

Carnatic Music Concert Overview

Concert format

Pre-Ariyakudi days

1. Typical concert was 4+ hours but there was no definite structure to the concert format
2. Each concert had only four or five songs that were elaborated in great detail.
3. RTP occupied the pride of place for nearly two hours because the pallavi was presented in 8 kalai. Each rendering of the pallavi line took a very long time and the pallavi was sung dozens of times with variations resulting in the RTP spanning multiple hours.
4. Since there was so much emphasis given to RTP, the number of songs rendered in a concert was very few. Consequently, the rich repertoire of compositions that Carnatic music possessed was not fully brought out to the audience.

Ariyakudi's role in shaping the present day concert format

1. Came about in the 1920's
2. Provided an overall structure to a Carnatic concert and his concerts included the following aspects:
 - a. Choice of madhyama kalam for rendering many of the krithis
 - b. Placing emphasis on proportion and variety, striking a balance between kalpana and kalpita sangeetham
 - c. Performing rakthi ragas in addition to Ghana ragas,
 - d. Rendering krithis composed by a great variety of composers
 - e. Introducing additional compositional forms besides krithis such as starting off concert with a varnam and singing miscellaneous pieces after the main piece (padams, javalis, viruthams – using a wider array of great composers besides Trinity)
3. Many of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar's innovations resulted in making Carnatic music more appealing to a wider base of audience.
4. The fact that the concert format that Ariyakudi introduced more than 90 years ago is by and large still the same is a real testament to the success of the format.

Performers in a Concert

- **Main Performer:** Could be either vocalists or instrumentalists. Instruments like the Vina, Flute, ChitraVina, Mandolin, Saxophone, Violin (it is used both as a lead instrument as well as an accompaniment), Nagaswaram etc are considered major solo instruments.
- **Accompanists:** The number of accompaniments varies depending on whether it is a vocal or an instrumental concert, and if the latter, upon the type of instrument. For a vocal concert, it is conventional to have a violinist to provide melodic support. The violinist generally follows the main artiste and during the creative aspects, is provided with an opportunity to both show his/her potential and also to provide the necessary short breaks to rejuvenate the main performer's spirits and creativity.
- The mridangist provides basic rhythmic support, at the minimum. But a really good mridangist will aspire to play appropriate rhythmic patterns during krithi renditions that will further enhance the beauty of the krithi itself and the style of rendering being attempted by the main artiste. The mridangist accompanies the main performer wherever the music has talam both in the creative and re-creative parts. Occasionally, he/she accompanies the main artiste even during tanam. Mridangist gets his turn to display their improvisational skills during the Tani avartanam.
- **Other accompanists:** There are other accompanying instruments, which are optional. They basically enhance the rhythmic effect in a concert. Termed as *Upapakkavadya*, as they follow the

mridangam and thus blend well with the main performer too. The instruments that generally follow in this category are Ghatam, Khanjira and Morsing. Occasionally there is also oral rhythmic support, known as Konnakkol.

- The Tambura or tanpura is the most important aid, especially for vocalists, in the quest for attaining perfect Sruti. Tuning the Tanpura everyday exposes the artist repeatedly to minute variations in pitch, and to intuitive recognition of the correct pitch.

