

Appreciating Carnatic Music
Dr. Lakshmi Sreeram
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture – 63

Accompaniment in Carnatic Music Melodic Accompaniment - The Violin

Among the many unique aspects of carnatic music is, Accompaniment. Now, accompaniment itself is not unique to carnatic music, but the kind of accompaniment that we find in carnatic music is certainly unique. All kinds of music, all genres of music, are described in terms of one or more lead performance, with some accompaniment.

So, if you have say a film song, you would have one or two playback singers with a whole orchestra that accompanies them. Folk music again, you will have one or two or a group of lead performers, and you will have accompaniment, percussive, melodic. In classical music, western classical music, you have pieces that are meant for one or two instruments with another instrument accompanying it.

So, what is accompaniment? Is literally is to accompany the lead performer. And in carnatic music, you would have seen that, we have a lead performer, either a vocalist or a veena player or a violinist or a flute player and so on. And the lead performer is always seated in the center and the accompanists are seated on the sides.

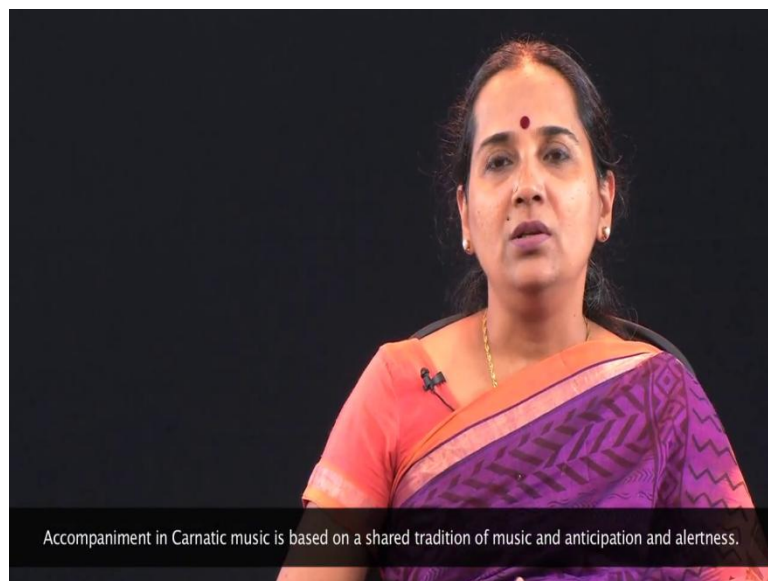
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We have percussive accompaniment, we have melodic accompaniment, these are the two kinds of accompaniment, that we have in carnatic music. Now, what is unique about this, is

that, this accompaniment involves a great deal of, entirely hinges around, the shared tradition, knowledge of a shared tradition and a great deal of anticipation and alertness during the concert.

That is, there is rarely if ever any rehearsal, the lead performer and the accompanists almost never get together to rehearse, for a particular concert. They may jam together, on another occasion. But a given concert, it is very rare that, in fact, the more season performers, never need a rehearsal, they don't rehearse together, nor is there obviously, nor is there any written score, that the performers can follow. So, the performers meet on stage and create music. (Refer Slide Time: 03:26)



Now, how this is possible, because as I said of two things, one is, the main thing is of course, the shared tradition. While the melodic accompanist, is also expected to have internalized many compositions. Quite often, in a concert, the lead performer may perform a composition that, the melodic accompanist has never heard of.

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In the case of, today in Carnatic music a melodic accompaniment, is always, almost always the violin. And suppose, we have a vocal concert, the singer may sing a composition, that the violinist has probably not even heard, and the violinist is expected to accompany the vocalist.

And then, we of course have, the manodharma aspect. The kalpana sangeetham or the improvisation, in which the violinist again expected to accompany. Now, how does this happen, because as I said you have a shared tradition, you have trained in this system of music and you have heard so many concerts and you are able to anticipate.

