



## Introduction to Carnatic Music

Indian classical music is comprised of two genres: Carnatic, which is a predominantly South Indian music style, and Hindustani, which is a North Indian style, and both have been around for roughly 5,000 years, establishing it as one of the oldest systems of music in the world. Carnatic music reached its golden era in the late 18th and early 19th century when three great composers- **Saint Thyagaraja, Shri. Shyama Shastri, and Shri. Muthuswamy Dikshitar**-dominated the scene.



### The Trinity of Carnatic Music

Since this time period, many key characteristics of this art form became traceable through the *guru-sisya* (teacher-student) dynamic through which the music has been able to be purely passed down through generations of students. Carnatic music is structured through a precise and rigid framework, as there are predominantly fixed compositions that are rendered by performers. However, there is also a large element of creativity and embellishment of these fixed compositions known as *manodharmam*, which allows for individualism in this structured form of music. Additionally, there is a heavy emphasis placed on the *Sampurna* scale types and *Melas*, which are a way to classify *ragas*, or scales. There are 72 *melakartas*, under which there are hundreds of other branches of *ragas* and variations to those particular scales: this intricate systems allows for the classification of all of the numerous *ragas* that are present in Carnatic music. Due to the myriad number of *ragas*, there are a variety of subsections of *ragas* that can all evoke different types of emotions in *kritis*. For example, the *ragas* with a more minor scale, such as Thodi, Bhairavi, Charukesi, etc, all contribute to a more dramatic or majestic type of emotion. And the *ragas* that follow a more major scale/key, such as Bilahari, Kalyani, etc, all create a more happy and lively kind of emotion.

In Carnatic concerts and performances, *Keerthanas* or *kritis* (devotional compositions) are the primary aspect of such performances, and they provide the main melodies, rhythms, and beats. Kritis are basically Carnatic songs that have a similar structure but are varied in style and raga. Kritis are typically all structured in the sense that there are three aspects. It begins with the Pallavi, then the Anupallavi (second verse), and then wraps up with the Charanam (which usually draws from the Anupallavi). This particular style is also more typically referred to as a *keerthanam*. Several popular kritis are ones that are usually composed by composers in the golden age, which includes compositions by Sri Tyagaraja, Sri Shyama Shastri, and Sri Muthuswamy Dikshitar. However, other kritis could be sung by other very popular composers, such as Sri Papanasam Sivan, Saint Purandara Dasa, Sri Swathi Tirunal, and so many more.



**Saint Purandara Dasa   Shri. Swathi Tirunal   Shri. Uthookadu Venkatasubbaier**

The main piece of a performance is called the Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi (RTP) and it is typically the greatest opportunity during a concert to improvise to a great extent. The ragam component is an alapana sketch of the ragam. The tanam is similar to the ragam alapana, but it expands the ragam even further by drawing syllables from the phrase “Ananta Anandam Ta” and there is usually a little bit more rhythm seen in this second component. The word *Pallavi* is derived from the three syllables **Pa** - *Pada* (words), **La** - *Laya* (rhythm) and **Vi** - *Vinyasam* (variations). Executing niraval for a pallavi is unique, as, unlike in a kriti, the artist is not allowed to change the locations of each syllable in the sahityam, as this lessens the innate beauty of the pallavi, so the artist sings many variations and intricacies all within a boundary.

Carnatic music is still evolving in this day and age and in this new generation of performers, spread out all throughout the globe. There are many modern influences and changes that are made to this form of music all while still retaining the core traditional aspects. Carnatic music has, and always will, represent a unique blend of many aspects and comprises of a multitude of *ragas*, rendering it as a truly intricate and complicated form of music, with all the essences of beauty.

## **Learning Indian Classical Music- A Shishya's Perspective**

Learning Carnatic music since the age of 5 has had a unique impact on my way of thinking and my mindset when I approach different aspects of day to day life. During the first couple years of learning such an art form, the primary goal of taking lessons was to practice for a specific amount of time every day and memorize the basics and the foundational principles of Carnatic music. This includes learning all the way from *saralivarisai*, which marks the very first exercise when beginning Carnatic music. The initial target was to simply attend class, practice, and then demonstrate what I had practiced for the next class. After the first several years of learning, the objective transformed to becoming more about expanding knowledge and learning more kritis and keerthanas. It became about building an arsenal of compositions that I could choose from to sing during any occasion and expanding the database that had been created to include dozens of songs. The several years after that then became about creativity- adding a new dimension to the knowledge of music I was initially introduced to.

This aspect of creativity was called *manodharmam*, and it included *raga alapana*, *niraval*, and *kalpana swaram*, all aspects of Carnatic music in which the performer improvises and draws upon the notes of the scale that the artist is singing in to elaborate and demonstrate a different dimension to the *raga* that is not taught like the rest of the *kriti* is.

Every few years, the goal of learning music has changed for me, evolving so that my guru could teach many different aspects of Carnatic music to me, and so that I was truly attempting to learn as much as I could. Throughout the years, there has been so much variety to what I have learned, and my goals and aspirations have evolved along with what I have been learning. And now, at this stage of my learning, rather than aim to memorize all the kritis I can, sing all the scales perfectly, or come up with stellar *manodharmam*, my new goal is to simply enjoy what I have been learning.

All these years, my focus has been on to improve myself and to work hard, which is very important, but the key aspect of learning such a beautiful form of music is to make sure that it is being cherished and enjoyed, that I am making sure I gain satisfaction from singing and that it brings me peace and happiness.

While my learning of Carnatic music has changed throughout the years, one thing will remain constant: I will continuously learn this art form for the rest of my life, as there is really an unbounded amount of Carnatic music to learn from that would take a lifetime to truly learn and master. And most importantly, I will remain an ardent *enjoyer* of Carnatic music.

**About the Sangeetha Rasika**  
**Shruthi Ramalingam**



I am a sophomore at **Washington University in St. Louis** majoring in Computer Science with a minor in bioinformatics. I am currently serving as the Director of Corporate Events for Washu's Women in Computer Science (WiCS) club, where I act as a liaison through WashU to communicate with company representatives to plan social events and reach out to industry professionals and company heads to help host events for female undergraduate engineers and computer science majors. Additionally, I work at the Optical Radiology Lab at WashU's School of Medicine on programming and bioinformatics projects.

I am also one of the founders of Washu's first Bollywood fusion a capella group, **Sur Tar Laaya** (STL), through which we perform at the annual Diwali show and are hoping to expand to performing more gigs and small shows.

I continue to support Sangeetha, St. Louis in its yeoman service for Classical Indian music and help by spreading message about our music as part of Community outreach.

I thank Sangeetha, St.Louis for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts and insights on Carnatic classical music and my experience in learning this wonderful form of performing arts.

I would lastly also like to thank my gurus of Carnatic music. My guru of 15 years, Smt. Vidya Anand, has shown me dedication and unwavering support, as she has been my primary guru and has been more than just a teacher for me. She has been a continuous support system during every step of my musical journey and has always been patient and understanding and most importantly, an incredible guru whom without I would not have learned as much as I have. Additionally, I would like to thank Vidwan Sri Maharajapuram Srinivasan Sir for his expertise, insightfulness, and patience and dedication to teaching me during the years around my vocal arangetram.