences of South Asian women pursuing creative careers. Hosting the discussion was an extraordinary line-up of trailblazing voices, including Almass Badat, Rupinder Kaur, Pritt, Seetal Kaur, and Kaajel Patel.

Day 2 of the festival marked the return of SAA-uk's all-night celebration of Indian Classical music, dedicated to the welcome return of Summer with an empanelled line-up of UK-based and global artists.

Among several towering figures in Indian Classical music that featured in the programme were: sitar virtuoso Roopa Panesar; Nabeel Khan, who has taken the art of the sarangi across the world; Aman Pal, student of the legendary Ustad Tari Khan; Sri Lankan and Carnatic vocalist Yarlinie Thanabalasingham; tabla wizard Shahbaz Hussain; and internationally visiting vocalist Professor Harvinder Singh.

Hosting us from dawn till dusk was The Old Gurudwara Sahib, a resplendent space that has been a reminder of heritage, community, and home for Leeds locals since 1961. For 25 years, The Old Gurudwara stood frozen in that history, a relic parched of life and care. Flooding the space with its former glory, we opened its doors for the first time since 1999 and immersed ourselves in the process of rekindling the hope and memories that lived within.



Visit our YouTube channel to relive the magic of the Summer Solstice Festival



Scan to watch the thought-provoking panel “Struggles and Triumphs of South Asian Creative Women”



EDUCATION PROGRAMME: *SAA-uk Academies & Enrichment*

Underpinning the ambitions of SAA-uk's Music and Dance Academies is a continual drive for refinement and evolution, one that carefully considers the individual journeys of our learners.

Expansion of the Education team, specifically the recruitment of an Academies Assistant, has encouraged an increased capacity for student and parent feedback to be shared, listened to and acted upon, with openness and honesty. This space for staff to strengthen their rapport with Academy members and guardians has enabled us to refine our education offer to ensure accessibility for all our 125 enrolled students.

As of March 2025, there are 89 students enrolled in our Music Academy, attending our Tuesday and Sunday in person classes and our 1-2-1 online sessions. The Dance Academy continues to grow with a total 36 students, split between the three disciplines of Kathak, Bharatnatyam and Odissi.

Our education offer doesn't stop at term-time activities: between July and August we opened the doors to SAA-Sanskar Music Summer School for a week filled with rhythm, creativity, friendship, and discovery through the rich traditions of Indian classical music. Attended by 40 students, the 6 days of intensive and varied lessons were delivered by known tutors in the UK, international visiting artist Pandita Anuradha Pal, plus guest workshops by poet and academic Keisha Thompson, circus skills day, and two live Baithak concerts.

Beyond our weekly classes, we have also designed a series of Enrichment opportunities for students to share their learning and passion with the city of Leeds and learn from accomplished artists. This has included, performing at the Academy Sharing days, Go-And-See opportunities to attend live events, and opening for professional acts as part of the SAA-uk concert series.

At SAA-uk, we believe that every child deserves the joy of music and dance, regardless of their background or circumstance. For this reason, free instrument loans, bursary schemes, and discounted tickets to SAA-uk live performances are a few ways we are continually shaping our education and learning offer to ease concerns around affordability and overcome socio-economic barriers to accessing creative learning outside to formal educational institutions.



Partner Highlight: *SAA-uk and Yorkshire Young Musicians*



Our partnership with Yorkshire Young Musicians (YYM) continues to create meaningful opportunities for emerging artists across the region. Together, we have supported young people and developed projects that encourage original composition, cross genre experimentation and cultural exchange.

Notably, the Leeds strand of YYM is the only one within the organisation that works with Indian classical music, making this collaboration a unique space for young artists to engage deeply with South Asian musical heritage alongside other styles.

Through this work, we have opened up new creative pathways for young people, giving them access to high-quality mentorship, the chance to explore sound worlds, and the confidence to grow as composers and performers.

