

A STUDY ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF MRIDANGAM IN CARNATIC MUSIC CONCERTS AND BHARATANATYAM DANCE RECITALS.

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Abstract: This study has been undertaken to highlight the contribution of Mridangam (Barrel shaped Indian drum) used in Carnatic music concerts and Bharatanatyam dance recitals in India and the lesser importance given to it by newspaper reviews/critics.

Key words: Mridangam, carnatic music, bharatanatyam

Introduction:

Carnatic music concert:

A standard Carnatic music concert will have, on the stage, a centre stage performer, to his/her left is the violin, on the right is the mridangam (Barrel shaped Indian Drum) player (if he is a right handed player) with additional percussion players such as Ghatam (Mud pot), Kanjira (circular wooden frame with jingles on the rim like tambourine), morsing (Jew's harp), if necessary. In classical bharatanatyam (South Indian form of dance) dance recitals, the musicians sit alongside the wings of the stage with vocalist, violin, nattuvanar, mridangam, flute and veena.

A typical Carnatic music concert will start with a varnam (warming up composition), followed by a kriti (composition) in praise of Lord Ganesha (elephant headed Hindu God-remover of obstacles it is believed) and further continues with sub main item and then main item followed with Thani avarthanam (solo performance of the percussion) and then Ragam-Thanam-Pallavi (another musical form) and tukkada (small items on famous lighter raga-s) and conclusion. The concert will be demonstration of Raga alapana (improvisation of musical notes), neraval (improvisation of lyrics), rendition of kriti (compositions) and kalpanaswaram (imaginative musical notes).

Like the way there are so many features in a concert be it vocal or instrumental stated above, during thani avarthanam (solo performance) the mridangam artiste starts with a Nadai (like tekka in hindusthani music) ending with phrases which are rhythmic patterns and keeps improvising them followed by a korvai (rhythmic pattern similar to cadence in western music) which is repeated three times. Like metronome, hand gestures are made called "Talam" to maintain the rhythm. This usually starts with a 4 micro beats per beat in a 8 beat cycle called Adi talam. There can be solo performance in other talams (hand gestures) as well namely Rupaka talam (3 beat cycle), Misra chapu talam (7 beat per cycle), kanda chapu talam (5 beat per cycle) and Ragam-Thanam-Pallavi is sung in usual talams (hand gestures) or in sapta(seven) talams(hand gestures).

Newspaper reviews or any updates in social media post the concert, are generally read by music lovers and an attempt to attend the concert if the review has been good. Even in our day to day life, we often go for movies if the review is good or is a Box office hit. It is seen that Newspaper Critics/Review of a concert, highlight / focus only the centre stage artiste performance in detail like how the improvisation of ragas with appropriate swarams (musical notes) were done, the usage of the gamakas (oscillations of musical notes), the authenticity of patantharam (the school of learning or Gharana in Hindusthani music) as there are different schools or gharana-s(schools) in Carnatic music. To some extent the role of violinist is elaborated as to how he/she has supported the main artiste. Yes but for mridangam generally a two liners^{1 2} or if the percussionist is popular/famous then

¹ Mature approach, clear articulation and striking prayogas marked the recitals of some of the eminent musicians at the Rajalakshmi Fine Arts Music festival in Coimbatore-review by T.K. Ganapathy in The Hindu, Chennai e-edition in Friday Review on 18th Sept 2009.

additional lines are added³. This happens to the Top artistes in the field. Does it mean that there is not much to write about the rhythm in mridangam or the critic/reviewer is not knowledgeable about the rhythm or is it too technical. For a budding artiste, Newspaper reviews does matter a lot in their musical career.

Secondly, layman/ rasika /music lovers do "post mortem" of the concert and generally speak high either about a raga or a composition in vocal or instrumental concerts but rarely they would say about mridangam or rhythm but definitely criticise if it is excess.

Thirdly, rasikas (audience or connoisseur) throng concerts if the vocal-violin-mridangam combination is good/popular notwithstanding their knowledge levels.

