

## Basic Principles of Carnatic Music – Part I

By Smitha K. Prasad

This week we will look at some of the basic tenets of Carnatic music. Despite the changes that Carnatic music has undergone over the centuries, there are certain principles that it has adhered to and these have largely remained unchanged.

### Sruthi

*Sruthi*, in Carnatic music, refers to the pitch of the vocalist's voice or the musical instrument. In any *kutcheri* (concert), the performer sings or performs in the same *sruthi* and this is not changed for the duration of the *kutcheri*. It is the responsibility of the artiste, particularly vocalists, to find a *sruthi* that is comfortable not only for the voice but also from an auditory perspective. The vocalist should be able to traverse a range of notes in the selected *sruthi*. While the selection of *sruthi* is determined, to a large extent, by voice quality, training and practice improves the range of the voice. Typically, children have a higher *sruthi* than adults; you may have noticed that even while normally speaking, younger children's voices tend to be higher pitched than adults.

The artiste relies on a *tambura* or *tanpura* (a drone instrument) to maintain *sruthi*. In fact, one of the terms that you frequently hear in appreciating an artiste is the '*sruthi suddham*' – how well an artiste adheres to the *sruthi* for the length of the concert.

### Swara

Like other music systems, Carnatic music also has 7 musical notes or *swaras*- *sa ri ga ma pa dha ni* which can be likened to the western scale- do re mi fa so la ti; the position of the *swaras* in Carnatic music is on a relative scale rather than an absolute scale. *Sa* and *Pa* are called drone notes since they are constant for a particular *sruthi*. The *tambura* (drone instrument) strings are a combination of *Sa* and *Pa* notes which are continuously plucked, and this gives rise to the drone, which the musician uses as a reference. Additionally, except for the drone *swaras* (*sa* and *pa*), which are constant, the other *swaras* all have variations- more about this in the upcoming issue.

### Raga

*Raga* or melody comes about when *swaras* are strung together. A *raga* consists of an ascending pattern and a descending pattern of *swaras* (musical notes). Depending on the pattern and the *swara* combinations in the pattern, the resulting *raga* is different and has a different name. Some of the commonly heard ragas in Carnatic music include Mayamalavagowla, Kalyani, Shankarabharana, etc. A *raga* has to always adhere to the rules (the particular *swaras* and the pattern of the *swaras*) that define it.

Raga Mayamalavagowla is typically the first *raga* in which simple exercises are taught to all students of Carnatic music. It has all the 7 notes in a straight ascending and descending pattern and is thought to be a melody that students can grasp. It is important to understand though that Mayamalavagowla is not a 'simple' *raga* nor should it be thought of as a 'beginners *raga*'. It is sung by many accomplished artistes and very often forms the main presentation in a *kutcheri*.

We will cover the remaining tenets in Carnatic music, and discuss more about *swaras* in the next issue.

Till we meet next time, do listen to *raga* Mayamalavagowla- if you google the *raga*, you will find Carnatic music websites where you can listen to compositions in this *raga*.

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