

Does music have a religion?

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Each religion has its system of music based primarily on its cultural origin. Church music indicates the Western origin of its original propagators and mosque music indicates its Arabian origin. But does music itself as an art have any religion? The themes of virtually all traditional compositions of Carnatic music are based on the Hindu religion, but does this imply that Carnatic music as an artistic system cannot exist without a basis of Hinduism, or for that matter, any religion? The above question is different from the issue whether there is a place for persons of non-Hindu religions in the Carnatic firmament. We already have Vedanayagam Pillai as a composer, Abraham Panditar as a musicologist and K.J. Yesudass and Sheikh Chinna Moula as performers. Dikshitar experimented with Western tunes. A Sikh gentleman has been regularly attending the concerts of the Music Academy during the season for the last 30 years. (Paradoxically, despite having two great ancient systems of classical music, we have chosen a Western tune and orchestration for our national anthem)!

We do have beautifully tuned non-religion-based Tamil compositions like *Tamarai pootta tadagamadi* and *Muttamizh solayile muttamma*, and several secular songs by Subramania Bharati tuned in beautiful Carnatic ragas. Most of us enjoy Tyagaraja's or Dikshitar's songs not because we are deeply religious or acutely conscious of our being Hindu, but because of their musical excellence. Theoretically, it is possible to have a Carnatic concert consisting solely of secular songs or even songs based on Christianity or Islam. But the existing

reservoir of Hindu religion-based compositions is so large and musically of such outstanding quality that it would be ages before secular and non-Hinduism-based compositions could match them in number or overshadow them in quality and displace them.

Music consists of bhava, raga and tala. Bhava is of two types—sahitya bhava and raga bhava. I do not see any objection to any type of sahitya being introduced. The main criterion, however, should be not their Christianity or Islam or iconoclasm but whether the sahitya is capable of generating bhava. Bhava is the developed, relishable state of a strong emotion. The bhakti of the Trinity is one such emotion, so is the eroticism of Jayadeva or Kshetravaya, the dramatic sense of Gopalakrishna Bharati or Arunachala Kavi, or the patriotism of Subramania Bharati. In the hands of a gifted composer, songs on Jesus or Allah can certainly generate a strong emotion capable of being refined into bhava. (The song *Chittam eppadio* in *Nadanamakriya* by Vedanayagam Pillai on Christ is an example). Allah as a theme could prove tricky as any description of Allah or his qualities is liable to be considered blasphemous by hard-core Muslims. But it takes a colossal genius to produce bhava out of porambokes!

What is the expected benefit from such innovations? Is it going to attract a large number of Christians and Muslims who hitherto have not been attending Carnatic music concerts? What section of listeners is expected to be attracted by a song on porambokes? Or, as an art, is the music going to please listeners and performers more?

Or, is it just the ego satisfaction that one has performed an act of significant social equalisation and inclusion if not 'cultural conversion'? Is it the revolutionary delusion of 'breaking the Hindu monopoly in Carnatic music'.

A vast majority of the Carnatic music audience and musicians do not know the language of the compositions they hear or sing, nor are they deeply aware of the themes of the songs or contemplate on them while listening. (In fact, many of them could be atheists!) In instrumental music, the audience, and sometimes even the musician, may not know what song is being played. (At wedding, a nagaswara vidwan was playing *Sadamatin* of Tyagaraja in Gambheeravani. Out of curiosity, I asked him what kriti he was playing. He said he did not know, he had only learnt the tune). In such a case, the theme of the song seems irrelevant to the enjoyment of music. The theme and the language are important only if, in addition to the music, one wants to appreciate the literary merit of the lyric.

Interestingly, the problem does not seem to exist in Hindustani music. Bade Ghulam Ali Khan sings *Hari om tat sat* and Bhimsen Joshi sings *Allah tero nam*. (But even here, I have not come across any musician singing songs in praise of Jesus or porambokes). This may be because Hindustani music has been nurtured by several Muslim rulers and Nawabs and traditionally many leading Hindustani musicians have been Muslims. Moreover, Hindustani music does not have such a rich reservoir of traditional, sophisticated compositions as Carnatic music has.

An issue which has agitated the minds of many Carnatic music rasikas is the adoption (plagiarism?) of Carnatic tunes and changing the lyric to reflect the Christian or Islamic faith. Plagiarism of Western musical tunes is widespread in Hindi films and these songs become hits. The Hindi tune *Beena, madhur madhur swar bol* became the Carnatic uruppadi *Kandan, karunai puriyum vadivel*, an all-time favourite in Madurai Mani's concerts. Even a creative composer like Papanasam Sivan adopted Tyagaraja's tunes in some of his compositions. (*Ninnarul iyambalaguma* is in the same tune as *Ninnu nera namminanura*). In my view, though this amounts to musical discourtesy to the composer and dishonesty, it also implies an admiration for the original tune. As there is no way this can be prevented,

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the best thing is to enjoy the lyric if it is good and if not, ignore it.

My suggestion is: let the present trend play itself out; if it produces some

outstanding music, it will continue and become stronger and if it does not, it will pass unnoticed over time.

(The author is a retired civil servant and connoisseur of music)



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