Structure of a concert

Overview

- The conventional mode of beginning a concert is with a Varnam. This can either be rendered in a brisk pace (usually madhyamakala) or in two degrees of speed in the first half and madhyamakala from the Charanam onwards. The Varnam is generally regarded as a warm-up piece, which sets the pace and mood of the concert.
- Some artistes prefer to follow varnam with an invocatory Krithi on Lord Ganesha, who is believed to bestow success upon one's endeavors.
- The opening piece is generally followed by a couple of brisk krithis with or without improvisations. If rendered with improvisations, it may be a short raga alapana or a few rounds of crisp neraval and kalpanaswaras.
- This is usually followed by a slower krithi with or without raga alapana.
- Then the performer renders the main piece of the concert in an elaborate fashion. It is fairly common to choose a Ghana raga and a weighty krithi for the main piece. The main piece will include various improvisations like raga alapana, neraval and kalpana swaram.
- The main artiste then gives an opportunity to the percussionists to rhythmically embellish the given melodic theme, with the Tani Avartanam.
- Now-a-days most artistes sing a Ragam Tanam Pallavi as the secondary major piece after the main piece. In the olden days, RTP used to be the main piece of a concert. The duration of RTP has reduced over the years and a typical RTP in present day concerts lasts about 30 to 40 minutes.
- This is followed with a sprinkling of the lighter variety of songs, like Ashtapadis, Bhajans, Padam, Javali, Ragamalika, Tiruppugazh and Tillana. Occasionally, *slokas* or *viruttams* are rendered. These are nothing but verses in Sanskrit or Tamil with devotional or philosophical content and are rendered like an alapana sans tala.
- The concert concludes with a Mangalam, which is a prayer for peace and prosperity.

Varnam

Types

- Tana Varnam. Used in music concerts.
- Pada Varnam. Primarily intended for classical dance (bharatanatyam). Also rendered in carnatic music concert.

Musical features of the Varnam

- Elaborate composition which fully explores the raga in which it is composed, and serves to illustrate the standard phrases occurring in that raga as well as the exceptions and special phrases. Hence while learning a raga it is important to learn Varnas in that raga.
- The composition also weaves intricate rhythmic patterns and illustrates the use of swara groups of 3, 4,5, etc.

- The solfa passages in a tana varnam are excellent illustrations of how to develop kalpana swaras the sahitya of the tana varnam is typically sparse, requiring long vowel extensions during vocal rendition thereby requiring the use of gamakas (ornamentation to notes) that characterize the essence of the underlying ragam.

Structure

Varna consists of two parts:

1. The first part (**Purvanga**) comprises Pallavi, Anupallavi, and Muktai swara
2. The second part (**Uttaranga**) comprises one Charana and several Charana Swara passages

The rendition of the Varna is in the following sequence:

- Purvanga is rendered first, and concluded with the repetition of the Pallavi.
- Then the Uttaranga is rendered starting with the Charana and then each Charana Swara by turn. At the end of each Charana Swara passage, the Charana is repeated.
- The varnam is concluded after rendering the Charanam after the last Charana Swaram.
- The Pallavi is not visited again

Tana Varnam and Pada Varnam

- Similarities
 - Sahityam in Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charanam.
 - Solfa for muktayi swaram and charana swaram.
- Differences
 - Only pada varnam has sahityam for muktayi swaram and charana swaram.
 - Sahityam in Tana Varnam has few words, requiring extensive vowel elongations during vocal rendition whereas the Sahityam in Pada Varnams is more expressive and full.
 - Pada Varnam is rendered at a single appropriate speed whereas tana varnam is rendered in two or three speeds

Examples of varnams:

- Tana Varnams - *Eranapai* (Todi), *Vanajakshi* (Kalyani), *Ninnukori* (Mohanam)
- Pada Varnams - *Sarasalanu* (Kapi), *Chalamela* (Natakurinji)

Popular composers:

1. Pacchimiriam Adiyappa
2. Pallavi Gopala Iyer
3. Vina Kuppayyar
4. Tiruvottriyur Tyagayyar
5. Patnam Subramanya Iyer
6. Ramnad Srinivasa Iyengar
7. Balamurali Krishna
8. Lalgudi Jayaraman

Demonstration of Varnam (thana and parts of pada varnam)

Krithis - Purpose

Most of a typical Carnatic music concert will involve rendition of Krithis. Krithis form the major part of all existing musical compositions. A kriti is a composition based on a particular raga and tala. Krithis bring out the beauty and feeling of a raga as the composer can choose the raga, tala, speed, style and the text that the composer wants. Krithis are ideally suited for neraval and kalpanaswara improvisations.

