

India/South India

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Imagine in your mind's eye approaching, from the air, the vibrant city of Chennai in southern India. You first notice in the east the rich blue of the ocean—the Bay of Bengal—spreading out to the horizon. Along the coastline is a white ribbon of sand. Facing the sea and on broad avenues stretching inland are huge whitewashed government buildings designed by the British, and the orientalist spires and domes of the High Court and University of Madras. Finally you would see modern glass-and-concrete office buildings, stores, hotels, and apartment complexes jutting up from a green sea of tropical foliage.

The colonial British had named their provincial capital “Madras,” but it had always been called simply Chennai—“the city”—in Tamil, the language of the region and the state of Tamil Nadu. The climate, similar to that of coastal Central America, is described jokingly by local citizens as having three seasons: “the hot, the hotter, and the hottest!” In truth, November through January—the season of festivals of music and dance—can be quite pleasant and Caribbean-like, with a sea breeze in the evenings and the temperatures dipping into the low seventies at night.

In the old days Madras was a leisurely and genteel city. Most houses and buildings were one and two stories, with only the temple *gopurams*—ornately sculpted towers of Hindu temples—projecting up overhead (see Figure 6.1). Coconut palm, banyan, neem, jacaranda, and other trees shaded houses and streets, while an array of tropical plants filled every yard and garden (and still do in many neighborhoods). Classical Indian music, religious songs, and vintage pop songs echoed from radios, temples, and outdoor concert halls. Each morning the day might begin in the cool hours as early as 4:30 A.M. And each evening the town would shut down by 9:30 or 10:00. At night one slept under the perfume of flowering jasmine and to the songs of nightingales.

In Chennai today, with its estimated population of up to 7 million, modern buildings—apartment high-rises, hotels, shopping centers, offices, and corporate headquarters—increasingly give the city a generic urban look. The chaotic traffic of cars, buses, trucks, vans, auto rickshaws, motorcycles, mopeds, bicycles, and

C H A P T E R

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FIGURE 6.1

A *gopuram* at the entrance to Sri Kapaleeshwara temple in the Mylapore section of Chennai is typical of those soaring over every city and town in South India.

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pedestrians clog the streets as they move in a cacophony of horns beneath a carbon monoxide haze. There is even an appropriately named Hotel Traffic Jam!

Overhead each day dozens of domestic and international flights approach the busy airport. A host of local television stations vie with international channels such as the BBC, ESPN, Nickelodeon, MTV, or Hong Kong's Star Channel. Sari-clad models posing as homemakers plug instant soup, shampoo, gadgets, face powder, or dishwashing detergent. Shop windows display refrigerators, air conditioners, TV sets, VCRs, automobiles, kitchen appliances, furniture, shoes, silks, and ready-made clothing. Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken sit amidst Indian restaurants with their pungent array of curries and vegetarian fast foods. Modern hospitals equipped with the latest medical technology and world-class doctors are spaced throughout the city. Massive factories and mills produce fabric, steel, automobiles and trucks, polymers, motorcycles, electronic goods, and railway locomotives. Computers and software are everywhere as, here and throughout the planet, India establishes itself as the place where excellent technical schools train a generation whose expertise and innovation feed the global high-tech industry.

Billboards and palatial movie theaters, popular magazines, radio, and TV proclaim the cultural dominance of the film industry. Songs from the latest hit movies in Tamil, Hindi, or other South Asian languages blare from tea stalls, from makeshift loudspeakers at gatherings, and from homes.

Down the block from the air-conditioned supermarket, the video store, or the modern pharmacy, one can still find the crowded shops of the bazaar—spices and grains piled high in pyramids, exotic perfumes in dozens of colors and fragrances, finely woven rugs, and exquisite hand-loomed silks and cotton fabrics spread out like a rainbow. On every street corner, a woman sits with a basket of fragrant flowers woven into strands for women's hair or garlands for the gods. In towns and villages, the skilled craftsmen for which India is famous follow the trades of their forefathers: carving in stone or sandalwood, weaving, making intricate jewelry, hammering out fine metalwork in brass or copper, painting, carving, engraving, or making musical instruments. In homes and restaurants, a seemingly infinite variety of traditional deliciously spiced dishes in regional styles continue to

make South Asia a paradise of fine cooking. Somehow, magically, these ancient traditions persist in a radically changing world, the new and old, the traditional and the innovative, thriving in a unique coexistence.

Everywhere, jarring juxtapositions confront the visitor. A farmer in a turban and loincloth plows behind bullocks in a field next to an airport runway as a Boeing 787 roars by. Mud and thatch huts sit in the shadow of luxury high-rise apartments. A nuclear power station, its machinery garlanded with flowers, is dedicated at an hour set by astrologers to 3,000-year-old Hindu chants. A traditional classical music performance takes place around the corner from a trendy coffee shop blasting out the latest American rap.

Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first prime minister, liked to describe his culture as a palimpsest, a manuscript parchment written on again and again in which everything written before is never fully erased. Everything written earlier is somehow still there, visible and readable, blurred perhaps, but never fully replaced or forgotten. The new is constantly added on, but the old, the traditional, continues. The multifaceted and complex nature of Indian civilization is one characteristic that makes it so rich in comparison with the increasingly monolithic nature of much of the rest of the modern world.

In the flash and color and familiarity of the modern it is easy to forget that South Asia—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and several smaller countries—is home to one of the world's most ancient civilizations.

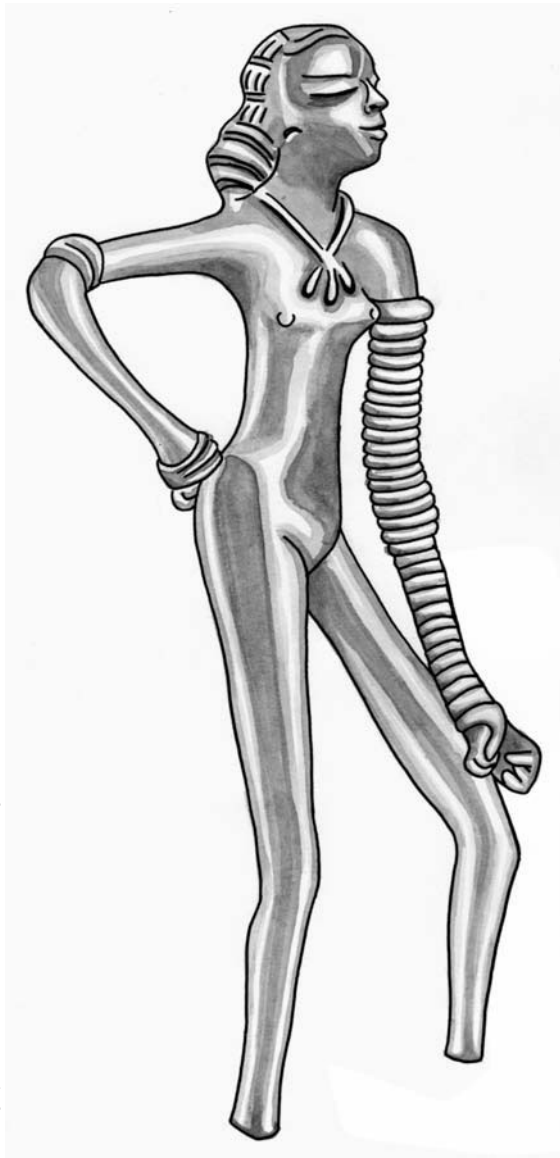
History, Culture, and Music

The facts about India are staggering. Its population of more than a billion people live in an area a third the size of the United States. The country has fifteen major languages, almost as many alphabets, and many regional dialects. It is the world's largest democracy. Its history running back thousands of years makes newer countries such as Canada or the United States seem like mere blips on the cosmic screen.

One of the oldest land masses on the planet, South Asia stretches at latitudes that, if superimposed on the western hemisphere, would stretch from Oklahoma (where the Himalayas would be) south through Texas, Mexico, and Central America (see the map at the beginning of this chapter). Perhaps owing to its geography—a huge diamond cut off from neighboring lands by the ocean, deserts, impenetrable jungle, and the highest mountains in the world—greater India, despite outside influences, has developed cultures and lifeways that are distinctly its own.

THE INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION (c. 2500–c. 1700 B.C.E.)

The region's continuous history goes back five thousand years and beyond, disappearing into time. Stone Age encampments uncovered by archaeologists point to early human habitation, but the retrievable story begins in collective myth and legend preserved in oral traditions for centuries before being written down. High culture begins with the Indus Valley Civilization, which flourished for 800 years from 2500 B.C.E. and was roughly contemporary with that of



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FIGURE 6.2

Dancing Girl. Mohenjo Daro, bronze, third millennium B.C.E.

Babylon and other cities in the fertile crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in current Iraq. The walled cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa in current Pakistan boasted well-planned grids of streets, an advanced drainage system, palaces, warehouses, public baths, and a written language (as yet indecipherable). Sophisticated art in clay and metal portrays elephants, tigers, deer, the familiar Indian cows with their shoulder hump, realistic human portraits, and dancing girls. As to music, aside from some clay whistles (toys perhaps), no instruments or performances are portrayed in art. But the four-inch bronze dancing girl of Figure 6.2 is intriguing. What music did she dance to?

THE ARYANS (C. 1700–C. 500 B.C.E.)

Toward the end of the Indus Valley period, a migration (or invasion) of people from Central Asia who called themselves Aryans moved into the northern plains of the subcontinent (like later invaders) through the mountain passes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Linguistic analysis has proven that groups of the same people also migrated south into Persia and west into Europe. Thus Sanskrit, Hindi, Farsi, Greek, Latin, German, French, Spanish, Italian, and English are all part of the same Indo-European language family.

The warlike and pastoral Aryans, with their chariots and herds of cattle, brought to India its first extant literature, the four **Vedas** (*vay-dahs*), sacred books of prayers, incantations, and rituals still chanted today. Prototypes of the Hindu gods appear in these texts, along with seeds of later philosophical thought. Musicians today tell their pupils that India's classical music originated in the chanting of the Vedas by priests, the four notes of chant gradually expanding to the myriad scales in the rich tapestry of the *raga* (*rah-gah*) system, discussed later in this chapter. This belief—along with another origin myth describing performing arts as a gift of the gods—illustrates an important concept: *in India, musical expression has a strong underpinning of the sacred, the ancient, the timeless.*

KINGDOMS THROUGH THE CLASSIC AND MEDIEVAL PERIODS (500 B.C.E.–C. 1400 C.E.)

A great many kingdoms, such as that of the great Buddhist emperor Ashoka (268–231 B.C.E.) or of Chandragupta II (c. 340–c. 415 C.E.), appeared in the succeeding centuries. Like Latin in medieval Europe, Sanskrit became the common language of the educated. Remarkable works on religion and philosophy such as the *Upanishads* (the “forest books”) explored the nature of reality and, through introspection, the

self. Sages invented the physical and mental discipline of yoga, now practiced around the world. Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (fifth century B.C.E.) expounded the new compassionate faith we know as Buddhism, eventually to spread throughout Asia. The various *Puranas* fleshed out the myths of the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, forming the basis of popular Hinduism today.

