

Format of a Carnatic Music concert

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, in this month's column, I will discuss the typical format of a Carnatic music concert. Over the years, Carnatic music concerts have undergone changes both in terms of duration and format.

Previously, most Carnatic music concerts would begin later in the evening and last into the early hours of the morning, a duration of 5-6 hours. There was also no typical format that was followed by artistes.

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 mostly held in the evening hours and generally last anywhere between 1.5- 2.5 hours although it is not uncommon to have *kutcheris* that are 3.5-4 hours in duration. The items that you will find in a typical concert 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 again composed in various *ragas* and *talas*.

Sub-main presentation- A typical concert has two prominent presentations- the main presentation and a sub-main presentation; the latter is of slightly lesser importance than the main presentation. The artiste brings in elements of *manodharma* (spontaneous improvisations) in the form of *alapana* (melodic improvisation of *raga*), *neraval* (improvisation of a composed line of a *krithi*) and *swaraprasthara* (improvisation of *swara* exposition).

Main presentation- The main presentation again places great emphasis on the elements of *manodharama* in the form of detailed *alapana*, *neraval* and *swaraprasthara*. Sometimes the main piece of a concert consists of a *ragam-tanam-pallavi* presentation. *Ragam* or *alapana* is the melodic improvisation, *tanam* (improvisation with an underlying rhythm) and *pallavi* (improvisation similar to *neraval*).

Tukkada- The second part of the concert consists of compositions in lighter *ragas* called *tukkadas* (tidbits), which are introduced after the main presentation. *Bhajans*, *Devaranamas*, and *abhangs* fall into this category.

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.

Mangalam- The *kutcheri* typically concludes with a *mangalam*- an auspicious prayer.

Till we meet next time, do try and listen to some Carnatic *kutcheris* (many concerts are available online) and see if you can identify the various items in a concert presentation.

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