Krithis

1. Kriti is the most important form belonging to the Sabha Gana group. You will not hear a concert without krithi rendition. Theme of krithis is mostly devotional. The emphasis is more on the musicality and aesthetic content.
2. Evolution: Kriti is said to have evolved from the older form, Keertana, which was in vogue around the 14th century. The keertana is a simpler form, giving more emphasis to the lyrics, which are usually devotional. The kriti, however, is a more complex form.
3. Structure: Normally, the kriti has all the three sections: Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charanam. The performer begins with the Pallavi, which is mounted with additional musical phrases in a progressive manner, called *Sangatis* and then goes to the Anupallavi, also sung with variations. He then returns to the pallavi again before proceeding to the Charanam. The kriti ends with the Pallavi. It is usually in Charanam that one finds the *mudra* (signature) of the composer. For example, Tyagaraja used his own name, while Muthuswami Dikshitar adopted *Guruguha* and Syama Sastri, *Syamakrishna*.

Special Features of a kriti:

- Some kritis of Muthuswami Dikshitar have only two sections, the Pallavi and the Anupallavi, where the Anupallavi is called Samashti Charanam. Example: *Anandamritakarshini* in raga Amritavarshini.
- Some of Tyagaraja's kritis have multiple Charanams with different tunes. Example: *Endukunirdaya* in raga Harikambhoji.
- Some kritis have Chittaswara or solfa passages and matching lyrics. Example: *Marivere* in raga Anandabhairavi.
- Certain kritis resemble the Swarajati in that, before a line of text is sung, the corresponding swara passage is sung. Example: Tyagaraja's *Pancharatna* kritis.
- Certain kritis consist of a passage with lyrics, which is faster than the rest of the kriti. This is known as the *Madhyamakala Sahitya*. This is typical of Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi's kritis, who pioneered it. Later, Muthuswami Dikshitar profusely used it in his kritis. Example: Dikshitar's *Mahaganapatim* in raga Nata.

Languages used: There are a number of kritis in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Sanskrit. Examples: Tamil - *Eppo Varuvaro* - Jonpuri; Telugu - *Brocevaravarura* - Khamas; Kannada - *Mosahodenallu* - Subhapantuvareali; Sanskrit - *Ekamresha* - Karnataka Suddha Saveri. There are also kritis in which the text is in two or more languages (Tamil and Sanskrit). Such kritis are called *Manipravala* kritis. An example of the latter is Muthuswami Dikshitar's *Venkatachalapate* in raga Karnataka Kapi.

Popular Composers: Annamacharya, Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar, Syama Sastri, Swati Tirunal, Papanasam Sivan, Patnam Subramanya Iyer and a host of others.

The Trinity

The Trinity have a very special place among the pantheon of great vageyakkaras in the history of carnatic music. Most of carnatic musicians invariably render several compositions composed by the Trinity. Quite

amazingly, all three of them hailed from the same geographical area called Tiruvarur in Tamil Nadu and they were contemporaries.

1. Saint Thyagaraja (born in 1767),
2. Muthuswami Dikshitar (born in 1775) and
3. Syama Sastry (born in 1763).

Born on May 4, 1767, **Tyagaraja** was a prolific composer who composed about 800 songs. His compositions were mainly in the Telugu language though he did compose in *Sanskrit* too. A great **devotee of Lord Rama**, Tyagaraja's songs are very **noble, sublime and soul-stirring**. Saint Tyagaraja is the most celebrated composer in Carnatic music.

The following characteristics define Tyagaraja's compositions:

1. First composer to perfect the musical form *Kriti*.
2. **Introduced the concept of the *Sangati*** (variations on the melodic line of a composition which can enrich the composition.)
3. **Composed several songs in unusual *Apurva Ragas*.**
4. **Style was simple, beautiful and charming which appeals not only to the scholar but also to the layman.**
5. ***Composer of Pancharatna kritis*** (lit. Pancha means five ratna means jewel or gem)
6. His compositions have relatively few words and so their movement is often spritely.

