

Available online at <http://www.ijims.com>

ISSN - (Print): 2519 – 7908 ; ISSN - (Electronic): 2348 – 0343

IF:4.335; Index Copernicus (IC) Value: 60.59; Peer-reviewed Journal

Challenges in the present-day Karnataka Classical Music Concerts

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Abstract

India has a rich heritage of Music. Her Culture and Music are inseparable. In fact, Indian Music represents Indian Culture. It has a history of many centuries right from 300 B.C. onwards. The Karnataka Classical Music Concerts (Kacheri-s) have played an important role in propagating classical music to the masses. Concerts have been happening right from the Vedic period as per the popular belief. The oldest text in Indian musicology, 'Natyashastra' of sage Bharata mentions about different instrumental ensembles named 'KUTAPA-s', this can be considered as another form of Concert. Hence the history of Classical Concerts can be traced back to 3rd century BC. The present-day concert pattern has been designed by Vid. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar during the early 1900s. The same pattern is being followed at present, with slight changes here and there; and many new concepts have been added in the last 20-25 years. At the same time, many challenges are being posed in the new age musical scenario, the biggest challenge being the preservation of classicism in Classical Concerts. Some unique features of Karnataka Classical Music and some striking Challenges are analysed and discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Kutapa, Gamaka, Kruti, Kacheri-Paddhati, Nerval

Introduction

India is a country of rich Cultural Heritage. Innumerable Art forms have nurtured the land from many thousands of years. Music is one such Fine Art which has flourished from time immemorial in this land as the Finest of Fine Arts. Though an Art, Music has a strong affiliation to many Science faculties like Psychology, Mathematics, Physics, Anatomy, Astronomy, etc., and other Art forms like Sculpture, Painting, Dance, Theatre Art, Astrology, History, etc., and the list goes on. Like other Fine Arts, Music finds its expression in Performances as well. In fact, display or exhibition of the art is the back bone of every art form. The same can be said about Music too. In Music, the exhibition happens through Performances or Concerts (Kacheri-s). There is a historical background of thousands of years for this Concert form.

The earliest mention of Concerts is found in the ancient treatise 'Natyashastra' of sage Bharata (3rd Cen. B.C.) wherein, various instrumental ensembles are explained such as Stringed instruments (Thatha) ensemble, wind instruments (Sushira) ensemble, etc. by a collective name, "KUTAPA". Thus, we can derive that concerts existed during the 3rd century BC. We can see the evolution of concerts in the later centuries in some form or the other, through various treatises written by a number of Musicologists. Almost all of them have mentioned about the concerts that were in vogue during their time.

The evolution of Concerts or Kacheri-s happened through the Ancient, Medieval and Modern Eras till the 'Kacheri Paddhati' or Concert System reached the present pattern. Many changes have taken place in the system during its travel through the ages according to Time, Cultural scenario, Socio-economic conditions, etc. In the process, Music has also carried along a rich tradition and culture unique to Karnataka classical Music. This paper focusses on the various aspects contributing to the uniqueness of Karnataka Classical Music and challenges faced in the concerts at present and their impact on Classicism in music concerts.

Evolution of Concert System or 'Kacheri Paddhati'

Indian Music is popularly believed to have originated from the 'Veda-s', the Sama Veda in particular, where there is a mention that the 'Saaman' (singer) used to chant Samaveda to the accompaniment of Veena, played by his wife. We can say that this

was a form of the earliest concert. From then on, concerts have evolved through many centuries in different forms. There were two forms of music namely 'Maarga Sangeeta' and 'Deshi Sangeeta' in ancient times. Maarga had many stringent rules to be followed and was practiced mainly by sages and spiritual seekers for their salvation. Deshi was more lenient akin to the worldly life and became more popular among the common people later.^[1] All the musical forms that have evolved later are the Deshi forms and many such compositional forms are being used in the concerts or 'Kacheri-s' at present.

