

Evolution of Carnatic music- a series

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, in this month's column, we will look at the role of women in Carnatic music and how that role has undergone a transformation as a result of societal changes. Women, both composers and performers alike, have played a very important role in the history of Carnatic music. Prominent women composers include Aandal, Meerabai, Akka Mahadevi and more recently Ambujam Krishna and Andavan Pichhai.

Aandal (also known as *Godai*) is regarded as the earliest woman composer (around 8th century). She is said to have been discovered by Vishnuchitta under a *tulsi* (Basil) plant in the temple garden of the town Srivilliputtur. As Godai grew up, her love and devotion toward Lord Krishna continued to increase and she decided that she was going to marry only the Lord. There is a famous legend attributed to Godai- she used to make the garlands that Vishnuchitta used to deliver to the temple. Unbeknownst to Vishnuchitta, Godai used to wear the flower garlands before they were offered to the Lord, a serious infraction since the scriptures teach that what has been worn by a human being cannot be offered to the Lord. When Vishnuchitta caught Godai in this act, he was extremely upset and ordered her to make a fresh garland which he then took to the temple. Legend has it that the Lord appeared in Vishnuchitta's dream and told him that He preferred the garlands which had been worn by Aandal rather than the fresh garlands. Aandal is said to have merged with the Lord in Srirangam at the age of fifteen.

Aandal's most famous work is the *Thiruppavai*, a collection of 30 Tamil verses in which she assumes the role of a *gopi* (cowherd girl) and describes how she would serve the Lord for all eternity. These verses describe in detail the ambience of her village, the gathering of her friends to collect flowers, the visit to the temple and conclude by asking that in all of their births they should be in the service of the Lord. Highly devotional in nature, these verses or *pashurams* are recited in *Vaishnava* temples and households during the *Margazhi* month which is mid-December to mid-January.

Perhaps the most famous musical rendition of Aandal's *Thiruppavai* is by the musician Smt. M.L. Vasanthakumari. *Thiruppavai* renditions by other musicians are also available; however MLV's rendition is considered the gold-standard for *Thiruppavai*.

Till we meet next time, do listen to the *Thiruppavai* rendition by Smt. M.L. Vasanthakumari-you can easily find her rendition on the Internet.

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