The greatest of the kingdoms provided royal patronage to the arts. The massive technical book of theater, music, and dance, the *Natya Sastra* (perhaps as early as 200 B.C.E.), describes performance, theory, and professional training in great detail. (The current-day classification of instruments into strings, winds, drums, and solid-body percussion follows the guidelines established in that work.) Many more music-theory books—such as Sarangadeva’s twelfth-century *Sangeeta Ratnakara* (“Crest-Jewel of Music”)—follow the development of Indian music over the centuries.

Along with the sciences, literature also flourished. Much Sanskrit poetry was actually lyrics to songs, but without notation the music has long been forgotten. The two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were written, remaining important even today as source material for theater, dance, and lyrics in music. The great poet and playwright Kalidasa (mid-fourth to early fifth centuries) wrote works that, like Shakespeare’s, have been translated into dozens of languages.

Painting, sculpture, and architecture also reached pinnacles of achievement. The murals in the Caves of Ajanta and Ellora, the remarkable stupa (hemisphere) at Sanchi, or the breathtakingly beautiful sculptures at temples such as Konarak, Khajarah, and Mahabalipuram are treasures of world art. Although many musicians are portrayed in paint and stone, their instruments and music are silent, lost in time (Figure 6.3). While Europe suffered through its Dark and Middle Ages, successive Indian civilizations were among the most advanced on earth.

THE MOGHULS (1527–c. 1867)

Beginning in the twelfth century, Muslim traders and warlords from Central Asia and Afghanistan appeared on the scene. The warlords periodically swept into the plains as far as Delhi, sacking cities and leaving devastation in their wake before



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FIGURE 6.3

Two flutists, two drummers, and a veena player (right, the veena is played over the shoulder) provide music for a dancer (center). Detail of frieze from temple, Rajasthan. Late tenth century.

returning to their homelands. However, in 1527 a remarkable general, Babur—a descendent of the Mongol Genghis Khan and a lover of poetry, books (though he could not read), music, and formal gardens—decided to stay. The result was the powerful Moghul dynasty, centered in Delhi and Agra, which dominated much of North India until a period of decline beginning in the 1700s. The Moghuls were Muslim and, though brutal in war, were lavish patrons of the arts, making their courts centers of learning and culture. Emperors such as Akbar the Great (reigned 1556–1605) and Shah Jahan (reigned 1628–1658) imported scholars, painters, musicians, writers, and architects from as far west as Arabia. To this day stories are told of legendary singers such as Tansen of Akbar’s court who in performance could miraculously light lamps or cause cooling breezes simply through the power of his sound and command of music.

The great monuments of Moghul architecture such as the palace at Fatehpur Sikri or Shah Jahan’s tomb for his wife—the Taj Mahal—illustrate the Moghuls’ most impressive artistic accomplishment: the remarkable integration of characteristics indigenous to India with elements derived from the Islamic world of Persia and beyond. This synthesis can be seen in the tradition of miniature paintings, which were originally book illustrations but now serve as masterpieces of art dispersed in museums and collections around the globe. This synthesis can also be heard in music. The melodic concepts of the *raga* system, soaring improvisations, and the singing of beautiful poetry, particularly in North Indian classical music, connect with elements found in Persian, Turkish, and Arabic musical traditions. The connection can also be seen in hybrid musical instruments such as the *sitar* (sih-*tahr*; a plucked twenty-two-string classical instrument) and *tabla* (tahb-*blah*; a set of two small drums, one of metal and pot shaped, the other of wood and cylindrical, played with fingers and palms), which have country cousins in the *setar* of Central Asia or the *tabala* of North Africa.

There is an important principal at work here, as true today as at the time of the Moghuls. Again and again over the centuries, foreign cultural ideas have migrated into India. Once there they have been absorbed, assimilated, digested, played with, and combined with indigenous cultural elements, merging eventually in a new and undeniably Indian synthesis.

Finally, the Moghul Era established a division in India’s two related but different classical music systems. In the north in areas under Moghul rule, musical influences from the Islamic world interacted more strongly with native traditions to form the Hindusthani (hindu-*stah*-nee) music tradition. By contrast, in South India, staunchly Hindu, conservative, and only marginally affected by Moghul invasions, the Carnatic (car-*nah*-tik) music tradition predominates.

THE PERIOD OF BRITISH COLONIZATION (1600S–1947)

In 1498, only six years after Columbus’s epic voyage, Vasco da Gama touched down in Kerala on India’s southwestern coast. He had found what Columbus was looking for. The Age of Sail had begun. Unlike previous invaders the British came by sea, at first as traders along with the Dutch, French, and Portuguese. The East India Company and later the British government, through wars and enforced alliances with native maharajas, finally emerged as paramount colonial rulers.

In spite of economic exploitation and the inherent racism of any colonial regime, the British did make some significant contributions to the subcontinent. They built railways, communications, and administrative and civic infrastructures, and they set up universities introducing English as the medium of study. (The widespread working knowledge of English has served Indians well in the globalization processes of recent years.) Education also helped to create a political movement that led eventually to independence with leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) using nonviolent resistance to confront political and social injustice. Gandhi's influence, which inspired Martin Luther King Jr. in the American civil rights movement, continues to this day.

Musically the contributions of the British regime are less obvious. In the heyday of the colonial era, the British cut themselves off from meaningful contact with "native" culture. Rather, they imported pianos and other instruments from home for their dance orchestras and military bands. The establishment of a Pax Britannica, however, provided a peaceful environment in which Indian arts flourished. The so-called golden age of South Indian classical music (c. 1700–c. 1900) occurred under British rule, unnoticed by the foreign missionaries and bureaucrats. In the 1920s a recording industry led by H.M.V. in Calcutta made it possible to listen to performances of Indian music again and again, a substantial change in an oral tradition in which music, never written down, was learned by rote from a **guru** (teacher who passes on knowledge to disciples), or tangentially at concerts. When "talkies" replaced silent films around 1930 the movie industry, drawing on traditional theater, was quick to incorporate songs into every film. Movie songs remain the source of most pop music today.

In 1936 a national radio, All-India Radio (AIR), based on the BBC model, was established. Under enlightened directorship, AIR produced hundreds of broadcasts of Indian classical music each year, including a prestigious weekly national concert.

Perhaps the most important development, however, was the discovery by Indian musicians that they could adapt some European instruments to playing music in Indian style. The piano was summarily rejected, but the violin, **harmonium** (portable small reed organ), clarinet, and even the banjo became, in essence, Indian instruments. Again as in the Moghul era we can see the process of synthesis by which India adopts foreign elements and "Indianizes" them.

INDEPENDENCE AND THE MODERN PERIOD (1947–PRESENT)

In 1947 British India—now India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—achieved independence; Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) became independent in 1948. The transition from colonies to nation states has had many ups and downs. Wars and social unrest have interrupted efforts at industrialization. Strong traditions have resisted change. Yet modernization has occurred, slowly at first, but at lightning speed since the 1980s.

We have seen that religion and the arts in India, especially music and dance, are inseparable. Today the polytheistic gods of Hinduism are alive and well, venerated in homes, temples, cycles of religious festivals, and music. Yet, about a tenth of the population is Muslim, giving India a larger Islamic population (120 million) than all but one of the Muslim countries of the world, Indonesia.

Caste and Community

The social system of hereditary caste, though changing, still plays a role in politics, in marriage, in household customs, and in music. In South India—in contrast to North India where many prominent musicians are Muslim—the majority of classical musicians have been high-caste Brahmins. However, the Devadasi, a caste of women dedicated to service in temples, along with their families, have also been among the most celebrated in music and dance traditions. The internationally esteemed diva, M. S. Subbulakshmi (1916–2004), South India's greatest dancer, T. Balasaraswati (1918–1984), and the eminent flutist/educator T. Viswanathan (1927–2002) were all born into this community.

Members of the barber's caste are known for playing the double-reed *nagasvaram* (*nah-gah-svah-rum*) and *tavil* (*tah-vil*) drum associated with temples, weddings, and other sacred events. A few musicians from minority communities, such as *nagasvaram* virtuoso Sheik Chinnamoulana, a Muslim, and the singer Jesudas, a Christian, are lionized. In popular music today A. R. Rahman, a Muslim, and Ilaiyaraajan, from the lowest (untouchable) Harijan community, are acknowledged masters. Genius, it seems, can transcend caste or background.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the tradition of highly valuing the arts has continued in India. As one traveler comments: “When I came into U.S. customs and told them I was a musician I was strip-searched. By contrast, when I arrived in India and said I was a musician, the customs official expressed his delight, wrote down a list of the best musicians and festivals, and waved me through.”

Culture has been one of modern India's most prestigious exports. Contemporary authors such as Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*) or Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*) are among the most famous writers in English today. Since the 1960s, many extraordinary filmmakers have also appeared. Perhaps the best known is Satyajit Ray (1921–1992), whose works from *The Apu Trilogy* to *Charulata* have gained him recognition as one of a handful of masters of contemporary art cinema. Dancers such as Balasaraswati or Mrinalini Sarabhai have performed all over the world. Musicians such as Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, and Zakir Hussain are megastars East and West.

In India, government support of music remains strong (dwarfing the miniscule government support of music in the United States). The Sangeet Natak Academy in Delhi oversees prestigious and substantial awards to prominent writers, actors, poets, and musicians. State governments do the same.

Today, tens of thousands of cassettes, CDs, DVDs, and videotapes are available covering every imaginable style. Musicians now have unlimited access, not only to their own traditions but also to music around the globe. Indian violinists may work a little of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* into an improvisation, drummers might try out a few rock and roll riffs. Or they may jam with visiting jazz musicians from New York, Paris, or Helsinki.

Instruments such as the saxophone, electric guitar, mandolin, and electronic keyboard have joined the earlier Western instruments adopted into Indian music. With globalization, Indian music is absorbing the new, as it always has. Yet the old, the traditional, remains. In the palimpsest that is South Asia, the interplay between the ancient and the modern continues through all the changes of time and history. This coexistence of the old and the new is part of the world of amazement that is India.

Many Musics

If you were to stroll through one of the residential neighborhoods of Chennai, you might come into contact with many types of musical sound. In the mornings come the vendors, each pushing a cart—the vegetable man, the pots and pans salesman, the fruit lady, the waste newspaper collector, the coconut man (who will climb your tree for a fee)—and each has a distinctive (and musical) call recognized by the local housewives.

