



A Glimpse into the History of Carnatic Music

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Abstract : The very word “music” stirs the mind, brings joy, and soothe the heart. It conjures up the image of an art that can lead the mind into the formless and abstract bliss. The inherent sound that exists in the nature can be observed by a keen observer, and it is described as Nada. This sound is naturally embedded in the expression and movement of every living being. The flow of rivers, rustling of leaves, rush of rainwater, and chirping of birds — all resonate with rhythmic sounds. Such sounds born from nature, when comprehended through classical frameworks, form what we call music.

The background of Indian music is unique compared to all others across the world. It is deeply rooted in spirituality. Even folk songs that lack classical structure have evolved as prayers to deities. For example: *belagāga nāneddu yāryāra neneyali yellujirige beleyola bhūmitāyina yeddomdu galige nenadeva* by bowing down to the Earth first, followed by Shiva. "*Siddhara gṛāṇa śivagṛāṇa mā śivana nidreṅgaṇṇāge nimagyāna*". Such is the nature of folk music. When folk music itself is so powerful, it is but natural that the classical tradition has evolved with even greater richness and depth.

The evolution of Indian music is believed to trace back to Vedic times, with a lineage of over 3,000 years. The foundation lies in the *saptasvaras* (seven notes). All diversity and grandeur in Indian music spring from these notes. Each note is believed to originate from nature, emphasizing an inseparable connection between music and the natural world.

This paper aims to give a brief outline of the evolution of Indian Classical Music, and by extension, Carnatic Classical Music.

IndexTerms - Nada, Saptasvara, Carnatic Classical Music, Sangeeta.

I. ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC

Sāmaveda is considered the root of Indian music, with its tonal inflections — *udātta, anudātta and svarita*— forming the earliest reference to pitch variations. The *chāṇḍogyaopaniṣat* describes music as the expression of cosmic energy. Up to the 13th century CE, scholars agree that there were no sharp divisions in Indian music. Scholars referred to music as “*saṃyāk gītām saṃgītām*” meaning well-formed and melodious song is true music. *Śārṅgadeva*, in his *saṃgīta ratnākara*, said: “*gītām vādyam tathā nṛityam trayam saṃgītamuchyate*” Meaning: Vocal music (*gītām*), instrumental music (*vādyam*), and dance (*nṛityam*) together constitute music. *Gītām* is the movement of breath bound by notes; *vādyam* is the rhythmic tuning of bodily beats; *nṛityam* is rhythm and mathematics embodied in movement. That which is composed with both *rāga* (melody) and *tāla* (rhythm) is called *saṃgīta* (music).

There was uniformity in the *swaras* (notes), their variants (*prakṛuti* and *vikṛuti*), and systems of *ārohaṇa-avarohaṇa* (ascending and descending scales). The *grāmas- śaḍjagrāma, madhyama grāma and gāṇḍhāra grāma* contributed to variety. Over time, *gāṇḍhāra grāma* faded, and only two remained. The various *swara* combinations led to *Jatis*, and the permutations of the seven *swaras* resulted in 72 *Melakarta* ragas, the parent scales.

Historical, political, and social transitions significantly influenced Indian music and arts. With shifts in perception of purity and doctrine, music bifurcated into two major traditions: **Hindustani (North Indian)** and **Carnatic (South Indian)**. Carnatic music preserved its ancient purity and tradition despite foreign influences and adapted only necessary changes while retaining core principles. Terms like *grāma* were systematized into seven regions of tonal mapping, distinguishing *śuddha svara* (pure) from *vikṛta svara* (altered). In rhythm, significant variations like *laghu, drutam*, and *anudrutam* emerged. The need for new notation systems and symbols arose to mark such intricacies.

While making the above-mentioned changes, new types of notation styles and numerical indicators emerged or came into practice. Although the identification of *sthāyi* (octave) and *swaras* (notes) continued to follow the Sama Veda tradition, new symbols began to be used to indicate finer nuances such as microtones (*shruti*), *sthāyi*, etc. Despite all these innovations and changes, Carnatic music remained strong and intact because it never strayed beyond its traditional principles, classifications, and frameworks.

Great scholars like *Bharata*, *Śārṅgadeva*, *Matanga*, *Abhinavagupta* documented and analyzed these changes, ensuring that innovations were passed down through generations both textually and orally. Vocalists of the time not only adopted these changes but also passed them down to disciples.