Born on March 24, 1776, **Dikshitar** was the youngest of the Trinity. He wrote about 300 compositions in all which were in *Sanskrit*.

1. A **great scholar**, he had **profound knowledge of the *Vedas*, *Upanishads***, astrology, mythology, magic, etc.
2. He sang praises of all the Deities without exception.
3. He chose a **medium to slow tempo** for his songs which gave him the **scope to bring out the depth and beauty of each *Raga* by using subtle *gamakas* (ornamentations) and delicate microtones. The use of the *Madhyamakala* (passages which are in a faster tempo than the rest of the song) **only added to the beauty of the compositions.****
4. His compositions reflect the great intellect he possessed. He has composed in many rare ragas and talas.
5. His five year stay in the holy city of Benares caused him to be **profoundly influenced by the *Dhrupad* style of singing** which was prevalent at the time. He also composed songs based on some **North Indian *Ragas***.
6. ***Navagraha kritis*** in praise of the nine planets and ***Navavarana kritis*** in praise of Devi (Goddess) are some of his other superb compositions
7. ***Dikshitar's compositions*** are carefully worked out - the laboured quality of his compositions cannot appeal to the layman. They **have to be studied carefully to appreciate their intrinsic value.**

Syama Sastry was born on April 26th, 1762. He was well-versed in both *Telugu* and *Sanskrit*, both of which he used in his compositions. He composed about three hundred compositions, mainly *kritis* and *Swarajatis*. A great devotee of Devi (Goddess Parvati), She is the theme for his compositions. His compositions are very scholarly and have to be listened to a few times before their value can be appreciated. He perfected the *Swarajati* to its present form. Some of his compositions are very rich in rhythmic conception. His style is not as simple as Tyagaraja's but at the same time not as laborious as Dikshitar's.

Demonstration of a brisk krithi rendition without improvisations

Improvisational Aspects

Raga Definition

Despite being a musical reality, the raga defies a simple definition, given that music is an abstract art form. A raga may be described from the following perspectives:

1. **Aesthetic / intuitive:** A combination of swaras (musical notes) which is pleasing to hear is raga.
2. **Analytical / Grammar:** A raga comprises a set of musical notes that follow a defined sequence while ascending in pitch, and an inverse/another sequence while descending in pitch.

In addition, there are further defining factors such as whether a note is rendered prominently or only fleetingly, straight or with embellishment, etc.

3. **Character and emotional impact** A raga has its own unique character and emotional impact. This is the reason that the final, elevating conclusion of a concert is performed only in certain ragas (mangala ragas). For the same reason, the raga chosen for a composition has to be appropriate for the meaning and emotion being conveyed by the text.

Identifying a Raga

During a music concert, there are some people in the audience, who always seem to know which raga is being rendered, much to the bafflement and wonder of those who may not yet be so deeply into music, though they enjoy it keenly.

So, how is the raga identified? Following methods are used:

1. **"Known composition" method:** This however does not help to identify the raga during the alapana, or if the composition is unknown.
2. **"Sounds like" method:** This is a more advanced method used by those who have developed a keen sense for music through long years of listening, but have not had a formal training. As the raga alapana progress, the listener is able to associate the raga lakshana with some krithis whose raga names are known and is able to deduce the name of the ragam. The fact that this method works pretty well in most cases shows that the raga has a feel and intuitive quality that can be recognized, even if one is not conscious of its grammar. There is a however a possibility of confusing between closely allied ragas in this method.
3. **Analytical method:** This is a precise, fail-proof method but requires two qualifications:
 - a. "Swaragnana", i.e., ability tell which notes are being rendered
 - b. Knowledge of the grammar of the raga. Those trained in music use this method naturally and without any effort. This method only depends on the correct understanding of the grammar of the various ragas.

It must be noted that recognizing a raga and giving it a name is only the academic aspect of music. The real purpose of music is its aesthetic enjoyment. So leaving the concert hall feeling elevated is more important than merely knowing the list of ragas rendered. Of course, knowing the grammar of the raga as well as immensely enjoying its rendition in the concert is to have the best of both worlds.

