

A brief and practical introduction to South Indian Classical Music (from "The New Millenium". A magazine for tourists in Kerala)

In my experience as a listener, student, performer, teacher and lover of Indian Classical Music, one of the most common myths I have encountered is the allegation that this sort of music is "Inaccessible" to the lay person. In the following little explanation I will do my best to destroy this myth as best as possible. I do not intend this to be a comprehensive treatise on the subject of course, but just a simple "User Friendly" listening guide to those uninitiated and consequently suspicious non-listeners and to be listeners of the sounds that people of my ilk make, so to speak.

If we take a quick look at all the countries of the world, we discover that not many of them are fortunate enough to have developed their own system of Classical Music over the centuries. (And that many of them have directly gone from the Barbaric times to the Decadent times without the bout of Cultured times in between, but that is another story of course.) <?India is one country which is Doubly blessed in this respect because it boasts of not One but Two distinct and thriving systems of Classical Music....the North Indian and the South Indian, popularly called the Hindusthani and the Carnatic systems of music.

The origins of both these are one and the same. The Vedas, or sacred texts (Of which there are four major ones namely the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Adharva Veda....and Sama Veda is normally said to be The thing where it all started, musically speaking.) which are dated several centuries before Christ and are about the most prehistoric that things historic can get. But let us leave them in their place, buried under the sands of time and preserved in the libraries and computers of Germany...skip a few centuries and come to the twenty first century, with the twentieth century tagging along sheepishly behind.

What does one see when one attends a normal concert of South Indian Classical Music ? (I prefer to avoid the terms Carnatic and Hindusthani as they are the Grossest possible misnomers, perpetrated by the British I would surmise, who had the amazing ability to corrupt names in any language other than their own.....which was in turn mangled by the Americans, but that again, is another story. The Indian name for both these systems of music is one and the same."Shaasthreeya Sangeetham" or "Scientific Music" which is what it IS after all, as you will hopefully start to understand by the time you finish going through this article.) <?

Assuming it is a vocal concert, one perceives a singer of either gender sitting cross legged on the floor, with a Violin and a Mridangam (Drum) on either side and

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perhaps a Ghatam (Earthen Pot) sitting coyly behind. And yes. All these instruments have people...one person each...to Play them too, needless to say.

The singer sings and the instrumentalists play in unison for some time. Then the percussionists take a break, while the singer sings elongated vowels without any obvious rhythmic pulse for some time, with the violinist alertly following him(Or her) like a shadow.

After this the violinist plays his (Or her) own stretch of the same non rhythmic stuff and all four start off again in unison. We observe that words are obviously being sung now.

Then suddenly the singer and the violinist part ways....and start to duet or duel, depending on the situation. The singer fires a round of notes pronounced as they are (Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha and Ni respectively) which is immediately taken up by the violinist and played right back at the singer.

Things continue in this vein for some time with varying lengths of the non rhythmic improvisation and the rhythmic firing of the notes till suddenly the singer and the violinist decide to take a break. And the percussionists do their thing, beating out a truly breath taking array of rhythmic and tonal variations. After the percussion interlude come a cluster of usually short and extremely delightful songs and that brings us to the end of a normal concert of South Indian Classical Music.

During the whole concert communication at the highest level is seen to take place between the musicians, usually with eye contact, shaking of the head and little sounds of appreciation which could vary from a tiny "Tch ! Tch ! Tch !" to little hums of pleasure ("Mmm!" or "Aaha!") to outright ejaculations of joy like "Baley ! Baley !" or "Shabhash ! Shabhash!" (Which loosely translates to "Bravo !" obviously). Interestingly it is not just the singer who complements the accompanists by complimenting them. At any given time any of the musicians could honour any of his/her colleagues with an appreciative sound or glance or a nod of the head. And yes. The members of the audience join in with Their share of appreciative sounds and gestures during the rendition of the music itself,(Though the length of the actual applause at the end maybe significantly less than what is the norm in the West)....Democracy at it's best, as the Swiss may sedately observe.

And now a brief explanation of the sounds.

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A normal concert of this kind has two distinct classes of material sung.

Fixed compositions and improvisation. An imaginative musician would normally fill 30 to 40 percent of his or her concert with fixed compositions and revel in improvisation for the rest of the time. The major part of the classical concert repertoire performed to this day are compositions by a handful of the most brilliant and talented musicians the world has ever seen, who lived and composed....and later died and decomposed....(Sadly, though inevitably) between 1750 and 1850....the same time as another similarly talented group of musicians like Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Haydn and others were blessing the West with Their genius. The Big Three of South Indian Classical Music are Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshithar and Syama Shastri...who all lived in what is now the State of Tamil Nadu in South India.

