

Evolution of Carnatic music- a series

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, over the next few columns, I will be discussing the evolution of Carnatic music through the ages. In the last issue, we looked at the *Veerashaiva* movement, which began around the 11th-12th century and its influence on Carnatic music. This week, we will look at the *Bhakti* movement and the impact of this movement on Carnatic music.

The *Bhakti* movement spread in central and north India between the 14th and the 17th century. This movement was initiated by a loosely associated group of *sants* (saints) whose main teachings focused on *Bhakti* or devotion to God. The music associated with these saints laid more emphasis on *maatu* (lyrics and their meaning). Their main teachings included the casting away of rituals and caste and the expression of love for their God in a 'simple' manner. In North India devotion centered mainly on the gods *Rama* and *Krishna*. The *Bhakti* saints composed numerous *bhajans* that were characterized by simplicity. They were sung in simple tunes, which enabled the common man, with no musical training to understand and repeat them. Some of the most famous *Bhakti* saints include Surdas, Meerabai, Kabir, Tulsidas and Namdev. While the *Bhakti* movement in the South had more influence on Carnatic music, the contributions by the *Bhakti* saints of North India and their subsequent incorporation into Carnatic music cannot be ignored.

Surdas, the deeply influential *bhakti* poet-saint was born blind. As a young boy, he left his family to join a group of traveling devotional singers. The mighty emperor Akbar was a patron of Surdas and his music. In the absence of authentic records, there is little information available about the many aspects of Surdas's life. *Sur-Sagar*, which is considered as one of Surdas's greatest works originally consisted of over 100000 poems, of which only about 8000 have survived.

One of Surdas's *bhajans* popularly sung in Carnatic music concerts is 'Hey Govinda Hey Gopala', beautifully tuned to raga Desh. These *bhajans* are typically presented in the latter half of a Carnatic music concert and come under the category of *Tukkadas* (lighter pieces).

Till we meet next time, do try and listen to some Surdas *bhajans* online; you may not find many of these sung in Carnatic style; however the meaning behind the *bhajans* is simply beautiful irrespective of the style that it is rendered in.

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Smitha Prasad is a Carnatic vocalist based in Cary, NC and can be reached at smitha_prasad@hotmail.com