Contribution of mridangam:

There is a saying in Sanskrit "Sruti Mata and Laya Pita" which means melody is equated with Mother and Father with Rhythm. Undoubtedly both are needed. One cannot think of a Carnatic music concert (South Indian music) without mridangam which belongs to the percussion category. There are concerts with additional percussion instruments like Ghatam (Mud pot), Kanjira (circular wooden frame with jingles on the rim like tambourine), morsing (Jew's harp). The mridangam player contributes a lot for the success of the concert. He/she is in charge of the rhythm. They maintain the speed or tempo of the concert. They enhance the concert with their playing. They help the centre stage musician to start or end the compositions at the right time. With percussion support a concert can be big hit amongst connoisseurs.

The questions that obviously arise in my mind is:

1. Why a layman or music lover is not able to appreciate the instrument or the rhythm in the instrument as much as the other aspect of music namely raga alapana (improvisation of musical notes), composition rendition etc.,. There are times when rasikas (connoisseurs) treat the thani avartanam (solo performance) as a "break time" and leave the Concert Halls causing embarrassment to the performers. However nowadays the trend has changed when Top ranked percussionist's play.

2. Is the concept of rhythm too technical for a layman.

Yes. The concept of rhythm is too technical save and except some places. At the most a connoisseur of music can appreciate the gait or change in the gait with a basic knowledge.

3. Is it difficult to understand the Solkattus-s (tamil) (bunch of syllables in English) and (Bols-in Hindi) which is played on the instrument.

Yes. It is difficult to understand the rhythmic syllables as they are too technical and not user friendly.

4. Cannot a layman understand the universal rhythm (sarvalaghu) -simple beats/claps.

To some extent connoisseurs of music can appreciate the tunes in rhythm but beyond certain levels it becomes difficult to understand.

5. Is the subject of rhythm meant only for knowledgeable listeners/ learners.

Undoubtedly the subject of rhythm is meant for knowledgeable listeners/learners.

The Issue:

1. Basic understanding of rhythm.

2 Soulful khamboji-review by P. Surya Rao in the Hindu, Chennai e edition in Friday Review dated 4th February 2011

³ Sandeep Narayan's emotion-filled singing-Review by P. Vasanthkumar in The Hindu, Chennai e -edition in Friday review dated 21st March 2019

Music lovers find it difficult to understand rhythm in technical terms unless he/she is a practitioner of percussion. Naturally, raga alapana-s (improvisation of musical notes) in famous raga-s or famous compositions are appreciated which are in memory. The same feelings do not apply to rhythm. There are musicians who are famous for some ragas-s name like Late Ariakudi Ramanuja Iyengar is famous for Thodi (name of a raga) ragam (improvisation of musical notes). Late Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer is famous for singing sarva laghu patterns (universal easiest flow of rhythm).

2. Is the trend repeating history.

Through ages, the subject of rhythm has been given little importance. However now the trend is changing with more solo recitals are performed on percussion for the music lovers like the way they appreciate ragas (improvisation of musical notes) etc. Workshops are conducted to appreciate rhythm.

3. How do we address the issue of rhythm of future generation of music lovers.

More rhythm appreciation concerts need to be organised so that the music lovers appreciate the rhythmic aspects in music besides the raga-s(improvisation of musical notes), the compositions etc.,

1. Will education of rhythm and understanding of the instrument change the scenario.

The percentage of rhythmic learners vis-a-vis vocal or instrumental is very low. If more workshops are conducted explaining the nature of rhythm etc rhythm appreciation would improve. It is seen that programs titled “Drums Festival” are organised annually in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India highlighting the importance of each percussion instrument like Mridangam, Ghatam, Kanjira, Morsing also Konnakol (vocal percussion).

2. Can the subject of rhythm be made simpler albeit it is technical.

The subject of rhythm was made simpler by stalwarts like Late Vellore Ramabhadran, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India who specialised in Nada (divine sound) simple rhythms and became popular adopting this technique. Presently Sri. Umayalpuram Sivaraman is popular for playing simple rhythms and mixes both simple and complex rhythms but nevertheless appreciated by everyone.

