

Workshop on Carnatic Music Appreciation

Introduction to the workshop

Most of us 'hear' music, but not really 'listen' to it actively. This is due to the fact that we are never taught how to listen to music. Learning to listen to music and more importantly understanding music is very similar to how a child learns to speak and understand a language. Even though a child is born with the innate ability to grasp a language - the process of learning is an interactive and a guided process, usually directed by the parents. Parents and adults 'guide' the language acquisition process of a child by helping the child make the necessary 'connections' between the sound, object and the underlying concept. Understanding of music is very much the same process. Music is also a language - and it has to be understood and learned very much in the same fashion - albeit much easier and simpler compared to language acquisition. Everyone is born with the necessary inner circuits and structures to relate and assimilate the musical language. However, this is not taught to us formally and as a consequence for most people - this ability exists in a latent form as a potentiality, but not as a fully realized skill.

The aim of this workshop is to introduce the language of music - and help people reach a better appreciation and understanding of music. The vehicle chosen for the workshop is Carnatic Music - or to be more precise - many of the South Indian Musical forms. Why Carnatic Music - why not some other popular musical forms - like western classical music, Jazz, Rock/Pop, film music etc?

There are many books, workshops that introduce western classical music in a very simple manner and they are all very successful. But such a course does not exist for Carnatic Music. In recent times, there have been some attempts to bring some material about Music Appreciation - there are many CDs, books that are written about Indian Classical Music. However, there is a fundamental flaw in many of these works.

Some of the books, material on Indian Classical Music are scholarly works - meant for serious students and practitioners of classical music. They are deeply technical and even esoteric for an average listener. They are meant to be used by singers, artists and composers.

The other type of material - which is aimed specifically for listeners - all suffer from lack of a proper appreciation of the fundamentals of music, and understanding of an average listener today. Instead of demystifying the classical music and make it simple and easy to understand - they make it appear as something very complex, esoteric and spiritual - in fact, much of the south Indian music is very simple, wonderful and very beautiful. There are naturally certain spiritual and esoteric functions of Indian Classical music - but these functions are universal in any area of human endeavor and arts.

Because of the perception that our classical heritage is deeply devotional, spiritual and esoteric - people think it is too complex, philosophical and so on. Today we do not see young people turning up for classical concerts. The concert halls are still full - but the people who attend them are mostly middle-aged people. We don't see the same young people that we encounter in malls in classical concert halls. This is unfortunate - and the responsibility squarely lies with the 'elders' - not with the young people themselves.

In the west, the general population shares an innate interest in their cultural heritage - they know their Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner to a large extent - but, an average Indian is spectacularly ignorant of his/her own culture. The ignorance - in my experience - leads to two diametrically opposite reactions. On one hand it gives rise to over zealous nationalism -

people who claim that all knowledge is in the Vedas (but fail to make any attempt even to get a glimpse of that so called wonderful knowledge) and on the other hand - it also gives rise to intellectual and philosophical slavery - anything Indian is crap, and anything Western is therefore good. Both reactions are two sides of the same coin.

The workshop, therefore, is designed with two objectives in mind:

1. Introduce some techniques of active listening. Using a set of listening exercises, we demonstrate that once a few basic techniques are known - active listening can open many doors, and music becomes much more enriching and joyful and it might even open up an area that is otherwise not easily accessible.
2. Demystify the Carnatic music - introduce the rich tradition, the many composers, their lives and what they did. It may be surprising to many people that even today - many popular film songs are a straight copy of a Tyagaraja composition.