As the day wears on, a mendicant may appear, chanting a sacred song and playing a small gong or the sacred conch shell trumpet. Once in a great while a snake charmer may walk the street with his bag of cobras. Unforgettable is the distinctive nasal whine of his snake-charming music on the *punji* (*pun-jee*)—a double-reed instrument with two pipes (for melody and drone). Other wandering minstrels come and go. Clearly, in this place we are in the rich realm of Indian folk music (Figure 6.4).

POP MUSIC

On TV, over the radio, or blasting from the neighborhood snack shops, one can hear Indian popular music, also called “cine songs” because almost all popular music originates in movies. The Indian film industry, incidentally, is the largest in the world. Each film features despicable villains, fearless and clever heroes, gorgeous heroines, romance (always rocky), family problems, utterly surprising plot twists, broad comedy, heart-stopping fight scenes, and sexy dances. In virtually all movies, songs periodically interrupt the plot with MTV-like visuals in exotic settings or elaborate song-and-dance production numbers. The actors and actresses always lip-sync the words, which are actually sung by “playback singers,” who along with the “music director” (composer/arranger) and lyricist are the true stars of India’s pop music scene.

Cine music is to some ears a curious and sometimes bizarre blend of East and West. Choppy and hyperactive melodies often in “oriental” scales are belted out by nasal-sounding singers over Latin rhythms and an eclectic accompaniment that may include Western instruments mixed with an array of folk and classical Indian instruments. It is an anything goes, “if it sounds good, use it,” approach to music. The “anything” today might include harmony and counterpoint, rap, rock, symphony music, and jazz, as well as Indian styles and sounds.

The lyrics, like those of pop music everywhere in the world, tend to focus on the eternal emotions and complications of love and romance. A duet/dialogue between female and male singer is thus the norm. But lyrics can also be comic, religious, ethical, family centered, highly poetic, or deeply philosophical.

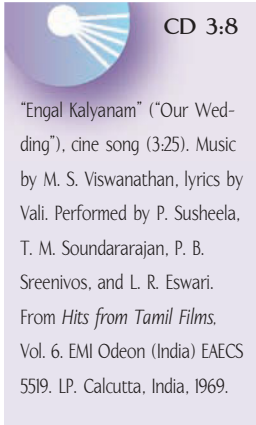
A good place to start is to watch videos (extracted from movies) of several contemporary songs by the great A. R. Rahman. In “Kannalane” (“O Eyes, Look Truly,” Song 2 from the film *Bombay*), an eloquent and lilting love song is backed

Image not available due to copyright restrictions

by traditional Indian instruments as dancers swirl in brightly colored skirts in a palatial setting, that of a Moslem wedding. “Sutram Boomi” (“Precept Earth,” Song 2 from *Dum Dum Dum*) and “Azhegama Raatchasiye” (“O Beautiful Demoness,” Song 3 from *Mudalvan*) emphasize folk music and instruments in their sound and are set appropriately in agricultural and rural village festival locales.

“Desinghu Raja” (“King Desinghu,” Song 3 from *Dum Dum Dum*) transforms modern hero and heroine into king and queen of ancient Tanjore. The elaborate production number is filmed in the spectacular temples and palaces of that city. American rock/Indian style along with English phrases appear in “Shakalaka Baby” (Song 1 from *Mudalvan*) and “Urvasi Urvasi! Take It Easy” (Song 1 from *Kadalan*) as hip college students dance their heads off. Tamil rap interspersed with a folk tune hilariously interrupts a classical dance scene in “Petta Rap” (“Neighborhood Rap,” Song 3 from *Kadalan*).

Listen to “Engal Kalyanam” (“Our Wedding”) on CD 3, Track 8. This vintage song takes a lighthearted look at the commotion and excitement of an Indian wedding, with the ever-present relatives and the joyful feelings of the happy couple.



Text,
“ENGAL KALYANAM”

(Chorus) Our wedding is a “confusion wedding”!

1. Sons-in-law put up the money,
And the father-in-law puts up the canopy to receive the gifts.¹
Morning is the wedding, and evening is the wedding night!
Enliven! A love marriage!²
Tomorrow at the altar we'll exchange garlands, won't we?
And won't the drums play with the pipes?³
2. The lovers' tale is performed in the eyes.
It's a great struggle—to perform in the eyes!
A colorful chariot is running beside me;⁴
Heaven is coming to us!
3. Mother-in-law puts on eye makeup,
While the sons-in-law stare at her mirror;
The [wedding] procession winds along the street with firecrackers,
While everyone gives their blessings.
Shall we have ten to sixteen children?
Shall the trimness of our [youthful] bodies be lost?
4. You claimed you hated men,
Yet you gave me desire!
If I am like Kama, the god of love,
You are the reason!
Your [blushing] cheeks invite me;
Your thoughts ask for me, I can tell!
Your eyes—are like bright lightning . . .
What are the pleasures we haven't experienced?
5. The bride's father had prayed to the god of Tirupati
That the marriage might be performed there,
So the bride and groom might have auspicious lives.⁵

The sons-in-law better come home now
 And give a send-off to the bride's father,
 So that he can take up *sanyasin*!⁶

Free translation from the Tamil by S. B. Rajeswari (1989).

1. The ceremony takes place under a canopy of banana stalks, bamboo, and cloth.
2. Spouses traditionally are chosen by parents. A "love marriage" as in Europe and the Americas is unusual, except in the movies.
3. "Drums . . . pipes" these are *tavil* and *nagasvaram* with their sacred and auspicious sound.
4. The groom is like an ancient god-hero riding a chariot.
5. Tirupati is the hilltop site of the most popular temple in South India.
6. Now that the bride's father has managed the tension and complications of his daughter's wedding, it is humorously suggested that he can become a recluse (*sanyasin*) meditating in a hermitage. In sacred texts, this is the last stage of human life.

Close Listening

"ENGAL KALYANAM" ("OUR WEDDING")

CD 3:8

COUNTER NUMBER	COMMENTARY	SECTION
0:00	Chorus: <i>Engal kalyanam . . .</i> ("Our wedding . . .")	A
0:18	Instrumental break	
0:32	Verse 1: Male-female duet in musical dialogue over "walking" bass line	B
0:49	Instrumental break	
0:53	Chorus (repeat): <i>Engal kalyanam . . .</i>	A
1:02	Instrumental break	
1:10	"Woody Woodpecker" call from U.S. cartoon.	
1:14	Verse 2: Duet over drum accompaniment, new sound	C
1:42	Verse 3: Duet over "walking" bass line	B
2:12	Verse 4: Duet over drums accompaniment	C
2:35	Verse 5: Duet over "walking" bass line	B
3:14	Chorus: <i>Engal kalyanam . . .</i> and quick fade-out	A

Although the style of “Our Wedding” is a “golden oldie,” one might notice certain strong characteristics that mark this song as unmistakably Indian: the frenetic pace of the clap-hammer rhythms, the alternating male and female voices with backup chorus, an eclectic orchestra, and the culturally specific references in the lyrics.

There are three musical sections to the song:

- A: The chorus (*Engal kalyanam . . .*).
- B: Marked by a jazzlike “walking” bass, before moving on.
- C: Marked by an accompaniment exclusively of drums, a very different sound. Sections B and C both carry the verses of the song. Instrumental interludes (one with a quote from an American cartoon) occur between the first four vocal sections.

Older Indian pop music as heard in films from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s may approach the semiclassical or even classical in style and instrumentation, as in the classic film *Thillana Mohanambal* (1968) about the romance between a famous dancer and a *nagasvaram* virtuoso.

The timbres, forms, and instrumentation of Indian pop music continue to evolve in extremely varied and creative ways, especially when compared with the rigid industry-controlled formulas for most American pop songs. The more one listens to Indian pop music, the more one can appreciate its unique qualities, enjoy the beauty of its lyrics and themes, and gain a better understanding of why this is the favorite music of a billion people, old and young, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Perhaps some day the great contemporary Indian songwriters such as A. R. Rahman and Ilaiyaraja will gain the recognition that they deserve on the world scene.

RELIGIOUS MUSIC

Religious music is another important category of music in India. Among the dozens of other devotional traditions of South Asia—folk, pop, or classical, primarily Hindu but also Moslem or Christian—is that of *bhajan* (*bhah-juhn*). A *bhajan* is a song, devotional in nature and relatively simple technically, that is sung primarily as an offering to God. *Bhajans* might be sung by a soloist with a backup of violins, flutes, harmonium, and drums (or a small cine orchestra), with additional rhythmic support coming from small ringing bell-cymbals, clackers, or hand claps. A *bhajan* can be sung straight through as a song, or sung in a congregational call-and-response manner with a leader singing out verses, while the group responds with either a repetition or a refrain. A member of the responding group thus need not be trained in music, but can participate simply by mimicking the words and tune of the leader.

As noted earlier, the ensemble of two or more *nagasvaram* double-reed pipes with *tanil* drums is associated with temple worship, religious processions, weddings, and auspicious occasions of all kinds. (Similarly, the sound of a pipe organ has religious connotations in the West.) But the music that the *nagasvaram* plays is largely that of South Indian classical music (Figure 6.4 and DVD movie *Thillana Mohanambal*, Scene 1).

Classical Music

The classical music of South India is called *karnataka sangeeta* (car-nah-tuh-kah sahn-gee-tah, with a hard “g”) or in English simply **Carnatic music**. The roots of this music lie in the distant past, in the courts and palaces of rajas and maharajas, in the great southern kingdoms and in the stately southern temple complexes built between the eighth and nineteenth centuries.

Sculpture in the ancient temples and palaces as well as murals and miniature paintings give us vivid visual images of the instruments, orchestras, dance styles, and the where and how of musical performance through several thousand years. Although the stone and painted images are silent, they bear a striking resemblance to what is seen in performance today (compare the dancers in Figures 6.3 and 6.6). Books also give us descriptions of music and performance. But the actual sound and style of pre-twentieth-century music exists only in conjecture.

Any oral tradition, such as that of Indian classical music, lives primarily in the hands, voices, memory, and creative imagination of individual human beings. In this tradition, the music can never be frozen in time, either by being written down (in words or notation) or by being preserved as a visual entity (as in a painting or photograph). The music, in a sense, lives uniquely in each performance, in the unique rendition of a song on a particular day, at a particular hour, and in the ephemeral spontaneity and creativity of improvisation. Today, videos and CDs can preserve a particular performance, but whether this fixity, this documentation, will change the essentially oral nature of Indian music and the liquid way musicians approach their tradition remains to be seen (Figures 6.5 and 6.6).



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FIGURE 6.5

Umayalpuram Mali gives a lesson on *mridangam*, South Indian drum, to a student. Music is transmitted orally and by example, with notation as in the book on the floor used only as a memory aid.

FIGURE 6.6

The renowned Guru Sudharani Raghupathy (seated in chair) gives a *bharata natyam* dance lesson to Priya Murle. Seated on the floor are vocalist Krishnaveni Sundarajan (left), dancer Aruna Subbiah (third from left), who is chanting dance rhythms, and composer and drummer K. S. R. Aniruddha (fourth from left).