II. ADVENT OF CARNATIC CLASSICAL MUSIC

A major turning point came with *Vidyāranya*, who is credited as the "Founder of the Carnatic Music Empire." He revolutionized the existing system by redefining *grāma* concepts, integrating *vikṛti svaras* into the *ṣaḍjagrāma*, and conceptualizing *Melas* (parent scales). His classification of *svaras* based on practical usage gave rise to a structured system with about 15 *Melas* and thousands of associated *ragas*.

Around 600 CE, references to South Indian music systems appear, particularly during *Immaḍi pulikeśi's* era, who likely coined the term "*Karnāṭaka Saṃgīta*." Later, *Matanga's* *brūhaddeśi* mentions '*Karnāṭaka valā*' and other related treatises.

Vidyāranya, also the founder of Vijayanagara Empire and pontiff of Sringeri Matha, was instrumental in shaping Karnataka music. His contributions led to the term "*Karnāṭaka Saṃgīta*" (Carnatic Music) rather than merely "*Dakshina Saṃgīta*" (South Indian Music).

III. CONTRIBUTION OF KANNADIGAS TO CARNATIC MUSIC

The contribution of Kannadigas to South Indian music is immense. "*Māṇasollāsa*" or "*Abhilashitārtha Chintāmaṇi*", one of the principal source texts of music, was authored by King *Someśvara* of the Kalyana Chalukya dynasty. The Yadavas of Devagiri, who were Kannadigas, were patrons of Śārṅgadeva, the composer of the "*Saṃgīta Ratnākara*." The commentator of *Saṃgīta Ratnākara*, *Kallinātha*, was also a Kannadiga.

Vidyāranya, who brought about a wave of transformation in Karnataka music through his work "*Saṃgīta Sāra*", was a Kannadiga. *Puṇḍarīka Viṭṭhala*, the composer of "*Sadrāga Chandrōdaya*", *Nijaguṇa Śivayōgi* of *Viveka Chintāmaṇi* from *Sāthanūr* near Bangalore, and the *Haridasas*—who flooded the land with a vast wealth of musical compositions—were all Kannadigas.

Bhārata Sāra Saṅgraha by *Mummaḍi Chikka Bhūpāla*, *Bharatasāra Saṅgraha* by *Basavappa Nāyaka*, and *Śivatattva Ratnākara* by *Keladi Basavappa Nāyaka*—all are extraordinary gifts from Karnataka to the field of music. *Govinda Dīkṣita*, the author of *Saṃgīta Sudhā*, and his son *Venkaṭamakhi*, who gave the field the monumental "*Chaturdaṇḍī Prakāśikā*", were also Kannadigas. Because of such foundational and theoretical contributions by Kannadigas to the realm of music, the term "*Karnataka Sangeeta*" (Carnatic music) came into being. (Source: *Kannada Sahitya*, *Shasanagalalli Saṃgīta Vichāra*, Dr. Chidananda Murthy, p.6)

Many individuals have contributed to the growth and development of Carnatic music, and the changes and achievements they brought about are truly remarkable. The *Swaramela Kalanidhi* composed by *Raamamatya* became a unique treasure in the field of music. He has been honored with titles such as "*Father of Modern Janaka Ragas*" and "*Abhinava Bhaṭṭachārya*", and is also regarded as a *Rama Vaggeyakara* (composer and lyricist devoted to Lord Rama).

His scientific analysis of *ragas* and the placement of *svaras* (musical notes), the principles of music, and its practical applications brought a new clarity to the subject. His study of "*Panchama Samvaditva*" (the consonance of the fifth note), the relationship and independence in the use of *svaras* remains relevant even today. For example: The concept of *Chyuta Panchama* acting as *Madhyama*, and the division between *Shuddha* (pure) and *Prati Madhyama*, supported the *Melakarta* raga system. Similarly, *Cyuta Shadja-Nishada*, *Madhyama-Gandhara*, and other such variations were explored. These elements are very clear in *veena* playing. *Raamamatya* perceptively captured the delicate overtones (*anahata nada*) produced when the *tambura* or *veena* is tuned perfectly. He had already recognized the advanced concept of measuring vibrations, which is prevalent even today. The *melakarta* system and the refined characteristics of *Janaka* (parent) and *Janya* (derived) *ragas* were all refined during his time.