Bharatanatyam recitals:

Bharatanatyam recital is one of the ancient dance form in India and is practiced all over the world. A typical Bharatanatyam will have a solo dancer or group dancers with musicians sitting on the side of the stage consisting of a vocal, violin, flute, mridangam, the nattuvanar (choreographer) with cymbals in hand called “thalam” (time keeping through hand gestures). As stated above earlier, even the newspaper reviews of dance recitals follow the same trend of appreciating/highlighting the dancer or the abhinaya (acting), facial expressions, the footwork etc. Neither the percussion players get any appreciation from these critics nor their performances reasonably elaborated and worse even no names are mentioned⁴. The same solution discussed above for carnatic music can be applied to bharatanatyam recitals as well.

In conclusion it can be stated that although the concept of rhythm is technical nevertheless it can be made more simpler by the rhythm players themselves.

No.1

Review by TK Ganapathy in The Hindu, Chennai edition in Friday Review on 18th Sept 2009.

⁴ Srikanth and Aswathy danced their way to glory in Ernakulam-Review by V Kaladharan in the e- edition of The Hindu, Kochi in Friday Review dated 14th March 2019.

Mature approach, clear articulation and striking prayogas marked the recitals of some of the eminent musicians at the Rajalakshmi Fine Arts Music festival in Coimbatore.

Sanjay Subramaniam's concert at the Rajalakshmi Fine Arts brought to the fore his penchant for virtuosity and discipline in music. As is his wont, his expertise and tonal outbursts defined the course of the items he handled. After his varnam in Sahana in vilamba and durita kaalams, his characteristic style of presentation became evident from 'Maamavasadha Janani' (Kaanada) embellished with swaras. His energetic voice defined the course of Dharmavathi for 'Arulvaai Angayarkanniye' and Khambodi for 'Sikkal Meviya.' The way he negotiated the course of the raga delineations revealed his complete involvement in the exercise to bring out the raga bhava. The musical excellence moved towards a cheery interpretation of sahitya and sangita. 'Sari Evare Ramayya' and 'Idhuvo Thillai' (Sindhubhairavi) were zestful and rhythmic presentations. The glimmering aesthetic flashes of his music made the listeners forget his gesticulations.

Varadarajan's brilliant accompaniment on the violin was evident in Sanjay's RTP in Brindavanasaranga and the swara repartees. Arun Prakash (mridangam) added punch and enthused the vocalist through his percussion support.

The charm of Carnatic music lies in awakening the rakti in ragas and songs the vocalist chooses for his agenda. If the artist achieves this, tranquillity in music gets dignified. This was missing in the vocal concert of Charumathi Ramachandran. Her attempt to register her capabilities had little impact. May be, her thematic recital on Mudhalvan 'Lord Ganesa,' gave no adequate scope to exercise her vidwat. Singing with a script in one hand was no concert etiquette. The opening 'Vallabha Nayaka' was followed by 'Charanu Siddhivinayakam' and 'Sree Maha Ganapatim' (Ataana) garnished with swaras. Her alapanas of Kharaharapriya for the kriti, 'Ganapathiye Karunanidhiye' and Thodi for the kriti, 'Gajavadana' were deprived of their loftiness and she was not comfortable while negotiating the tara sthayi. The RTP in Hamsadhwani was elongated testing the patience of the rasikas. The kutcheri was a tame affair with no verve or aesthetic finesse.

Usha Rajagopalan demonstrated tonal purity in her fingering prowess. Her solo essays of ragas were heart-warming with a touch of vivacity. The percussive support of Sivakumar (mridangam) and Sivaramakrishnan (ghatam) was lively, energetic and passionate.

Steady voice

Bharath Kumar's recital, in the junior slot, was an amalgam of prowess and mellifluousness. Son and disciple of Suguna Varadachari, the vocalist with a steady and strong voice gave an impressive recital. Though the opening Kalyani varnam with chittaswarams was not rendered with gusto, he made it up with an elegant version in the next number, 'Parameswara Jagadeswara' (Nattai). His Begada alapana was sculpted with karvais and brighas and pleasing musical phrases in the upper octave for the kriti, 'Amba Sankari Neeve.'

'Upacharamu' (Bhairavi) with niraval and swaras revealed a full measure of imaginative manodharma. His resonant voice is an asset. Rahul (violin) and Guru Raghavendra (mridangam) were the accompanists.

