

## A brief history of Carnatic Music

Written by Sri.V.Sriram. Extracted from the book Carnatic Summer with the author's kind permission and published in Nadasurabhi Souvenir 2007

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Carnatic Music is a peculiar name for an art form that lays claim to a lineage stretching back over many centuries. But why the term 'Carnatic' music, or its more Indian version 'Karnatak' music ? It certainly had nothing to do with the eponymous modern state in south India that has its capital as Bangalore.

Several reasons have been given as to why the name Karnataka Sangita for the music of south India. Many have opined that the region south of the Vindhyas was referred to as Karnatakam and hence the name. The word Karnatakam also stands for 'that which is very old' and scholars have interpreted it to mean that this music form is an old one. Yet another explanation is that the word derives from Karna (the ear) + Ata (to haunt) or 'that which haunts the ear'. That would certainly be an apt description for Carnatic Music.

It appears that in the period prior to the Sangita Ratnakara, a 13th Century work on music by Sarangadeva, there was only one stream of music across the whole of India. By the 15th Century, Kallinatha refers to the music of south India as Karnataka Sangita and records its practice between the rivers Krishna in the north and Kaveri in the south. Several treatises made their appearance from this time onwards, but as is always the case in an art that encourages imagination, extrapolation and interpretation, the theorists were soon overshadowed by the practitioners. Foremost among these was Purandara Dasa, who lived in Vijayanagar and died a year before the fateful battle of Talikota (1565) which destroyed the empire.

Purandara Dasa, who belonged to a sect of Vishnu worshippers called the Haridasas (also referred to as Dasa Kootas), is referred to as the Pitamaha (Grandsire) of Carnatic music. It was he who codified the beginners' lessons and also gave the art a concrete syllabus for learning that is followed till date with very minor variations. Purandara was a prolific composer, but unfortunately in the chaos that prevailed in the years after his death owing to the break up of the Vijayanagar empire, the tunes of most of his works were lost though the lyrics of many songs have survived. These are now sung in various tunes by present day musicians.

A senior contemporary of Purandara Dasa was Talapaka Annamacharya (1408/1424-1503) who composed entirely on the deities of the Tirumala temple. Several of his songs were discovered engraved on copper plates in a sealed chamber in the Tirumala temple at the turn of the last century. Though some of the plates mention the ragas in which the songs were originally set, the absence of any notation meant that the music of Annamacharya is now lost. His songs were tuned by several contemporary scholars and composers. Annamacharya is referred to as the Pada Kavita Pitamaha, or the Grandsire of the Pada, which is a form of song.

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Certainly, it is in his works that one comes across for the first time the use of a pallavi (beginning line) and several charanams (verses). Annamacharya was among the earliest composers whose works adhered to alliteration and prosody.

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Kshetragna who used the mudra of Muvva Gopala, was an illustrious composer of a slightly later period who is today best known for his padas, which are replete with eroticism. Later some other composers such as Sarangapani (1680-1750) also composed in this genre. These songs were preserved exclusively by the Devadasis, women whose profession it was to entertain by music and dance.

It was however only in the 17th Century that Carnatic music became codified the way we know it today. Venkatamakhin wrote the Chaturdandi Prakashika, in which he for the first time defined the parent scales (ragas) and mathematically arrived at 72 of them (called the melakarthas) based on the variants of the seven notes. A later scholar, Govinda, further refined this scheme in his Sangraha Choodamani and it is his nomenclature that survives till date. All other ragas were attached to one or the other of the parent 72 based on their notes, and were called janya ragas.

Carnatic music had by the 17th Century shifted further south to Tanjore, where under the benign rule of the Nayaks and later the Maratha kings, it flourished as a major art form. Many of the kings were themselves greatly respected musicologists and composers. Attracted by employment opportunity and the stability, several Brahmins from Andhra region moved to Tanjore and its environs. This sect of Mulakanadu Smartha Brahmins was to play a major role in the development of Carnatic music. Several composers lived in Tanjore and the language of composing was invariably Telugu as that was the language of the court.

The Maratha influence brought about the development of the Harikatha or the tradition of discourses on the greatness of God in the form of stories, accompanied by music. This greatly added to Carnatic repertoire with bhajans, folk songs and several operas entering the mainstream. The art of percussion too acquired great refinement as a result of these Harikathas.

The arrival of the Carnatic Trinity was an epoch-making event for the art form. Syama Sastry (1762-1827), Tyagaraja (1767-1847) and Muttuswami Dikshitar (1775/6-1835) were all born in the town of Tiruvarur. All three of them took to music and evolved into composers of outstanding

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excellence. In keeping with Indian tradition, they are collectively thought of as divine in the incarnations.