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Music for South India's dance traditions—particularly in *bharata natyam* (*bha-ruh-tah nah-tyam*)—is similar in style to that of classical concert music. The forms of the songs, however, are unique to dance and may include sections where a specialist sitting among the musicians chants out rhythmic syllables—*nattu-vangam* (*naht-tu-vahn-gum*)—to match the intricate footwork of the dancer (Figure 6.6). Musical phrases may be repeated again and again as the dancer interprets and reinterprets the meaning of lyrics in a visual language of hand gestures, facial expressions, and body movement. In several genres of dance music the lyrics are beautiful love poetry, as often as not exploring the erotic myth of the sensuous god Krishna and his earthly lover, the beautiful Radha. Songs borrowed from the dance tradition are commonly included toward the end of classical music concerts.

As noted earlier, the Carnatic style of the south contrasts with the Hindusthani tradition of the north. In **Hindusthani music**, expansive improvisations move gradually from near immobility to sections of great speed and virtuosity. In contrast, the Carnatic music is built around an immense repertoire of precomposed Hindu devotional songs. The musical texture is more busy, and improvisations fall into blocklike sections.

Carnatic music began to take its present shape in the “golden age” of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Three great saint-poet-composers dominate this period: Syama Sastry (1762–1827), Tyagaraja (1767–1847), and Muttuswamy Dikshitar (1776–1836). Like singer-songwriters today, these composers wrote both the melodies and the lyrics to their songs.

A clever proverb describes the trademark of each. Dikshitar's songs are like a coconut: The “hard shell” of his intellectual music structures and scholarly song texts must be broken to get to the sweetness inside. Sastry's music is like a banana: The flavorful fruit is not so difficult to get to, but one must still peel off the bitter “skin” of tricky rhythm. But Tyagaraja's songs are like a mango: The “sweet fruit” of both poetry and music are immediately accessible. It is no wonder then

that Tyagaraja's songs dominate the repertoire today, cherished by musicians and audiences alike.

THE SOUND WORLD

Listen to "Devi Niye Tunai," a classical song in *kriti* (*krih-tee*) form composed by the twentieth-century composer Papanasan Sivan (CD 3, Track 9). *Kriti* is the principle song form of South Indian classical music. The singer is Shobha Vasudevan, a graduate of the University of Madras. She has sung recitals at Brihaddhvani and at other venues. The *mridangam* accompanist David Nelson is Artist in Residence at Wesleyan University, where he received his Ph.D., and a senior disciple of the great drummer T. Ranganathan. Nelson has accompanied T. Visnathan and others in India, the United States, and tours of Europe and China. The song text is in the Tamil language and praises the goddess Meenakshi with fish eyes (always open), who is worshipped in the magnificent temple in the southern city of Madurai.



1. *devi neeye tunai ten madurai vaazh meena lochani*
2. *devaati devan sundaresan cittam kavara bhuvana sundari-amba*
(Repeat 1)
3. *malayadhvajana maadavame kaancana maalai pudalvi mahaaraagjni alaimahal kalaimahal pani keervaani amudanaya iniya muttamizh valartta*
(Repeat 1)

Text,
"DEVI NIYE TUNAI"

1. O Devi, with fish eyes! One who dwells in the south, in Madurai, protect me.¹
2. You are the one great beauty in the world who has captured the heart of the Lord of Lords, Sundaresa.²
3. O, the One born out of the penance of the Lord of the [Himalaya] Mountains, Daughter of the mountains, great in wisdom, O Devi, [even] the daughter of waves and the daughter of the arts bow in respect to you.³

Free translation from the Tamil by Shobha Vasudevan.

1. *Devi* (related to the English *diva*) means "goddess." Meenakshi is one of many manifestations of the goddess Parvati, wife of Siva.
2. Similarly, Sundaresa is a manifestation of the great god Siva.
3. The "daughter of waves" is Lakshmi, goddess of wealth; the "daughter of the arts" is Saraswati (Figure 6.15).

You may notice that each line is repeated (with successive variations) several times and that the *kriti* is in three sections. The opening phrase (beginning *devi niye tunai*. . .) is repeated after sections 2 and 3 as a refrain. The *raga* is *Keeravani* (keer-uh-vaw-nee) with a scale (if one disregards the intensive ornamentation) similar to the European harmonic minor scale:



TRANSCRIPTION 6.1
Scale of *Keeravani raga*.

Close Listening

“DEVI NIYE TUNAI” (“O DEVI! WITH FISH-SHAPED EYES”)

CD 3:9

COUNTER
NUMBER

COMMENTARY

0:00	Electronic <i>tambura</i> drone background.
0:07	Brief <i>alapana</i> improvisation introduces <i>raga</i> .
0:28	1. <i>Pallavi</i> (“sprouting”) section. Song and <i>tala</i> cycle begin. Drum enters. Each phrase and variation of the phrase is sung twice.
1:36	2. <i>Anupallavi</i> (“after sprouting”), second section of the <i>kriti</i> . Each phrase and variation sung twice.
2:11	Reprise of final variation of (1). <i>Pallavi</i> .
2:31	3. <i>Charanam</i> (“foot”), third section of <i>kriti</i> .
3:00	Singer puts brief improvised phrase into song.
3:24	Song continues with melody of (2). But the melody is set to new words here in the <i>Charanam</i> .
4:04	Reprise of final variation of (1). <i>Pallavi</i> and improvised final vocal phrase.
4:22	Listen for the drum’s three-times-repeated rhythm, which signals closure.

The *tala* (time cycle) is *Adi tala* (*Ah-dee tah-luh*), the most common of the South Indian time cycles. It has 8 beats subdivided 4 + 2 + 2. (See Figure 6.12 for instructions in counting *tala*.)

If you think about the song “Devi Niye Tunai,” you will notice that it is marked by an environment of sound—like the spices of curries or the brilliantly colored silk saris worn by South Asian women—that signals at once where on the planet it is from. First, there is, the incessant, unchanging sound of a *drone* with a nasal buzz. Against this unchanging background a *single melody unfolds*. This melody differs greatly from tunes of Western classical or popular music: Its lines are sinuous and complex, marked by subtle bends and slides, with *intense ornamentation* in sharp contrast to the “plain” notes of most Western music (Figure 6.7).

The notes of its scale may also zigzag through intervals unfamiliar to Western ears, in tones flatter or sharper than those of the piano keyboard. A

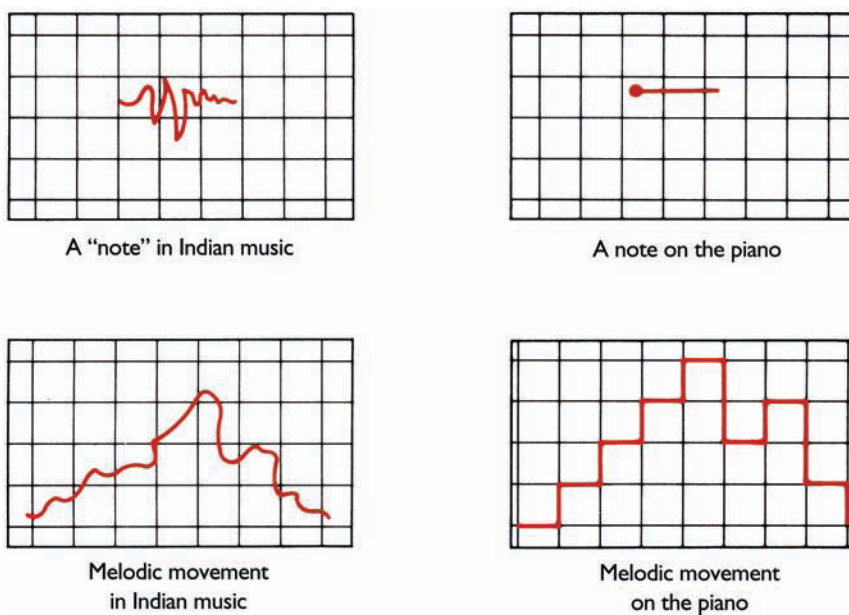


FIGURE 6.7

Notes and melodic movement in Indian music compared with those of the piano.

“note”—called a *svara* (*svah-rah*)—in Carnatic music is quite different from the fixed, stable note in Western music. A “note” can be a tiny constellation of ornamented pitches. Further, movement from one *svara* to the next may be sliding or gliding rather than the stepwise movement between Western notes (Figure 6.7).

Improvisation plays a key role in performance in Indian music. All musicians must be able to invent music on the spot. In “Devi Niye Tunai” the singer improvises briefly only twice, but the drummer is improvising throughout.

An interesting timbre, or tone color, strikes us. This sound world distinctly prefers *nasal timbre*, whether in the human voice or in musical instruments. Even adopted European instruments such as the clarinet or violin are played in a manner to increase their “nasalness.”

In performance, music paper or notation is nowhere to be seen: The performers are clearly *working by ear in an oral tradition*. There is no conductor, but each performer has a comfortable and well-defined role to play.

When the drum comes in, we are immediately struck by the energy and *complexity of the drummer’s rhythms*, played with the fingers and hands. We can sense a strong beat, but the metrical unit—*tala*—seems to be longer and more complicated than those we are used to (3/4, 4/4, etc.).

Finally, *lyrics in classical music are touchstones to Hindu mythology*. Lyrics reference details in the stories of the gods and goddesses, their attributes, and their relationship to human devotees. For South Indians these references can be read easily since they are part of the culture they have grown up with. (Similarly, we “read” the Woody Woodpecker reference in the pop song.)

