

VOCAL AND INSTRUMENTAL RENDERINGS IN CARNATIC MUSIC - A COMPARISON*

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Abstract: *Carnatic music, the classical music of South India, is rich in melodic and devotional content. Vocal renderings effectively convey the devotional aspect, and a variety of instruments enhance the melodic effect of the vocal renderings. After briefly tracing the origins and early development of Carnatic music, we will describe vocal and instrumental renderings and provide a comparison. We also allude briefly to some links between Carnatic music and Hindustani music, the classical music of North India.*

0. Introduction

I appreciate the invitation from the Center for the Study of Hindu Traditions (CHiTra) of the University of Florida and the Florida Chapter of The Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Among Youth (SPIC-MACAY) to speak at this *Sangeet Sammelan*. The topic I have chosen is very broad and so this talk will not be a complete treatment. But the talk is given in the hope that it will help enhance the appreciation of Carnatic music concerts in general, and those at this Sammelan in particular. I do not consider myself an authority on Carnatic music, the classical music of South India, but I am an ardent *rasika* (= devoted enthusiast). Although I will make references to Hindustani music, the classical music of North India, I will concentrate on Carnatic music with which I am more familiar.

The talk is divided into three sections. We begin by briefly describing the ancient origins of Indian music and its significant development in the last few centuries. Then we present various aspects of vocal rendering and conclude with a discussion of instrumental music both as accompaniments as well as lead renderings in Carnatic concerts.

1. Origin and early development

Divine origin: Hindus believe that their music has a divine origin. Of the four *vedas*, the Hindu holy scriptures, the *Sama Veda* is very musical. Even though all four vedas have to be recited in very specific sonorous fashion, the Sama Veda is actually recited in musical form. Indeed the *sapta swaras*, the seven basic musical notes *sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, da, ni*, originate in the Sama Veda. Of all the Hindu gods, Lord Shiva is especially fond of the Sama Veda. Saint Thyagaraja, the greatest of the Carnatic composers, says in his famous composition *Nada Tanumanisam Sankaram* in raga Chittaranjani, that the *sapta swaras* emerged from the five faces of Lord Shiva who is referred to as Sankara in this song. The specific lines of the composition alluding to this are “*satyo jathadhi pancha vaktraja, sa ri ga ma pa da ni vara saptaswara*”. Quite appropriately, this composition of Thyagaraja is the prayer song of the Madras Music Academy and is sung at the opening of its Annual Conference every December.

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Salvation through music: Music can excite a variety of senses in our body and mind. Some forms of music kindle our carnal desires, while other forms provide calmness and tranquility. To the Hindus, music is a medium to communicate with, and eventually reach, God. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, one of the foremost carnatic vocalists of the twentieth century, pointed out in his speech as the President of the 1947 Music Academy Conference, that Sarnga Deva, in his great thirteenth century treatise *Sangeetha Ratnakara* on music, says that the four *Purusharthas* (= human objectives), namely *Dharma* (= righteousness), *Artha* (= wealth), *Kama* (= desire), and *Moksha* (= salvation), can be best attained through music. It is the aspiration of all Hindus to attain *moksha* and be permanently with God instead of being caught in the cycle of birth and rebirth and suffers the ills of mortal life. Thus the belief in the devine origin of our music and the emphasis that music is the perfect medium to reach God, is the primary reason that Carnatic music is intensely devotional.