Learning a Raga

Compositions in a raga offer the primary means of learning it. It is said that one should learn at least ten compositions in the same raga to grasp its grammar and scope adequately. The reasons for this are: - all possibilities of a raga cannot be brought out in a single composition - different composers have their own unique style of handling a given raga, and this gives a broader perspective of the raga's scope

Learning varnams in the raga helps greatly to understand the grammar and construction of the raga.

Rendering Raga-Alapana

Opening the Raga:

1. Opening phrases should be chosen so as to clearly communicate which raga is being rendered.
2. The raga should be identified as soon as possible, since much of the enjoyment of music lies in anticipation of how the raga would be developed further. Also, this helps the accompanying violinist to settle down fast.
3. The expert musician can pinpoint or at least give a strong indication of the raga with just a single opening phrase. Add a couple of more phrases, and the introductory outline is completed, and the raga becomes established.

Elaborating the Raga:

1. Next the Raga is systematically elaborated. The duration of this phase depends on the planning of the concert, and the length of the composition that would follow the raga alapana.
2. The elaboration also serves as a prelude to the main composition and matches it properly. For example, if the composition starts from the upper Sa, then it might be inappropriate to dwell too long in the mandra sthayi notes during the alapana.
3. The phrases should be well connected, smooth flowing, and progressively show the main character and individuality of the raga. The features that make this raga pleasing should be brought out well.
4. It is better not to attempt an extensive elaboration of ragas that are known to be small because trying to do so will result in too much repetition and it is difficult to capture the audience attention.

Concluding the Raga:

1. Finally the alapana is concluded such that the built up crescendo finds a well settled and steady finish, and sets the stage for the Kriti following the alapana.

Neraval

1. *Neraval* is when the artiste takes a composed line from *krithi* and sings this line over and over, with fresh music each time.
2. An expert musician can pick any line of a composition and do a neraval. However, the great scholars from whom our tradition has descended, have emphasized that the line chosen for neraval must have 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.
3. Since *neraval* is sung with percussion support, the artiste has to keep track of the *tala* (rhythmic cycle) being used and ensure that the main words of the line occur in the correct position with respect to the tala.
4. As all aspects of music, the sequence of phrases must flow naturally according to the *raga*.
5. As the *neraval* progresses, the artiste introduces brisker passages. *Neraval* is the main aspect of the *pallavi* section of the *ragam-tanam-pallavi* piece.

Kalpana Swara

1. In *kalpana swara* the musician presents the various phrases of a *raga* through the *swaras* that make up the scale of the ragam. *Kalpana swaras* are sung around a chosen line. The artiste will

sing the several *swaras* and finish on the same line every time, ensuring that *swara* exposition has ended on the exact position in the *tala* where the line starts.

2. The choice of the *swaras* used must adhere to the grammar of the *raga*. The combination of *swaras* sung cannot introduce *swaras* that do not belong in the scale of the *raga*.
3. Artistes like T.N.Seshagopalan introduce a lot of mathematical intricacies (*kanakku swarams*) into their *kalpana swaram* singing. This requires a very strong grip on the *layam*.
4. Madurai Mani was an expert in *kalpana swara* singing using melodious free-flowing patterns of notes (*sarva laghu swarams*) introducing innumerable variations that were incredibly appealing.
5. Artistes often practice set patterns of *swarams* (*korvais*) to conclude a *swara* exposition in an enthralling fashion.