Goals of the workshop

- To enable people to appreciate and actively listen to Carnatic Music. Active listening requires that we construct a different kind of memory - a memory that is non-verbal and pattern oriented. For the uninitiated, it is very difficult to remember and recollect a melodic pattern. The workshop is designed to help people construct such a memory for themselves.
- Provide some techniques of recognizing what a raga is? Indian Music is centered on the concept of 'Raga'. The Indian Musical Tradition transformed the complex art of 'melody' into a pure science using the techniques of Raga. A Raga is nothing but a well defined melodic pattern - something that exists independent of a particular song and its dynamic aspects like rhythm, amplification and tempo. Without some understanding of what a Raga is - understanding of Carnatic Music is not possible. However, understanding a Raga is not as complex as it is made out to be by some of the new age music gurus. It is rather quite simple and it can be a lot of fun.
- Remove the esoteric and complex aspects and technicalities and explain the basics of musical theory in simple non-technical form. Much of the musical theory is written in Sanskrit - a language that is unfortunately not accessible to many people. In this workshop, we introduce the musical terms in a non-technical, simple terms.
- Some useful information about the great composers, artists and their lives. It is rather amazing that there exists a total parallel between the evolution of western musical system and the Carnatic musical system. Even the lives of the great composers and their work are very similar between the west and the south India. Each of them lived almost around the same time, went through the same problems and made very similar innovations and contributions. Bach and Annamacharya, Mozart and Tyagaraja, Beethoven and Dikshitar, Wagner and Syama Sastri - share a wonderful parallel between them.
- Provide participants with a beginners collection of Carnatic music. Today, there is a lot of music available for purchase. In this workshop, we provide information for people who want to start their collection. This is broken down into a beginner's collection, amateur collection, and advanced collection.

Long Term Goals

One of my long term goals is to build a system of cataloguing, categorizing and searching through Indian Music. Today most of the music is digitized and stored in databases. However, the system of cataloging Indian Music is very different from the western cataloguing schemes. The proceeds from the workshop will be used to create 'Gracenote' equivalent database for Indian Music.

Workshop Organization

- The workshop is primarily broken down into a series of listening case studies.
- The exercises are designed to bring out certain aspects of the underlying music, introduce various aspects of the musical forms, and enable people to recognize the different aspects of Carnatic music.
- Some of the exercises are designed to introduce certain techniques of identifying the underlying pattern that runs through the music.

Case Studies

Each of the following case studies is designed to 'sensitize' the ear to certain aspects of music. The case studies are arranged to gently 'acclimatize' oneself to the language of music. We start with very simple case studies and work our way up the more complex case studies toward the end of the workshop.

There are many aesthetic qualities embedded in every musical composition - be it a simple folk song or a complex concert type classical composition. The goal of any musical tradition therefore is to reach a systematic understanding of the aesthetics, lay down theory and techniques for composers and artistes so that they can bring out the various elements of aesthetics to listeners. Apart from the aesthetic qualities, there are certain 'technical' aspects of sound - like frequency, modulation, amplification and so forth.

A song or a musical composition that we hear brings together all these various aspects together. The case studies in this workshop are designed to enable listeners to get a firm grasp of the aesthetic elements of music and how they are used and brought about in a musical composition.

Sound has only two major characteristics - frequency and amplitude (pitch and volume). The art of music composition involves mastering the complex craft of transforming the emotional and melodic structures into frequency and amplitude. Active listening involves understanding this process, and constructing and accessing 'musical memory' - much like the way we remember words, concepts and the relationships between them.

The advantage with Indian Music is that it is highly structured and almost scientific. Because, it is 'Raga' based, the entire process of constructing a musical memory can be centered on Ragas. A raga - in a non technical terminology - is nothing but an information structure, encoded in sound. All we need to do to become more musically tuned is to understand the store these information structures.

The great thinkers of Carnatic Music developed a highly sophisticated methodology for categorization of the knowledge of music, the music theory, the process of composition and singing and playing of music. The methodology can be presented along various dimensions.

- **Static and Dynamic Aspects:** It is amazing that music composition is very much like programming, and programming theory. In computing science, we have two concepts called Algorithms and Data Structures. Both can be studied independently of each other, and finally a program brings together the algorithms and data structures in a dynamic environment. Music is exactly analogous to programming from this perspective. The static aspects of music are divided into three categories - Harmony, Melody and Rhythm. Harmonic aspects are not used heavily in Indian Music. The Melodic aspects are explained using Ragas, and the Rhythm aspects are explained using

