

Not by voice alone

As one who is first a passionate rasika and then a performer and pedagogue of both vocal and instrumental music (and also as one who has composed for both), I have always been fascinated by the complementary roles of these in our wonderful system as well as other systems such as Hindustani, Jazz or Western classical.

While vocal music strikes a chord with most listeners familiar with a system, it is the abstract instrumental music that draws people from outside to it. For instance, in Western classical music, orchestras are heard much more universally, while vocal-centric operas attract a decidedly smaller subset. Hindustani music (which is 'Indian' music to most people on this planet) is to this day, symbolised by the sitar and tabla, a sway that their greatest vocalists are yet to match. But then in north India, high quality instrumental music attracts excellent crowds even today.

Understandable scene

But in Carnatic music which is composition-centric, it is quite understandable that vocal music should occupy the primary place in listeners' hearts. Vocal music is generally taught to even those who aim to specialise in instruments. Some of the greatest instrumentalists such as T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai (nagaswaram) and Budalur Krishnamurthy Sastrigal (gottuvadyam) could give frontline vocalists a run for their money.

Unique species

Notwithstanding the above, it must be remarked that the Carnatic rasika is a special breed among music lovers. (S)he can filter out almost anything



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– poor acoustics, voice culture mostly present through its absence, floating and flexible intonation or a tonal production that would not be considered attractive or even viable in several other systems. The rasika would yet be able to hone in on the emotive or spiritual appeal of a composition based on an odd word here and there, even if the rest of the piece, not being in the native tongue – were unintelligible to him! For instance in a composition like *Vara raga layagnulu tamanuchu vadarerayya Sreerama*, the last part, Sree Rama, would be enough to evoke an overwhelming feeling of bhakti among listeners, though Tyagaraja has in this Chenchukambhoji composition flayed his co-musicians for their total lack of musical sense.

Further, the Carnatic music rasika will often find the biggest hits in other parts of the world such as tani avartanam or virtuoso melody instrumental music utterly uninteresting.

Kalki, the renowned critic, in one of his essays (way back in the 1930s), bemoaned how there was a relative

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freeze among audiences for even high quality instrumental music, as compared to even mediocre vocal music. So, the trend continuing today in many cases is not exactly surprising, even if not desirable. It is time for certain larger perspectives to be shared among listeners so that they can get to appreciate both vocal and instrumental music.

Shaping history

Instruments have played a stellar role in shaping the evolution of our music over centuries. In recent times, the nagaswaram and the veena (which includes the chitraveena) have shaped the way vocalists think about music. The nagaswaram style has influenced stalwarts like GNB, whereas the veena style held sway over those like T. Brinda and Ramnad Krishnan. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, while leaning towards the former for the major part of his music, would sometimes feel tranquil enough to show glimpses of the latter, especially in his viruttam-s or padam-s. Rasika-s and musicians alike have carried on heated arguments about which was superior – the extroverted, macroscopic nagaswaram bani or the introverted, subtle veena bani.

Instruments have influenced composers too. Dikshitar's veena certainly helped him create music that was distinctive compared to say Tyagaraja, Oothukadu Venkata Kavi or Syama Sastry. In fact, the very fact that Dikshitar was a vainika, is proof enough for good thinkers to contest (and disprove) a few assertions put forth in some quarters about the way he was supposed to have handled certain raga-s or phrases, going only

by theory books – however well written – as their basis. A good instrumentalist can show how Dikshitar could not have conceptualised certain phrases the way they are being interpreted by some artists today.

Going further back – closer to the very roots of Indian music, the value of Bharata's defining and pioneering *Natya Sastra* is enhanced immensely because of his scientific approach using instruments. To go even farther back, mythological 'research' shows that none of the Gods or even celestials like Narada seem to have been renowned vocalists.

Solid proof

Humour apart, even today, an instrument such as the chitraveena or violin can prove or debunk many theories put forth by those who have arrived at results only using vocal techniques (such as the *ni* in Begada or the *ma* in Gaulipantu), which in most cases can be instinctive at best and downright flawed otherwise.

Instruments have also been used sometimes to teach vocalists. It is well known in some circles that Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavathar used the chitraveena (that he learnt from his friend Gottuvadyam Narayana Iyengar) to demonstrate some of his musical ideas to his disciples.

Global appeal

Since I am also a vocalist, I can say with no prejudice that the popularity of vocal music is regional in most cases, because the very factors (like language, lyrics, emotive and spiritual content) that draw people who know or empathise with them alienates them from those who

cannot. A few vocalists are now making forays among non-Carnatic audiences, which is heartening.

But it is predominantly instrumental music that has made forays into most countries with small Indian populations, be it Japan, Croatia, Yugoslavia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Poland, Norway, Denmark or several South American or African countries and even shown them Carnatic music. It is instrumentalists who have been featured in high quality world-level events, be it the Olympics or Millennium Festivals. Instrumentalists have led the way where collaborations with leading symphony orchestras or renowned ensembles are concerned. It is instrumentalists who have won Grammys or other world level awards. In short, it is instrumentalists who have put our system on the global map. In fact Carnatic music's image globally is through the conquests of virtuosos such as Flute Mali, N. Ramani, Lalgudi Jayaraman, Veena Balachander, Palghat Raghu, Umayalpuram Sivaraman, Trichy Sankaran, Karaikkudi Mani, Dr. L. Subramanian, Dr. L Shankar, U. Shrinivas and Shashank, to name a few.