Pleasing recital

Sankari Krishnan's thematic recital on Devi kritis of Thanjavur quartet was deeply rooted in classical vocabulary. Her presentation of the kritis drawn from the Thanjavur quartet was marked by maturity. After her kick start of 'Maayatheetha,' 'O,

Jagadamba' was rendered with vividness and consistency. Her alapanas of Sahana for the kriti, 'Kaliyugamuna' and Pantuvarali for the kriti, 'Neetu Padame' were sketched with sampradaya pidis and the musical phrases were handled with precision. Her raga vinyasam of Thodi centered on lucidity free from vocal extravagance for the song, 'Kaamitapaladayini.' The RTP in Madhyamavathi with the Pallavi set in Kanda chatusra jathi, jampai talam treading into Vaasanti, Varamu and Revathi ragas was strengthened by weighty prayogas. A lilting Behaag thillana rounded off her agenda.

Baskar's role on the violin gave fillip to her creative impulses and his solo excursions of the ragas glowed with a cascade sancharas. Vaidyanathan (mridangam) and Sridhar (ghatam) garnished the compositions and swaras with the right touches of exuberance and subtlety.

Refreshing Saveri

Varalakshmi Anandakumar began her recital with a refreshing Saveri varnam followed by a fluent version of 'Maha Ganapati Palayamam' (Nata Narayani). Her raga delineation of Bhairavi revealed her manodharma coursing through all the three octaves for the kriti, 'Balagopala.' Her fare included, 'Durmargachara,' 'Thaaye Tripurasundari' and a viruttam in Bhimplaas. She can become a top artist if she tempers her skills to bring out the nuances of the ragas and compositions with greater ease and facility. Sreelakshmi Venkataramani (violin) and Karthick (mridangam) were the accompanists.

Young Pradeep Kumar topping the list of young brigade-to-be-watched proved himself a mature artist among the juniors at the music festival. Well-aligned to sruti, his meticulous paatanthara was fortified by clear articulation of the sahityas. His alapanas of Chandrajothi for 'Baagaayanayya' and Chakravaham for the kriti, 'Etulabroduvo' with suitable pleasing prayogas and jarus added punch to the kutcheri. Ananthakrishnan's violin accompaniment was enjoyable and classic in quality. Gopalakrishnan (mridangam) provided enough percussive rhythm to heighten the dignity of the concert.

Clear diction

A compelling euphoria in raga bhava marked Vijay Siva's vocal concert characterised by swelling manodharma at every stage. Sruthi suddham and clarity of diction invested his kutcheri with a solid base. The opening 'Sree Nadhati Guru' (Mayamalawagowlai) with niraval and swaras set the tone and tenor for his agenda. The kriti, 'O, Jagadamba' followed by 'Iti Neeku Nyayama' with a pleasing niraval and swaras were exuberant and soulful. In the expansive Kharaharapriya alapana, the vocalist revealed step by step the impressions of his manodharma in giving shape to the picturisation of the raga for the kriti, 'Charanagathavatsala Rama.' The RTP in Mohanam with the Pallavi, 'Mohana Ramayya Samayamithe' revealed Siva's expertise in exploring the tara stayi with effortless ease.

The devotional pieces on Saradambal, Dasar and Pasuram left an abiding effect on the listeners.

Sreeram Kumar's accompaniment on the violin was commendable in following the kritis and the swara sallies. Manoj Siva (mridangam) and Gioalakrishnan (ganjira) played an inspiring thani.

Classic flavour

Learnt under the tutelage of the Brinda and Dhanammal schools of music, Rama Ravi's choice of compositions at the festival had a classic flavour. Her musical expression revealed an easy flow bereft of unnecessary frills. Warming up with the Kanada varnam,

her 'Vidulaku' (Mayamalawagowla) with swaras struck a deep chord with the listeners. Her alapanas of Kiravani for the kriti, 'Bhakta Paalana' and Naatakurinji (briefly though) for the kriti, 'Maayamma' were full of striking prayogas softened by melodious graces giving a consummate touch to them. The main piece of the recital, Sankarabharanam (the crest-jewel of Sankara) was defined by majestic pidis with clear karvais steeped in vintage appeal for the kriti, 'Akshayalinga Vibho.' The tukkadas towards the end were ear-worthy. She concluded with a vibrant thillana in Purvi. Bhaskar lent good support on the violin and his solo raga vinyasam of Sankarabharanam and Kiravani was reflective of the vocalist's emotive account of them. Subramanian (mridangam) presented a spirited thani.

