

Sahitya in Carnatic music- Part I

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, in this issue, I would like to elaborate on the importance of the written word or *sahitya* in Carnatic music. As the times change, the importance, as well as the relevance of *sahitya*, in Carnatic music is often under intense debate.

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to give a demonstration on Carnatic music for music majors at Meredith College. One of the questions asked was whether there were pieces in Carnatic music that had been composed without any lyrics i.e. a purely instrumental piece. I thought that sharing this question would be a wonderful way to open a discussion on *sahitya*, its importance in Carnatic music, as well as its relevance in modern times.

Most of the Carnatic compositions are in the South Indian languages of Telugu, Tamil and Kannada as well as Sanskrit. Typically, Carnatic compositions have always contained lyrics (*sahitya*); these compositions are set to a particular *raga* and *tala*, usually by the composer. This is true for Carnatic compositions (*krithis*) composed by the Trinity (Sri Thyagaraja, Sri Dikshitar, Sri Shyama Shastry) as well as other prolific composers such as Mysore Vasudevacharya, Sri. Muttiah Bhagavathar, etc. In fact, a lot of attention and detail is given by the composer to the *sahitya*, incorporating features such as *dwitiyakshara prasa* (consonance in the 2nd letter of the opening word in each line of the composition), alliterations, etc. *Krithis*, while utilizing *sahitya*, also emphasize the musicality in a composition, highlighting salient aspects of the *raga* that is used for the composition.

The compositions by the Haridasas (e.g. Purandara Dasa), Bhakti activists (e.g. Akkamahadevi), called *keerthanas*, propagated the idea of *Bhakti* (simple devotion) among the masses. These compositions were not set to specific *ragas* and hence can be tuned in various ways by different singers since the emphasis is more on the lyrics- music is used as a vehicle to share the message.

Both the types of compositions described above demonstrate the role of *sahitya* in Carnatic music. In recent times, there are examples of pieces composed specifically for instrumental interpretation; however these are few and far between and again, a product of more recent times as people explore the idea of decoupling Carnatic music and its traditional emphasis on *sahitya*.

Next month, I will continue the discussion of the importance and the relevance of *sahitya*, as it stands, in Carnatic music. Till we meet next time, do keep the questions coming- I look forward to sharing my thoughts and hearing your opinions.

Smitha Prasad is a Carnatic vocalist based in Cary, NC- www.smithakprasad.com

Email: smithakprasad@outlook.com