
PROGRAM NOTES

Carnatic Music: A Brief Overview

By Nikhil Mandalaparthi, AB '19

Of the Indian subcontinent's countless musical traditions, two in particular have been deemed as "classical": Hindustani music in the north, and Carnatic music in the south. Both traditions emerged in the Hindu temples of the subcontinent and were nurtured by royal courts. Hindustani music, the more well-known tradition of Indian classical music, flourished in the courts of the Mughal Empire and other kingdoms of northern India, where it absorbed musical influences from central Asia and Iran. Carnatic music, on the other hand, was practiced in the temples and royal courts of southern India. These elite traditions were profoundly affected by the experience of British colonial rule, which introduced new instruments and technologies and disrupted traditional patronage systems, paving the way for Indian classical music to appear on the modern concert stage.



The "Carnatic Trinity:" Muttuswami Dikshitar,
Tyagaraja, and Shyama Shastri

Elements of Carnatic Music

At its core, Carnatic music is the interplay between three basic elements:

Raga (melody): The *raga* is the defining feature of Indian classical music. Originally meaning “color” or “passion”, the word “raga” signifies a specific pattern of *swaras* (notes) that provides a framework for compositions and improvisation. Unlike Western melodic scales, *ragas* are defined by the unique melodic oscillations and ornamentation used to travel from one *swara* to another. Two *ragas* may contain the same *swaras*, but their ornamentation could differ significantly. Generally, Carnatic compositions are tuned to one specific *raga*. Some *ragas* boast of dozens of compositions, while others only contain one or two; the former are seen as providing more scope for improvisation than the latter. For the most part, Hindustani and Carnatic music utilize different *ragas*, though there has always been cross-pollination between both traditions.

Tala (rhythm): Just as Carnatic compositions are set to a specific *raga*, they are also set to a specific *tala*, or rhythmic cycle. Popular *talas* include *adi tala* (8 beats), *rupaka tala* (6 beats), and *mishra chapu* (7 beats). Performers and audience members alike delight in intricate mathematical rhythmic patterns, often showcased during a concert’s *tani avartanam* (percussion solo). Indian classical music’s rhythmic emphasis can be seen in its proximity to dance. Both Hindustani and Carnatic music are intimately connected to dance forms; Hindustani music provides the foundation for Kathak dance, and Carnatic music does so for the Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi traditions.

Sahitya (text): Carnatic music’s textual content includes South Indian poetry along with text that lacks linguistic meaning. The lyrics of Carnatic compositions are mostly in South Indian languages like Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam, in addition to Sanskrit. Carnatic music was shaped significantly by three 18th-century composers who lived in the kingdom of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu: Tyagaraja, Muttuswami Dikshitar, and Shyama Shastri. Most compositions are either devotional (*bhakti*) in nature, addressed to Hindu deities, or they are romantic (*shringara*), addressed to a lover (often a deity or king). Additionally, Carnatic music uses non-linguistic text: rhythmic syllables that are used in compositional genres such as the *thillana* and improvisational techniques like *tanam*.

The Concert Experience

The Carnatic ensemble consists of a main performer (often a vocalist), with melodic accompaniment (a violinist) and rhythmic accompaniment (a *mridangam* player). A *tambura* (long-necked stringed instrument) provides a foundational drone, and additional accompanying instruments include the *ghatam* (clay pot), *kanjira* (tambourine), and *morsing* (mouth harp). Though the majority of Carnatic concerts feature vocalists as the main performers, instrumental concerts featuring violin, veena, or flute players are also common,

Unlike Hindustani concerts, where an artist often methodically explores just one or two ragas, the standard Carnatic concert format (which developed in the 1920s) is characterized by the performance of several compositions. The rendition of a Carnatic composition is often preceded by, permeated with, and followed by extensive improvisation. Improvisational techniques include:

- *Alapana*: exploration of a raga without rhythmic accompaniment
- *Kalpana swara*: melodic improvisation using solfege
- *Neraval*: melodic improvisation on a line of a composition, changing the melody but keeping the lyrical syllables intact
- *Tanam*: exploration of a raga with a rhythmic pulse, using rhythmic syllables
- *Tani avartanam*: percussion solo



a *tambura*

The Carnatic World

Indian classical music has always been an elite art form. Carnatic music was historically practiced by three communities: temple musicians who played the *nadaswaram* (large wooden oboe), *devadasis* (courtesans and temple dancers), and Brahmin scholars and musicians. In the early 1900s, caste politics and the rising anticolonial nationalist movement in South India fundamentally altered the social makeup of the Carnatic world, with *nadaswaram* players and *devadasis* marginalized from urban concert stages. The exclusion of *nadaswaram* players represents the loss of a distinct instrumental tradition within Carnatic music, and the marginalization of *devadasis* saw Carnatic music's romantic (*shringara*) compositions set aside in favor of devotional (*bhakti*) compositions. Today, Carnatic music is practiced and patronized

primarily by Brahmins, who sit at the top of India's caste hierarchy and make up around 5 percent of the population.



A Carnatic Music Concert by E. Ramki

Further Reading and Listening

- TM Krishna, *A Southern Music: The Karnatik Story* (HarperCollins, 2016)
- Lakshmi Subramaniam, *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India* (Oxford University Press, 2011)
- Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (University of Chicago Press, 2011)
- T Viswanathan and Matthew Harp Allen, *Music in South India: The Karnatak Concert Tradition and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 2003)
- Dr. Padma Sugavanam, *Lecture-Demonstration on Carnatic Music* (<https://youtu.be/D0BTeuYAj0s>)
- TM Krishna, Manodharma — *A Lecture-Demonstration, Part One* (<https://youtu.be/Va7kZP434LE>)