No.2

Soulful khamboji

P. Surya Rao

FEBRUARY 04, 2011



FRIDAYREVIEW

Kamala Deepti impressed with a crisp rendition.

Swarajhari presented a vocal **concert** by Kasturi Kamala Deepti of Visakhapatnam, who received her musical training from Pantula Rama. The young singer is pursuing her masters in Information Technology in Chennai and is under the guidance of Padma Bhushan awardee T.N. Seshagopalan. She has already, at the age of 22, received many awards and accolades from several sabhas in the country. The concert was held at Sringeri Peetha Paripalita Sri Sivaramakrishna Kshetram, Vijayawada.

Starting with crisp saveri varnam, Kamala Deepti next sang Abhayambaya of Dikshitar, complimenting it with fine raga delineation. This was followed by Muthiah Bhagavatar's composition Sarasadala Nayana in Saramathi. Ninnu vinaga, a beautiful composition of Syamasastri in Poorvikalyani was sung as the sub main with fine raga version and swaras.

For the main item, Kamala Deepti took up the majestic composition of Thyagaraja in Kambhoji O Rangasayi. The raga delineation was exhaustive. The niraval and swaras were also brilliantly rendered. **B.V. Durgabhavani and K. Sai Giridhar supported efficiently on violin and mridangam respectively.** Another attractive piece in the concert was Madurai G.S. Mani's composition Palimpa Tamasama in Sivaranjani.

No.3

Sandeep Narayan's emotion-filled singing

P. Vasanth Kumar

MARCH 21, 2019



FRIDAYREVIEW

Everything was in the right proportion in Sandeep Narayan's soulful concert

Sandeep Narayan is one of the popular Carnatic vocalists of the day. His major asset is his voice, which has the right proportion of *azhutham* as well as the capacity to handle *brigas* with clarity. With his growing repertoire, Sandeep presented a soulful concert at the youth hostel auditorium in Indira Nagar under the auspices of Hamsadhwani.

Mysore Srikanth on the violin, the maestro Umayalpuram Sivaraman on the mridangam and B.S. Purushothaman on the ganjira were the accompanists, who added a lot of sheen to the concert. When one has Umayalpuram Sivaraman's mridangam accompaniment, the success of the concert is pre-determined. This concert was no exception. A few phrases of Thodi ushered in the Adi Tala Patnam Subramanian Iyer varnam 'Era Napai,' rendered in a dual tempo. This set the mood for the concert and the weighty fare that followed.

Malayamarutham is considered as a morning raga but its appeal was not absent in the evening. 'Manasa Etulo' of Tyagaraja was the kriti sung with an elaborate niraval at the opening lyrics of the charanam 'Kalilo Rajasa.' The solfa passages following the niraval were rightly not overdone and revealed the vocalist's sense of proportion. Mysore Srikanth was precise in his niraval and kalpana swaram replies.

Arunachala Kavi's 'Eppadi Manam Thuninthado' in Huseini has a rasa of pathos, in which Sita questions Lord Rama as to how he decided to leave her and head for the forest from Ayodhya. The mood of the composition was amply conveyed by Sandeep in his rendition. The vilamba kala pramanam of the song was well maintained in all the three segments without resorting to accelerating the speed in the charanam. Syama Sastri's 'Parvathi Ninnu' in Kalgada was brisk. That Sandeep has an affinity towards vivadhi ragas, could be seen from his rendering of this song.

The two melodies, which were taken up for vinyasas were Khambodi (Emayya Rama — Bhadrachala Ramadas) and Kanada ('Sukhi Evvaro,' Tyagaraja). Sandeep has the right approach in revealing the identities of the ragas he essays in his opening phrases. Khambodi was dealt in a leisurely manner initially, which was impressive. The adventurous phrases during the latter part of the alapana were reminiscent of his Guru Sanjay Subramaniam's style. This was in no way less engaging. The niraval and kalpanaswaras were aptly sung at the charanam followed by a sama kuraippu in K. Chapu culminating in an interesting korvai.