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Violin as an instrument, is was adapted into Carnatic music, sometime in the nineteenth century. It is said that, Muthuswami Dikshitar's brother, Baluswami Dikshitar was a pioneer.

And he tried to play carnatic music on the violin. So, also Vadivelu of the Tanjore Quartet, that I have mentioned. He too played carnatic music on the violin. And soon it caught on and today a carnatic concert is almost inconceivable without the violin.

There was a time and even today, there are experiments that other kinds of accompaniment very rare of course, but these experiments do happen and veena used to be an accompanying instrument and in many respects, it is, it would give a very different musical experience

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The experience of carnatic music How we feel? How we experience carnatic music, is to a large extent, determined by the nature of the accompaniment. Both the melodic and the percussive accompaniment determine the carnatic experience to a large extent. So, we have the melodic accompaniment and the percussive accompaniment.

Sometimes, on stage you may also see some, especially when you have a senior performer, you may see, one or two other people, accompanying the performer, the singer and most likely his students, who lend support. So, that is another kind of accompaniment but, does not really contribute much to the concert as a whole, it is just supportive of a lead performer

And of course, you always have the tambura accompaniment. Somebody playing the tambura, though it seems a very simple matter, physically it is very taxing to sit and play the tambura, for two hours or two half hours. And it does involve some technique and training, to able to play the tambura properly, so that the right kind of atmosphere is created. Today, we are focusing on the melodic and percussive accompaniment in carnatic music.

Melodic accompaniment as I said is, almost always the violin. Now, what does the violinist do by way of accompanying. When we talk of the two aspects of carnatic music, kalpita and kalpana, when the lead performer is performing a composition, the violinist is expected to follow, if the violinist knows the composition well and good and even if he knows the composition, there is very lightly some subtle, minute differences between the way, the violinists notes the composition, the way the lead performer knows it

So, all this has to be factored in. When the violinist, had to be all the time on his toes, see the violinist has to be very alert, anticipating, very, listening very keenly, to what, listen it is not just listening, he has also been observing. So, you see in a concert violinist and the percussion, the mridangam artist, they are not just playing, there all the time looking at the lead performer.

And when it comes to, kalpana sangeetham, improvisation, suppose it is an alapana, again the violinist follows, here obviously, it is going to be very difficult because you would not really know, what the singer, let's say lead performer as the singer.

There is no way of knowing exactly, what the singer is going to sing. But given that is this particular raga, the violinist will know; what the raga is and how it goes? How exactly the phrases are going to be formed? How they are going to be delivered? That is where improvisation lies and the violinists have the tough job on hand.

But it is the accompany in any case and at least the tail end of the phrase are the usually performed. There are gaps between the phrases in an alapana, those are softly filled in by the violinists with the tail end of the vocalist's phrases. If you listen carefully you will know, what I am talking about.

And in carnatic music, the manodharma aspects, whatever manodharma or improvisation, the lead performer engages in, the violinists responds, if not equally, at least to a measured level. So, if the vocalist performs an alapana and the violinist accompanies him, through the alapana and then after the vocalist has finished, his alapana, the violinist will give a solo presentation of that raga. He will also perform an alapana,

Now this is the way, this is the role of the accompanist. It is pretty well defined in carnatic music, where the violinist has to come in and where the mridangam player comes in. What are their solo segments, there are very fairly clear conventions regarding these? Unlike for

instance, Hindustani music, where it is entirely up to the lead performer to determine, when the accompanists could have their own solo for ease.

So, the violinists respond with his/her alapana, so also with the other segments of other aspects of manodharma, the violinist, suppose the singer performs swara prastara another aspect of manodharma, the violinist will respond.