The contribution of "Pundarika Vitthala" to the field of music through the *Veena Mela* system is truly remarkable. '*Ragamanjari*' is a major work for Hindustani (Uttaraadi) music, while '*Sadrāga Chandrōdaya*' is one of the greatest assets of Carnatic music. "In the *Swaradhyaya* (section on notes) of his work, he takes up discussions on *nada* (sound), its origin, significance, and its functional structures, including the concept of twenty-two *shrutis*. He is the first to propose that the *Anumandra sthayi* (lower octave) originates in the navel region. In the *Ragadhyaya* (section on *ragas*), he systematically organizes the popularly known *swara* values and scientifically formulates the concept of *raga mela*. Among the revolutionary concepts he introduced, the most significant and impactful is the mathematical scheme of *raga melas*. Among all the *mela* systems propounded in the history of Carnatic music, this is considered the most logically sound, scientific, and ancient." — (Dr. R. Satyanarayana, *Karnataka Sangeetavahini*, p. 241)

Venkatamakhi, famously known as the "*Panini of the music world*", authored the "*Chaturdandi Prakashika*", which is an outstanding treatise covering both the practical and theoretical aspects of music. He distinctly illustrated the 14 *svarasthanas* (note positions) within the framework of 12 and 22 *shrutis* in the seven *svaras* (notes). He precisely presented the classification of the 12 *svarasthanas*. Alongside his predecessors, Venkatamakhi scientifically and clearly explained the structure of the *Sooladi Sapta*

Talas (seven fundamental rhythm cycles) and the categorization of *melas* (scales) into *shuddha madhyama* and *prati madhyama* types.

The author of “**Viveka Chintamani**”, *Nijaguna Shivayogi*, outlined various rules and principles of music in his work. He explained the origin points of *svaras* (musical notes), the proper time to sing them, the presiding deities of the notes, their respective outcomes, and the distinctions in *shruti* (microtones). *Nijaguna* mentioned the twelve *svaras* and the corresponding 22 *shrutis*, but also indicated that the placement of these notes could differ. He emphasized the importance of musical value, quality, indigenous tonal variations (*deshi*) and *gamakas* (ornamentations).

The contribution of the *Haridasas* to Carnatic music is immense. **Purandaradasa**, **Vadiraja**, **Kanakadasa**, and **Vaikunthadasa** gave great prominence to *manodharma sangeeta* (improvised music) and played a vital role in the healthy development of the musical art form. It is historically acknowledged that *Purandaradasa* formulated the foundational educational structure for learning Carnatic music in its early stages.

Scholars opine that before the term “*sarale*” (basic exercises) came into use, *Venkatamakhi* used the term “*swarali*”, and later *Tulaja* clarified this. There is also a view that the “*swaralankara*” described by *Venkatamakhi* should be considered a sequence of joint exercises. While *Sharngadeva* mentions 63 types of *alankaras* in the *svaras* (notes), *Venkatamakhi* remarks that they do not have such defined practical forms. However, it appears that many of these might have originated around the time of *Purandaradasa*.

Similarly, the evolution of *talas* (rhythmic cycles) over time, particularly those widely used in *alankaras*, is also discussed in relation to their historical development.

Examples:

1. **Jombata Tala** – In chronological progression, it began as *Adi* and *Eka Tala*, composed of *laghu jati*, *viraama* and *anudruta* elements.
2. **Pillari Geethe** – These were initially used for practice singing, and the *suladis* were considered as a sequential collection of compositions similar in nature to the *Pillari Geethes*.

(Source: Dr. R. Satyanarayana, *Ganakala Manjari*, "Haridasa Tradition in Carnatic Music", pp. 11, 12, 13)

Both Śrīpādarāya's *Bhramaragīte* and the first rāga in Rāmāmātya's *mēla* system are the same — *Mukhāri*. The 133 *Sulādis* composed by Śrīpādarāya have earned him the distinction of being the first *vāggeyakāra* (composer and lyricist) of Carnatic music. *Purandaradāsa* offered a rich variety of compositions such as *gīta*, *thāya*, *sulādi*, *ugābhoga*, and *pada*. Śārṅgadeva mentioned that *thāya* was a traditional type of *gīta-prabandha* (musical composition). What we now refer to as the *kṛtis* of Tyāgarāja were earlier called *padas*. Similarly, *sulādis* were categorized under *gīta*.

