



CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN LISTENED MUSICAL TRADITION AND WRITTEN MUSICAL TEXT

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is an overview of the engagements between two modes of remembering generally seen in practice in Indian music. Listening practices formalised through traditional modes in languages learning is combined with modes of writing in the reproduction of musical repertoire. Hence 'heard' or 'listened' music is also treated here as musical text. These modes in combination also become important for establishing the historicity of musical repertoire, enabling, both a recognition of style and departure as well as time period of the repertoire.

**KEYWORDS:** *Indian music , musical repertoire.***INTRODUCTION**

This kind of intertextuality is found in almost all forms of classical music in India. This paper is an extract from the research done on the production of such an inter-textual repertoire in 2010, of an early 18th century south Indian music opera by the eminent carnatic musician Smt. R.Vedavalli. It was for the first time in many decades that a classical music lineage of performers was engaging with a three century old opera produced for and practiced by the devadasi musicians. Pallaki Seva Prabandham, the opera composed by Maharaja Shahji Bhonsale II was recast in music by ¹Guru Vedavalli and her disciples, through a careful construction of the melody from a bare text of notation. It was at once a heritage piece from 300 years before, the fruits of Professor P. Sambamoorthy's enormous effort in early 20th century, to trace a singing lineage and notate the music. But mostly it was a contemporary construction of an intertextual development of musical technique and contextual framing musical memory within a value system.

The process was more about the questions and less about the answers. How old is the Raga Saveri or the Raga Pantuvarali really, as it appears in the opera? How much of its form, that

¹ Sambamoorthy. P, *Pallaki Seva Prabandham: Telugu Opera of Shahji Maharaja of Tanjore*, Madras, Indian Music Publishing House, 1955

emerged from the notation, belonged to the Devadasi lineage, considering it was here that the Professor first heard it being sung, how much of the notation was Professor Sambamoorthy's own impression or intent and how much of the current version was Guru Vedavalli's own lineage and practice? And what part of it was compromised both by the limitation of the multiple layers of listening and modes of archiving?

Was this a search for authenticity or was it an attempt to adapt the given form to a contemporary performance? Was it a search for some musical truth or was it just an attempt to glimpse a sensibility of a different period if such a thing were possible? This course taken by the musicians was not that different from the one's taken by historians who construct narratives from the archives.

This paper is not about the History of musical practice but an attempted critique on the historian's frameworks of enquiry into the nature and evolution of southern Indian classical music at the turn of the 19th century. The dualities of textuality and orality; craft and knowledge, have emerged as core concern in debates, especially those on the social construction of Indian music. My paper attempts to reexamine our assumptions about these, all two clean compartmentalizations, in musical construction and archiving.

Musical events take many forms and there are multiple claims to musical practice, as divine expression, as knowledge, as craft (creative endeavour), as cultural capital (heritage), as a social signifier (ritual and social music) and as a medium of communication (for bhakti, politics, etc). The construction and archiving of this as such also involves multiple modes, the prominent ones being singing, listening and reading. In Indian aesthetic conception, as scholars like Mukund Lath remind us, musical continuity or parampara may be attributed to the presence of three factors, the kavi or the composer-*vaggeyakara*, in the case of music, the *kavi karma* or the process of music or poetry making and the *sahrdaya*, or the sensitive recipient . The musician's ² attempt is always in the direction of carefully negotiating between the Sahrdaya in front of her and the sambhashana or conversation that is to be had with the musical past. Within this negotiation there are other negotiations such as those between the text and practice, technology and aesthetics etc. The crafting of music has been captured for nearly 2000 years in numerous grammatical and descriptive texts in great detail. However, the difficulty for practitioners of Indian music lies in the inscrutability of these texts which cannot be interpreted unless there is sufficient immersion in the practice of music. Such an imperative laid on continuity of thought in the crafting of a musical, has given rise to long standing debates between practitioners and musicologists, that today, happen increasingly under the hawk eye of the historian and the anthropologist, thus becoming a subject matter for social theorists.