In the later centuries, many scholars have written treatises about the music of their time. There are many references of Indian Orchestras giving performances in foreign countries like China in as early as the 4th Century A.D.^[2] Many ancient treatises talk about the concerts that were in vogue during different periods of time. The word 'Music' was used to depict Song, Dance and Instruments collectively, all the three branches being interdependent for all the performances in those days. This is substantiated in Sharnga Deva's Treatise "Sangeeta Ratnakara" wherein he says, 'Geetam vaadyam tathaa nrittam, trayam sangeetamuchyate'^[3] which means, Song, Instruments and Dance-collectively, are known as music.

Many other Musicologists have reiterated the same opinion in their works in the later centuries. This system of concerts combining all the three forms of music continued probably till the 17th Century. It was only during the 18th Century that Song was separated from Instruments and Dance. And these two forms continued to give performances together.

King Someshwara III of Kalyani Chalukya dynasty (12th Century A.D) has dedicated a complete chapter for Music in his monumental work "Maanasollaasa" or "Abhilashitaartha Chintamani", wherein he has dealt in detail about various aspects of music, including the concert system. This treatise is considered as a great treasure of **Indian Music** by musicians and musicologists alike, as this was written during the time when Indian Music was not divided as Hindustani and Karnataka systems. He gives detailed instructions regarding the music performances including stage set-up, seating arrangements of performing artists and audience, types of compositions to be rendered in the concerts and decoration of the concert hall including the size of the stage. He has also spoken about the 'Music Conferences' and expert academic sessions comprising of learned musicians and musicologists on the panel, discussing about various practical and theoretical aspects of music.^[4] This treatise is considered as an important reference for the present-day Music Conferences conducted by various music organisations and Sangeet Sabha-s. It is quite interesting to know about the existence of such a system in as early as 12th century AD.

Music received Royal patronage abundantly in the later centuries too, till the fall of Vijayanagar Empire in South India. The Bhakti Cult which started during Vijayanagar Period contributed immensely towards propagating Devotional Music among the common people. Haridasa-s like Purandara Dasa thrived much for spreading music in a simpler form to the masses as compared to the older complicated forms. Later, the Wodeyar dynasty of Mysore extended very good patronage to Music. The most revered Golden Era of Karnataka Music in the 18th century A.D. saw the maximum compositions in the form called "Kruti", which took the Classical music scenario by storm. The three gems of Karnataka Music, Saint Tyagaraja, Shyamashastry and Muthuswamy Deekshitar, popularly referred to as the 'Trinity' of Karnataka Music have composed thousands of Kruti-s which occupy the major part of any classical music concert even now.

After the Royal patronage, it was the rich landlords and connoisseurs who extended great support to Classical music. The concept of Chamber Concerts was developed sometime in the later part of the 19th century. The present pattern of Classical concerts was conceived and developed by Late Vidwan Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar in the early 1900, after a lot of research. This pattern is still in use in almost all Concerts (Kacheri-s) of today barring a few, where some new experiments are being carried out to change this long-standing concert pattern. But these experiments have not caught the greater attention of the masses yet.

Some Unique features of Karnataka Classical Music

Karnataka Classical Music system has some interesting and unique features. The Ragaalapana paddhati (Raga rendering system), Taana rendering, Nerval and Swarakalpana are very unique and of great importance in this system. They all come

under the Manodharma Sangeetha (Creative Music). All other compositions like Varna, Jatiswara, Kruti, Tillaana, etc. come under the Kalpita Sangeetha (Created Music). Raga-Tana-Pallavi (RTP) is another unique form of Manodharma which requires a lot of expertise, experience and creativity. It is considered as the pinnacle of Manodharma Sangeetha, which is not found in any other music system in the world. Dhrupad form of Hindustani system resembles this RTP to some extent.

The 'Gamaka' (Embellishments) is another special feature of this system. There are many ancient texts written about the Gamaka-s. Some treatises have explained ten different types of Gamaka-s; while some others have explained fifteen types. Some Gamaka-s are suited only for instruments. It is also said in many treatises that the best instrument for rendering various Gamaka-s is the Human Voice itself, and the closest to the voice is Veena.

