

The Voice in Carnatic Music

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There is no doubt that raga and tala form the foundation for Indian classical music. However, what is unique about our Carnatic music is the emphasis placed on lyrical compositions. Throughout the centuries great poets such as Thyagaraja, Dikshithar, and Shyama Shastri have, largely as a result of divine inspiration and exceptional musical prowess, authored and set to tune thousands of magnificent sahyams. It can even be said that these compositions are what dictate the grammar and style of Carnatic ragams and talams. It is due to these sahyams that Carnatic music is and will always remain a primarily vocal art form. This is not to discount the vast scope for instrumental expressions of Carnatic music, but only to motivate why vocal music is held in such high regard. It is therefore worthwhile to try to understand the role of the voice in Carnatic music.

As a student of vocal music, I have always had a fascination for the human voice and its endless capabilities. Not a day goes by where we do not use it to talk, laugh, cry, or sing and yet, like our biceps and hamstrings, the vocal chords are just another muscle in our body. Anatomically, there is nothing so significant about the vocal chords. Rather, it is the ways in which we learn to maneuver and manipulate them that make these muscles so special.

We define “voice culture” as the ideology of training the vocal chords in order to achieve a desired singing result. It is clear that by this definition, every genre of music has its own voice culture as each style necessarily requires different ways of using the voice. In fact, such a concept should be familiar territory to all students of Carnatic music: as beginners we sing the Sarali Varsais, Jhanta Varsais, Alankarams, etc. in the hopes of training our voices so that we may be able to continue on to the more advanced lessons. Although it may not seem like it, the beginning lessons of Carnatic music are a primer in the essence of voice culture. Many have even built upon this idea and developed specialized training regimens, sometimes called “akara sadakam”, to accomplish the same goal. The set of exercises done may vary from person to person, but the basic concept is the same: to control our voice in order to achieve shruti suddam, perfect tonal quality, clarity of notes, modulation, range, the edges between notes, and speed. If our vocal chords possess these precise qualities, then we may be able to adequately perform the compositions of Carnatic music as well as the embellishments of manodharma (alapana, neraval, and kalpana swaram, etc.). These qualities are very important and one cannot hope to pursue Carnatic music at a serious level unless he/she has mastered their voice in this manner accordingly.

However, there is something clearly odd about this last statement. Is it a requirement that every great artist possess the perfect, chiseled voice attained by proper voice culture as outlined above? What about Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer? Semmangudi was known for the distinct, horrible nasal-tone in his voice that, despite incessant fighting and struggling with, was far from under his control. And Madurai Mani Iyer? He had great troubles with the enunciation of syllables and was unable to render brigas and sangathis of significant speed. And let us not forget the doyen Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, whose voice could not help shaking and straying off shruti at nearly every note. The great mridangam vidwan Palghat Mani Iyer once said that in his own opinion, the only artists who possessed a truly “good voice” were MS Subbalakshmi, GN Balasubramaniam, and Maharajapuram Vishwanatha Iyer. However these were clearly not the only great artists of their time: Semmangudi, Madurai Mani, and Ariyakudi are all considered some of the greatest Carnatic vocalists to ever live. And this is despite their supposed vocal deficiencies!

What this tells us is that we must be wary when we discuss the role of the voice in Carnatic music. Voice culture is important, no doubt. But the music itself reigns supreme no matter what. Semmangudi rose to the top because, despite a recalcitrant and unappealing voice, his musical ideas were far too great to be unnoticed. Madurai Mani may not have been able to physically sing every briga that came to mind,

but he adapted a style of singing that suited his voice and it became a huge hit with the public for generations to come. The same can be said of Ariyakudi as well as many of the other greats in history. In the end, the voice is simply a vehicle by which the magnificence of Carnatic music may be conveyed. Having all the proper voice culture qualities is important, but what is even more important is being able to sing Carnatic music the way it should be sung. Every individual may formulate his or her own style based on what their voice can handle, but ultimately it is the content of the music more so than the presentation that is truly important in Carnatic music.