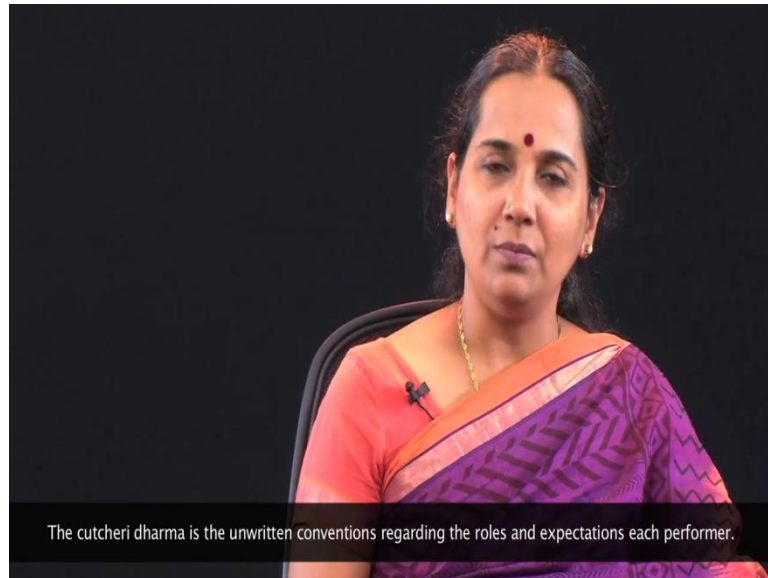
So, in these areas especially of manodharma and especially of swara prastara in neraval, the violinist contribution is not just to follow and to respond, but to actually provoke the lead singer on. And the lead singer will in turn provoke the violinists and this kind of interaction and prodding happens on the time in carnatic music.

In fact, the level of interaction in carnatic music, among the performers is stages of a very high order. Since nothing almost is completely determined, even compositions there is a fair and there is a very real uncertainty about, how exactly they will be presented by the lead performer. So, there has to be a great deal of anticipation and interaction among the performers.

And, that is also, what makes a carnatic music a very live and sometimes raw experience. In the sense, as I said, the violin cannot entirely anticipate and completely accurately anticipate, what the lead performers going to sing. And yet, they do accompany and some levels, sometimes there is a rough (()) 13:57 to it, to the music which (()) 14:02, we learnt to overlook, that kind of rough (()) 14:06.

That is part of the musical experience, as part of the creation of music, that happens in carnatic music. Of course, if a violinist, has performed very often with the particular vocalist, they would, more or less know the style of that vocalist, and they will be able to respond. They will able to follow, more accurately. But there is never, there is never the case, that everything is perfectly in place.

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Now, as I said there are well understood, widely accepted conventions, regarding how the, regarding the role of the violinists, or the mridangam player, this is called the cutcheri dharma. Some principles, that are to be abided by in a concert. So, let's say the vocalist performs an alapana in a particular raga, is expected that the violinist will respond the same raga and the violinist should try to compliment the vocalist's performance.

It cannot be completely divergent and in a completely different style or completely different speed. There has to be an attempt, to maintain the overall coherence of the performance. So, if the vocalist has sung, say ragam Bhairavi and use using mostly softer phrases. And more leisurely treatment of Bhairavi, suppose this is what the vocalist has presented. Then the violinist should try to keep to that style, keep to that laya and so on.

Because, see in a musical presentation, like a carnatic music presentation. Where there are no written course, there has to be somebody was to take lead. And that is the lead performer, the singer or the one instrumentalist, he or she takes the lead. And the other have to join him. That is only that that alone can make for a coherent musical experience.

So, again in terms of duration, if the vocalist has sung for say ten minutes an alapana, the violinist typically plays for six to seven minutes, never exceeding ten definitely. That is seen as inappropriate. Again, swara prastara again, if the vocalist is performing swara prastara the certain region of the raga, then the violinist also generally confines herself to that region.

So, the violinist rule is to very keenly aware of the vocalist style, and what the vocalist is doing, all in the larger interest of the coherence of the presentation. If everybody on stage was doing, his or her own thing, then the experience of the concert will be difficult to absorb.