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Carnatic Music

The Classical Music of South India

In this essay, we will explore some of the salient aspects of this form of Classical music that is practiced in South India - its origins, structure, scope for composition and improvisation.

Carnatic or Karnatic Music is the name given to the Classical Music of South India. Carnatic Music is believed to have divine origins - Goddess Saraswati, the Hindu Goddess of Learning, is depicted with the veena, a fretted musical instrument. The Sama Veda, the 3rd of the four vedas, is believed to have elements of music handed over to humanity by the Gods.

Carnatic music has many salient aspects that merit discussion and elaboration. It is a **highly structured and disciplined form of music, but has ample scope for creativity and improvisation**. Carnatic music grammar is highly developed both in melodic (raga) and rhythmic (tala) aspects. **Compositions** range from simple to highly complex. There have been great composers such as Purandara Dasa who laid the foundation of systematization of Carnatic music. Oothukkadu Venkatasubbhayyar was another phenomenal pre-Trinity composer. The Trinity of Thyagaraja, Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri who lived in the 18th century enriched this form of art with their versatile and soul stirring compositions. Post trinity composers such as Papanasam Sivan, Swathi Tirunal and my Guru, [Padmabhushan Lalgudi Jayaraman](#), have further enriched the depository of compositions.

One of the unique attributes to Indian music is the **concept of relative pitch**. The singer or instrumentalist who is the main performer, is free to choose any note as his or her fundamental (adhaara shadjam). This determines the **sruti** or relative pitch. Every other note is defined relative to this fundamental. Unlike Western music in which voices are categorized in groups such as bass, tenor or soprano, in Carnatic music, every composition can be performed by every musician by choosing a pitch that is appropriate to the natural tone of his or her voice. Most concert performers train their voices to reach 2-3 octaves relative to their fundamental. The use of tambura or drone is a must as a background accompaniment as it helps the performers sustain their sruti.

The notes in Carnatic music are called **swarams**. There are 7 basic swarams (solfa names given in brackets): Shadjam (Sa), Rishabham (Ri), Gandharam (Ga), Madhyamam (Ma), Panchamam (Pa), Dhaiyatam (Da) and Nishadham (Ni). Sa and Pa are called Achala swarams or notes that do not allow for variations. Ri, Ga, Da and Ni each allow for 3 swara sthanams or frequencies while Ma has 2 possible swara sthanams. Again, the exact frequency of each of these swarams is relative to the fundamental and also varies minutely from raga to raga. The three Ri's are called Suddha (R1), Chatusruti (R2) and Shatsruti (R3) Rishabhams; the three Ga's are called Suddha (G1), Sadharana (G2) and Antara (G3) Gandharams; the two Ma's are called Suddha (M1) and Prati (M2) Madhyamams; the three Da's are called Suddha (D1), Chatusruti (D2) and Shatsruti (D3); the three Ni's are called Suddha (N1), Kaisiki (N2) and Kakali (N3). Out of these 16 swarams, 4 swarams, i.e., R3, G1, D3 and N1, are called **Vivaadi swarams**. These 4 vivaadi swarams have swara sthanams that overlap with that of another note. R3 overlaps with G2; G1 overlaps with R2; D3 overlaps with N2 and N1 overlaps with D2. Therefore, there are 12 unique swara sthanams although there are 16 different note possibilities. Again, it should be noted that R1 in Raaga Gowlai has a slightly lower frequency than R1 in Raaga Mayamalavagowlai. This leads us to the **concept of 22 srutis**.

The Raaga system is one of the cornerstones of Indian Classical music. A raaga (or ragam) can be described as a distinct melodic entity that has its own grammar, rules and characteristic note combinations. The scale of a ragam provides an introduction to the ragam but in many cases does not provide a complete picture of the scope of the ragam. The scale is subdivided into **arohanam** (ascending portion of the scale) and **avarohanam** (descending portion of the scale). In Carnatic music, ragams are best understood through learning compositions in them. For many ragams, the arohanam/avarohanam will not provide enough information for a musician to perform any improvisation or study of a ragam. The structure, scope, bhava (mood) and limits of a ragam can be grasped only by listening to renditions by other musicians as well imbibing the intricacies of a ragam by learning different compositions. Take for example, Raaga Sankarabharanam. The Western

equivalent of this raga is the **C-major scale** but simply playing note combinations in C-major scale will not yield the raga Sankarabharanam!

The Tala System is the rhythmic side of Carnatic music. It is a complex system that is integral to learning and performing this genre of music. There are **7 basic talams** - **Eka, Rupaka, Tripata, Jhampa, Matya, Dhruva and Ata**. Each of these 7 basic tala structures can take 5 possible variants or **jaatis** - tistra (3), chatusra (4), khanda (5), misra (7) and sankeerna (9).

Manodharma Sangeetham or Creative Aspects include Alapana (free flowing improvisation of a raga), neraval (improvisation of a line in a composition) and kalpana swaras (extempore rendition of notes for a line of composition). The Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi often is a major exercise of creativity in a concert. The raaga framework is considered unique to Indian classical music. Every raaga has a unique grammar. One needs to improvise keeping in mind the grammar of the raga being handled.