- Tala and Laya. Finally a musical composition brings together the Raga and Tala in a dynamic (temporal) context, along with the amplitude (volume).
- **Melodic Structure:** This deals with the 'rasa' or 'experience' of music. There are about nine primary 'rasas' and another nine sub categories. There are all kinds of permutations and combinations of these primary experiences are possible, but any composition's melodic aspects can be explained using these 'rasas'. Apart from the Rasas, there is a 'presentation' aspect of the experience. The presentation is further divided into three categories: Majestic, Mellifluous, Simple (the Sanskrit Terms are Ghana Ragas, Rakti Ragas and Desi Ragas).
 - **Melodic Patterns:** The human ear is apparently very logarithmic. All music uses a concept of Octave. An octave is a predefined set of 'notes' or 'frequencies'. The most frequently used octave all over the world uses 12 notes. Basically, you start from a certain base frequency, and keep increasing the frequency for every subsequent note, and by the time the octave is completed, you would have doubled the original frequency. Basically a Raga is a particular subset from an octave (7, 6 or 5 notes). It defines how to move back and forth along the octave (called Ascent and Descent). It also defines certain relationships between the notes - these are called 'sangati' and 'sancharam'. In other words, a Raga defines - purely theoretically - a certain 'musical movement' (chalan), and also gives a set of 'musical phrases' that could be used to create a certain type of experience. A 'raga' therefore defines both the melodic structure and the melodic pattern. The beauty of a raga is that it is just a pattern - without any 'fixed' compositional aspect to it. The same pattern can be used in millions of different ways - giving rise to a wide variety of compositions. A raga is thus a design pattern or a 'semantic abstraction'. In the same way that a bird does not exist any where in the physical world, but there are millions of manifestations of the bird, a raga has no physical existence - it is just a useful abstraction.
 - **Rhythm:** Western Music took harmony to unprecedented heights. Carnatic Music took Rhythm to an entirely new dimension. Perhaps, there is no other musical system in the world that compares with Carnatic Music in its richness of Laya and Tala. Rhythm basically sets the melody to a beat cycle - simply stated, rhythm controls both the time and the melody together.

The above description is a very short introduction to the methodology of Carnatic Music. The workshop is designed to help people experience some of these elements of Carnatic Music. It is designed as a series of listening exercises.

Identify the different instruments used in a composition

There are various musical instruments used in a typical concert or a composition. In this case study we introduce many different type of musical instruments used in Indian Music and sensitize the ear to the tonal quality of these instruments - so that one can distinguish between the sound of a Sitar and Veena for example.

The second part of the case study deals with how to pay attention to different instruments used in a composition, their specific melodic role in that composition, and the their 'temporal' and 'harmonic' relationships.

- Play some songs and then identify all the different instruments that are used in the song.
- Identify the north Indian and south Indian equivalents - example - veena and sitar, mridangam and tabla etc.
- For this exercise, we need to first play each instrument separately for some time, and then play the songs

Identify the Melodic Structure

As stated earlier, the Carnatic Music - the theory and its process of composition and singing - uses a very sophisticated methodology.

- This exercise is designed to identify the three kinds of Ragas - Ghana, Rakti, Desi Ragas
 - Basically Ghana Ragas are majestic, royal - for example, a song that is meant to be sung in the royal presence
 - Rakti Ragas are very pleasing and some what cheerful, pleasant - here, we do not associate a mood, but more the underlying type of the song
 - Desi Ragas are more like folk songs, sung at home in various occasions
- Exercise-1
 - Choose some of the well known Ghana Ragam, Rakti Ragam and Desi Ragam. Choose various songs at least three in each type - and play them in random order. Then, let people identify which is which, and why they think it is a Ghana Ragam or a Rakti Ragam
- Exercise-2
 - Choose various different moods - for example, sringaram, bhakti, vishadam etc., which can confuse a little bit in the identification - and play them together. Allow people to identify which song is of which type and describe why they feel it that way?