Foundations of Carnatic music: Although Indian music is ancient, the foundations of Carnatic music were laid only a few centuries ago - recent compared to the long history of India. In Sarnga Deva's musical treatise *Sangeetha Ratnakara* written around 1227 AD, one finds a precise definition of *grama*, the unit with which the range of the *sruti* (= pitch) can be partitioned. Music flourished in the Vijayanagar Empire in South India, especially under the rule of Krishna Deva Raya. Another golden era for music was in the Chola period in Tanjore in South India. Some of the great early composers were Purandara Dasa, Kshetragna, Rama Das, and Annammacharya. Of particular importance is Purandara Dasa (early 15-th century), who was born rich, but gave up his wealth and contemplated on God through music. He composed hundreds of songs in different *ragas* (= scales) and with the raga *Mayamalavagowlai* as the starting point. Indeed today, when learning music, every student begins with a recitation of the sapta swara notes in the raga *Mayamalavagowlai*. Purandara Dasa's emphasis on *Mayamalavagowlai* served as a motivation for Govinda Dikshitar to construct the scheme of 72 basic *Melakartha* ragas from which all other Carnatic ragas can be derived. Govinda Dikshitar served as a Minister in the court of Tanjore from 1577 to 1614. His seminal work *Sangeetha Sudhamani* was further developed around 1620 by his son Venkata Makhi who provided a rigorous classification of the ragas based on the *melakartha* scheme, and that is what is in use today.

The great Trinity: In the century following the introduction of the *Melakartha* scheme and the raga classification, Carnatic music attained a perfection owing to work of the three greatest composers all of whom were born in Tiruvarur in the Tanjore district just a few years apart. They were Saint Thyagaraja (born in 1767), Muthuswami Dikshitar (born in 1775) and Syama Sastry (born in 1763). It is as if the three Gods - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, all incarnated at about the same time and effected a glorious transformation of Carnatic music!

The Trinity gave the world hundreds of *kirtanas* (= well structured compositions) in a whole range of ragas. Through these compositions, the full scope and structure of the Carnatic ragas were exhibited. Each of three saints had a different musical style and message to convey. Saint Thyagaraja's compositions were philosophical in content so much so that his work is referred to as *Thyagopanishad*, comparing it to the *Upanishads*. Thyagaraja was a devotee of Lord Rama (one of the two premier incarnations of Lord

Vishnu, The Protector) and most of his compositions focus on Lord Rama. In contrast, Dikshitar undertook the task of visiting temples all over India, and composed songs in praise of the many Hindu Gods and Goddesses in these temples. Syama Sastry on the other hand focused on Goddess Parvathi (the consort of Lord Shiva), one of the three principal female Hindu deities.

Thyagaraja compositions which are mostly in the Telugu language, have relatively few words and so their movement is often spritely. The sweetness derived from the ease of movement of Thyagaraja's compositions is compared to *draksha paka* (= the sweetness of the grape), because as soon as the grape is put in the mouth, its sweet taste is immediately felt. Dikshitar's compositions are in Sanskrit; they are more weighty and slow paced and so it takes a greater effort while singing them to properly deliver their melodic effect. Their delight is compared to *narikela paka* (= the sweetness of the coconut), because the hard shell of a coconut has to be broken before one can enjoy its contents. Syama Sastry's compositions are just as weighty and slow paced as Dikshitar's, but have fewer words like those of Thyagaraja thereby providing an easier movement. The sweetness of Syama Sastry's compositions is compared to *kadali paka* (= sweetness of the banana), which can be realized by peeling the banana. The banana is easier to peel compared to the breaking of the coconut.

The compositions of the Trinity also enhanced our understanding of the structure of the various ragas. Some ragas lend themselves nicely for elaboration, such as Todi, Bhairavi, Sankarabharanam, and Kalyani. Such ragas are known the *ghana* (= weighty) ragas. The capacity to elaborate on a raga lies of course in the imagination of the composer and performer. For example, the raga *Karaharapriya* was not considered a *ghana* raga before the time of the Trinity. After Thyagaraja's great composition *Sakkani Raja*, *Karaharapriya* was elevated to the status of a *ghana* raga.

Besides being set in a raga, each Carnatic composition is also set in a *tala* or beat cycle. *Adi tala* (8 beat cycle), *Rupaka tala* (3 beat cycle), and *Misra Chapu tala* are three of the more prominent talas. Among all talas, *Adi tala* is considered supreme. Indeed, most of Saint Thyagaraja's compositions are in *Adi tala*.