CONCERTS

Concerts usually begin between 5:30 to 6:30 in the evening except at music festivals, when they occur from morning until late night. Programs are sponsored

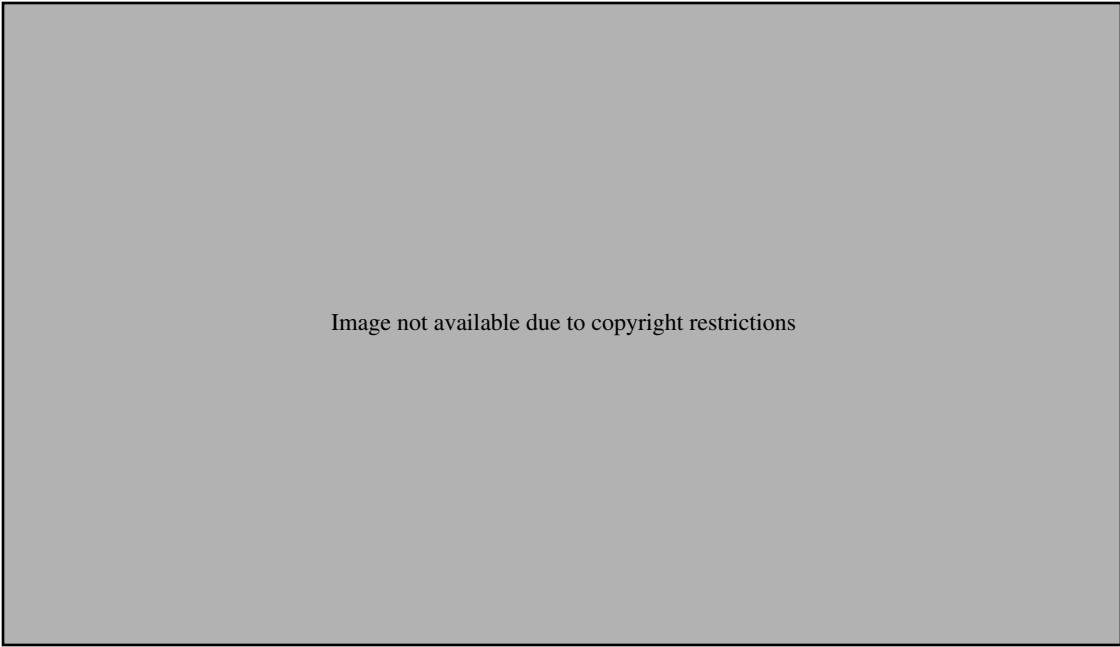


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by *sabhas* (*sah*-bhahs), cultural clubs that bring to their members and the general public music, dance, plays, lectures, and even an occasional movie. The large and prestigious *sabhas* have their own buildings, often large shedlike structures with overhead fans and open sides to catch the evening breeze. Other *sabhas* may use an auditorium, a lecture hall, or a temple. The audience may sit in rattan chairs or, as in the past, on large striped rugs or mats spread on the floor. The musicians sit on a raised platform or stage, and they are sure to have cronies or fellow musicians sitting in close proximity in front to offer reactions and encouragement through stylized motions like head wobbling, enthusiastic verbal comments, or tongue clicking (which, in contrast to Western culture, means “Awesome!”).

Musicians sit on a rug on a stage or platform with the principle musician always in the middle, the drummer on stage left, and the violinist or other accompanist on stage right. Other musicians, if any, sit in the rear (Figure 6.8).

Compared with classical music concerts in the West, these concerts are relaxed and informal. Members of the audience may count time with their hands, periodically exchange comments with friends, or occasionally get up to buy snacks at the refreshment stand. Usually there are no printed programs. A knowledgeable audience is familiar with the repertoire of songs, *ragas* (melodic modes), and *talas* (time cycles). A concert lasts from one-and-a-half to three hours without an intermission.

THE ENSEMBLE: MUSICAL TEXTURE

In a concert each musician and instrument has a role to play. These roles, creating the musical texture, might be described as functional layers: (1) the melody layer, (2) the background drone, and (3) the rhythm/percussion. Within each layer there may be one or more musicians (Figure 6.9).

The Melodic Layer

The *principal melodic soloist* dominates the ensemble. A disciple may support the principal melodic soloist in the background. A singer is principle melodic soloist in maybe 80 percent of all concerts, but instruments such as violin, bamboo flute, saxophone, *veena*, or mandolin may be featured.

The next important role within this layer is the *melodic accompanist*. In South India this is usually a violinist, partly because the violin is always used to accompany a vocalist, and most concerts feature voice. The melodic accompanist

plays three important roles: He or she must (1) play along on all the songs (following the notes of the soloist instantaneously); (2) echo and support the soloist's improvised phrases in the *alapana* (*ah-lah-puh-nuh*) (which frequently precedes the song), adding a short *alapana* of his or her own; and (3) alternate with the soloist in later improvisations, which bring the performance to a climax. In instrumental concerts, an instrument duplicating that of the soloist might provide the melodic accompaniment, for example, violin + violin, *veena* + *veena*, etc.

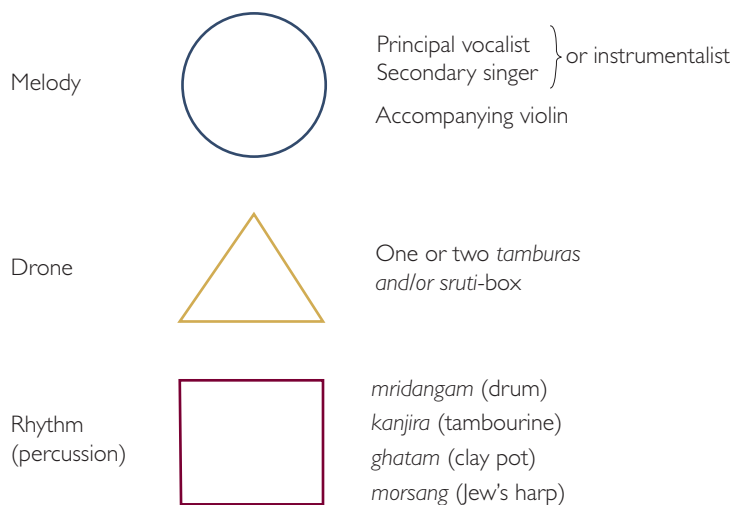


FIGURE 6.9

The functioning layers in Carnatic music.

The *Sruti* Layer

The drone, or *sruti* (*sroo-tee*), layer includes one or more specialized instruments. The *tambura* (*tahm-buh-ruh*) is a four-stringed plucked instrument tuned to the tonal center and fifth. Its buzzing timbre is created by inserting a small length of thread under each playing string on the slightly rounded top of the bridge, creating a rich blend of overtones. This sound is perhaps the most recognizable “Indian” sound of all. The tuned reed *sruti-box* can also be used. Played with a bellows, it gives a continuous reed organ sound. Today most musicians use small synthesizers that can duplicate electronically the sound of either instrument.

The Rhythm/Percussion Layer

Finally, there is the bedrock of the ensemble, the percussion. The double-headed, barrel-shaped *mridangam* (*mrih-dun-gum*) drum is the *principal accompanying percussion* instrument (and often the only percussion) in Carnatic music (Figure 6.5). When other *subordinate percussion instruments* are added, their players must follow the signals of the *mridangam* player, who tells them when to play together or singly, or when to drop out. The other percussion instruments used in classical music performance are the *ghatam* (*gah-tum*), a large clay pot with a ringing, metallic sound (Figure 6.13); the *kanjira* (*kahn-jih-rah*), a tambourine with a snakeskin head and jangles; and the *morsang* (*mor-sang*), a Jew's (or jaw's) harp that is played in the same rhythms as the other percussion instruments.

In the CD examples (CD 3, Tracks 9 and 10), note that there are only two performers: singer/*mridangam* and *veena/mridangam*, respectively. In both cases,

an electronic *sruti*-box supplies a drone background. Thus, all three functioning layers—melodic, drone, and percussion—are represented.

Now that we have looked at the makeup of a South Indian ensemble, we need to explore two concepts that are central to an understanding of India's classical music: *raga* and *tala*.

raga: THE MELODIC SYSTEM

The ancient texts define a *raga* as “that which colors the mind.” In fact, in Sanskrit the primary meaning of the word is “coloring, dying, tingeing.” This connection with generating feelings and emotions in human beings—with “coloring” the mind and the heart—is important because a *raga* really has no equivalent in the West. A *raga* is an expressive entity with a “musical personality” all its own. This musical personality is, in part, technical—a collection of notes, a scale, intonation, ornaments, resting or pillar tones, and so on. Most of all, it includes a portfolio of characteristic musical gestures and phrases—bits and pieces of melody—that give it a distinct and recognizable identity. Each *raga* has its rules about the way a musician may move from one note to another and particular ways of ornamenting certain notes with slides and oscillations. But, aside from its scale, a *raga* cannot be written down; it is part of the oral tradition. One gets to know a *raga* gradually—by hearing one's guru or other master musicians perform it over many years. It is said that getting to know a *raga* is like getting to know a close friend: beginning with the face and voice, one eventually perceives the inner personality with all its quirks, puzzles, and delights.

Traditional texts associate particular *ragas* with human emotions: the nine traditional *rasas* (*rah-sahs*; “flavors”)—love, anger, sadness, fear, disgust, wonder, heroism, laughter, religious devotion—plus a possible tenth, utter peacefulness. *Ragas* may also be associated with colors, animals, deities, a season of the year, a time of day (like late at night or early morning), or certain magical properties (causing rain, calming the mind, auspiciousness, and so forth). Because of these many extramusical associations, there is a genre of miniature paintings of *ragas* called *raga-mala* (*rah-gah mah-lah*). In the painting of *raga* Goda (Figure 6.10), the mood of the *raga* is created through two colorfully dressed figures in the foreground—a woman playing a frame drum and a dancing nobleman, both frozen in movement—against a dark background. Delicate green leaves connect to a vine wrapping around a tree, a symbol of lovers.

Musicians know these associations and the many folkloric tales about them: *ragas* charming cobras, causing rain, bringing peace of mind, raising the dead, healing sickness, causing a rift with one's guru. One amusing tale even illustrates that if a particular *raga* is sung in the morning, the singer will go hungry the rest of the day. What is clear in all this is that in India *ragas* are seen as powerful and full of expressive force; they touch deep emotions within the human heart as well as deeper realities at the very core of existence.

THE MELAKARTA SYSTEM

In Carnatic music, all *ragas* relate to a *melakarta* (*may-luh-car-tah*), a basic “parent” or “mother” scale. There are seven notes in each *melakarta* scale—(1) *sa*—(2) *ri*—(3) *ga*—(4) *ma*—(5) *pa*—(6) *da*—(7) *ni*. In the system (Figure 6.11) the




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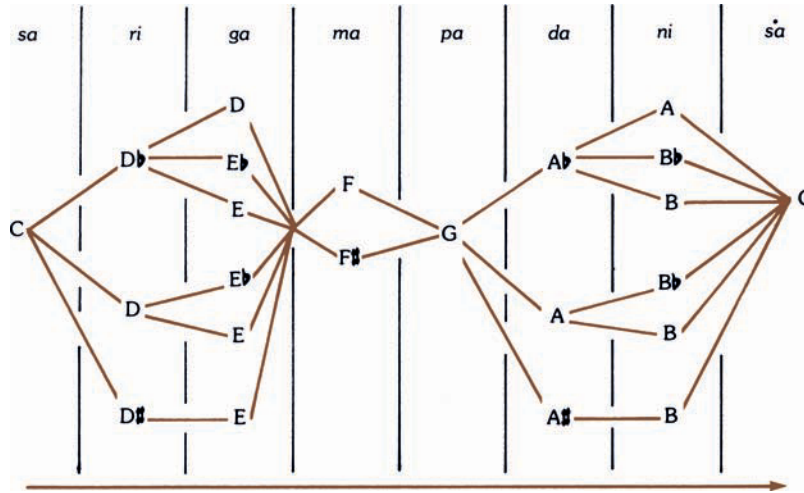
tonal center—(1) *sa*—and the perfect fifth above—(5) *pa*—never change since they coincide with the drone. The other five notes mutate in a complex system to create different scales.