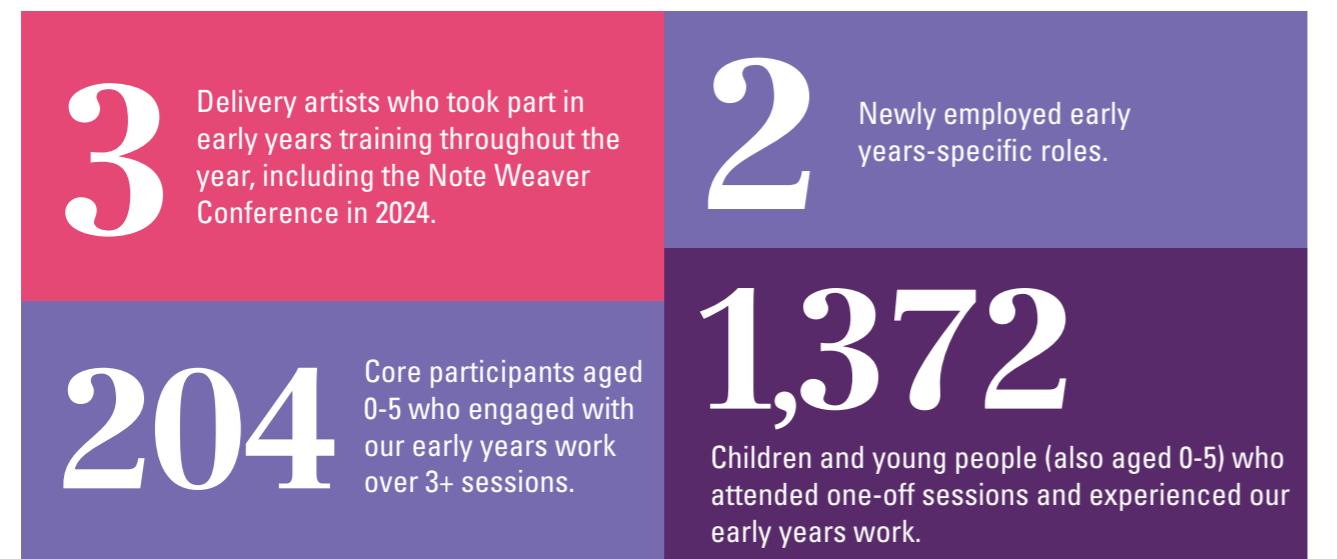
Our partnership with YYM strengthens the music ecology of Yorkshire by joining their specialist training with our deep-rooted expertise in South Asian classical and contemporary arts.



Chhotu: Little One

SAA-uk's *Chhotu: Little One* project funded by Youth Music: Trailblazer Fund and Arts Council England focused on developing an early years' music strand that feeds into our Music Academies. Through this project themes of South Asian music and culture were introduced to pre-school children (aged 0-5) at an enjoyable and comfortable pace.

This project has been our first experience of delivering early years work, and so far, it has empowered us to engage with:



The implementation of early years classes in our music academies is a core ambition we have been focusing on since we began this journey in 2023: we are now closer than ever to have the confidence, training, and skillset to deliver these sessions as part of our regular education offer, with the intention of Early Years becoming a permanent strand of our work and legacy of the Chhotu project.

Following the conclusion of the project funding in July 2025, we will present early years activities as part of our yearly music Summer School, and from September 2025, with the start of our new academic year, we plan to kick-start a series of sessions for all children aged 0 to 1.5 yrs & 2 to 4yrs.



**YOUTH
MUSIC**

AMP

**Orchestra of the
Age of Enlightenment**

ORCHESTRAS *live*

SPECIAL PROJECTS *YCC Bradford & Leeds*

Youth voices are deeply powerful yet often overlooked. Reinventing autonomy in creativity, empowerment, and opportunity for the next generation of young musicians, YCC: Bradford and Leeds was a project built by and for emerging artists.

What began in 2018 as an initiative by Drum the Bass 'Croydon Young Composers' to nurture young musicians in Croydon found new life and energy in Leeds and Bradford in 2024. Under the inspiring mentorship of Shri Sriram and Dennis Rollins MBE, 13 young musicians from diverse backgrounds came together to compose four original works. Each piece reflected not only their individual musical identities but also what is possible when talents merge across genres and traditions. Encouraging ownership and autonomy beyond composition, the young musicians were invited to title their own pieces, storyboard their compositions, and collaborate with a videographer to bring their music videos to life.

From Indian classical instruments like the sitar, tabla, and santoor, to Western strings, brass, and keys — these collaborations wove together distinct sonic worlds into powerful, unified expressions. The compositions were later arranged for brass band and presented at two major performances, moving audiences at Leeds Conservatoire and Victoria Hall, Shipley.

These young composers didn't just write music — they built trust, broke barriers, and learned to value difference as a source of strength. The project stands as a testament to how collaborative music-making can empower the next generation to innovate, express, and connect.