Prabandha refers to a “song.” In earlier times, compositions were sung with specified melody (*gāna*), rhythm (*tāla*), language, and meter (*chandas*). They also included forms like *vṛutta-mālikas*, *dhavala*, *kanda*, and *tripadi*. It is believed that *Purandaradāsa* composed *padas* in a language called *Bhāṇḍira*. References exist suggesting that this language had its own phonetic system, grammar, and idiomatic expressions. Interestingly, the *padas* of the *Dāsas* follow the same threefold structure as modern *kīrtanas* — *pallavi*, *anupallavi*, and *charaṇa*.

There are also unique *ugābhogas* — compositions without rhythmic constraints (*tāla*). Though rāgas are indicated, there is no fixed rule about how they must be rendered. Overall, the *Dāsas*' compositions belong to the oral tradition and are not confined to rigid frameworks.

Thus, the contribution of Kannadigas to the South Indian Classical Music and tradition, right from *Vidyaranya* is immense and no wonder it is called Karnataka Sangeeta or Carnatic Music.

IV. DEVELOPMENT OF CARNATIC MUSIC IN THE 18TH CENTURY

The author of “**Sangeeta Saramruta**”, *Tulaja*, is believed to be from the *Bhosale Maratha* dynasty and to have resided in *Thanjavur*. His work, dating back to the 18th century CE, is a significant treatise that discusses the style of music and its technical components like *shruti*, *tala*, and *laya*.

The contributions of the *Trinity* of Carnatic music are of immense significance. In terms of rāga, tāla usage, style, literature, and compositional structure, their works paved the way for the highest form of musical achievement. Their compositions have come to serve as foundational guidelines for musical theory. One can observe devotion, tradition, scientific insight, and literary excellence — all beautifully integrated in their works.

Tyagaraja's “*Divyanama Sankeertana*,” the *Bhajana* tradition, *Utsava Sampradaya Keertanas* – works in the *Bhagavata* and folk styles – are renowned for their marvelous melodic arrangements, innovative use of ragas and styles, musical plays (*Geetanatakas*), and the *Pancharatna Kritis*, all of which are hallmarks of the *Prabandha* tradition. Tyagaraja is revered for attaining spiritual liberation (*moksha*) through the path of music, known as *Nadānusandhāna*.

Dikshitar's compositions are known for their well-structured form, Sanskrit lyrics, use of rare ragas, elaborate raga designs, and sophisticated application of *mudras* (signature phrases). His works, including English notes, hymns to deities, the *Navavarna* and *Navagraha* compositions, are considered matchless in their depth and artistic excellence.

Shyama Shastri's compositions are especially noted for their rhythmic richness, particularly his fondness for *Chaputala*. He was the first to experiment with both *Takita takadhi* and the reverse (*Viloma*) *Takadhi-takita* patterns. His kritis like "*Marivere Gati*" in *Anandabhairavi* set to *Misra Chapu tala*, and "*Nannu Brovu Lalita*" in *Lalita raga*, are excellent examples of *Viloma* and *Anuloma* rhythmic structures. He is also known for his expert use of *swarasahitya* (lyrics integrated with swaras or notes).

The compositions of the musical Trinity (Tyagaraja, Dikshitar, and Shyama Shastri) are outstanding examples of spirituality, literary richness, social sensitivity, musical evolution, and rare innovations. While these are historically significant, they are also widely studied, and hence, detailed analysis has not been attempted here. Their compositions and associated instruments have the potential to open new pages in music history.

V. CONCLUSION

Overall, the history of Carnatic classical music is vast and profound. Right from the Vedas to the formation of Kacheri paddhati in the 20th century, Carnatic music is constantly evolving and immersing the listener in the nectar of bliss. The evolution of Carnatic music also lets us trace the changes to the societal traditions, political developments and turmoil, and the ever-changing moods of the society. It also sheds light on the musical prowess of Kannadigas, and the passing of baton with respect to upcoming musical traditions. Many have dedicated their lives to its evolution of Carnatic music. Walking the path laid down by these greats is a blessing for us all. As Tyāgarāja beautifully said:

"Yeṃdaro mahānubhāvuḷu aṃḍariki vaṃḍanamulu"

(Many are the great souls — salutations to them all.)

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