

## THE STATE OF INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

At a panel discussion during the December season, musicians spoke about the recent trends which have had a considerable impact on Carnatic music like social media and advent of digital gurus (such as YouTube). While analysing the pros and cons, one 'not so positive' development that was discussed was the dwindling interest of rasikas in instrumental music. Carnatic music seems to be going through a

phase where interest in instrumental concerts is waning. *Sruti* spoke to several instrumentalists and all of them consistently expressed the view that instrumental music outside Chennai enjoyed better audience and appreciation! Perhaps it is time for organisers and musicians to find new ways of attracting audiences to instrumental kutcheris in Chennai. *Sruti* recently conducted a two-day lecture demonstration series with

Music Forum, which focussed only on music instruments—their history, playing styles and pointers on how to appreciate instrumental music. How do we kindle more interest in instrumental music? *Sruti's* correspondent V. KARPAGALAKSHMI spoke to some of the leading instrumentalists like Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi and Akkarai Sisters (violin), J.A. Jayanth and Sikkil Mala (flute) and some percussionists too. Here are excerpts from the interviews.

## What instrumentalists have to say

**Q. Do you feel there is a good response for instrumental music? How do you approach a concert?**

**LALGUDI VIJAYALAKSHMI :** I feel there is more appreciation for instrumental music in other states compared to our own. Chennai audience needs to learn to appreciate instrumental music better. It is also a vicious circle; organisers arrange only a few instrumental concerts citing lack of crowd and because of less number of instrumental concerts the audience attendance is poor; even in a series, maximum concerts are that of vocal music.

When we (my brother GJR Krishnan and I) approach music, we are very conscious that we are expressing music through an instrument and that it should reach the audience and make them enjoy it without the lyrics. We are mindful when we select the compositions to be played in our concerts. The nuances such as anuswaras and intonations are heard more clearly and sharply when played on an instrument than in vocal music.



HEMAMALINI S.



**AKKARAI SISTERS :** While performing abroad we found that the audience which comes for a concert stays till the end; be it vocal or instrumental. Perhaps they are more attuned to instrumental music and enjoy it better.

The Chennai audience is not able to relate to the music if they cannot 'hear' the words. Whenever we perform a rare kriti, one of us will sing it while the other plays the violin to familiarise the audience with the piece.

**J.A. JAYANTH :** A fresh approach will help. While trying to make the concert interesting, artists should not depend just on speed but include slower items too, while keeping the

classical tradition intact. Several youngsters are interested in Carnatic music and are also quite knowledgeable; but their work schedule makes it difficult for them to attend concerts.



HEMAMALINI S.

**SIKKIL MALA :** The reason could be because there are too many events in Chennai, and also perhaps people are biased about whom they should listen to! Irrespective of the number of people present, we should perform well and not be indifferent. I do not resort to gimmicks just for the sake of getting more

opportunities and I am very particular about presenting soulful music in its purity. Every raga has various bhavas and exploring such aspects demands a lot of effort. Also, if we play compositions popularised by other vocalists, the audience is better able to relate to what we present.



AKIRA IO

**Q. Do you think there is parity when it comes to instrumental concerts?**

**LALGUDI VIJAYALAKSHMI :** In vocal music even when it is an unknown song in an unfamiliar language, the audience seems to enjoy it, but when it comes to instruments it has to be a well-known kriti! The mindset appears to be anchored on the lyrics to be able to appreciate the music. If we can play a rare kriti in many concerts, it will soon become familiar to the people. In fact, there are compositions which are heard more often and also more suitable to instruments than vocal. The audience too should make an effort to listen to instruments more; they are missing out on a lot of great music. It is enough to keep your ears open and listen in order to realise there is more pure music beyond lyrics.

**AKKARAI SISTERS :** Though our music is based mainly on the vocal style, there are pieces to demonstrate the

virtuosity of the instruments. For instance, a varnam can be played in five speeds on instruments, while the same may not be possible in vocal. So artists could select a raga/composition which would be interesting to listen to even in five speeds. We should also plan the concert in a balanced manner without compromising on the greatness of the music. In the ragam-tanam-pallavi for instance, the tanam is very suitable to showcase the virtuosity of the instrument and it is also quite abstract. However, an entire concert with abstract tunes will not work under the kutcheri formula.

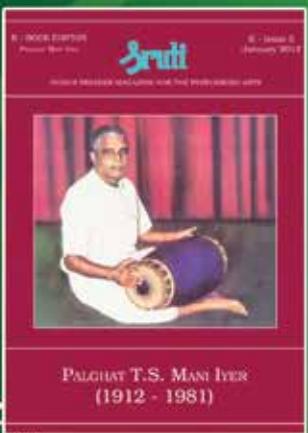
**JAYANTH :** Vocal and instrumental music cannot be compared. Instrumentalists can play in genres other than classical music too; it may not be that easy for vocalists, though some artists have managed both well.

Similarly, while some instrumentalists sound purely Carnatic in a classical concert, some are not able to avoid the influence of light music. But instrumental music can never match the adulation that vocal music gets, be it Carnatic or Hindustani.

**SIKKIL MALA :** A senior musician-scholar once told me, that vocal music is three dimensional with lyrics, melody and rhythm, whereas instrumental music is two dimensional without the lyrics! Perhaps the lyrics add to the attraction. To understand and explore the subtleties takes a lot of time. The keenness to listen to music on the whole, seems to be on the decrease due to various distractions.

(Detailed interviews can we read on [srutimag.blogspot.com](http://srutimag.blogspot.com))





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