YCC: Bradford and Leeds presented a valuable opportunity to develop our delivery of SAA-uk's Music and Dance Academies. With learners aged under 18 making up the majority of the student base, the YCC project encouraged us to reflect on how learning could be better tailored to support the growth of a diverse spectrum of young people.

“From this experience, I took away the importance of keeping the students at the heart of what we do. It also reinforced the importance of giving opportunities to students who are not necessarily the most confident, because projects like this push them to grow in musical ability and confidence. It was a joy to see them flourish and blossom as the project progressed.

SAA-uk Music Development Officer, Maryam Jameela Sajad



SPECIAL PROJECTS

Dance (All Night, Leeds)

Drawing from the vibrant dance scene of Leeds, its diverse communities and powerful history of female activism, London-based visual artist, Melanie Manchot, developed *Dance (All Night, Leeds)*.

Under the night sky, SAA-uk joined 9 dance organisations representing a colourful sundry of cultures, styles, and stories swept across the city. Synchronised by solidarity and support for women to take up space safely after dark, the dancers retraced the steps taken by the pioneering women who led the Reclaim the Night march in 1977. Witnessed by an estimated 1,000 people, the empowering experience included workshops, and a silent disco.

From Bulgarian folk dance, hula hooping, and more, SAA-uk's Dance Development Officer and Kathak Tutor, Jyoti Manral, alongside a collective of her students, were delighted to bellow the message with the strength of Indian Classical dance.

While a liberating project, stepping into the experience presented excitement as well as reservations. Not only did we have to consider the safety of our female dancers, most of whom would be performing in a street procession for the very first time, we had to confront possibilities of racism. Advocacy for a safer Leeds determined that we would be courageous, flooding the streets with an unmistakable message of hope, power, and sisterhood.



“*I was thrilled to be part of this event, which champions a crucial cause relevant to today's society. Growing up in Delhi, my parents urged me to return safely before dark. Now, as a mother of a daughter, I understand parents' constant fear for their children's well-being at night. I am determined to contribute to ending this fear through my dance and make a powerful impact on the world.*

I am incredibly proud that we stepped out of our comfort zones and embraced a challenge and an opportunity to demonstrate to ourselves and the world that women are powerful. We deserve the right to move freely at any time of day. We are all human and have equal rights in every respect. Together, we have the power to bring about positive change in the world.

Let's support each other and strive for a brighter future where everyone can thrive.”

SAA-uk Dance Development Officer and Kathak Dancer, Jyoti Manral

Supported by Lubaina Himid Projects and Balbir Singh Dance Company.
Melanie Manchot's 'Dance (All Night)' was performed with permission from Arts Council Collection.



Scan to discover the inspiring story behind the Reclaim the Night march

TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Generation 21 Programme

The arts sector faces a significant underrepresentation of skilled individuals from global majority backgrounds: from artists to arts administrators and leadership roles. In response to this disparity, SAA-uk established the Generation 21 Training Programme, which during the 2024-25 financial year has developed into an umbrella programme to spot and nurture talent through three main strands:

1. PATHWAYS: Providing structured support and development opportunities for children and young people during their training in South Asian music and dance at the SAA-uk Academies. This financial year we have been researching ways to implement an early year's music programme for 0-5 years old as part of our Chhotu: Little One project. Critical steps have been made in the development of a formal syllabus/system and accreditation reflective of teaching of Indian classical music.

2. HEADSTART: This two-year, full-time training programme for individuals aged 16-30 from global majority backgrounds, has re-opened its doors in September 2024, offering a competitive salary, comprehensive training, mentoring, and placement opportunities to two selected trainees – more about their journey with SAA-uk on the next page.

3. SAHARA: A programme focusing on breaking down barriers for underrepresented artists rooted in South Asian music and dance, providing targeted support to help them reach their potential. From financial contribution towards creating new work to industry talks relevant to their career's stage, signposting of opportunities, through to drafting funding applications. This year we were able to support more artists than ever before: 17 musicians and dancers who presented 5 original pieces to a live audience.

SAA-uk remains committed to promoting diversity, equality, and inclusion, ensuring a dynamic and representative cultural sector through its training programmes, which today include an active placement scheme with the University of Leeds.