In the context of Carnatic music the 19th century holds a special significance. This century in many ways marked the momentous forging of musical impression and grammar (Lakshya and Lakshana) together in the production and performance of compositions by the 3 great Vaggeyakara, Shyama Sastri, Tyagaraja and Muttuswami Dikshitar, setting the course for the what becomes modern Carnatic music as we know it today, The 19th century is also a very significant century which sees the beginnings of the divergence between orality and written textuality of

²Lath, Mukund, *Transformation as Creation: Essays in the History, Theory and Aesthetics of Indian Music, Dance and Theatre*, New Delhi, Aditya Prakashan, 1998

music. It is this century that sees the tectonic shift from music as craft to music as knowledge. It is roughly, here that I wish to locate my paper and look at some of the conversations happening in musical craft, about the “karna parampara” (the listening lineages) and the written text.

At the turn of the 20th century however it was believed that writing of music was a desperate measure of a time when their practices were under duress due to excessive Colonial intervention. We find a profusion of usages like conserve and preserve musical heritage and rich tradition and such sentiments. The foreword to the 1904 magnum opus of Carnatic archiving, the Sangita

Sampradaya Pradarsini, carries a passage where the writer reveals that the patron of the book had even notated Southern Classical music in English staff notation in order to preserve the great Indian musical heritage which is both “scientific and has the power of knowledge”. The question remains, were these sentiments, shared by the practitioners? Perhaps but in the author’s note in SSP, the Vaggeyakara, Subbarama Dikshitar, the author, only offers gratitude to his patron the Maharaja of Ettayapuram and Chinnasami Mudalaru, and ends with a note on his future projects.

The patron and the artist in this case seem to come to the text from two different motivations, it seems, the patron from an anxious place of loss of heritage and the author from a place of conviction in the significance of continuity of technique hitherto transmitted through a listening lineage, both converging on one mode of archiving which for this genre was a very innovative push at the time.

With this discussion on the emerging intertextuality in Carnatic music in late 19th century, I would like to argue that the 19th century musical experience in Southern Indian Classical music, was mediated largely by listening and remembering not merely because (i) writing did not exist in music or (ii) that writing was a community specific practice. The superior status of *listening* as a modular intervention in the construction of Carnatic music is because the listening mode enabled the construction of music in a certain way that comes to define the entire genre, especially through the Vaggeyakara kritis.

The Vaggeyakara compositions of the 19th century, is still considered integrally related to the practice of listening or Karna parampara. This old usage does not pertain as much to rasikatva or a refined reception of the music or transmission of information as it does with an ecology of the vaggeyakara mode of music construction. Perhaps in this sense it to qualifies the space of the musical publics, through notion like “kelvi gnanam” or knowing by hearing that may also indicate a co-perception of what is heard and shared together as musical values. I approach this point today not through a detailed musical analysis but largely through History, both written and *listened* History.

The two texts that I use primarily in this paper are, U.V.Swaminatha Iyer’s (1855-1942) “Talaimuraikku podum” - a book of biographical sketches and critical observations on early and mid 19th century musicians and composers of the tamil speaking region, first published as essays in the magazines and newspapers like Kalaimagal, Dinamani, Swadesi mitran, Ananda vikatan and now compiled and Published as an edited volume in 2016³. Not a hagiographical work, its value for modern historians lies in the exquisite narratives interwoven with details from written works, anecdotes, grammatical treatises in music, language, craft, mysticism and religion sprinkled

³Swaminatha Iyer, U.V, *Thalaimuraikkum Podum, Chennai, Kalachuvadu Publications, 2016*

generously with his own observations. The *Sangita Sampradaya Pradarsini* (SSP) by Subbarama Dikshitar, (1839-1906) the grand nephew of Muttuswami Dikshitar. In this book Subbarama Dikshitar who was himself a vaggayakara of great merit develops a swara notation method with a system of diacritics and symbols to represent the gamakas or movements of which the Carnatic form has many.