Karnataka Classical Music is mainly Sahitya-based (lyrics) and the sahitya is well expressed through the 'Feel' or 'Bhaava' in a raga and this feel is beautifully enhanced by the proper use of the right Gamaka-s. Many a time, it is the Gamaka which distinguishes a Raga from another similar or allied Raga. Eg: Raga Darbar and Raga Nayaki. Both have the same Swaras in the scale. But it is the Gamaka which helps us to understand the difference between these two ragas.

Next comes the 'Tani-Avarthanam' by the percussion instruments in the Kacheri. After the main item in the kacheri, a few minutes are exclusively dedicated to the percussion artists to showcase their individual talents in playing solo. Many great percussionists have carved a niche for themselves in the Classical kacheri-s for their wonderful creativity and mastery over their instruments. Like this, the list of unique features of Karnataka Music can go on...

Some Challenges faced in the Present-day Classical Concerts

Concerts have played a very important role in propagating Classical Music to the masses for over a century. As already discussed above, the Concert system as such, was promoted and popularised in the later part of the 19th Century. It has a history of over 125 – 130 years as of now. The present Kacheri pattern was so attractively tailored that it just took off within no time.

The older version of the kacheri was too elaborate and ran up to four or five hours easily. The number of compositions in the Kacheri was small; giving more time for creativity or 'Manodharma'. The total number of compositions would be just four or five in a span of five hours. Ragaalaapana and nerval were the major ingredients in any Kacheri during those days. The listeners were ready to enjoy such lengthy concerts as well.

But as the lifestyle, economic conditions, etc underwent changes, people became slightly restless with the long duration of Kacheri-s and elaborate rendition of a single composition for more than an hour. So, the genius in Vid. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar coined a new format of concerts which included a number of compositions with short Raagalaapana-s, Nerval and Swarakalpana to give a new colour to the concerts. This was immediately welcomed by the audience and along with the elite audience, common people also started enjoying the songs which were short and sweet. The duration of the concert remained at three and half hours for a few decades. It was reduced to two and half hours in the later part of 1960s.

Now the concert happens just for one and half hours at the most. So, the first challenge to the performer is to showcase all his creativity and talent within this short time, which is considered difficult by many artists. To avoid this, some artists do not venture in Manodharma part in their concerts at all. Instead, they fill the total duration of concert with a number of compositions, which is not acceptable to many listeners who are more interested in the Manodharma aspect of the concerts.

We come across a variety of audience in a classical concert. Some would enjoy heavy classical numbers, some like to hear fast music, some may want lighter touch, and some may enjoy the Manodharma aspects like Ragaalaapana and Nerval; and so on. It can be said that the next challenge to an artist is to please all these listeners in a single concert, which is indeed a tough job. And there are 'Informed listeners' among the audience as well. They would have a good knowledge of classical music and their expectation in the concert will be higher than that of the common man. Art Critics can be classified under this category. They are not just listeners; they carry the responsibility of appraising the people about the performance of a particular artist through their reviews in newspapers and periodicals. There was a time during the late 1960s and 1970s when some popular Art

Critics literally ruled the classical music field by their reviews in leading newspapers. Musicians either gained very good popularity or totally lost their footing in the field by these reviews. But good reviewers are not to be seen these days. The younger generation of today does not accept the critical reviews in the perspective of growth; but take very personally. This may be one of the reasons for good reviews not being published now.

The present Era of 'Event Management' has further reduced the duration of classical concerts to 30-45 minutes, which throws another challenge. The big Corporates and Commercial establishments host meetings and conferences quite often and arrange for some music concert as a cultural event for their relaxation. Ironically, many of them do not understand classical music; Yet they ask for classical music! This has given way to a new trend called "Fusion Music", which encapsulates classical, light, filmy and western music forms in one single concert. This is gaining popularity since many years now. The ardent followers of pure classical music who do not wish to perform in such concerts are branded as 'Purists' and they do not get to perform in as many concerts as the fusion artists do, these days. Classicism is being compromised for want of name, fame and money. Preserving the Classicism is the toughest challenge that a classical musician has been facing from almost a decade.

