

Carnatic Music- Components of a Carnatic concert

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, this month, I would like to discuss the components of a Carnatic music concert. Previously, Carnatic music concerts would start later in the evening, and would go on through the night till sunrise the next day! These days, most concerts are held in the evening and they last about 2.5 hours on average, although shorter concerts are also commonly seen.

The modern day *kutcheri paddhathi* or concert format that most musicians follow today was introduced by the legendary vocalist Sri. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. The present day concerts are a well-proportioned mix of preset compositions and creative improvisation (*manodharma*).

The preset compositions typically include:

Varnam- Most musicians begin concerts with a *varnam*. *Varnam* is a composition that has both *swara* (notes) components and *sahithya* (lyrics) components. *Varnams* have been composed in a number of *ragas* (melodies) and *talas* (rhythm cycles) and serve as a warm up for the artiste before plunging into some of the more demanding aspects of the concert.

Krithi- The *krithi* is the main music compositional form in Carnatic music and consists of three main units. *Krithis* are composed by various composers in various *ragas* and *talas*. Some *krithis* in a concert are used to elaborate on elements of improvisation

Thillana- The *thillana* is a rhythmic composition sung typically towards the end of a Carnatic music *kutcheri*. The incorporation of rhythmic syllables makes it extremely suitable for dance presentations also.

Other preset compositions typically include “lighter” compositions (*tukkadas*) such as *bhajans*, *devaranamas*, *javalis*, etc. While *bhajans* and *devaranamas* can differ in melodic interpretation between artists, the compositions are usually tuned beforehand.

The *manodharma* (spontaneous improvisation) elements in a concert are in the form of *alapana* (melodic improvisation of *raga*), *neraval* (improvisation of a composed line of a *krithi*), *swaraprasthara* (improvisation of *swara* exposition) and *ragam-tanam-pallavi* presentation. *Ragam* (or *alapana* is the melodic improvisation, *tanam* (improvisation with a rhythm component) and *pallavi* (improvisation similar to *neraval* but with more complexities).

Till we meet next time, do attend a Carnatic music concert and try to identify the various components discussed above.

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