The immortal work on the Trinity served as an inspiration for a host of other composers, and so there is no dearth of good kirthanas in Carnatic music today. Indeed new compositions are emerging regularly. Of the many composers after the time of the Trinity, perhaps the most illustrious was Maharaja Swathi Thirunal of Travancore (in the state of Kerala). Indeed The Trinity, Purandara Dasa, and Swathi Thirunal, are considered the five greatest composers in Carnatic music. Papanasam Sivan (of Madras) perhaps stands above all of the composers in the last fifty years. I actually had the privilege of listening to a live concert of Papanasam Sivan in Madras in the 1970's when he sang many of his famous compositions and presented some new ones which have since become well known.

Spread of Carnatic music: The great compositions of the Trinity were handed down to their disciples and in the decades that followed, these compositions were being heard regularly all over South India - in the courts of the Maharajas, in temples, and in various cultural gatherings - and Carnatic music was being considered as the classical music of South India. Some of the notable *vidwans* (= scholars) who were instrumental in the spread of Carnatic music were Patnam Subramania Iyer, Konerajapuram Vaidhyanatha

Iyer, Ramnad Srinivasa Iyengar, Madurai Pushpavanam, and Maha Vaidhyanatha Iyer. Some of them were accomplished composers in their own right, having imbibed the deep knowledge directly from the Trinity. Patnam Subramania Iyer was a disciple of Thyagaraja and his compositions are remarkably similar to that of his great master in melody and grace. Maha Vaidhyanatha Iyer composed *Mela Raga Malika*, a magnificent song in which the various stanzas are set in the different Melakartha ragas. In rendering this masterpiece of Maha Vaidhyanatha Iyer, the grand structure of the full set of Melakartha ragas is unfolded.

We will now describe the evolution of carnatic music concerts and compare the role of vocal and instrumental music in these concerts.

2. Vocal music in Carnatic concerts

The concert format: Even though great vidwans were giving public performances in the nineteenth century, the actual format of a Carnatic concert crystallized only in the early part of the twentieth century. The present concert format structure is due to Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar, one of the greatest vocal performers of the first half of the twentieth century.

A typical Carnatic concert starts with a *varnam* which is a short piece emphasizing notes and containing very few words. A varnam is a warm up item and helps the artiste get into the groove; it also provides a delightful start and sets the mood and tempo of the concert. The next item is usually in praise of Lord Ganesha (the elephant faced God), the remover of all obstacles. These are followed by a few short compositions. After this, more weighty compositions will be sung, and for these quite often the artiste will render an *alapana* (= elaboration) of the *raga* (= scale) in which the composition is set. Sometimes for such compositions, the artiste will choose a specific line of the song and do a *neraval*, which is an elaboration of that line in the full scope of the raga and in various speeds. The neraval will be followed by a rendering of *swaras*, namely the permutation and combination of the notes of the raga, in different speeds. Thus with the raga alapana, neraval and swaras, the grand structure of a major composition is exhibited. Usually after every raga alapana, and after every round of neraval and swara singing by the vocalist, the stringed instrumental accompanists get a chance to respond suitably.

In some concerts, a *Ragam*, *Thanam*, *Pallavi* is chosen as the central piece. A Pallavi is the starting line of a song, and for a Ragam, Tanam, Pallavi, the starting line of any song could be chosen for this kind of elaboration. But there are special pallavis (famous one liners!) that have been composed and it is such pallavis that are typically chosen for elaboration with Raga and Tana introduction. In what follows, I will say something more specific about the appropriate rendering of neraval, swaras, tana and pallavi.

After the vocalist renders the main item of the concert, the percussion accompaniments do a short and brisk *thani avartanam* (solo demonstration). After this thani avartanam, the vocalist sings a few *thukkadas* (= light pieces). Very often, songs with *sringara rasa* (= romantic flavor) are sung in the thukkada portion. After this, the concert concludes with a *mangalam* which is a benediction for peace in the world.

A major carnatic music concert is about three hours long and except for short spells when the instrumentalists are playing, the vocalist is singing for the entire stretch. Senior

vocalists often have their disciplines as supporting voices. This is mutually beneficial. It helps the senior vocalist who with advancing age would not have the same stamina to go full throated for the three hour duration; it provides an excellent concert training for the disciple to sing along with the master.