Interestingly the major share of All their compositions are in Telugu and Sanskrit and not Tamil. The father of South Indian Classical Music as we know it today, or the Grand Old Man of South Indian Classical Music is a gentleman called Purandara Dasa(1484-1564) who laid down the rules and regulations of how to sing what, where and when, which are followed to this day more or less, by any student of Classical Music. He left us with a treasure chest of innumerable compositions, unparalleled in their simplicity, variety, literary and philosophical content, timelessness, devotion to God and sheer common sense. The subjects he touched upon were as varied as the charming antics of the Child Krishna to the conditions necessary for an ideal musician to the travails of family life to the lament about life in general, when people forget to nurture their spirit and are obsessed with just material things.

Some of the other all time great composers were people like Thallapaka Annammacharya, Sadasiva Brahmendra, Bhadrachala Ramadas and Jayadeva to name a few.

The State of Kerala was blessed by our very own Mozart, in the form of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal. Though a ruling king, brilliant in his own way, he is best remembered for his unparalleled musical accomplishments. To this day he remains the sole musician from either system of music to have not only loved but also Mastered Both the North and the South Indian systems of music and also went on to compose the most exquisitely poetic compositions in both these styles. Just as Mozart made his mark in Opera, Sonatas, Concertos, Quartets, Quintets

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and Symphonies, Maharaja Swathi Thirunal went on to make His mark in Pada Varnams, Thaana Varnams, Keerthanams, Javalis, Padams, Thillanas (Brilliantly rhythmic compositions using mostly percussive syllables mainly meant for dance, which he derived from the North Indian version of the same called Taranas) and in Hindusthani compositions like Khyal, Dhrupad, Bhajan, Tappa, Thumri and Hori. And again just like Mozart he lived for just three and a half decades.

Indian music is something meant to be learnt entirely by the ear. The teacher sings. The student listens and tries to copy the sounds that he just heard. And the student teaches His or Her students the same way and so on. The greatest tragedy for composers like Maharaja Swathi Thirunal, Purandara Dasa, Annammacharya, Sadasiva Brahmendra, Bhadrachala Ramadas and so on was that they didn't have an unbroken line of disciples who learnt and preserved their compositions for posterity. While the greatest triumph of the Trinity (Thyagaraja, Dikshithar and Shyama Shastri) was that they did. Fortunately the lyrics of the other composers survived and are being resurrected musically by various musicians of the present with varying degrees of success.

So much for the songs. The most absolute form of improvisation is called an Aalaapana (Or Aalaap in the North) Here the singer paints the portrait of a scale called a Raga (A Raga is actually MUCH more in scope than merely a scale. If one were to compare a Raga to a lovely woman...body, mind and soul included....the scale could be compared to just her skeleton.) using mostly vowels. An Aalaapana could be as brief as a few seconds or it could extend over several hours. (These days due to the restriction in the duration of the entire concert itself normally Alaapanas tend to stretch to a maximum of twenty minutes or so.) One could say that the singer literally Paints with Air. Another place for improvisation is called Thaanam which is one of the most fascinating arenas to display one's creativity. Here the words "Anantha Aanandam" (Meaning "Endless Bliss") are sung again and again with fascinating rhythmic and melodic variations.

A good Thaanam has become an increasingly hard thing to find these days sadly....and subsequently, a hard Thaanam good to find too, I guess.

Another area of improvisation is Neraval where one line of a song is taken for improvisation on and is sung with a variety of variations in tune, but with each syllable of the literature remaining firmly in place, rhythmically speaking. (A Pallavi operates on the same principles as Neraval more or less, with the major difference being that the entire composition consists of just one line which is pulled this way

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and that and subjected to the "Third Degree" in improvisation, so to speak.) And the most appealing (And applause winning) area of improvisation is singing Swarams or the seven Notes as they are. The percussionists who normally remain silent during Aalaaps and Thaanam join in with a Bang, so to speak, when the composition starts....and continue to embellish the concert when the singer improvises. During this time, the singer becomes the composer, conductor and the performer all rolled into one.....

Amazing, don't you think? Well, just wait till you see what I have to say Next!

The accompanists actually Follow the singer. As they have been educated in the oral tradition too, they find it simply part of the day's work to listen to and repeat whatever the singer sings.....on the spot. With the result that ANY competent singer of Indian Classical Music can meet up with ANY competent accompanists ON STAGE (Yes. The three maybe complete strangers to each other.) and give totally synchronized and successful concerts without ever having rehearsed or even discussed the music about to be performed even a single time. I myself have given concerts in various places in India and abroad where this has happened.

And at times we the musicians ourselves marvel at how fantastic a system of pedagogy we have been gifted with.

Hopefully the next time you go for a concert of South Indian Classical Music, you will recognize what is happening.....when the singer improvises, when the accompanists do a good job, all the nodding and the smiling and the sounds made by the musiciansall this will be recognizable for you.