Local apathy

Given all this, why is it that there is a deficit of appreciation for instrumental music – except for the novelty value of new instruments and sounds or for music geared to trickle and tickle rather than wash the listener over with tranquillity? One of the chief reasons is that most instrumentalists play music that is at a total disconnect from the vocal style, even when they play songs popularised by vocalists. In fact some of them play at a higher standard than many vocalists, but the style of plucking/

bowing/strumming clearly showcases their unfamiliarity with the lyrics, leave alone meaning and spirit of the song. Instrumentalists (their guru-s) should definitely think much about this vital aspect of our great system if they have to appeal to serious connoisseurs, unless they are super-brilliant artists who can hold sway with just two dimensions – melody and rhythm.

Tuning and intonation

Instrumental music will never be able to get away with tonal or intonation impurities, even with the highly tolerant Carnatic rasika-s. The first step for string artists is tuning their instruments perfectly. Often this is compromised by even established artists and it shows up badly throughout the concert even if the playing is not incompetent. If a 20-stringed sitar/sarod or a 100-stringed santoor can be tuned meticulously by human beings just a few hundred miles away, what excuse can be offered for not tuning a 7-stringed veena or a 4-stringed violin properly – except a lack of commitment to standards? How can rasika-s be blamed if the fretting of a veena (or guitar) is not accurate or the holes in a flute are not carefully checked? Yet, these are realities in a sizeable majority of the cases.

Tone and timbre

Next comes good tonal production, which involves sound plucking/bowing/blowing techniques as well as excellent use of the left hand. While left hand techniques in the Carnatic violin are quite distinct from Western systems, it is a fact that very, very few (such as Dwaram Venkataswami Naidu, Prof. T.N. Krishnan and M.S. Gopalakrishnan) have invested

seriously in bowing techniques. It is not uncommon to see many wielding a bow almost like an iron box at times, which cuts off the usable part by almost 50 percent. Microscopic attention to plucking techniques are as important. Especially the use of the ring finger will go a long way towards bringing vocal style renditions.

A fair question may be posed: 'How many vocalists sing with good tone/sruti purity or even with clarity or good pronunciation?' But as already mentioned, other factors like lyrics play a big role in offsetting the lack of these in the minds of the votaries of Carnatic. But truth to say (I speak as a vocalist here!) it severely limits vocal music to the region.

Repertoire

Many instrumentalists think that a handful of tunes can run careers. It can, only in the case of super-quality artists who can make the same song fresh with each rendition. A good vocalist or instrumentalist must know at least 800-1000 quality songs from authentic sources (committed to long term memory and accessible at will) in order to be classified as solid. This need not result in all of them being presented on the stage. But they will definitely give a serious boost to the artist's musicianship, thinking and expression, even in the creative sections.

While there is a distinctive repertoire (if one can call short melodies – often without lyrics – that) in Hindustani, there is not much in Carnatic.

Certain songs like *Raghuwamsa* (Kathanakutoohalam) or *Ninnuvina* (Navarasa Kannada) are more suited for instruments than the voice, but that is no more than a happy accident. Instrumental compositions are not unwelcome in Carnatic concerts in small percentages – say 5-15% (but this could vary based on each artist's outlook; if it is a fusion concert, the story would be different.) A number of Lalgudi Jayaraman's tillana-s can be considered pioneering instrument-centric efforts. Gottuvadyam Narayana Iyengar's *English Notes* were definitive instrumental pieces, while Muthiah Bhagavata's *Note* is certainly more suited to instruments, even though immortalised by Madurai Mani Iyer's vocalised solfa rendition.

Thinking beyond the instrument

While each instrument has its own beauty which must be explored and projected, a great artist often goes that extra mile and brings out more than just that. The kind of value that Veena Balachander brought to the table with his sustained strokes or elaborate deflection, the manner in which Flute Mali extended the frontiers of gamaka-s in flute or the manner in which Lalgudi Jayaraman accentuated the sahitya bhava with his distinctive bowing techniques, has given them a larger-than-instrumentalists stature.

Building taste

Audiences need appreciation courses on the unique and attractive features of various instruments

periodically, so that they are able to relate to quality instrumental music. Otherwise, instrumentalists may end up doing a lot of extra-musical things – from sub-standard gimmickry in traditional concerts to half-baked, under-rehearsed or ill-matched collaborations under the banner of fusion – a profusion of which is due to the confusion among both organisers and artists themselves as to what can serve as an infusion of excitement for audiences afflicted by a diffusion of musical values.

Not for the jobless

The above notwithstanding, I conclude by addressing a serious misconception – that instrumentalists resort to jugalbandi-s or fusion because of non-takers locally for their wares. Nothing can be farther from the truth in the case of topnotch artists, who have earned very lucrative global markets because their fundamentals (melody and rhythm) meet international yardsticks. When such artists accept collaborative engagements, it is out of a genuine desire to explore other avenues and also share the beauty of Carnatic music with artists and audiences of other cultures. At the end of the day, these are the artists who bring in newer audiences to Carnatic music. As long as their motives, credentials and competence are impeccable, their efforts should never be derided (irrespective of the success or otherwise of a show on a given day), as it will seriously cramp the expansion of our great system.

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