SAA-uk offers university placements across several disciplines and modules, empowering students to gain valuable experience and insights into the impact of arts and cultural programming, whilst contributing to various aspects of SAA-uk's work: from our recently-established Creative Communities programme Pop Up Culture, to a unique research piece on the history of the South Asian violin, now published on the SAA-uk website.



Scan to read the latest research written by student researcher Rakshika Kaur Bansal

HeadStart: For a Creative Future

SAA-uk's HeadStart training scheme was introduced with the desire to give rise to an increased number of future leaders of the creative world in mind. With senior positions rarely held by individuals from global majority backgrounds, this two-year training scheme was designed to provide a steady foundation of learning, experience and growth, particularly for those from culturally underrepresented communities.

After sharing a nationwide call-out, two individuals with unmistakable passion and bold ideas to share with the creative world were selected.



“*I'm Yamana, a creative with no fixed specialism but a deep love for learning. I explore all kinds of artistic practices - from drawing to dance. HeadStart has been a fast-track immersion into the world of arts and cultural production. From the get-go, I was thrown into the deep end (in the best way possible) during the production week of Travel Light - an incredible cross-cultural performance that brought together Sufi vocals, Spanish guitar, Zulu harmonies, poetry, tabla, and digital projections. Supporting nine artists as they built a show in just five days gave me a first-hand look into what it takes to make magic happen - from artist scheduling to stage management to documenting a creative process. Since then I've learned how to write artist briefs, book venues, compere shows and design newsletters. It's also been an absolute privilege to be working on placements and making connections with incredible organisations such as Chapel FM, Leeds Heritage Theatres and Leeds International Film Festival. Through all this, I've not only gained technical skills but also clarity around what I want to contribute to the sector. My dream is to help build connections and create spaces where people can come together to learn, create, and grow. HeadStart has been a vital step in that journey - and I feel incredibly lucky to be on it.”*

SAA-uk HeadStart Trainee, Yamana Jaman-Browne

“Working with SAA-uk through HeadStart has changed the way I view myself as a creative professional. Before joining, I didn't have formal training in marketing, producing, or community engagement. I've since had the opportunity to be involved in a wide range of projects including radio work with Rangoli Radio and Fever FM, supporting the delivery of events like Parampa and Summer Solstice, and engaging with neighbourhoods across Leeds through community visits and conversations. I also had the chance to attend AI tour hosted by Microsoft, which tied into my personal interest in technology and digital art. Through each of these experiences, I feel confident that I have developed transferable skills that will allow me to contribute meaningfully to any arts organisation I work with. One of the most empowering aspects of the programme has been being trusted to speak on behalf of my demographic. As a young person, it can be easy to feel like your voice doesn't hold much weight, especially when talking about your visions or the kinds of things you want to see represented. Through HeadStart, I've come to understand that these perspectives are essential to building a more inclusive and innovative sector. I've realised there is a particular value in the kind of knowledge that comes from being deeply embedded in online/digital culture and creative communities. I've learned how to translate that insight into creative strategy. That understanding is something I now bring into every area of my work. I've always believed in the importance of building strong, sustainable arts communities in the North. HeadStart has helped me see how I can contribute to that.”

SAA-uk HeadStart Trainee, Orisa Pather



Creative Communities *Chai & Chats*

This year's Creative Communities Engagement Programme involved the goal of a city-wide listening exercise, to gather the cultural and creative needs of Leeds' South Asian communities. From September 2024 to March 2025 a total of 9 Chai & Chat sessions were held, connecting us with various groups: from young learners of South Asian music and dance, to local artists and creatives, and international students from the University of Leeds.

These sessions took the format of an informal focus group, with each Chai & Chats shaped specifically for the invited audience. In January 2025, we joined forces with the National Poetry Centre and held a Poetry Chai & Chat for local poets to share their cultural and creative needs. Further to this, two Chai & Chats led by placement students were held at the University of Leeds campus, to ensure the voice of the Leeds student population was heard.

Listening can take many different forms, so we set out to participate in some of the many cultural events and workshops happening in the city. This included Kenya Cultural Day in the Burmantofts and Richmond Hill ward, as well as supporting our team to train in Asset Based Community Development, and join the conversations about Leeds as a Marmot City. Highlights of our creative communities programme so far have included establishing strong working relationships with seven Neighbourhood Hosts, with interest from others in joining the project next year. The Chai & Chat sessions were received positively with participants wanting more sessions to develop the conversations further in a safe and comfortable space. Although gathering participants for the Chai & Chat sessions has been a challenge initially, as relationships are established and networks build overtime it is slowly becoming easier. The many conversations we had during the Chai & Chats will shape the programming of our very first Pop-up Culture series, activating the localities and celebrating the creative cultures of Leeds during South Asian Heritage Month in Summer 2025.