Umayalpuram Sivaraman was at his very best in accompanying for the songs in his inimitable style.

The mastery of Sivaraman during the tani avartanam following 'Sukhi Evvaro,' would be best left to the imagination of the connoisseur. The initial laya patterns literally felt as 'Sukhi Evvaro'. B.S. Purushothaman on the ganjira in his accompaniment for the kritis revealed his sangeetha gnanam. His counter replies to Sivaraman during the percussion session had the veteran appreciating his playing.

The Kanada raga essay by Sandeep saw him at his best during this concert. The visranti in the alapana was soothing, a mood not marred by the meaningful fast phrases towards the close of the alapana. Mysore Srikanth presented a pleasant version of Kanada. 'Aadum Chidambaramo' (Behag, Gopalakrishna Bharati), 'Apaduru' (Khamas- Pattabhiramayya), the lilting Brindavani thillana of M. Balamuralikrishna and a Tiruppugazh in ragamalika comprised the dessert fare offered in this vibrant concert.

No.4

Srikanth and Aswathy danced their way to glory in Ernakulam

V Kaladharan

KOCHI, MARCH 14, 2019



FRIDAYREVIEW

Ever since the Dhananjayas have established their sway, dancing duos have been a phenomenon in the world of **Bharatanatyam**. N Srikanth and Aswathy V Nair have carved a space for themselves in the field by means of their prowess and perseverance. Their recital at the TDM Hall, Ernakulam, was a treat for the audience.

The couple began their concert with the Purandaradasa composition, ‘Gajavadanaa veduve’, extolling the features and distinctions of Lord Ganesha. Each padartha (word meaning) like ‘pasankusadhara’ (one who holds these weapons), ‘paramapavithra’ (the most sacred) and ‘munijanaprema’ (one who loves the sages) contributed to the dominant mood, bhakti (devotion). For the varnam, the dancers chose the all-too familiar Pancharatnakriti of saint Tyagaraja, ‘Jagadananda kaaraka’, in raga Natta. Although its sahitya (text) has references to Lord Krishna and Vishnu, the kriti, overall, is in praise of the countless virtues of Lord Rama.

There is little scope for sanchari (improvisational segment) in it. Yet the dancers, through their stylish execution of hand gestures and measured movements of the torso and the limbs, conveyed the spirit of the pallavi, anupallavi and charanams, much to the contentment of the audience. The non-textual **dance** supported by the jathi and swaras carried ample geometrical grace.

MD Ramanathan's composition, 'Saagarasayanavibho', in raga Bagesri, followed. Srikanth unfurled the many different manifestations of Lord Vishnu in the visualisation of this padam. He briefly touched upon Gajendramoksham as sanchari. Again the principal sentiment of bhakti prevailed throughout the presentation.

Afterwards Aswathy took up a padam of Gopalakrishna Bharati to bring out the pangs of separation of the nayika from the nayaka, who is none other than Lord of the Chidambara temple. Beginning with the anupallavi of the padam, Aswathy fluently shared the nayika's longing for reunion with her Lord. The Lord's sympathy towards his devotees is infinite. As the nayika, Aswathy cited the story of Kannappanar who poured a mouth full of water on the Sivalinga which he took from the river, Swarnamukhi. He gave the Lord whatever meat he could gather from hunting. The Lord did not see any impropriety in all these since he was aware of the depth of devotion of Kannappanar. Aswathy could convincingly portray this anecdote that indirectly highlighted the nayika's Premabhakti (love-soaked devotion) towards the Lord.

The duo concluded their recital with a brisk thillana in raga Amritavarshini, composed by Guru Sadasivam. Backed by forceful nattuvankam, alluring vocal music, dexterous fingerings on the mridangam and sterling notes on the violin, Srikanth and Aswathy danced with gay abandon. BEAME, an Ernakulam-based cultural forum, organised the event.