My Guru, Lalgudi Sri Jayaraman likens a **raga alapana** to a painting. The grammar of the raaga acts as the canvas. One can paint anything whatsoever using any medium, color or theme as long as it the painting can be successfully contained in the canvas and the end result is pleasing to the senses. Let us take the example of an alapana of say, Raagam Kambhoji. Kambhoji has a unique melodic identity. An alapana of Kambhoji has to be faithful to this identity. This is the fundamental premise for an alapana. Beyond that, the expansiveness of an alapana is limited only by the creativity of the artiste. The development of an alapana is done by not merely performing random combinations of notes, but with an intent to bring out the soul of the raaga that is taken up for elaboration. How does one understand the nature, scope and melodic identity of a raaga such as Kambhoji? This understanding does not develop overnight, but is cultivated over years of listening to Kambhoji rendered by stalwart musicians and by learning several dozen compositions in this raga. Focused listening, experimentation and practice of compositions help an artiste imbibe different facets of Kambhoji. Other ragams such as Mohanakalyani and Nalinakanti are scale-based in the sense they are still in the earlier stages of evolution and therefore can be performed with a reasonable level of confidence by a musician who has understood their arohanam (ascending scale) and avarohanam (descending scale). Most alapanas are structured with a mix of fast paced passages that bring out the vocal or instrumental fluency of the artiste and slower, **gamaka** (microtonal oscillations) based passages that result from an artiste's understanding of the mood of the raga as well as study of compositions in the raga. When performing an alapana, artistes use syllables such as ta-da-ri-na-na. The placement of these syllables is done purely by intuition developed from listening. Alapanas can be brief sketches that precede a minor piece in the concert or can be expansive when preceding a major number. In a vocal concert, the alapana of the vocalist is followed by a similar spontaneous, creative exercise by the violinist.

Vocal music is given primary importance in Carnatic music. A reason for this could be the wealth of compositions available. Compositions are rich in lyrics which often include prayers to Hindu Gods, description of temples and vivid description of stories from epics such as Ramayana. In a typical concert, the main performer is usually a vocalist and he or she is accompanied by a violinist and one or more percussionists. The mridangam is generally the main percussion instrument and often, additional percussion instruments such as ghatam (clay pot), kanjeera (tambourine) and morsing (jew's harp) are available. Concerts where the main performer is an instrumentalist such as violinist, veena player or flautist are also common and quite popular. Co-ordination between the main performer and accompanists is achieved, not in a pre-rehearsed but spontaneous fashion. Since most improvisation is done ex tempore, the accompanists often have to watch and follow along as the main performer improvises. This spontaneity and creativity makes Carnatic concerts hugely exciting to the audience.

Composition Formats: While improvisation plays a very important role, the vast depository of compositions make a Carnatic concert a uniquely enriching experience. A beginner to Carnatic music is typically oriented through systematically developed **swara (solfa notes) exercises** and simple songs called **Geethams**. Geethams are set to different **ragams** and **talams** (rhythmic structures). The swara exercises like sarali, jhanta varisais and alankarams help strengthen and steady the voice and develop a good understanding of the swara sthanas (note positions), talams and provide an introduction to the important role played by gamakams (microtones). There are also **Kirtanas** by great composers like Thyagaraja, Dikshitar and Purandara Dasa in praise of different deities that have simple tunes that a beginner can learn and render with a fair amount of ease. **Varnams** are a more complex type of composition that help with voice culture and mastery of rhythm by systematic rendition in different speeds. A rigorous training in a good number of varnams with due emphasis on gamakams and tala provides an excellent foundation for a deeper foray into Carnatic music. **Kritis** are typically 3-part compositions with the opening section being the **Pallavi**, the middle section being the **Anupallavi** and then having one or more **Charanams**. The range in the complexity, mood, theme, length, ragams, talams and other aspects of the huge database of

kritis available today is mind boggling, to say the least. Most professional performers typically have a continuously growing repertoire of several hundred kritis. Lighter composition formats include **tillanas, bhajans, kaavadi chindu** and **abhangs**.

A key attribute of Carnatic music is that each composition is typically designed for performance by one individual although all compositions can certainly be performed as a chorus. For this reason, there is less emphasis on harmony (i.e., multiple notes being sounded at the same time) and more emphasis on the flow of the whole piece in one voice. Since Carnatic music and the Hindu religion are inextricably linked, the lyrics have profound spiritual significance.

Musical instruments: The **tambura** is widely used as the drone instrument to help sustain pitch during a rendition. The **veena** is one of the ancient Carnatic instruments. It is believed to have evolved into its current form over several thousand years. It is a lute type instrument with 24 frets. The **violin** has been adapted into Carnatic music and now occupies a high position due to its ability to produce a continuous tone and gamakams. The **flute, chitraveena (gottuvadyam)** and **nadaswaram** are some other traditional instruments. Many Western instruments such as the guitar and saxophone are also increasingly being used to perform Carnatic music. The **mridangam** is the chief percussion instrument, with the **ghatam, kanjeera** and **morsing** playing a subsidiary role.

I will continue to develop and refine this post. To listen to free weekly podcasts series on Carnatic music by Devesh Satyavolu and myself, please visit www.raagarasika.com

- Vidya Subramanian, www.vidyasubramanian.com

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Dear Ms. Vidya Subramanian,

I appreciate the good work being done through ur blog. The blog is quite informative.

I am writing this to invite ur kind attention on the number of srutis being used in contemporary Carnatic traditions. You had rightly pointed out that only 12 swara-sthaanas are somewhat quantifiable. The additional 4 swaras narrated in Carnatic musicology are inclusive to these 12 positions and their designations are often con-textual. I have done some research work on the existence of an 'ancient music' which contained 22 srutis, as believed by Bharata Muni and Dattila Muni. I have discovered that our ancient music belongs to a pre-historic era (even prior to the Sumerian era which is the oldest civilization known to our historians). I have brought out these details in my Book "The Mystic Citadel of 22 Srutis Music". In addition, I have tried to cover some important features of my discovery in the form of blogs and presentation slides over the net. I am sure that as a keen musician-cum-musicologist, u would be interested in perusing them. I would offer you one link, through which u could gain access to all these articles. I would request u to peruse them and comment pl.

Link: Search for Our Ancient Music (Blog) --- <http://searchfourancientmusic.blogspot.com/>

Regards,

Sreeni Nambirajan

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