Differentiate between 7 note and 5 note songs

- This exercise is basically designed to train the sensitivity of the ears to the octave. One has to identify how many notes are used in the song - five notes, or seven notes?
- One fantastic example of this exercise is Kuntalavarali - which has a big jump in the tonal quality. The full featured songs have a better range, and are a lot smoother in terms of how the voice moves from one note to another. Contrary to expectation, the 7 note songs may sound rather bland - for an insensitive ear, because - the frequency jump is not "sudden" - but very smooth
- Example Ragas - Kharaharapriya, Mohanam, Kalyani, Sankarabharanam, chakravakam, kuntalavarali etc

Differentiate between Symmetric and Asymmetric Ragas

- This exercise is to familiarize the ear to the musical or tonal movement. There are two types of 'ascent' and 'descent' used in music - symmetric (meaning that the movement along the octave - in both directions - is symmetrical), and asymmetric (the movement along the octave follows a 'zigzag' pattern). The melodic quality of this chalan is very different.
- The exercise is to play some songs that are composed in symmetric ragas and asymmetric ragas - and we try and identify these types.

Differentiate between scales

- The basic idea of the exercise is to sensitize the ear to the various notes in an octave. For example - Kharaharapriya and Kalyani use very different notes.
- Format of the exercise is to play songs that are in ragas that very widely spaced, and then identify which songs belong to which group
 - Choose may be 3 songs from each group and play them in a random order, and ask people to group them together

Similarity of the scales

- A scale and a raga are very much similar. In this sense, it is possible to pick up that similarity in a western classical piece and a Carnatic composition
 - For example, Kharaharapriya is roughly equivalent to D-Major of the western scale. Therefore, a symphony or a sonata in D-Major and a Composition in Kharaharapriya
- The second exercise in this division is to select songs from the same group of the scale, for example - Kapi and Sriragam and some songs from another scale - say mohanam or hindolam, and identify which songs belong to the same scale - meaning the tonal quality of the song
 - It is important to pick songs from widely spaced out scales

Identify the notes from different octaves

- There are primarily three octaves used. And, mostly - many singers use about 2 and half octaves of range. So, it is difficult to sing for example 'Nil' in the third octave - it becomes very high pitched and hoarse. It is not very difficult to pick up the group of notes that belong to a particular octave - low, middle and high octaves
- The exercise consists of one full song - where more than octave is used - especially higher pitched notes from the higher octave. People are asked to identify which parts of the song are in which octave

Identify the amplification and pitch differences

- Pitch and Amplification are completely different aspects of the dynamic projection of a song. Amplification relates to the amount of sound that is moved back and forth, where as pitch deals with the frequency modulation. In general, many people - who are not trained in their voice control, generally use higher amplification when higher pitch is also used. The exercise is to enable people to differentiate between the amplification and pitch differences
- The exercise is to listen to one full song - vocal composition, and identify the effects of amplification in the dynamic projection of the voice of the singer. How, a combination of amplification and pitch modulation are used to produce an effect
- The second part of the exercise is to listen to an instrumental rendering and identify the amplification effects and pitch effects

