

## The status of Carnatic instrumental music today T.T. Narendran

Carnatic music has been evolving, probably, from the time it took its roots in south India. The evolution involves forms of compositions, usage of ragas, introduction of new ragas, themes of compositions, concerts, formats, duration, emphasis and more. Vocal and instrumental music have coexisted and have enjoyed varying degrees of patronage from the listening public (“languished for want of patronage” may be more appropriate in some cases!).

Nagaswaram and tavil, veena, flute, gottuvadyam (now rechristened chitraveena), mridangam, ghatam and khanjira were among the traditional instruments. Over time, other instruments were introduced to the music with varying degrees of success. The violin remains the strongest entrant—it was amenable to the production of most of the gamakas; the bow helped sustain notes for a long duration; it was seamlessly adopted as an accompanying instrument for all vocal concerts, for most flute concerts and for a few other instruments, too. Some lay listeners say that it is easier to identify a raga when the alapana is played on the violin.

In the early part of the 20th century, the harmonium had served as an accompanying instrument but faded out, eventually. The clarinet came into Carnatic music but with limited use, and with a small number of musicians. The mandolin and the saxophone were much later entrants and do not seem to have made a significant impact except when handled by the musicians who pioneered their entry to the concert platform.

Solo instrumental concerts do not seem to have enjoyed the popularity of vocal music, most of the time. If we scan the archives of the Music Academy’s annual series in the 1930s or 40s, we find the same pattern, that is, a few instrumental concerts amidst a large number of vocal concerts.

Let us seek out reasons: If improvisation or manodharma is accorded the premier status, then the medium of music,

vocal or instrumental, should not matter. Raga alapanas and swaraprastaras in the hands of capable instrumentalists should have been effective on the concert stage. The progression of sangatis in kritis, a noteworthy feature of Carnatic music, should have also sounded just as good. The high priority accorded to kritis, with particular emphasis on lyrics was, perhaps, a development that hurt instrumental music. It promotes Carnatic music “recitals” rather than “concerts”, and that is probably what prevails today in the performance domain. Even with this shift in emphasis, some instrumentalists have been lauded in the past for near-perfect vocal renditions of kritis. If the audience seeks to listen to the lyrics to enjoy the music, then the instrumentalist is at a loss. Ironically, in vocal concerts, many of the popular compositions are in languages that many in the audience (and, often, the musician, too) do not understand. The lyrics may be mispronounced, distorted, split inappropriately and yet the audience wants to hear the lyrics!

Among the vocalists, the champions of correct lyrics, of correct pronunciation and of conscious rearrangement of poetry’s lines to prose order, have taken it to a whole new level. The intrinsic bhava of the music has yielded place to the bhava of the lyrics. Often, the repetition of a line for the sake

of an ordered progression of sangatis became a burden on the lyrics-conscious singer. The instrumentalists and those, disadvantaged by languages they did not comprehend or could not pronounce right, were pushed further away from the concert platforms.

What then, is expected of a solo instrumentalist? There is a sizeable section of our audience that seems to demand a wide repertoire, with kritis and ragas not being repeated, from a vocalist but an identifiable, recognisable set of kritis to be dished out by the instrumentalists, preferably sounding as close to the vocal rendition as possible. Breaking away from the tradition of following the vocalist and creating new musical forms for the instruments does not seem to have aroused much of an interest among the native audience.

