

Evolution of Carnatic music- a series

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, this week, we continue our fascinating journey exploring the evolution of Carnatic music as a result of changes in the social and political landscape in various parts of India. This week I would like to discuss how royal patronage influenced Carnatic music.

In the pre-independence era, Carnatic music was almost always patronized in the royal courts in south India. The Thanjavur royal rulers, the Mysore Maharajas and Maharaja Sri Swathi Tirunal were among those royals who supported Carnatic music, patronized musicians and encouraged exchanges of thoughts and ideas, often in the form of lively debates in their courts. Many of these rulers also had resident court musicians or “*ashtana vidwans*”. Apart from being patrons of music, a number of kings were also prolific composers. Perhaps the most famous of the composer kings was Maharaja Swathi Tirunal of the Travancore kingdom, who is credited with over 400 compositions. The Mysore Maharaja Sri Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar also has a number of beautiful compositions to his credit. In the coming weeks, I will discuss more about these royal composers and their contributions to Carnatic music.

The kings by virtue of their wealth and position also unwittingly led to a number of beautiful compositions on this subject. Perhaps the most famous composition that refers to wealth is the Thyagaraja *krithi* “*Nidhi Chala Sukhama*”. Sri Thyagaraja (1767-1847) is one of the Trinity of Carnatic music composers – his compositions mainly extol devotion to Lord *Sri Rama*. Upon learning of Thyagaraja’s genius, the king of Thanjavur sent an invitation, along with numerous gifts, to Thyagaraja to attend the royal court. Thyagaraja rejected the invitation and composed the masterpiece in *Raga Kalyani*-

Nidhi Chaala Sukhama Ramuni Sannidhi Seva Sukhama

Does wealth bring happiness or is it service to Sri Rama that brings happiness?

Similarly Sri Purandara Dasa, the *Sangita Pitamaha* (Father of Carnatic music), was not enamored by the wealth of the Vijayanagar rulers and in his *krithi* “*Antarangadalli Hariya Kaanadava*”, he says:

Narara Sevisa bedavo yendendigu

(Stay in the service of the Lord) do not stay in the service of man (referring to the king)

Till we meet next time, do listen to the composition *Nidhi Chaala Sukhama*. The lyrics and meaning as well as many renditions of this composition by various artists can be found on the Internet.

.Smitha Prasad is a Carnatic vocalist based in Cary, NC and can be reached at smitha_prasad@hotmail.com