Neraval: In principle, an expert musician can pick any line of a composition and do a neraval (elaboration) of it in the underlying raga (scale). However, the great scholars from whom our tradition has descended, have emphasized that the line chosen for neraval must have *arthabhava* (= lofty meaning and emotional content). Also, that line should have relatively few words so that the movement is easy and uncluttered. Then the neraval will be pleasant and soul stirring.

Swaras: While it is true that the permutation combination of the notes of a raga require a mathematical understanding, swaras are not to be delivered as mechanical calculations. The great practioners of the past have stressed that while rendering swaras, the curves of the raga must be emphasized. Such swaras replete with *raga bhava* are called *sarva laghu swaras*. Also swaras have to be improvised right on the concert stage thereby making the exchange between the vocalist and intrumentalists spontaneous. These are called *kalpana swaras* (= swaras that are created spontaneously and are outcomes of the artiste's imagination). Swara combinations are not to be memorized and recited mechanically on the stage. In this context, I wish to point out that there are certain specific compositions for which the composer himself has created a set of swaras which are perfectly suited for that song. These are called *chittaswaras*. Then there are great compositions in which each line of the song is preceded by a fantastically beautiful swara combination. The most famous of such compositions are the *Pancha Ratna Kritis* (= the five gems) of Thyagaraja, and the *swarajathis* of Syama Sastry. Of course these swaras of the composers have to memorized and delivered without any changes. The pancha ratna kritis of Thyagaraja are so famous, that they are sung every year at the annual festival in January to commemmorate the birth of this great Saint. In the first concert of this Sammelan, Syama Sastry's great swarajati Amba Kamakshi in raga Bhairavi will be presented.

In the twentieth century, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer was unmatched in the rendering of slow sarva laghu swaras, while Madurai Mani Iyer brought out fantastic melodic effects in his unique style of rendering fast paced kalpana swaras.

Tana: "Tan" in Hindustani music means "to stretch". Tan in Hindustani music is a way of stretching the swara notes. In Carnatic music, tana is interpreted as the abbreviation of the Sankrit word "ananta" or "aananda", which means happiness. Thus in a tana, the word "tana" is repeated often and in stretched form to provide special melodic effects of the raga. A tana is rendered in a Ragam-Tanam Pallavi after the raga elaboration is done and before the Pallavi is sung.

The stringed instruments such as the veena and the violin are especially suited for the rendering of the tana.

Sometimes, there is *mridangam* (percussion drum) accompaniment for the tana. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer told me that it was a tradition in the Maharaja's court in Travancore, to always have mridangam accompaniment for the tana. Semmangudi was *Asthana Vidwan* (= palace scholar) in Travancore in the 1950s, and he was a master of rendering tana with mridangam accompaniment.

Pallavi: The opening line of a composition in Carnatic music is its Pallavi. Usually the composer states the main theme of his composition in the pallavi. While it is possible to pick the pallavi of any composition and sing it elaborately in a Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi, traditionalists stress that it is best to choose Pallavi's that are specially composed for Ragam-Thanam-Pallavi. These are well constructed *one liners*, which are particularly suited for elaboration in a specific raga, and rendered in various speeds in a specific tala. There are some composers who have become very famous for just composing pallavis. One such person was Pallavi Gopala Iyer.

In a Ragam-Thanam-Pallavi, the pallavi singing begins in a very slow speed in a rather complicated tala, and concludes with the pallavi rendered in high speed. In recent years, most artistes after completing the pallavi in fast speed in the specified raga, then provide a rapid rendering of that same pallavi but in a different set of ragas. This has become very popular with listeners and is also an opportunity for the artiste to demonstrate his or her mastery.

In the second concert of this Sammelan, a Ragam-Thanam-Pallavi will be presented.