Your teacher will guide you through the simplified chart given as follows (Figure 6.11). Following the lines from left to right, one can discover that there are seventy-two possible tracks, and therefore seventy-two basic seven-note “parent” scales in the system. These scales of seven notes up and the same seven down—with the other elements that form a *raga* added to them—are known as the *seventy-two melakarta ragas*.

But the system does not end here. Dozens of other *ragas* may derive from each of the seventy-two *melakarta* “mothers” by creating other characteristics: (1) omitting notes in ascent and/or descent, (2) zigzagging the scale in ascent and/or descent, (3) adding “visiting” notes from other scales, and (4) adding other distinguishing elements such as unusual ornaments, intonation, or special melodic phrases.

FIGURE 6.11

The *melakarta* system
(tracks read from left to right)



There are thus hundreds of *ragas* in common use—and potentially many more. Some *ragas* are popular, while others are rare; some are “major,” others are “minor”; some are deep and complicated, others are “light.” Some have been in the Carnatic music tradition for centuries, while others are recent. Some have traveled down from North India or even from as far away as Cambodia.

As one begins to listen seriously and in depth to Carnatic music, one discovers that the seemingly infinite variety of *ragas* and the expressive use musicians

make of them, shaping them into beautiful melodic compositions or spinning them out in improvisation, form the heart and soul of India’s classical music.

FIGURE 6.12

Counting *talas*.

Adi tala (fast or slow tempo): 4 + 2 + 2 = 8 beats

1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . /5 . 6 . /7 . 8 . //

(&) (&) (&) (&) (&) (&) (&) (&)

Clap Clap Clap

Finger count

Wave

Wave

rupaka tala: 1 + 2 = 3 beats

1 /2 3 //

Clap Clap

Wave

(khanda) chapu tala: 2 + 3 = 5 beats

1 2 /3 4 5 //

Clap * Clap Clap *

*space (i.e., nothing)

misra chapu tala: 3 + 2 + 2 = 7 beats

1 2 3 /4 5 /6 7 //

Clap Clap * Clap * Clap *

TALA: THE TIME CYCLE

Tala, the organization of time in music, is part of a conceptual spectrum in Indian thought that moves from a fraction of a second—as the ancient texts picturesquely put it, the time it takes a pin to puncture a lotus petal—to the great *yugas* (*you-gahs*), or “ages,” which like geological time periods span millions of years. The musician regards time initially as a beat, or regular pulse. On the larger level, beats are grouped into regularly recurring metric cycles. These cycles are called *talas*. In theoretical texts there are hundreds, but in Carnatic music today only four *talas* predominate in common practice (Figure 6.12).

Except for the *khanda chapu tala* (*kahn-dah chah-pu tah-lah*) and *misra chapu tala* (*mis-rah chah-pu tah-lah*), which are generally performed at a brisk tempo, all *talas* may be performed at

fast, medium, or slow tempo. In slow tempo there are two pulses per beat, as in “1 & 2 & 3 & 4 . . .” and so forth.

The *tala* cycles differ from the common Western time signatures in that *tala* accents occur in uneven groupings (4 + 2 + 2, or 3 + 2 + 2, or 1 + 2, and so on). These groupings are marked by the accent of hand claps.

THE DRUMMER’S ART

In performance the *mridangam* player and other percussionists play in an improvisatory style based on hundreds of rhythmic patterns and drum strokes that they have learned, invented, absorbed, and stored in their brains and hands (Figures 6.5 and 6.13). In performance the percussionist may use precomposed patterns, arranging them in predictable or unpredictable groupings. Or he may create entirely new patterns, spontaneously, but within the limits and grammar of his rhythmic language.

The drummer’s art centers on drum strokes—distinctive individual tones produced on different parts of the drumhead by different finger combinations or parts of the hands. These strokes, individually and as part of rhythmic patterns, can be expressed *sollukattu* (sol-lu-kaht-tu), spoken syllables that duplicate drum strokes and rhythmic patterns. Some patterns with *sollukattu* drawn from elementary lessons are given in Transcription 6.2.

The drummer’s art is complex. At first he must accompany songs, the *kritis*, and other compositions of the Carnatic music tradition. He must know each song, picking up the flow and feeling, shaping his accompaniment to the internal rhythm of the song.

The drummer emerges from the background during long-held notes in the melody, or at cadences, marking endings with a formulaic threefold repetition called a *mora* (mo-ruh) or *korvai* (kor-vai). When the melodic soloist is improvising within the *tala* cycles, the alert drummer is quick to recognize and respond to patterns, to echo them, or to ornament them rhythmically. The South Indian percussionist, however, does not merely “play off the top of his head.” Through years of training, study, and listening, his brain in a sense has been programmed with hundreds of rhythmic building blocks, formulas, and possibilities for larger combinations. He is also calculating constantly, like a master mathematician, how his formulas and patterns of asymmetrical lengths will fit into the *tala* cycles to come out right at the end.

Although we have only touched the surface of the drummer’s art, we can begin to appreciate a rhythmic system as complicated as any on earth, a counterbalance to the melodic beauties of the *raga* system. As an old Sanskrit verse says, “Melody is the mother, rhythm is the father.”



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FIGURE 6.13

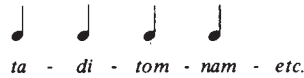
N. Govindarajan practices the clay pot *ghatam* at home.

TRANSCRIPTION 6.2

Drum rhythms in
sollukattu.

LEVEL 1:

Basic drumstrokes and sound on the *mridangam*—2 or 3 for the left hand, about 14 for the right hand and fingers.

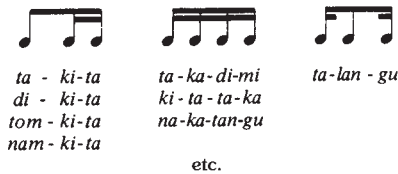


LEVEL 2:

Tiny cell-like rhythmic patterns, such as:



connected with various stroke arrangements:



LEVEL 3:

Brief rhythmic patterns of several (or more) beats built from combinations of rhythmic cells, like:



or:



LEVEL 4:

Longer strings of rhythmic pattern combinations, and *moras* (3-times-repeated ending formula) like:



The above small *korvai* pattern (LEVEL 4) is ten beats long and is played three times (10 + 10 + 10 = 30 beats). It resolves on a final "tom" after the third repetition. In *rupaka tala* (3-beat cycle) begin the pattern on the first beat. (Note that the first repetition begins on the second beat of a *tala* cycle, and the final repetition begins on the third beat of a *tala* cycle. The final "tom" will resolve on the first beat of an additional *tala* cycle.) One can also try doing the pattern in double-time (twice as fast). The final "tom" will still resolve on the first beat of the *tala* cycle.

A Carnatic Music Performance

A concert in South India is marked by a string of songs, each in a specific *raga* and *tala*. While the song may be performed alone for its own intrinsic beauty, the principle musician may choose to perform one or more forms of improvisation before, within, or after the rendition of the song. In a concert, several song forms



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FIGURE 6.14

Ranganayaki Rajagopalan with the veena she has played since she was a small girl.

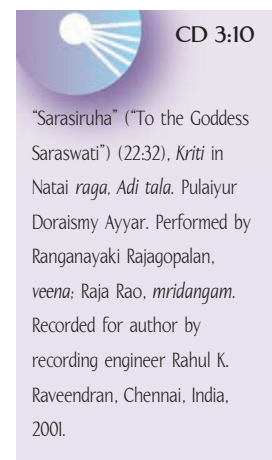
are used. A *varnam* (etude) usually begins a concert. Then a string of contrasting *kritis* build up to the “main item,” the climax of the concert with the most extensive improvisations and a drum solo. (The “main item” may have a stately *kriti* in a “major” *raga* at its core, or it may be in a mostly improvised genre known as *ragam-tanam-pallavi* [*rah-gam, tah-num, pawl-luh-vee*]). Then the last half hour or so of a concert has a more relaxed atmosphere with “lighter” *bhajans* and other devotional music, *slokam* (*shlo-kahm*), religious verses chanted recitative-style in *ragas* of the singer’s choice, or songs from the classical dance tradition.

Listen to a performance of a *kriti* with improvisations and drum solo (CD 3, Track 10) played on the plucked *veena* by Ms. Ranganayaki Rajagopalan accompanied by Mr. Srimushnam V. Raja Rao playing the *mridangam* drum. Before examining the performance itself, however, we must meet the musicians.

Ms. Ranganayaki (Figure 6.14), now more than seventy years old, in 1936 was a very unruly child. Her parents had sent her to live with a childless uncle and his wife in the prosperous southern town of Karaikudi. The uncle was the friend of a great *veena* virtuoso, Karaikudi Sambasiva Iyer. (You will notice that South Indian musicians often take their hometown as a “first name.”) The wealthy merchants and financiers of the town, many of whom had traveled to Singapore, Hong Kong, or other outposts of the British Empire to make their fortunes, were great supporters of music.

As the story goes, one day Ranganayaki’s uncle appeared with his four-year-old niece at the great musician’s house. As the elders were talking about music, Sambasiva Iyer sang a tone. To his surprise, the young girl, playing nearby, sang the same tone. Sambasiva sang another note. The girl duplicated that note. Recognizing a rare talent, the musician took the little girl into his household, into an apprenticeship known as the *gurukula* (*gu-ru-koo-lah*) system.

The discipline was extremely rigorous, with lessons beginning at 4:30 in the early morning and continuing throughout the day, as the stern guru taught her and other youngsters living in the household. Mistakes or laziness were met with painful slaps from a bamboo rod. Effort and accomplishment were rewarded not



with praise, but with subtle gestures such as the guru himself serving food on a student's banana-leaf plate. Ranganayaki describes her life during that period as "not a normal childhood. I had no playmates or anything. It was *asura sadhakam* ('devil's practice')" (Personal communication 2000).

Ranganayaki's musical genius gradually developed. By age twelve she was accompanying her guru in concerts, and soon thereafter she was giving solo recitals. The close relationship continued after her marriage at age fifteen, through a move to the big city of Chennai, and up until Sambasiva Iyer's death in 1958. The apprenticeship had lasted twenty-two years.

Over the years Ms. Ranganayaki has enjoyed a distinguished career. She has been recognized as dedicated to her tradition and as one of the great *veena* virtuosi of her time. With her phenomenal memory she is a rare repository of the songs played by the Karaikudi tradition, while her skills and creativity at improvisation—always avoiding the preplanned and formulaic—are remarkable. She has toured Europe and the United States, and has been regularly featured in the prestigious AIR national radio broadcasts. After a string of previous honors, in 2000 she received one of India's highest artistic awards—the National Award for Music—from the Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi.