Marketing, Communication and Audience Development

Throughout 2024-25, the Marketing department has contributed to the exponential growth of our audiences, both online and in person.

Utilising digital marketing platforms such as Mailchimp, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn alongside traditional marketing strategies such as in-person brochure and flyer distribution, we have ensured our messaging has been as wide-reaching as possible, whilst maintaining a clear brand identity throughout our communications.

Conducting regular reviews to assess the engagement, accessibility, and reach of our digital output, our evaluations have been crucial in better understanding our target audiences, subsequently allowing us to optimise our content in a way that is impactful and relevant.

Deepening our insights, we have pro-actively engaged with the Arts Council's Illuminate platform. Through documenting audience attendance figures for each event and distributing demographic data surveys, it has been possible to clearly track and improve the effectiveness of our programming. Despite Illuminate's benefits, the data collected does not account for audience feedback. Making space for audience members to share their experience is an important consideration for us. With that in mind, post events, we distribute a curated questionnaire that prompts our audience to let us know what they enjoyed and what could be improved. This process has been a great way of ensuring our audience opinions matter in the shaping of our programming.

In the past year, we have emphasised a commitment to meaningfully building relationships with arts organisations in Leeds and national networks, including Arts Together, Child Friendly Leeds, Family Arts Campaign, and Culture Consortium Leeds. These connections have strengthened our awareness of the diverse cultural and creative needs of families, young people, marginalised communities, among others. These enriching perspectives and observations have fortified our own planning and ambitions for future programming, which is firmly committed to ensuring our work is accessible and welcoming to all.

“*The wonderful, amazing singing and the connectivity of the traditions and cultures. Spellbinding. Excellent to be at the Howard Assembly Room. Plus, it was good to be in the daytime for our public transport use.”*

Audience Feedback from Sacred Music: Celebrate the Spirit

“Absolutely brilliant, I am in awe of the inspirational and talented musicians. Would have brought my whole family had I known what to expect. Please do this again, preferably two or three times a year. The show was the perfect length. A few more facts/background on each musician/singer would have been fun because we are now big fans and want to know all about how they developed into such distinguished artists.”

Audience Feedback from YCC: Bradford & Leeds



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Keeping South Asian Arts Alive: Fundraising and Development

At the core of SAA-uk's mission is a deep commitment to keeping South Asian arts vibrant and accessible for generations to come. We firmly believe that every child deserves the joy of music and dance, regardless of their background or circumstance, and that enriching and culturally relevant artistic experiences should be available to all. Throughout 2024-25, these intentions were turned into reality by funders, supporters, volunteers, and donors, supporting our various programmes of work and empowering young, talented musicians to continue their musical journey and shine. Thanks to their trust in our mission, we were able to raise £54,770 between project funding and fundraising appeals.

This year we also ran our first successful crowdfunding campaign, *The Future of Music*. As part of Future Talent's 20th Anniversary Celebrations, 12 outstanding young musicians from our academies—youngest being 10-year-old Anika from Leeds and oldest Subhan from Bradford—have been given the incredible opportunity to perform their very own composition, *Serendipity*, at The Roundhouse in London, sharing the stage with peers from across the UK in April 2025. The campaign was launched in December 2024 to support travel and accommodation costs with a £5,000 target. Our community of supporters came together to reach this financial goal, gifting these young artists the unforgettable memory of sharing their music on a world-class stage.

Despite the challenges of these times, when creative opportunities for young and aspiring creatives are under significant threat, we step into 2025-26 with renewed energy and ambition, connecting with funders, supporters, and donors aligned with our mission and values, to ensure that financial constraints do not prevent anyone from accessing the joy and opportunities of learning and creating.



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GOVERNANCE & BOARD DEVELOPMENT:

Testimonial for SAA-uk

This financial year, we were delighted to welcome three new members to the Board of Trustees. Each bringing a wealth of expertise across diverse fields including healthcare, finance, and project management, their unique experiences and perspectives have been invaluable additions to the Board.