Identify the Raga

- There are various aspects to a raga - some of the most important characteristics are - 1. The scale used, 2. The movement or chalan - which is contained in the ascent and descent, 3. The sangatis used - the specific musical phrases that are part of the basic pattern of the raga 4. The mood or type of the raga etc.
- However, it is very difficult to pick up the scale used - that is identifying which specific notes are used. But, it is not difficult to pick up the 'sangatis' and the 'movement' or chalan, which is more or less, defines the raga.
- There are various exercises in this category - as this forms the bulk of the workshop.
 - First exercise is to pick up a few film songs in one raga that are very close to each other. And, identify whether they sound similar or not, and then why?
 - It is easy to pick up the similarity if the 'tune' as a whole is more or less repeated. However, it is not easy to pick up the similarity if the 'tune' is somewhat different, but still the song belongs to the same raga.
 - An example is 'pibare rama rasam' and radhaku nivera pranam. Here the tune is exactly the same - meaning the entire 'chalan' and scale is used as is in both songs.
 - Slightly more difficult is to pick up the raga from 'om namasivvaya' in sagara sangamam and 'samaja varagamana' in sankarabharanam
 - Second exercise is to again use a few film songs that are in the same raga - but are some what widely spaced. Not obvious until you can recognize the pattern. For example, there are thousands of songs in HIndolam and Mohanam. Play some of them, and ask people to identify and discuss why they sound similar
 - Third exercise is to pick up songs from films and classical music that are in the same raga - and then identify the common pattern in all of them and also why they sound very different
 - This can be somewhat complicated exercise. Therefore, it is split up into multiple exercises.
 - First is to select some instrumental part from the film song as well the classical piece
 - Second is to use the vocal and full songs and then identify the pattern in them
 - The difference is mainly because of the temporal aspects - tempo, the way a sangati is sung - in classical music - the sangatis could be long, but in film music they are shortened. Another difference is that film music does not have to stick to 'rules' - like on which note to stop, and also they can split the sangati into voice and instrumental component - something not possible in the classical format
 - Fourth exercise is to pick up songs from the Carnatic music that are in the same raga - but still sound very different. For example, a raga like Kalyani has such a wide range - they could sound very different
 - Exercise-5: Here, we pick up a few pieces in the same raga from different instruments - like violin and veena - and pick up the pattern.
 - For this exercise, we pick up two different songs - one in violin and another in veena, and then try and identify the pattern. The objective is to sensitize the ears to differentiate between the tonal quality and the movement.
 - Exercise-6: In this exercise, we demonstrate how film songs can be composed from Carnatic music. We listen to one full Carnatic song, and then a few film songs - and then identify which parts of the Carnatic song are used in the film songs.
 - Basically, there is a lot in the classical singing. For example, many of Bismillah Khan's ragas are used in the film songs, and Bala Murali and Chittibabu's

alapane are used in film songs. We pick up a few such film songs - Abheri or some other ragam where this is obvious, and then play them together.

- Exercise-7: Identify the Raga.
 - Part-1: Pick up two ragas that are very widely spaced - like Kharaharapriya and Kalyani. Play randomly some songs from each group - and identify which one belongs to which raga.
 - Part-2: Pick up two ragas that are some what have the similar characteristics - may be rakti ragams - like Kalyani and Mohanam. Play some songs from each group - and identify which of them belong to which group
 - Part-3: Combine film songs, Carnatic songs from two or three ragas and then identify which one belongs to which group
 - Part4: Find the odd man out. In this exercise, we pick up 5 songs from the same raga, and one from a different raga and play them in a random order. Identify the odd man out.

Understanding the Rhythm and Tala

- The basics of tala is to bring the dynamic projection of the music - and organize it in a time scale. It basically deals with 'units' of time for each note, and how ascent and descent are used in a song.
- Introduce the basic tala types, play some songs in two or three different beat cycles and identify which of them belong to which tala group

Identify the composer styles

- Tyagaraja and Dikshitar have very different styles of composition. One is very spontaneous, where as the other is very structural. By careful listening, it is possible to pick up whether a song is composed by Tyagaraja or Dikshitar.
- Exercise-1: Pick up two songs in the same raga by Tyagaraja and Dikshitar - for example Hindolam - Samajavaragamana, and the other one. Play them both and explain the compositional styles. And, then play some songs in random order - and try and identify the composer
- Exercise-2: pick up some songs may be 5 or 6 in different ragas, and sung by various artists and then identify the composer

Material related to a listening course

One of the aims of the workshop is to provide a basic beginner's collection of Carnatic Music.

- Who and what type of songs to listen
- The beginners CD collection
- Amateur collection
- Advanced listeners
- Methods of organizing your music collection
- A one month suggested listening schedule
 - A list of CDs and songs, and a plan of listening them for a month for a better appreciation
 - Provide a format of a note book - to make observations while listening

Design Considerations

- It is important that the workshop is done in one shot in a continuous time span. This is because, it is difficult to 'remember' music over a longer time period, because we do not have a well developed 'pattern' memory.
- However, listening to so much music takes time. For example, the average length of a Carnatic song could be 15 minutes. We have to keep sufficient time for discussions, listening multiple times if necessary and play them back while explaining a certain aspect of the music after the exercise
- Need to design the exercises in such a way that a group can do the exercise together.

Dates

TBD. Probably some time in Feb'07?