Speaking of the *veena* tradition of which she is one of the greatest living exponents, she has said, "Words cannot describe it. One can only feel it while listening to it. It is just like this: you can *say* that sugar is sweet. But you can only really understand the sweetness by tasting it" (Personal communication 2000).

Ms. Ranganayaki's instrument, the *veena*, has three drone strings and four playing strings. Its carving and ivory trim make it a work of art, and testimony to the skill of the hereditary craftsmen who made it. The chromatically placed brass frets are set in black wax, which is scalloped to allow room for the fingers to bend the strings in ornamentation. A set of complex fingerings, slides, and pulled multipitched ornaments enable the musician to interpret the character of each *raga* and its subtle intonation.

Women in Music

A note on women in South India's classical music is in order. As we can see by our two listening examples (devotional songs to the goddesses Meenakshi and Saraswati), worshipping God in a feminine form is common in Hindu India. Given this highest form of respect, it is perhaps no surprise that women are accepted into most professions and have been prime ministers in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In music, two of the greatest poet-composers—the Rajasthani princess Mirabai (1504–1550) and the Tamilian saint Andal (early eighth century)—were women. In the contemporary scene many of the leading musicians are women, especially as singers (M. S. Subbulakshmi, D. K. Pattammal are examples), but also on instruments such as violin (T. Rukmani), flute (the Sikkul Sisters), and *veena* (Rajeeswari Padmanabhan, Kalpakam Swaminathan). On the other hand, women do not tend to play reed instruments such as the clarinet, *nagasvaram*, or saxophone. Nor do they tend to play percussion instruments. But there are exceptions to this mold, such as Kaleeshabi Mahaboob Subhani (*nagasvaram*) and Sukanya Ramgopal (*ghatam*), and certainly in the future women will break through these barriers.

The drummer is Srimushnam (his ancestral village) V. Raja Rao on the *mridangam*. He is one of the great contemporary performers on his instrument. Known as "a musician's musician," he has accompanied most of the leading

singers and instrumentalists of Carnatic music in India and abroad in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. He takes particular pride in his ability to accompany the soft tones of the *veena* with a light yet precise touch of fingers and hands on the drumheads. In the CD example (CD 3, Track 10), he illustrates both the art of accompaniment and a brief drum solo.

Raja Rao's instrument, the *mridangam*, has a barrel-shaped body carved from jackwood. Both of its heads are made from multiple layers of leather, the outer layers cut with a circular hole in the middle. The lower (untuned) left-hand head has a blob of damp wheat paste applied to its center to give it a booming sound. The center of the right-hand head (which is tuned) has a hard metallic black spot made of many polished layers of rice paste and other ingredients. The use of the fingers as miniature drumsticks allows the drummer to play passages of incredible speed and virtuosity.

The performance begins with two improvised sections—*alapana* and *tanam*—for *veena* alone. *Alapana* (in free time, with “breath” rhythms and no regular pulse) and *tanam* (marked with strong, energetic, and irregular rhythms) must precede a song and introduce the listener to the *raga* in which the song is set. The beginning of the song in *kriti* form, “Sarasiruha” in Natai *raga*, *Adi tala*, is marked by the entrance of the drum. A lively improvised section for *veena* with drum accompaniment called *kalpana svaras* follows, with a brief drum solo, the *tani avartanam*, at the end.

We will now look at the five sections of “Sarasiruha” and its improvisations in performance (see the Close Listening guide).

Close Listening

“SARASIRUHA” (“TO THE GODDESS SARASWATI”)

CD 3:10

COUNTER
NUMBER

COMMENTARY

Alapana (improvised)

0:00	<i>Veena</i> alone (with drone), Free rhythm (no regularly recurring beat). Introduces the melodic characteristics of Natai <i>raga</i> . Begins slowly in the lower range of the instrument, then moves higher and faster to explore the middle and high ranges.
2:05–3:15	Peak of <i>alapana</i> . Reaches highest note. Then descends to conclusion.

Tanam (improvised)

3:18	<i>Veena</i> alone (with drone). Irregular beat. Rhythmic exposition of Natai <i>raga</i> . Listen for the phrases to begin low in the range, then work their way to middle and high range.
7:48–8:18	<i>Veena</i> switches back to <i>alapana</i> style for descent and close.

Kriti (composed song) “Sarasiruha”

- 8:25 Song begins in *Adi tala* (4 + 2 + 2). Drum enters.
- 13:31 Repeated variants of musical phrase—invocation of Saraswati, then song continues to the end.
- Kalpana svaras 1** (improvised, short—one cycle or less)
- 14:45 Lively improvised section. Begins with four short *svara* improvisations of less than a half *tala* cycle, each returning to the *idam* “place.”
- Kalpana svaras 2** (improvised, extended)
- 15:10–17:48 Three extended *svara* improvisations of six and one-half-, seven and one-half-, and ten and one-half-*tala* cycles respectively, each returning to *idam* “place.”
- Tani avartanam** (drum solo)
- 18:00 Improvised and precomposed rhythmic solo by the *mridangam*. *Adi tala* continues.
- 21:30 Listen for the *mora* or *korvai*, a formulaic rhythmic pattern repeated three times that signals the end of the drum solo.
- Kriti return and close**
- 22:22 *Veena* joins back in with *kriti*’s first bit of melody and an improvised close.

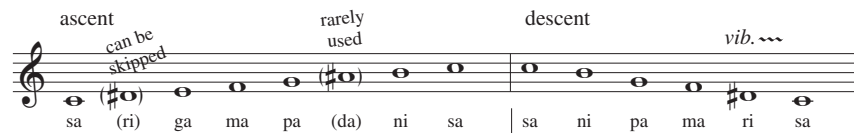
ALAPANA

The first section of the performance (CD 3, Track 10) is an *alapana* (ah-lah-pah-nah), a free-flowing exposition and exploration of the *raga* its facets and phrases, its ornamentation, its pushes and pulls of intonation, as well as its mood and character. An *alapana* is nonmetrical, that is, it has no regular beat or recurring *tala* cycles. Instead, its phrases evolve in flowing proselike “breath rhythms,” phrases that eventually come to rest on important pillar tones, or resting notes.

An *alapana* has a general plan set both by the tradition as a whole and by the improvisational habits of the musician. In general, the phrases of an *alapana* begin slowly and gradually increase in speed and complexity as they move higher and higher in the range of the voice or instrument. After a peak there is a descent back to the lower register with an ending on the tonal center (*sa*). The voice or (as in this case) melodic instrument always performs against the drone background.

The *raga* of the *alapana* is derived from that of the *kriti*, the song composition, which it precedes. In our performance the *raga* is **Natai** (nah-tai), an ancient and powerful *raga* associated with the great god Siva in the form of Nataraja (nah-tuh-rah-jah)—“the Lord of Dance.” The Dance of Siva is said to shake the universe with its power and fury. The basic scale of Natai is as follows:

TRANSCRIPTION 6.3
Scale, Natai *raga*.



The most noteworthy characteristic of this *raga* is the shake or oscillation on the second note of the scale, *ri* (D♯ in our notation) as it descends downward to the tonal center *sa* (C). It is a sound startlingly similar to the major/minor “blues” third found in the African American tradition (Chapter 4). If you listen carefully or hum along with the performance, eventually you will begin to recognize the series of musical phrases and gestures that give *Natai raga* its character or “musical personality.”

TANAM

Tanam (*tah-nam*) is a highly rhythmic exposition of the *raga*. It is usually played or sung only once in a concert and is placed after the *alapana* and before the *kriti*. On the *veena* the musician plucks the playing and drone strings in asymmetrical improvised patterns while simultaneously working through the various phrases of the *raga*. Although there are no *tala* cycles in *tanam*, there is a strong sense of beat. Just as in *alapana* the overall shape of a *tanam* follows the range of the instrument from low to high in graduated steps and back down again. The Karaikudi tradition is famous for its *tanam*.

KRITI “SARASIRUHA”

All compositions in Carnatic music are songs, melodies with words. Because they are not precisely notated but, rather, taught and learned orally, songs do not have definitive versions. But within a specific guru’s style, students will be expected to follow the guru’s version. As a song is passed down from strings of gurus to disciples on its journey over hundreds of years to the present, many variant versions appear. Yet the composition remains recognizably itself—the main turns of phrase and the lyrics remain despite the variations in detail.

The *kriti* (composition) is the major song form of Carnatic music performance. (The word *kriti* is linguistically related to the same Indo-European root *kr* as the English word *creation*.) A brief *kriti* might be as short as four minutes; a long *kriti* in slow tempo could last for fifteen minutes or more. The structure is amazingly flexible—it may be contracted or expanded in an almost infinite number of ways.

The melody and lyrics of “Sarasiruha” (*sah-rah-see-roo-ha*) are by the nineteenth-century composer Pulaiyur Doraisamy Ayyar. The song is addressed to the goddess of music and learning, Saraswati (Figure 6.15). A free translation of its text follows:



FIGURE 6.15

Saraswati, goddess of music and learning.

Drawing © Navarana Reck, 2001. All rights reserved.

1. O Mother who loves the lotus seat,
Ever delighting in the music of *veena*,
Ever joyful, and ever merciful to me.
2. Save me who have taken refuge in you!
O You with feet as tender as sprouts,
You charm the hearts of poets.
You dwell in the lotus.
You of the jeweled bracelets.
(reprise) 1. O Mother who loves the lotus seat . . .

Text,
“SARASIRUHA”

3. Lotus-eyed Mother who is gracious to the lowly who seek your mercy,
 Mother with a face as lovely as the autumn moon,
 Pure Lady! O Saraswati, chaste, ever fond of learning.
 Lady with breasts like ceremonial vessels,
 Complete Being, who holds a book in her hand which bestows all dominion.
 (reprise) I. O Mother who loves the lotus seat . . .

Free translation by Indira Viswanathan Peterson.

Although the words of the song are not audible in an instrumental performance, the musicians and knowledgeable members of the audience know the song text well. The importance of this knowledge can be seen in the performance of “Sarasiruha”: At the place in the lyrics where the name of the goddess “O Saraswati . . .” appears (CD 3, Track 10, 14:33–15:10), Ms. Ranganayaki repeats the musical phrase over and over again—a multiple invocation of the goddess’ name—before she moves forward to the completion of the *kriti*.

KALPANA SVARAS

Kalpana (kahl-pah-nuh) means literally “imagined,” and *svaras* (svah-ruhs) are the “notes” of the scale of the *raga* being performed. This section of improvised “imagined notes” occurs either in the latter part of the *kriti* rendition or after the *kriti* has been completed. Identifying this section in a vocal performance is easy, because the performer sings the names of the notes of the *raga* scale—*sa*, *ri*, *ga*, *ma*, *pa*, *da*, or *ni*—instead of lyrics. In an instrumental performance, the musicians articulate or pluck each note.

