

Carnatic Music- Readers Questions Answered

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, this week, I am answering more questions from our readers. It is indeed heartening to note that so many of our readers have a deep-rooted interest in Indian classical music. I am also very happy to hear that many of you read the columns with your children, who learn classical music. In our family, many a time, we have animated dinner-table conversations revolving around some topic or the other pertaining to classical music!

One of our readers from Virginia brought up the fact that both Carnatic and Hindusthani music have *swarams* (musical notes) of the same name; yet they refer to different notes on a musical scale. For instance, the note- “Shuddha Ga” means different *swarams* in Hindusthani and Carnatic music. This is because in Hindusthani music, the reference scale is “Bilawal” *thaat* (parent scale) - all the *swarams* that occur here are classified as *Shuddha*- the other *swarams* are either *komal* (flat) or *tivra* (sharp) with reference to the “Bilawal” scale. In Carnatic music, the term *Shuddha* is used to denote the lowest possible position that a *swaram* can occupy on the scale. Hence “Shuddha Rishabha”, “Shuddha Gandhara”, “Shuddha Madhyama”, etc. are the lowest possible positions that these *swarams* can occupy. Conversely, the same *swaram* on a musical scale has different names in Carnatic and Hindusthani music. For instance, “Shuddha Rishabha” (Carnatic) and “Komal Re” (Hindusthani) refer to the same note even though they have different names!

On another note, while it is important to know the different *swarams* on the musical scale, classical music also has the concept of *gamakas* (oscillations). With regard to Carnatic music, even though many ragas have the same *swaram* (e.g.: Chatushruthi Rishabha), the way the *swaram* is rendered in each raga is different since it takes different *gamakas* in different ragas. The *gamakas* associated with each *ragam* unfortunately cannot be derived from notation. One has to be familiar with the *gamakas* for the particular *ragam*- this comes by learning from a guru as well as listening to many different renditions of the *ragam*. Sometimes, there are very subtle variations in the way that the same *swaram* in a single *ragam* is sung! That is what makes classical music so challenging!

Till we meet next time, I look forward to more of your questions, comments and suggestions for topics that you would like to see covered through this column.

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