Tradition, classicism and innovation (part 2)

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**Some predictions**
(or wishful thinking?)

The violin was a colonial instrument that entered the fold of south Indian art music perhaps in the early 1800s thanks to Baluswami Dikshitar and the Tanjavur Quartet. Thus, about 200 years ago, the violin was not part of the Carnatic music tradition while it is an integral component today. Not only have various banis of performing the violin come into being, there are competitions and benchmarks that place the various players of today. The violin came to India during the lifetime of Beethoven. Its natural sound range and tuning (E/A/D/G) was altered to suit the vocal range of Indian performers; even the strings are tuned S/P/S/P much like the Saraswati veena of south India.

The harmonium came to India with the missionaries; the pedal harmonium was a substitute for the church organ. The hand bellowed harmonium was an innovation which gained popularity in Hindustani khayal music, thumri, bhajan and keertan renditions, the bhajana sampradaya and other sub-genres of Carnatic music yesteryear.

Playing Carnatic music on instruments alien to the south Indian soil in a solo setting is just an extension of the existing paradigm of Carnatic music. However, bringing alien instruments into the fold of a vocal performance of Carnatic music is certainly an innovation of the past two centuries that has now become a tradition. The violin which generally only accompanied vocal and flute music in the 1960s now even accompanies the veena.

Tyagaraja was an innovator, the first to develop sangatis to the extent we admire and appreciate today. Dikshitar created new kriti formats, totally different from those of the existing norm. He also created a new genre of nottuswara sahiyita with Sanskrit lyrics fitted to colonial tunes, thus conforming to the definition of an ‘inferior vaggeyakara’ as described in the Vaggeyakara Lakshanamu section of the Sangeeta Sampradaya Pradarsini! Although he was rooted in the orthodox Venkatamakki tradition and the Srividya tantric fold, he was easily able to step out of his shoes, negotiate with alien tunes brought in by the East India Company and create a hitherto non-existent genre of Indo-Colonial music.

There has been innovation in the content of kutcheris. The word ‘tukka’ is of Urdu origin (it means ‘a slice/piece/part of the whole’) and it is no secret that the ‘tukkada chapters’ of certain artists are more popular than the ‘poorva bhagas’ of their kutcheris. And while Hindustani styled non-kampita prayogas are occasionally frowned upon in kutcheris, the tukkada section of a kutcheri is often replete with bhajans and abhangs and an occasional tarana.

Today is not the last word on Carnatic music. After all, the kutcheris of today bear little resemblance to the performances of yesteryear. The microphone, the hall sizes, the accompaniments, and short listening spans have created a performance culture probably vastly different from the high pitched long span recitals of earlier centuries. An Indian Rip Van Winkle from the year 1800 woken up from a 200-year slumber today would probably shudder at the sight of a Western violin being used to play ragas such as Anandabhairavi, the drop in sruti of the male singers, and the overt dependence on amplification.

The (live) audiences of today are all in concert halls, the sabhas the very act of singing in which is condemned by none other than Tyagaraja. It is an irony that the very words that he uses to condemn musicians singing ‘to mortals in sabhas’ are being sung to 21st century mortals in sabhas today for a fee.

The Carnatic music world today has a number of conundrums. The orthodox Carnatic music community holds the
kutcheri-dharma as sacrosanct and begins the day with Kumbakonam degree coffee regardless of the fact that the word kutcheri – a word of Urdu origin – means ‘a court’ and it does not even have anything to do with music. Every bean used to make the filter coffee cherished by this ‘tradition bound’ world owes its origin to the Muslim Sufi Saint Baba Budan who smuggled a lone coffee bean into India from the Middle East.

Here is a quote from vidwan M. Balamuralikrishna again from his 1984 interview to Sruti. “Those who harp on tradition (and tradition, the way they understand it) should either go along with the traditional musicians to heaven or understand what tradition really is”.

Innovations in the future

So, given where we are with the framework of ragas and talas that constitute the backbone of the larger umbrella of the Carnatic music tradition (above and beyond the kutcheri paddhati in sabhas) what innovations may we expect in the future?

- The present day kutcheri and its scaled down versions on radio and television, as well as the scaled up four-hour kutcheris, are the result of an innovation from the days of Ariyakudi. Could radical changes happen to the form and presentation of a kutcheri? One hears the rumbling of the beginning of these changes and the resultant echoes in the form of rebuke from critics. Further changes are bound to happen. Only time will tell.

- Other sub-genres of Carnatic music such as the sacred music of the Tevaram or the music that pre-dated the Trinity, might gain currency and potentially a more musically aware so

accompaniment even for the music that came into being before the violin got absorbed into Carnatic music, unlike concerts of Western art music where baroque era music is performed strictly with instruments of that period.

- The term manodharma sangeetam refers to the improvisatory component of Carnatic music rendition. Today’s manodharma is exhibited in the alapana, the tanam, the niraval, sangati and kalpana swara renditions. Can this be extended? Can other forms of improvisation come into being?

- Could ‘on the spot creation of lyrics’ become a feature of concerts? There was a practice during the golden era of dhrupad when singers had to be proficient in the art of creating compositions spontaneously. Could that skill be part of the manodharma component of kutcheris of the future? Would that involve a different kind of training? Would this difference in approach to creativity create a new breed of musicians amongst whom a Tyagaraja may incarnate in our generation?

- The rasas explored in Carnatic music will broaden in scope to include a wider body of expression; themes will expand beyond Hindu religious ideas and cover a broad range of subjects much like how the freedom movement in the early 1900s spurred the creation of a patriotic repertoire which entered the Carnatic music kutcheri and took singers like MS and DKP to dizzying heights of popularity. This broadening of subject areas will in turn play a larger role in enabling diverse audiences to enjoy and appreciate the art form.

- Shorter compositions written by the performers themselves will add an element of unpredictability and a greater degree of creativity in kutcheris and will contribute to an enhanced sense of anticipation on the part of audiences.

- Music moved from temples and royal courts to sabhas in Madras. The kutcheri and other allied forms of performance may move to other places such as schools. The movement to other non-conventional avenues such as parks and kuppams has already begun.

- Innovation in music education and the introduction of art music as a discipline in schools may spur the creation of curricula that forwards musical awareness and appreciation, and basic performance skills.

- Formal curricula in music history and music creation (formal training in building a community of vaggeyakaras), will create career options in music beyond the current realm of performance and teaching.

- The ‘on-demand availability of music’ on the Internet and social media is already beginning to ‘disrupt’ traditional models of music delivery and pedagogy. The increased online presence of performers, teachers, students and rasikas will only increase the outreach of Indian art music.

- Voice culture will play a larger role and will refine the aesthetics of what is heard.

- Ensemble performances of ‘arranged music’ featuring non-traditional instruments (from all over the world) and choirs as well as manodharma sangeetam played by unconventional ensembles will begin to develop new audiences and will become a part of the larger Carnatic music umbrella.

All of the above will create a more erudite base of music makers and consumers, a wider audience base and potentially a more musically aware society.

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(Concluded)