The *kalpana svaras* always return to a phrase from the *kriti*, a familiar island in a sea of improvisation. This phrase, its beginning note, and the place where it begins in the *tala* cycle are important, because ultimately each turn of the *kalpana svaras* will lead back to it. Indeed, it is called the *idam* (ih-dum), the “place.” In Ms. Ranganayaki’s performance the “place” is the opening phrase of the *kriti*:

TRANSCRIPTION 6.4

The opening phrase of “Sarasiruha” is the *idam* (“place”) for the resolution of *kalpana svaras*. It begins on the second pulse of the downbeat after the first beat of the *tala*, its first pitch is *pa*, both “places” in time and space to which the conclusion of each improvisation must lead. After the first few of its notes the *idam* may be slightly varied in performance.

idam

1 + 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

sa - ra - si - ru - ha

end of cycles of improvisation leading back to *idam*.

beginning of cycle(s) of improvisation

At first, the improvised *svaras* will be short, perhaps only filling the last four of one *tala* cycle before returning to the phrase of the *idam*. As time goes on, the improvisations will grow in length and complexity, extending through more and more cycles of the *tala* as the performer's imagination runs free. A final extended improvisation will bring the *kalpana svara* section to a climax before its final return to the *idam* and the song.

THE DRUM SOLO: TANI AVARTANAM

As a conclusion of the “main item” in a concert, the *mridangam* player (and other percussionists, if any) come to the foreground with an extended solo. In a full concert, this solo will extend for ten to fifteen minutes or more. In our performance, Raja Rao's solo is concise. As noted earlier, the drum solo gives the percussionist the chance to display the full range of his skills and rhythmic imagination. In each section of the solo the drummer will explore a certain range of patterns and architectural ideas. Finally, the solo will end on an extended *korvai* (*kor-vai*), a big pattern repeated three times. This pattern leads back to an entrance of the *kriti* by the melodic soloist and the conclusion of the performance.

One form of improvisation not used in our performance, *niraval* (*nih-rah-vahl*), is a set of improvisations based on a phrase from the *kriti* and its song text which can precede the *kalpana svara* section.

On another occasion, at another performance, the musician might decide—using the same *kriti* as a centerpiece—to shape the performance in a different way. The song might be performed alone, for example, after a perfunctory *alapana* of a few phrases. Or the *tanam* and drum solo might be omitted. While the shape of the *kriti* will remain basically the same, the nature of the improvisations might vary as the musician draws on the procedures, ideas, and performance habits stored in his or her memory and on the interpretation of a particular *raga* on a particular day. This fluidity of performance sparked by the creative instincts of the South Indian musician is one of the delights of the Carnatic music tradition.

Indian Music and the West

As noted earlier, India's culture has long assimilated outside influences and made them its own. The presence of the violin, saxophone, guitar, and mandolin in Carnatic music, and the all-inclusive nature of South India's cinema/pop music industry are obvious examples. As the globalization of music through television, movies, CDs, cassettes, and travel continues, mutual influences between India and the West are bound to increase.

Since the 1970s, South Indian musicians have seen the connections between jazz improvisation and India's classical music traditions. From that awareness the genre known as “fusion” was born, an interface between East and West that continues to excite a younger generation of musicians and listeners. The Carnatic violinists L. Shankar and L. Subramanian have worked extensively with American and European jazz and rock musicians over the past thirty years, as has the *tabla* wizard Zakir Hussain. In the 2000s, the Australian singer Susheela Raman fused Carnatic *kritis* with an electric, hard-driving Chicago blues style (as in her album

Salt Rain). She also has composed original songs reflecting her multicultural background. The talented American jazz pianist Vijay Iyer, whose parents are from South India, has worked with saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa and others to bring into jazz a subtle integration of Carnatic music rhythm and improvisational procedures, creating a unique style that defies definition (see the album *Reimagining*, 2005).

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, an increasing number of South Asians have been working, studying, and living abroad. Cohesive communities of transplanted Indians, many trained in music, now appear in almost every major city or university town on earth. The children of first-generation immigrants often find themselves in a bicultural world where the “Indianness” of their home and family must be balanced against the pervasive dominance of the mainstream culture of their adopted country. Cultural clubs, temples, and mosques support the study and presentation of concerts of classical Indian music and dance. Various Indo-pop styles, such as “bhangra” in Great Britain (note Panjabi MC’s self-named album *Panjabi MC Beware*) or “tassa-beat soca” in Trinidad, have also evolved. Here the drones, scales, and sometimes the instruments and languages of Indian music fuse with the beat and electric sound of mainstream rock and pop styles.

Indian music has infiltrated the West since the late 1950s. The *sitar* virtuoso Ravi Shankar is a seminal figure. Having spent years in Paris as a boy with the dance troupe of Uday Shankar, he has been able to move with ease in the elite worlds of Western classical and pop music. By the late 1960s his concerts with the *tabla* virtuoso Alla Rakha at venues as varied as the Edinburgh Music Festival and the Monterey Pop Festival eventually gave him superstar status in Europe and the United States, as well as in India.

Over the years Ravi Shankar has released many collaborative recordings. These include the *West Meets East* dialogues with famous Western musicians—among them the classical violinist Yehudi Menuhin, the flute virtuoso Jean-Pierre Rampal, and the jazz musician Paul Horn. In the album *East Greets East* (1978) he performed with traditional Japanese musicians. His *Shankar Family and Friends*, an early 1970s recording made in San Francisco with several dozen Indian and Western musicians (including one listed enigmatically as “Harris Georgeson”) includes some fascinating music.

In the mid-1960s, Ravi Shankar acquired the most illustrious of his students, George Harrison of the Beatles. Harrison’s interest in Indian classical music and religious philosophy resulted in a series of finely crafted Indian-based songs ranging from “Love You To”^{*} and “Within You, Without You” to “The Inner Light” (recorded in Bombay) and the post-Beatles “My Sweet Lord.”

In “Love You To,” from the Beatles 1966 album *Revolver*, the *sitar* begins with a brief introduction of the notes of a *raga*-like scale in unmeasured time—a hint of an *alapana*. A background drone of *tambura* and bass guitar continues throughout. The *tabla* drumbeat enters, establishing a driving metrical pulse of *tala*-like cycles. Harrison’s vocal line is sung in flat tones and ends with a descending melisma of distinct Indian vocal sound. In the second section of the song, the repetitive riffs

^{*}The song was incorrectly listed in its 1966 Decca American release as “Love You Too.”

alternating between *sitar* and voice reflect the “question and answer” interplay of Indian musicians in performance. Then there is an instrumental break with the *sitar* and *tabla* improvising first in cycles of seven beats, then in five, and finally in three, all of which leads to a final rendition of chorus and verse. A fast instrumental postlude corresponds to the ending climactic sections of a North Indian performance. All of this in a three-minute song!

Many of John Lennon’s songs of the mid-sixties also had Indian influences, such as “Across the Universe” with its Sanskrit phrases or the beautiful song “Rain.” Lennon often used Indianlike sound and textures to indicate the trippiness of drug-induced states (as in “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds”). In the musical texture of “Tomorrow Never Knows,” built over a hair-raising drone and Ringo’s hypnotic beat, Lennon (with producer George Martin) uses exotic riffs and Indian instruments floating in a hallucinogenic collage of backward tapes and sound effects (described by one critic as “a herd of elephants gone mad!”). All of this backs the otherworldly dream state of the lyrics inspired by the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as interpreted by the LSD guru Timothy Leary.

Indo-pop music has continued to flourish in Great Britain, where large immigrant communities from the former colonies continue to generate new genres and sounds. The filmmaker Vivek Bald, in his groundbreaking documentary *Mutiny: Asians Storm British Music*, has brilliantly surveyed the Indo-Brit scene in the late twentieth century.

The singer and composer Sheila Chandra, born in 1965, has treated diverse influences from East and West with intelligence and sensitivity. Trained in both Western and Indian music, in the 1980s she joined with Steve Coe and Martin Smith to form an innovative East/West fusion band, Monsoon (see *Silk*, 1991). In the exquisite song “Ever So Lonely/Eyes/Ocean” from the 1993 album *Weaving My Ancestor’s Voices*, she sets her English lyrics to *raga*-based melody, drone, and synthesizer. In “Speaking in Tongues” I and II from the same album, Chandra adapts the lightning-fast language of spoken Indian drum patterns with great ingenuity, moving from traditional *sollukattu* to whispers, clicks, and playful gibberish. In her more recent work, Chandra has focused on the unique qualities of her voice set against electronic and acoustic drones and explored the synthesis of world vocal traditions from the British Isles, Spain, North Africa, and India.

In South India, the film composer and songwriter Ilaiyaraja is a superstar (Figure 6.16). Born in a village in 1943 to a poor family in the lowest stratum of society, Ilaiyaraja left high school to join a band formed by his stepbrother to provide entertainment at political rallies and festivals. Seeking his musical fortune in Chennai, he apprenticed himself to “Master” Dhanaraj, a composer for one of the big film studios. The eccentric “Master” taught him not only the skills of writing songs and film scores but also Carnatic music, Western music notation, harmony, and the classical European music of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. Meanwhile, Ilaiyaraja supported himself by playing guitar in studio orchestras. In his spare time he arranged pop songs by the Beatles, Paul Simon, and others.

Ilaiyaraja’s break came in 1976 when he was hired to write songs and background music for the hit movie *Annakili* (“The parrot Annam”). In contrast to the “classical-lite” pop songs of his day, Ilaiyaraja echoed the earthy South Indian rural theme of the film with folklike melodies backed by driving village rhythms and an orchestra filled with folk instruments. His music with its folk roots and

FIGURE 6.16

Composer Ilaiyaraja's head dominates a billboard for the movie *Kadagattam-kari* ("Kadagattam-girl").

Kadagattam is a South Indian folk genre in which the female dancer must balance a clay pot on her head as she dances.

Photo © Carol Reck 2005. All rights reserved.



vibrant sound took the country by storm, blaring from radios and bazaar loudspeakers, admired by men, women, and children of all classes, rich and poor—taxi drivers, coolies, villagers, and urban intellectuals alike.

In the ensuing years, Ilaiyaraja has written songs and background music for more than seven hundred films. He is so famous that his name precedes those of movie stars.

In his composition "I Met Bach at My House," Ilaiyaraja illustrates the facility by which he can flit from East to West. After a brief violin *alapana* in Carnatic music style, a string orchestra enters playing an arrangement of a Bach prelude (from the Third Partita for violin). The solo violin enters again, flitting through the contrapuntal texture like a soloist in a Baroque concerto grosso, but the violin's sound, style, intonation, and ornamentation are pure South Indian.

As Indian classical and popular musicians continue to absorb the varied musics of the world around them, and as world musical traditions continue to be instantaneously accessible, perhaps the ancient traditions of classical Indian music North and South, Hindusthani and Carnatic, will continue to find echoes, reflections, interpretations, and responses in the music of the West.



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