3. Instrumental music as lead renderings and as accompaniments

The variety of Indian musical instruments: There are several very ancient instruments that are in use in Indian music today. The *Veena* is a very ancient stringed instrument and there are images of Saraswathi, the Goddess of Learning, playing the veena. Similarly, the *Venu* (= flute) is associated with Lord Krishna. And legend has it that *Nandikeswara* (the bull God) played the *Mridangam* (percussion drum) to the delight of his master Lord Shiva in his celestial abode Kailasa (= Mount Kailas in the Himalayas). Thus the Veena, Venu and the Mridangam are musical instruments of Indian antiquity.

Along with the Veena, some of other stringed Indian musical instruments are the *Gottuvadyam* (Mahanataka Veena), the *Sitar*, the *Sarangi* and the *Sarod*, the last three being used in Hindustani music. Besides the flute, the other principal mouth instruments in Carnatic music are the *Nadaswaram* and the *Morsing*. The Nadaswaram is the instrument played in all South Indian weddings and Hindu festivals. Besides the mridangam, the premier percussion instruments in carnatic music are the *Ghatam*, the *Kanjeera*, and the *Thavil*, which is the main percussion accompaniment for the Nadaswaram. The premier Hindustani percussion instruments are the *Tabla* and the *Dolak*.

This list of Indian instruments is far from complete. I could perhaps add the the *Jalra* (cymbals) and the *Jalatarangam* to the above list. In what follows, I will comment briefly about the Western instruments, namely the violin, the mandolin, the clarinet, and the saxophone, and how they have attained a prominent role in Carnatic music.

Gamaka: In Western classical music, we have both the concept of melody and harmony. In Carnatic music there is melody, but no harmony. This provides greater scope for improvisation. In doing so, emphasis is placed on *gamakas*, which are graces or embellishments on the notes of a raga. Professor Sambamoorthy, a great historian of Indian music, has pointed out that the *harp* is actually an ancient Indian instrument, but it fell in disuse in Indian music because it was not suited for gamaka. But some western instruments have become quite prominent in Carnatic music because they are suited for gamaka.

The violin and other western instruments: The violin was adopted in Indian

classical music in the 19-th century because it is possible to exhibit gamakas very well on the violin. To facilitate this, the violinist is seated on the floor of the stage and holds the violin between his feet and his shoulder, unlike the stand up posture in Western classical music. This frees up both hands of the violinist from holding the violin and therefore enables the performer to play the violin with emphasis on gamaka. The great Thirukkodikaval Krishna Iyer popularized the use of the violin to such an extent that the violin has now become the premier accompanying stringed instrument in Carnatic music, replacing the veena in that role.

The capacity to adopt an instrument in a certain musical form lies in the hands of the performer. A talented artist by his or her skill can show us how to best use an instrument as part of an ensemble. Who could have imagined that the *mandolin*, a simple Western instrument could be used in Carnatic music? Yet, in the past few decades, the genius U. Srinivas (popularly known as Mandolin Srinivas), has used the mandolin in a remarkably effective fashion in Carnatic music. Yet another Western instrument that has made a prominent entry into Carnatic music in recent years is the *saxophone*, thanks to the efforts of the talented Kadri Gopinath. In a different angle I wish to point out that instruments of past that have faded away could be resurrected to their former glory if talented artistes would start playing them. That is the case with the Gottuvadyam, which has come back into prominence because of Ravi Kiran. Like U. Srinivas, Ravi Kiran was a child prodigy.

The capacity of the veena: While it is the case that the violin has now supplanted the veena as the main accompanying stringed instrument, both have major roles as lead instruments in concerts. The veena, owing to the nature of its strings, can be played in a manner as to even provide a percussion effect. This is why the veena is ideally suited for the playing of the tana. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer once gave a performance just accompanied by the great veena maestro K. S. Narayanaswamy, his contemporary from Travancore. I asked Semmangudi why there was no mridangam accompaniment for that concert. His response was that with veena, sometimes there is no need for a mridangam.