To build on the momentum of the recent developments in our governance and to further involve artists, participants, supporters and audience members in our decision-making process, a SAA-uk's "Step Change" Away Day was organised in May 2024. Facilitated by arts consultant team FentonMicklem, the day was filled with inspiration, collaboration, and growth: team, trustees, freelancers, and friends of the organisation came together to share ideas, strengthen bonds, and explore new possibilities for our future endeavours.

Stepping wholeheartedly into SAA-uk's work by regularly attending live concerts, community events, and board meetings, each trustee has sincerely committed to understanding the value of SAA-uk's creative output. Admirably, the Board have been fearless in voicing their ideas and insights on how beneficial changes can be implemented to better serve our city, artists, and wider community, fostering a sense of unity and sparking new creative ideas that we are excited to explore further.

“*I have been a trustee for just over a year and I applied to join the SAA-uk board after following their work on social media and being inspired by their community engagement and rigorous approach to South Asian music and dance education. Having studied South Asian history and culture in London and New Delhi, and lived in India for several years, maintaining connection to these art forms will always be very important to me, they have brought me new perspectives and lots of joy. What matters to me is being able to pass this joy on, by supporting the organisation's ongoing success with my time and skills. The most memorable experience has been our away day, where staff, trustees, teachers, students, families and community members gathered to envision SAA-uk's future.*

Meeting everyone who believes in and is touched by the mission was special. It is very clear to me that SAA-uk is an organisation that means a lot to so many. This is shown by the fact that there is a large group of people that dedicates their energy and expertise to ensure that it thrives. What makes SAA-uk remarkable is how it values and includes everyone's voices and opinions. After every board meeting, I'm filled with inspiration at the ambition, standards and respect shown to everyone who interacts with the organisation - trustees, staff, students and audiences alike. This high standard is matched by genuine support and commitment to helping everyone grow, learn and ensure that their lives are enriched by South Asian culture and arts. Looking ahead, SAA-UK's future burns brightly. I see the thought, care and commitment to constantly developing an organisation that represents all South Asian communities in Leeds, pushing artistic boundaries and ensuring longevity of the organisation. Exciting times lie ahead - here's to another 28 years of SAA-uk!"

SAA-uk Trustee, Adele Newman



STRATEGIC REPORT

Financial position

The Net Income for the year has reduced to £128,910 (2024/25) from £146,173 (2023/24) principally due to the increases in costs arising from the higher staffing levels.

The Total Funds Carried Forward at the year-end have increased from £195,352 (2023/24) to £324,262 (2024/25). As was stated last year, it is always important to maintain sufficient reserves to provide financial security during periods of unexpected adverse conditions (e.g. a Covid pandemic), but it is also important to use as much of our funding as possible to further the aims of the charity. The Trustees are very aware of the need to keep these two aims in balance.

Income from Trusts and Foundations increased from £20,003 (2023/24) to £52,000 (2024/25). This is an income stream that SAA-uk is targeting to diversify its funding base and it is pleasing that progress is being made.

Income from academy fees were down from £34,855 (2023/24) to £27,373 (2024/25) reflecting slightly lower participation, particularly in the Bharatanatyam classes. However, academy costs were also down from £104,101 (2023/24) to £99,452 (2024/25) reflecting some changes in the staffing levels in the academies. Consequently, there was only a small increase in the net cost of the academies from £69,246 (2023/24) to £72,079 (2024/25).

In order to make the most of the increase in funding from the Arts Council England, the staff team has been expanded over the past two years. There was an increase in 2023/24, and the staff expansion continues to be steadily developed in 2024/25 with staff-related costs (Wages, Social Security, Pensions) rising to £349,210 (2024/25) from £291,597 (2023/24).

Artists Fees have fallen from £98,342 (2023/24) to £66,413 (2024/25). In 2023/24 SAA-uk made an investment of £32,000 into a highly successful tour of musicians playing the original music of Jasdeep Singh Degun. No investments of this size were made in 2024/25.