Historical accounts by U.V. Swaminatha Iyer and notation of SSP are reminders of a changing reality from the thriving listening mode to a fledgling and struggling engagement with writing music that marks 20th century Carnatic music. These two texts are crossovers from the 19th to the 20th century when the notion of *Carnatic music* was born. The 19th century throws up many surprises and questions about some of our notions about musical textuality, oral and written and the way they have come to inform the discourse on Carnatic music in the 20th century, and the 21st. While all other notated texts are static works, The SSP is a work of great fluidity. It has today become a sort of gateway between the 19th, 20th and the 21st century imagination of Carnatic music, not merely because of the innovative gamaka codification system it proposes but because of some definitive statements it makes about musical craft of 19th century.

Subbarama Dikshitar's illustrious family of Vaggeyakaras, including Balaswami Dikshitar, Ramaswami Dikshitar and the inimitable Muttuswami Dikshitar, is representative of a period and place that produced a prolific amount of repertoire that now engenders Carnatic music. The Vaggeyakara of 19th century Tamil country is a product of a very mixed set of persuasions, motives and circumstances. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer in his essay on Muttuswami Dikshitar notes that the Vaggeyakara is an exemplary composer, whose musical clairvoyance is such that verse and song looked like they could not exist together in any other way but in that manner. It is to him, not just heard music but remembered music.

Hearing and remembering as part of the craft of music is central to the idea of Karna Parampara (the lineage of the Ear) as well of the Sishya parampara (the lineage of the disciples). Who the music was meant for and who sang it and who heard it are significant questions within sociological scheme of enquiry. But what happens to '*listened music*', what kind of music is listened to and what skills are required to make the listening the core of musical construction, are questions pertaining to craft. This coinage Karna Parampara, generally used among practicing musicians and language scholars in a historical sense when referring to information transmission, in practice though the emphasis has always been on the act of listening and not of singing or saying. The act of listening is public. Writing can become a conversation with oneself but listening transmits, with the '*listened*' information, thrown open to transmutation. Where **such** information is used to conserve formal continuities, such as a genre, style or a raga, there arises the need for the act of listening to be strictly bound by rules. Subbarama Dikshitar's short compilation '*the Vaggeyakara Caritamu*' talks of vaggayakaras as having received advanced training in several languages and sometimes other practices such as ayurveda, jyotisha, forms of arts and mystic practices⁴. Given that, much of this education is transmitted in the early years through repetition and chanting, with writing learnt also as a craft, training in absorbing sound and meaning as sound is already there when they begin their musical journeys. This perhaps is the ecology within which music was crafted in 19th century

⁴Dikshitar, Subbarama *Sangita Sampradaya Pradarshini Volumes I-V*, ed by Rao, Venugopal Pappu Chennai, The Music Academy, Madras, 2012

and before that, regardless of the thematic or contextual particularities ie, Bhakti, Srngara, dance music, nataka music, temple music, court music and so on. This is not to say that literacy was not part of their practice, it was not a big part of the archiving practice..

If we were to pose the question, why did the literary excellence of the Vaggeyakara not naturally transfer to the archiving of music in written text, it is perhaps because they recognized a more efficacious mode in their knowledge ecology that worked for them. However there are other views within the genre that question our current understanding of how and what writing music is defined as. I am proposing here, that the music of the early and mid 19th century, be looked at as the history of modes of musical construction that are archived **in** the musical craft and performance, rather than be understood solely through a social history of performance and archiving. The text of Sangita Sampradaya Pradarsini is an instructive case in point when analysing the conversations between the monolithic notions of orality and textuality. The text primarily addresses the fading away of a mode and a vision of a vaggeyakara and of an impending struggle to remember music despite the discontinuity in the listening lineages. In their attempt to bridge this discontinuity, musicians debate the SSP and its musical propositions. Some choose not to engage with this debate and concern themselves only with performing, others who study the text with great focus, negotiate between the text and their learning from their Gurus, and yet others are simply perturbed that a written text is now questioning what their Gurus had passed on to them through oral tradition.

To conclude, what is perhaps most interesting for a historian is that, SSP a project to conserve *listened* repertoire and the sound of the Carnatic gamakam actually becomes the beginning of another craft, the craft of *reading and writing the gamakam* that logically can only ever be known to the ear.