

CAN KARNATIC CONCEPTS PRODUCE ONLY KARNATIC MUSIC?

Article by Rafael Reina published by the Bangalore Times in November 2001

In the summer of 1997 I wrote an article entitled 'Can Karnatic music change the history of Western music?' published by the Bangalore Times. In that article I tried to explain why Karnatic music, being the most complex, yet beautiful music of the planet, has traditionally been completely ignored in the West, unlike Hindustani and other forms of so-called 'World Music'.

The essence of my reasoning was that, due to the general ignorance in India regarding classical and contemporary western music and its development in the last 75 years (*no pejorative implications are implied*), most Karnatic musicians have felt compelled to play 'light classical' music concerts when performing abroad, instead of revealing the amazing possibilities of Vivadi raga development, structural thinking and rhythmical complexities. Thinking that western music equals Michael Jackson and other pop artists, most Karnatic musicians repeatedly present more 'straight ahead' concerts using ragas that are very similar to our simple major and minor scales, talas that are no different from our straight 4/4, and with simple accompaniment in the percussion, mostly in chatusra. This has created the impression among western classical music performers, critics and composers alike, that Karnatic music is an 'exotic' version of western pop.

Ironically, even the simplest form of Karnatic music is not 'commercial enough' to displace other sorts of non-western music from the pedestal they occupy in the preferences of the regular western audience. Karnatic musicians have, therefore, unwittingly presented something too difficult for the regular public, and simultaneously too simple for western classical music lovers.

Fortunately, this is beginning to change.

In February of 1993, in a rather fortuitous way, I met Jahnvi Jayaprakash with whom I took a few lessons here in Amsterdam. Since these few lessons could, of course, do no more than merely scratch the surface of this ancient Art, I then determined to go to Bangalore, which I duly did, studying with Jahnvi for three consecutive summers. Karnatic music became a kind of addiction, that I could not and did not want to shake off. What started out as something that I had conceived as an interesting tool for my own compositional desires and needs, began to develop into a whole corpus of theory, that, if presented in a way that most western classical musicians could grasp (said quite simply: presented in a western way), could seriously change many things in the current thinking of composers and performers in the West. In other words, I began to conceive a System based on the Karnatic music concepts and techniques that could eventually positively influence many professional musicians and advanced students.

From the outset, this approach faced (and still faces) a serious obstacle, namely the way in which most musicians think of Indian music: for many of them, teaching Karnatic

music as a tool to deepen and better understand issues such as microtonality, rhythmical complexities and structural thinking, seemed (and seems) as absurd as teaching ancient Greek in order to understand current day New York slang.

So here in Amsterdam, I started a kind of 'Crusade', playing recordings I made of Jahnvi in Bangalore to different music agents. The result, almost invariably, was of astonishing awe in most listeners and some of them even asked me if this was Indian music!

Through one of these sessions, the former chairman of the 'Improvised Music' department of the Amsterdam University of the Arts, presented me with the opportunity of teaching some aspects of the rhythmical concepts and raga construction in Karnatic music to a few advanced students in order to enhance their improvisational skills. That was in 1994. I had 7 students and the course received not even a passing mention in the University's brochure.

Now, as I write, there are around 70 students, two of whom are teachers, the program has become compulsory in the Composition and Flute departments and the Administration of the University highly recommends the programme to postgraduate students. As of this year, it has become a part of the Master's Degree Curriculum and the programme receives excellent coverage in all brochures, special folders have been issued for distribution throughout the Netherlands and we have our own web site. It has been necessary to take on two more teachers for students of the 1st year of the program. In addition to all of the above, last year 2 former students began a new initiative, organising a concert series they called 'The Karnatic Lab'. This concert series attempts, in various ways, to explore the pillars of the program: microtonality, advanced rhythmical concepts and ornaments (gamakas or otherwise). This proved so successful that in June this year, a 2-day Festival was held with 3 concerts, 4 seminars, involving around 40 artists (none of whom were from India). The influence of the programme and the concert series is thus beginning to extend to various corners of Europe, taking over some existing jazz and classical movements and re-directing them into new forms of music, with the concepts and techniques given in the program acting as a starting point. Everyone wants to do 'his own thing', but the common denominator is Karnatic concepts and techniques learnt and further explored in the concert series.

What has happened in these last 7 years?

Giving a detailed account of all the gradual advances, setbacks, successes and tears would be too long and unimportant to the reader. There are, however, 3 crucial factors that made this 'little miracle' possible, which should be mentioned here:

-The realisation among many people that what I preached about the possibilities of Karnatic music was true and that positive results were achieved almost immediately.

-Learning Karnatic music theory does not imply playing Karnatic music or having to learn Karnatic instruments. On the contrary, it has enabled everyone who studied the course to start developing another stream of music (a music more vital, rhythmical and organic than a lot of contemporary music written over the course of western history), without

having to give up so many years of traditional western music studies and their historical basis.

-The 3 macro seminars and concerts that Jahnvi Jayaprakash gave, accompanied by several musicians, in Amsterdam in April 1998 , January 2000 and May 2001.

Let me try to be more specific about the last two points.