Statement of Financial Activities for the Year ended 31 March 2025

(including Income and Expenditure Account and Statement of Total Recognised Gains and Losses)

	Notes	Unrestricted fund £	Restricted funds £	2025 Total funds £	2024 Total funds £
INCOME AND ENDOWMENTS FROM					
Donations and legacies	2	703,379	64,500	767,879	738,060
Charitable activities					
Charitable activities	4	33,974	-	33,974	41,920
Invested income	3	7,646	-	7,646	2,343
Other income		24,323	-	24,323	17,310
TOTAL		769,322	64,500	833,822	799,633
EXPENDITURE ON					
Charitable activities					
Charitable activities	5	211,342	64,375	275,717	295,887
Other		429,195	-	429,195	357,573
TOTAL		640,537	64,375	704,912	653,460
NET INCOME		128,785	125	128,910	146,173
RECONCILIATION OF FUNDS					
Total funds brought forward		180,352	15,000	195,352	49,179
TOTAL FUNDS CARRIED FORWARD		309,137	15,125	324,262	195,352
FIXED ASSETS					
Tangible assets	11	12,575	-	12,575	8,284
CURRENT ASSETS					
Debtors	12	4,761	-	4,761	27,849
Cash at bank and in hand		356,765	15,125	371,890	235,046
		361,526	15,125	376,651	262,895
CREDITORS					
Amounts falling due within one year	13	(64,964)	-	(64,964)	(75,827)
NET CURRENT ASSETS		296,562	15,125	311,687	187,068
TOTAL ASSETS LESS CURRENT LIABILITIES					
		309,137	15,125	324,262	195,352
NET ASSETS		309,137	15,125	324,262	195,352
FUNDS					
Unrestricted funds				309,137	180,352
Restricted funds				15,125	15,000
TOTAL FUNDS				324,262	195,352

STAFF & TRUSTEES

The Trustees who served during the year 2024-25 were:

The Board

CHAIR

Inés Soria-Donlan

VICE-CHAIR

Sidrah Warburton

TREASURER

Paul French

TRUSTEES

Jasjit Singh (resigned September 2024)

Flora Yang

Ramesh Chauhan

Mohit Chaturvedi

Adele Newman

Barsa Ray

Renuka Nadarajan (from April 2024)

All Trustees are non-executive and are not remunerated for the services rendered to South Asian Arts UK (SAA-uk).

Management and wider Team

C.E.O AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Keranjeet Kaur Virdee MBE

FUNDRAISING AND TRAINING MANAGER

Barbara Cardone

ARTS MARKETING & CREATIVE COMMUNITIES

MANAGER

Sherin Sara Alex

PRODUCER

Himanshu Pankaj Khinchi

DANCE DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

Jyoti Manral

MUSIC DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

Maryam Jameela Sajad

ARTS ADMINISTRATION OFFICER

Gaia Cardone

CREATIVE COMMUNITIES ENGAGEMENT OFFICER

Ellen-Ayesha Hann

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS ASSISTANT

Dimple D'Cruz

ACADEMIES ASSISTANT

Dhivya Sundararaman

HEADSTART TRAINEES

Yamana Jaman-Browne

Orisa Pather

Placements & Research Projects

University of Leeds, Violin Festival Researcher
(August – November 2024): Rakshika Kaur Bansal

University of Leeds, School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science placements
(October 2024 – March 2025): Anna Ridley

University of Leeds, Engaging the Modern City placements

(December 2024 – March 2025):

Yushi Liu, Mengxia Chen, Mengting Cai,
Yanshan Zhou, Yinyin Cai, Yixin Yang

Artistic Team

MUSIC

SENIOR ADVISOR AND SITAR ONLINE

Ustad Dharambir Singh MBE

SITAR TUTOR

Luke Reddin-Williams

SITAR TUTOR

Kirtan Kaur Virdee

TABLA TUTOR

Shri John Ball

BOWED INSTRUMENTS

Harjodh Singh Gill

BOWED INSTRUMENTS & GURBANI KIRTAN TUTOR

Simrandeep Kaur

SANTOOR TUTOR

Eeshar Singh

VOCALS TUTOR

Poulomi Chakraborty

DANCE

BHARATANATYAM TUTOR

Santosh Menon

KATHAK TUTOR

Jyoti Manral

ODISSI DANCE TUTOR

Sayani Roy



Registered Office:

Mill 1, Ground Floor North,
Mabgate Mills, Leeds LS9 7DZ

Charity Registration Number: 1080292

Company Limited by Guarantee: 3391845

Legal and administrative details

The registered name of the charity is South Asian Arts uk. The charity was incorporated as a company limited by guarantee 10th June 1997. The charity is governed by the provisions of its Memorandum and Articles of Association.

Professional Advisors

External Auditors: KJA Kilner Johnson Ltd

Bankers: Lloyds Bank, Briggate, Leeds

FUNDERS & PARTNERS

The Trustees who served during the year 2024-25 were:

Principal Funders



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