Some of the younger artists of today are of the opinion that 'Specialisation' is the key word for any classical concert now. To elaborate, the stalwarts of last century were adept in many aspects of classical music and one could expect a great Raagalaapana, a soulful Nerval, beautifully woven Swarakalpana, a scholarly RTP; everything from a single artist. But now the picture is different. Some specialise only in Raagalaapana, some in Swarakalpana, some in mathematics in music and so on. Specialisation has crept in Classical Music like in any other subject now. A listener has to select the artist according to his taste and attend the concerts. So, the music concerts of today do not provide a 'Bird's eye view; they give only a worm's eye view' of Classical music.

The Music Sabha-s and Organisers of musical events and concerts play an important role in the music field. Upcoming musicians generally wish to perform in prestigious Sabha-s to get more recognition. The organisers will have an upper hand in such cases and only the influential artists get good opportunities to perform in many Sabha-s. Many talented and worthy artists who are less influential, will go un-noticed many times. Hero-worship is yet another factor which influences music concerts adversely to some extent.

"The musicians are in a dilemma as to whom to please and how to please, whether it's the organisers or the listeners; and finally, the quality of classical music suffers. Normally and more so in the present days, we find that music is being bought for a price and the dictation comes from the person or persons who pay the piper. Under such circumstances, the call for dictation from within is hardly a thing artist would think of or care for",^[5] says Sri R C Mehta. In such situations, people tend to believe that the highest paid artist must be the best; which may not be true always.

We have seen many western instruments being adapted to Karnataka Classical Music since many decades. Instruments like Clarinet, popularised by Vid. AKC Natarajan; Saxophone, promoted by Vid. Kadri Gopalnath; Mandolin, popularised by Vid. U. Srinivas; have been very successfully brought in to this system of Music. But the 'Gamaka' (embellishments)- oriented Karnataka Music could not be played on these instruments as effectively as on traditional instruments like Veena, Flute and Nagaswaram, according to some elderly musicians and scholars of those days when these were introduced. But this challenge has been successfully handled by the artists playing on these instruments over many years now. The fact that the Saxophone has pushed the ancient Nagaswaram into the background proves this fact. But it's a pity that the centuries-old traditional Indian instrument Nagaswaram is almost going into oblivion due to the popularity of Saxophone. Many Nagaswaram artists are now switching over to saxophone due to lack of opportunities, which is not a comforting sign.

One more challenge comes with the advent of the social media. A few decades ago, music students were exposed to the performance arena only after completing a certain level of learning under a Guru. The scenario has undergone a drastic change now, where the young students are given performance opportunities even before they understand music properly, which hinders their growth, as opined by some experienced musicians. The instant popularity gained in the Reality shows lures the young students to start performing even before acquiring proper knowledge. Elderly musicians like Padmabhusana Vid.R.K.

Srikantan were always of the opinion that this practice should be curbed and students should be first encouraged to pursue the Music Education properly for attaining a good standard and then only start performing. Innumerable music channels are flooded with a variety of music programs and videos; and the students are so confused that they find it difficult to decide on what they really need. So, it is required to educate the children through formal classical music training for a few years without any distractions, till they attain some standard in their art. Once the foundation is laid strongly, their growth is naturally steady and strong. It is also necessary to inculcate some values into the young minds about our ancient culture and rich heritage.

Conclusion

Karnataka Classical Music is best performed in its original form as received from our elders through many generations. This system has a Culture, a defined structure and a well-formulated Shastra (Theory) for support. This has successfully stood the test of time for many centuries and is still going strong. Some challenges like these have been there all through, in different ways, at different periods of time. Every art form has to pass through these challenges to prove itself and survive. Classical Music is no exception either. So, it is the devotion towards the Art and respect towards the ancient tradition which helps the sincere students of Classical Music to brave these challenges gracefully and preserve the legacy to pass on to the next generation.

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