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Tyagaraja was the most prolific among the three and emotion was his forte. He composed in his mother tongue Telugu, in several popular ragas and some rare ones. Though most of his songs are on his patron deity Rama, his songs have several observations on the day to day life in his times. They are indeed valuable sociological works apart from being gems of music.

Syama Sastry, the eldest of the three, was hereditary priest at the Bangaru Kamakshi temple in Tanjore. He composed on the Goddess and his songs, mainly in Telugu, are excellent in melody. Their true strength, however, lies in the way the rhythm is woven into the song.

The youngest of the Trinity, Muttuswamy Dikshitar, had an interesting life. His younger brother Baluswami observed the violin used by Westerners in Madras and adapted it to Carnatic music. Muttuswami Dikshitar travelled in the company of his guru to North India and was influenced by the Hindustani stream as well. A very learned man, he composed in chaste Sanskrit and adopting a peripatetic existence he visited a number of shrines in south India and composed on them. His songs excel in their structured usage of ragas.

Coming as they did at the same time, the Trinity eclipsed all earlier composers. Carnatic music having relied on the oral tradition, many of the songs of the pre-Trinity period completely vanished. The disciples of the Trinity spread far and wide propagating their songs, and soon their compositions began dominating Carnatic repertoire. The era immediately after the Trinity witnessed the rise of a number of performing musicians who were also composers such as the Tanjore Quartet, Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan (1844-93), Patnam Subramania Iyer (1845-1902), Ramanathapuram Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar (1867-1919), and several others such as Harikesanallur L. Muthaiah Bhagavathar (1877-1945) and Mysore Vasudevachar (1865-1961). These composers created songs in several forms such as varnams, javalis, and tillanas. They looked to the royal courts for patronage and with the decline of the Tanjore court in 1799, others such as Mysore, Travancore, Pudukottai and the smaller estates such as Ettayapuram, Ramnad and Sivaganga took over. An important personality was the composer Swati Tirunal (1813-1846), who ruled Travancore. Unlike the Trinity, several of the composers who followed did not consider composing on patrons to be beneath their dignity and there are several songs in the honour of kings, including Queen Victoria, King Edward VII and George V !

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Around this time the violin became the favoured instrument for accompaniment and later acquired solo status. Two violinists who shot into prominence very early in the history of the instrument were Tirukodikkaval Krishna Iyer (1857-1913) Malaikottai Govindasami Pillai (1879-1931). Soon many artists took to becoming violinists. The advent of the violin saw the gradual decline of the veena, though there were several prominent vainikas such as the Karaikkudi Brothers- Subbarama Iyer (1883-1936) and Sambasiva Iyer (1888-1958) and later S. Balachander (1927-1990). The instrument, due to its low volume, was ideally suited for chamber performances and has been a casualty in the explosion of sabhas with poor acoustics.

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Percussion has always been an integral part of Carnatic music. Its importance was further enhanced by the bhajana and the Harikatha traditions that depended on rhythm to create an atmosphere. There have been two principal schools in percussion. The first is the Tanjore school which was founded by Naraynaswami Appa (19th Century), an aristocrat of Maratha origin. He used the mridangam for accompanying himself as he sang bhajans. He was followed in time by Tanjore Vaidyanatha Iyer (1894-1947) and others. The other school is the Pudukkottai school founded by Manpoondia Pillai (19th Century). His stellar disciples were Pudukkottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai (1875-1937) and Palani Muthiah Pillai (d 1946). He is also credited with introducing the kanjira to the concert platform.

Carnatic music also owes a lot to the temple traditions that demanded nagaswaram performances during processions. The nagaswaram artists were well known for their extensive raga alapanas, their scintillating pallavis and their rapid swaras. Keeping pace with them were the tavil vidwans who maintained a high standard of mathematics when it came to percussion. In the era preceding the advent of the electric light, all night processions of temple deities accompanied by gas lights and sonorous nagaswaram performances were an integral part of village culture. Several villages of Tanjore district such as Tirumarugal, Semponnarkoil, Tiruvizhimizhalai, Ammachatram and Tiruvidaimarudur were made famous by their nagaswaram artistes. The trend of migration to the city brought to an end the mass participation in temple festivals, which in turn brought about the decline of the nagaswaram tradition.

Madras began its rise as a musical hub in the late 18th Century when the rich dubashes and businessmen of the city began patronizing artistes. With the setting up of the High Court, law became a favoured profession among the Brahmins of the music loving Tanjore Kumbhakonam belt. With their move to Madras, several musicians followed suit. The earliest sabhas came up in the 1880s with the Tondaimandalam Sabha being the pioneer.