TANI AVARTANAM

An outline of the *tani avathanam* is given below:

1. *Tani Avartanam* is the exclusive property of the *laya vidwans*, where they get to show their technical and creative prowess.
2. The *mridangist* plays the *Tani Avartanam* using the same *tala* in which the main artiste left off. He elaborates either on the central theme that the main artiste presented or presents something on his own. This part is called *vinyasa*. Thus, he has a very wide scope. An able and experienced *mridangist* gets the opportunity to exhibit his talent and skill in a remarkable way. After elaboration or *vinyasa*, the *mridangist* rounds off with what is known as a *kuraippu*, (progressive tapering of the number of rhythmic cycles per round), *mohra*, which are just set patterns, before launching into the final stage of the *Tani Avartanam*, the *korvai*.
3. If there is more than one *laya vadyam* in a concert, the *Tani avartanam* is played by each of the artistes in turns, where the general idea is delivered in various parts. In such a case, the artistes generally display the different *gatis* / *nadais* in the same *tala* for sheer variety. It is the usual practice to play different patterns in *Chaturasra gati* in the first part and in *Tisra*, *Khanda* or *Misra gati* in other parts, depending on the time available. All the percussionists merge during the *mohra* and play the *korvai* together, in a grand finale. Subsequently, the main artiste picks up where he left off initially and completes the song.
4. The most important aspect of the *Tani Avartanam* is that it should generally be in the same *kalapramana* (tempo) in which the main artiste has sung the main piece. Besides, it should also be played at the same *eduppu* (starting point of that particular line where the main artiste left off).

Demonstration of Raga Alapanai, Neraval and Kalpana Swaram followed by Tani Avartanam

Ragam Tanam Pallavi

1. The *ragam-tanam-pallavi* is the central item of a Carnatic music concert.
2. It is highly improvised.
3. In its grandest form, it consists of a detailed *raga alapana* followed by *tanam* in the same *raga*.
4. The *pallavi* section is basically a single (pre-composed) line that is elaborated in the *neraval* form. Most artistes will introduce complex mathematical phrases into the *neraval* singing also, often rendering the line in three speeds (*trikalam*).
5. After a lengthy *neraval*, *kalpana swaras* are sung in the same *raga*.
6. Most artistes will supplement this part by singing *kalpana swaras* in different *ragas* (*ragamalika swaram*).

Tillana

Melattur Virabhadrayya was the first person to compose the Tillanas. The Royal-composer, Swati Tirunal and several other post-trinity composers composed this form of music in the 19th century. The Tillana derives its name from the syllables, *ti - la - na*. Tillanas can be compared to Taranas of Hindustani Music.

Structure: The tillana also consists of three sections: Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charanam. The Pallavi and Anupallavi usually comprise rhythmic syllables while the Charanam comprises lyrics followed by passages of swara and rhythmic syllables. Syllables like *nadru*, *deem*, *dirana*, etc. are employed. These syllables have no particular meaning.

Types:

(1) Those sung in music concerts - These are fast-paced and the emphasis is on the raga.

(2) Those performed in dance concerts - These are medium-paced and the jatis are woven into the composition to allow the dancer to exhibit variations in footwork.

Languages used: Telugu, Tamil and Sanskrit.

Popular composers: Swati Tirunal, Patnam Subramanya Iyer, Ramnad Srinivasa Iyengar. In modern times, we have composers like Lalgudi Jayaraman, M Balamuralikrishna and Chitravina Ravikiran.

Examples: *Dirana tanadeemta* (Jhunjooti), *Tanom tanata* (Paras), *Takatajanu* (Mohanakalyani)

Purpose: Tillanas are short and lively compositions that give a fitting finale to a concert, be it music or dance.

Demonstration of a Thillana

Conclusion

By listening to live concerts and recordings of great artistes, listeners can slowly develop a greater appreciation for all the nuances of this great music system, both from an intellectual standpoint and an emotional standpoint. Indian classical music is one of the greatest contributions that India has to offer to the world at large and is also part of the great cultural lineage that we want to preserve and sustain wherever we happen to live it. Those of us who are practitioners of carnatic music, to whatever degree, will absolutely benefit from the listening experience which will help accelerate our musical prowess. For the rest of us, learning to appreciate carnatic music will provide another new avenue to spend your time on something you like. For those of us who are more into carnatic music, some of these concerts can truly be a soul-stirring experience.