The reader may wonder why I keep making this distinction between Karnatic concepts and Karnatic music - aren't they the same, many people may ask. The answer is a simple NO. The Karnatic concepts gave birth to a beautiful system of music called Karnatic music. Within this music, there are many elements that turned an almost universal way of structuring and conceiving music into what is currently known as Karnatic music. This doesn't necessarily mean that the only possible outcome of these elements, concepts and techniques is the performance of Karnatic music. Neither does it imply that those taking the programme and experimenting with the content, do not like Karnatic music: on the contrary, everyone loves it. So why is it that we do not want to play Karnatic music when we are so deeply interested in its concepts and techniques? There are several factors to this:

-We realize that to play Karnatic music as it exists today, requires many years of serious study of topics such as Raga Lakshana (which constitutes at least 50% of all the corpus of theory given in India), topics that will not enable musicians to approach and cope with other types of music. The commonest comment among most musicians in Europe, is that when Karnatic musicians are so good at what they do, there is little point in our trying to emulate them, when we could only ever hope to reach at best 25% of their technique, knowledge and musicality in the performance of Karnatic music. Besides, who wants to see a group of westerners playing Karnatic music? And what sort of possibilities does a musician, performing solely Karnatic music in Europe, have?

-The amazing need, referred to above, that every creator in the West has of 'doing his/her own thing, creating his/her own way'. This aspect, almost irrelevant in India, is THE most important evolutionary motor in Europe. No one wants to reproduce what someone else has already done. The necessity of being unique and having your own voice has acquired almost pathological proportions in the West. Nevertheless, this is the reality from which I had to start working. I had, therefore, to re-structure ('translate' if the reader prefers) all I had learnt in India, to fit the western mentality (where, for a start, teaching methods are diametrically opposed to those employed in India), at the same time leaving enough room for everyone to understand that this material could help them in the search for their own truth, instead of imposing 'eternal truths' of Karnatic music on students. And so every performer or composer taking the course, while respecting the most logical and basic rules provided by Karnatic Music, tries to use the concepts and techniques as tools for his/her own musical development.

Related to this point, is the fact that in most Western Universities where Karnatic music is taught 'as it is', the number of students is usually limited and, in most cases, they follow such studies for musicological purposes.

We believe that this program has attracted so many musicians for all of the above reasons. In addition, the fact that so many people are using this material, serves simultaneously, my other goal, namely that of spreading the best of Karnatic music among jazz and classical music lovers in the west and drawing more people to Karnatic music concerts. I can only hope that, in the light of all these changes, Karnatic musicians begin to re-analyse the content of their concerts when they come to Europe, particularly when performing in Holland, and that they avoid committing the mistakes already mentioned. Unfortunately I sometimes feel that Karnatic musicians are our worst enemies in spreading the heights that Karnatic music can reach.

This is where I come to Jahnvi; I have never met a musician like her. She is the incarnation of music. Her understanding of both Karnatic music and what we are trying to do here, is outstanding. The University, together with the Foundation for Microtonal Music of Amsterdam, have organised very special seminars in which Jahnvi has exposed deep and interesting concepts of Karnatic music. These concepts include an exhaustive analysis of the differences between very microtonal ragas (Varaly, Rasika Priya, Kanakangi, etc), a thorough approach to Grahahedam (with concrete illustration of cyclic cents), a detailed analysis of Pallavi, Ragatalamalika and Varnam, possible usage of Shadanga Talas, how Gamakas are produced and behave in the ragas, and many other issues of equal complexity and importance. In other words, providing information in which we, as producers of contemporary music, are interested.

Many is the time I have discarded seminars and clinics offered by various visiting Karnatic musicians, who proposed giving an overview of the Janaka ragas (but, of course, thinking that a raga like Shankarabarana is more appealing for us because is like our major scale) and Suladi Talas (with every exercise or demonstration in Adi Tala: what of the other 34 talas?). This approach can hardly be expected to arise interest among musicians and will again be too complex for non musicians.

The reasons for Jahnvi to come are pristine: she can provide a lot of very deep and interesting information and, almost as important, she knows how to formulate it for a western audience. This explains why, on her last visit to Holland, there were altogether no less than 200 people in the seminars. Not only this, but Jahnvi performed in concert halls exclusively used for western classical music, intentionally refusing to adopt the 'light classical' approach and instead setting Karnatic music at the same level as the highest artistic manifestation of western music, by offering concerts of incredible complexity and control, which every listener felt to be very special and unique.

Jahnvi need not be the exception: we need more Karnatic musicians showing paths of complexity and beauty in order to re-create them in our own music. We need Indian musicians who are prepared to abandon the beaten track of Karnatic music and explore the

almost limitless possibilities latent in many chapters that have become 'endangered species' in Karnatic music concerts, especially those held abroad. Only in this way, will the interest for Karnatic music keep growing and by extension, the interest of musicians in learning the concepts and techniques. Performing what is similar to western music, or adopting a simple approach, will only serve to keep audiences away from the halls and the classrooms. Watering the concerts with simpler concepts sets Karnatic music at the same level as hundreds of 'world music' styles and diverse forms of rock and pop. In contrast, deepening the best elements of Karnatic music will set it on the Pantheon of Art of western culture.

Returning to the question posed by the title, is it possible for Karnatic concepts and techniques to produce new streams of music and not only Karnatic Music? We believe so. Now it is the turn of Karnatic musicians to believe so, and to respect the possible outcome. We are just starting down a new path, a new way of conceiving music using Karnatic tools mixed with other concepts taken from our, or other traditions, but we need the support and understanding of every Karnatic musician. If this could only happen, we would be on the verge not only of changing, but of making western music history.

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