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With the proliferation of the sabha culture, the boom in recording and broadcasting and the avenue of films slowly opening up, it more or less became necessary for musicians to move to Madras and pitch their tent among fans and patrons. Moving first to George Town, they slowly spread to the southern districts of the city with Mylapore becoming the area of choice by the 1930s.

Carnatic music also ceased being an entirely oral tradition around this time, with the print medium gaining ground. The early works in print began coming out by the 1870s and with the efforts of A.M. Chinnaswamy Mudaliar, a Christian who lived at the turn of the 20th Century, songs began coming out with notation. His publication, Oriental Music in Staff Notation (1893) was a landmark in Carnatic music history. It was entirely owing to his efforts that the Sangita Sampradaya Pradarshini of Subburama Dikshitar (1839-1906) was published in 1904. Hailed as the last magnum opus in Carnatic music, it brought to light several songs of Muttuswamy Dikshitar.

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Music in that era was a healthy amalgam with various castes and communities contributing to its well being. The artistes themselves came from several backgrounds. Brahmins dominated among the vocalists and the Isai Vellalars constituted the bulk of the instrumentalists, especially in percussion. Women singers came predominantly from the Devadasi community, which was synonymous with the Isai Vellalars.

In 1927, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a member of the Madras Legislature, began an attack on the Devadasi system equating it with prostitution and demanding that it be abolished. Her campaign was strong and forceful and despite several attempts by leaders of the Devadasi community such as Bangalore Nagarathnammal (1878-1952) and Veena Dhanammal (1868-1938) to get the public to see their point of view, a bill banning the Devadasis was passed. The Anti Nautch Bill, as it was called, was the first step in alienating communities other than the upper castes from the performing arts. The Isai Vellalars felt overwhelmed by the stigma of being part of the Devadasi community. Most of them gave up their hereditary profession. The loss to Carnatic music was immense. This being primarily an oral tradition, several songs were lost in the process.

The Music Academy of Madras was set up in 1927 when the All India Congress Session was held in the city. The Academy soon emerged as the pivot of Carnatic music with serious attempts in its early days to codify and standardize several aspects of the art form. It brought to the forefront several performing greats such as 'Tiger' Varadachariar (1876-1951). It also played

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a key role during the anti nautch crisis and the Tamizh Isai crisis. Led by its able secretary, E. Krishna Iyer, the Academy fought for the Devadasis but in vain. They however did yeoman service in ensuring that girls from upper castes learnt the dance form of Sadir (later renamed as Bharata Natyam) that the Devadasis were abandoning in haste.

In 1941, came the Tamizh Isai crisis. As recorded earlier, Carnatic music concerts were dominated by songs in Telugu and Sanskrit. This irked many lovers of Tamizh, which could boast of a long and hoary tradition in music with the earliest records of a codified system being mentioned in the Silapadikkaram (2nd Century BC). Unfortunately most of this was lost over time. Banding together under the leadership of Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar, the Tamizh Isai lobbyists passed a resolution at Chidambaram in 1941 demanding that concerts in Madras Presidency ought to comprise Tamizh songs only. The Music Academy opposed this, its members led by T.T. Krishnamachari being of the view that Tamizh was not a musical language.

The Tamizh Isai Sangam was created as a counter to the Brahmin dominated Music Academy. Among the positive outcomes of the crisis was the resurrection of several Tamizh works such as the Tevaram, the Tiruvachakam, the Tiruppugazh, and the Divya Prabhandhams. The songs of composers such as Arunachala Kavi (1711-1778), Marimutta Pillai (18th Century), Muttutandavar (16th Century) and Gopalakrishna Bharati (1811-81) came to light. The works of contemporary composers such as Papanasam Sivan (1890-1973) and Koteeswara Iyer (1870-1936) also began to be sung.

With the coming of mass entertainment and the electronic media, Carnatic music lost its base. From an art for the masses less than a hundred years ago, it has become an art sustained by a miniscule population. If at all Carnatic music has continued to survive it has been due to the charisma and the crowd pulling capability of its top ranking performers who held sway during the period 1920 to 1960. Many of them worked in various capacities in the cinematic medium, but their hearts were in Carnatic music and they dedicated their lives to it. The demand for the recordings of these old masters continues unabated, with a flourishing parallel industry in their concert recordings that are traded all the time, across the world.

Today, Carnatic music has survived contrary to all the gloom and doom that was predicted. New artists are added, new labels released and new sabhas are born every year. If Carnatic music is still heard all over the world and makes an emphatic and grand statement of survival each year during the annual December season in Chennai, it is because of these great men and women, powerful personalities who bore the art form aloft amidst crisis and threats.