

## **Carnatic Music vs. Western Music: A Comparison by Maya Anand**

Many music *rasikas* are familiar with the phrase “music is music” or “all music is the same”. However, as a student of both Western Classical music and Carnatic music, I am able to identify a few fundamental differences in the two styles of music. While it is true that all music is fundamentally similar to some extent, it is important, and quite frankly, interesting to take time to compare the striking contrasts between genres of music. This isn’t to say that Carnatic music and Western music don’t share anything in common. There are definitely similarities in pitch and rhythm, which are the first things that one must understand about any type of music.

Pitch is an important aspect in any type of music, and this rings true in both Western and Carnatic music as well. There are many things similar about the basics of these two musical genres. Firstly, both of them have seven notes in their scale. In Western music, that scale is Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, and Ti. In Carnatic music, the scale is Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, and Ni. Already, it is evident that these *solfa syllables* resemble each other greatly, further demonstrating that all music probably derived from the same concepts. The similarity doesn’t end there.

Not only are these differing styles of music similar in pitch, they are also similar in rhythm. In Western Classical music, there is something called a *time signature*. The time signature of a piece of music is similar to what we call *tala* in Carnatic music. Both time signature and tala help guide the beat, flow, and pulse of the piece of music. Time signatures dictate how many beats are allowed in one measure. This can be compared to tala, which dictates how many beats are allowed in one *avartanam*. There are obviously miniscule differences, but the concept is essentially the same. Until this point, you as the reader may think that Western music and Carnatic music are quite similar! They share many principles and have similar rules for pitch and rhythm. On the other hand, there are stark differences, and these differences are what make up the unique identities of the different styles of classical music.

When understanding Carnatic music, one must understand the significance of *raga*. Raga is perhaps the most important part of Carnatic music. Many music students like to claim that raga in Carnatic music is the equivalent of different *keys* in Western music. However, this comparison would show an incorrect understanding of both Carnatic and Western music, and here’s why. While there are seven solfa syllables in Western music, there are 12 notes (C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#, A, A#, B). This can be compared to the fact that while there are also seven solfa syllables in Carnatic music, there are variations of each of these as well. For example, take the Carnatic solfa “Ni”. There are three types of Ni, just as there are multiple types of all the other Carnatic solfa syllables as well.

Now, theoretically speaking, for each Western note, there is one Major Key and three Minor Keys (natural minor, harmonic minor, and melodic minor). If you do the math, this means that there are 48 different keys in Western music. This isn't incorrect. What's incorrect is when you assume that this means there are 48 ragas in Western music. Obviously, there is no such thing as a raga in Western music, but even if there was, there would only be four ragas. This sounds strange, but it is the truth. The truth is that all major keys are the same raga, and that raga is *Shankarabharanam*. All natural minor keys are the same raga, and that raga is *Natabhairavi*. All harmonic minors are the same raga, and that raga is *Keeravani*. All melodic minors are the same raga, and that raga is a unique blend of the two ragas *Gowrimanohari* and *Natabhairavi* (there is not an actual raga that can be directly translated to match the Western melodic minor).

Anyway, the next question you have is probably "Then why have 48 keys if there are only four distinct ragas?" The answer to this is *shruthi*. In Carnatic music, every singer sings at a different pitch. This is known as shruthi. Therefore, C Major is simply Sankarabharanam played in C shruthi (1st Kattai), G Natural Minor is simply Natabhairavi played in G shruthi (5 Kattai), and so on. Basically, the concept is that key is associated with shruthi, not with raga. Raga is a unique concept that isn't valid in Western music. The fact that there is an infinite number of ragas is foreign to Western musicians, and this makes Carnatic music that much more fascinating.

At the end of the day, music theory is something that takes years to comprehend. Not only did I have to learn Western music theory, it was also necessary for me to learn Carnatic music theory. Being a student of both these types of classical music, it is impossible for me to pick which one I prefer, or which one I think is more complex. However, I will say that the understanding that I have for Western music has played a huge role in my success in Carnatic music. Likewise, my understanding of Carnatic music has helped me further interpret Western music.

What I'm trying to say is that I hold both styles of music near and dear to my heart. Without either of them, I wouldn't be the musician that I am today. I am grateful for the fact that I have the opportunity to acquire skills and concepts from both Carnatic and Western music, and I hope that I have been able to impart some of that to you today.

### **About the Author – Maya Anand**



I'm Maya Anand, and I'm currently a sophomore at Marquette High School. Music has played a significant role in my life since the age of three, when I started taking Carnatic vocal lessons from my mother, Vidya Anand. Soon after, I started learning Western piano and violin as well.

I have participated in many piano competitions, I am a part of the Symphonic Orchestra at Marquette, and I have also been a part of All Suburban Orchestra. In my spare time, I enjoy playing the guitar and the ukulele, and singing Pop/Bollywood songs.

Last summer (2018), I gave my arangetram under the training of Sri Maharajapuram Srinivasan, from whom I've been receiving advanced classes for the past six years.

Having my arangetram was a long time dream of mine, and it was everything I could've hoped for and more.

Despite my many other hobbies, music has always been and will always be my primary focus and passion, and I'm excited to see what comes next in my musical career.