Accompaniments: The role of accompaniments is to enhance the effectiveness of the vocal music or of the lead instruments. Palghat Mani Iyer, one of the greatest mridangists of all time, has emphasized that voice is supreme in Indian music, and that instruments are there to enhance the vocal rendering. This is somewhat surprising since Mani Iyer was an instrumentalist, but it is because he realized that Indian music is intensely devotional, and that vocal music is the medium through which this devotion is best conveyed. To Mani Iyer the pursuit of music was like *tapas* (= intense and prolonged meditation), where perfection is achieved through *bhakthi* (= devotion to music and God), and with *sadhaka* (= tireless practice). He pointed out that the great instrumentalists played so well that you could almost hear the words while they were performing. Mani Iyer cautioned that while an instrumentalist should seek to recreate voice in his playing, the vocalist should not try to bring instrumental effects in his singing for that would mean that the vocalist is resorting to gimmicks!

Improvisation - vocalist vs instrumentalist: Vocalists have the advantage that they have practiced a certain *neraval* or *swara*, *tana* or *pallavi*, before rendering them in a concert. The instrumentalist often has to respond on the spot to the vocalist. This is a challenge to the instrumental accompaniments. But instrumentalists have the advantage

of having played for vocalists trained in different schools, and so the instrumentalists get exposed to different styles of rendering the songs. This experience gives the instrumentalist a special *gnana* (knowledge). Thus experienced instrumentalists are well equipped to meet the challenge and respond to the vocalist appropriately. While responding suitably, the instrumentalist is not supposed to outperform the vocalist by a show of force. Similarly, a vocalist is not supposed to put the instrumentalist accompaniments in a difficult position by unwarranted surprising moves. A *pakka* (= accompanying) *vadyam* (= instrument) becomes a *pakkaa vadyam* (= top class accompaniment) if there is a healthy and appropriate exchange between the vocalist and the accompaniments.

Instruments for solo and lead renderings: Carnatic music in the early years was confined to the Indian listener and with a focus on South India. Indian music in general, and Carnatic music in particular, have now gone beyond the borders of India and appealed to foreign audiences. In this regard, instrumental concerts such as those with the violin, veena, the mandolin or the saxophone, have become very popular, because one can appreciate the melodic effects even if one does not understand the meaning of the song in an unfamiliar language. Similarly, Carnatic concerts in which the performer chooses ragas that are common to both Hindustani and the Carnatic systems, tend to have wider appeal.

The 2010 Sammelan concerts: The two concerts to follow will provide a good balance between vocal and instrumental rendering and also deal with both the Carnatic and Hindustani styles. The first is a vocal Carnatic concert with violin and mridangam accompaniment. The second will feature an ensemble of vocalists and instrumentalists who will sing and play in both Carnatic and Hindustani styles in an interactive format known as a *jugal bandhi*. The ragas chosen are common to both Carnatic and Hindustani music, such as Carnatic ragas *Kalyani* (= raag *Yaman* in Hindustani music), and *Hindolam* (= Hindustani raag *Malkhauns*). Whereas the first concert has a violin accompaniment, the second has the veena as a lead stringed instrument. Also, the first concert has mridangam as the percussion accompaniment, while the second features the tabla.

Concluding thought: India has a great culture which has evolved over the centuries - indeed over millennia. Music is an excellent medium to understand and appreciate Indian culture. More specifically, Carnatic music in vocal and instrumental form not only provides an ideal path to the culture of India, but also gives supreme bliss and peace of mind owing to its melodic and devotional content.

Acknowledgments: In gathering material for this talk, I profited from hearing taped lectures on Carnatic music by the great vocalist and scholar, Musiri Subramania Iyer and a lecture demonstration on the mridangam by Palghat Mani Iyer. I have also gained much from several conversations with Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer at his home in Madras.

****About the speaker:** *Krishnaswami Alladi is Professor in the Department of Mathematics at the University of Florida where he was Chairman until 2008. He is the Editor-in-Chief of The Ramanujan Journal, that is devoted to all areas of mathematics influenced by the genius Srinivasa Ramanujan, and published by Springer. He is deeply interested in Carnatic music and attends the Madras Music Academy Conference every year in December. He is inspired by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, one of the foremost Carnatic vocalists of the twentieth century.*