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Research Article

The Stage Is the Teacher: Music Festivals and Experiential Learning in Carnatic Music

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Abstract

In earlier periods, the growth and sustenance of music and musicians in India were largely supported through royal patronage, followed by the patronage of individual connoisseurs and zamindars. With the decline of these traditional systems in the post-colonial era, sabhas and music festivals emerged as the primary institutional spaces for the performance, preservation, and dissemination of classical music. These festivals provide structured and sustained performance opportunities that are crucial for the organic artistic development of musicians. In a creativity-centric tradition such as Carnatic music, artistic maturity is shaped not only through learning and practice but through repeated stage experience, where musical ideas are tested,
refined, and internalised. This study examines the role of music festivals in facilitating experiential learning, enhancing artistic skills and repertoire, and fostering cultural continuity. By analysing major music festivals across India and the diaspora, the paper highlights how festivals function as cultural ecosystems that nurture artists at different stages of their careers while simultaneously contributing to the sustained growth and transmission of the art form.

Keywords: *Carnatic music, music festivals, stage experience, artistic growth, cultural transmission, rasikas.*

INTRODUCTION

South Indian classical music, is an ancient system of music which has been existing from time immemorial and has undergone lot of significant changes over time. We have many treatises that speak about the gradual and organic development of music from Sama Veda to the current form through their references about music in that particular period.

The Upanishad speaks about musical instruments such as Vina and Dundubhi. The Epics, Ramayana (5114 BCE) and Mahabharatha (3136 BCE) has lot of references about music and dance. In the tamil tradition, the Tamil epic Silapadhikaram (2nd Cent AD) also has plenty of references to music, dance, musical instruments and musical forms, as one of the main characters of Silappadhikaram, Madhavi, is a dancer in the story of anklet. The treatise Bharata's Natya Shastra has full reference of dance, qualities of a dancer, singer, instruments, musical forms, dance repertoire and many more such information can be got from this work.

In the medieval period, scholars such as Matanga (6th cent AD) wrote 'Brhaddesi', and the 13th cent work by Sarangadeva called 'Sangeetha Ratnakara', has lots of valuable information about the growth and development of music from 2nd cent to 13th cent. The bhakti movement in the 15th, 16th, 17th centuries played a crucial part in the birth of various musical forms and compositions which were an outcome of the spread of spirituality. Many saints were born during this period who contributed to the rich and vast repertoire of Carnatic music. Composers such as Annamacharya, Purandaradasa, Jayadeva, kshetrayya were incarnated in this period who spread bhakti by singing in praise of Lord. Temples were not only place of worship but also a hub where music thrived to spread Bhakti which set a perfect stage for some of the greatest composers of Carnatic music.

The 18th cent marks as golden period with the birth and lives of the trinities who gave the world of Carnatic music the greatest number of compositions which were soaked in Bhakti at the same time that were musically, lyrically of high order. Thanks to their disciples, the sahithyam was preserved along with the melody and we have a vast collection, though not full.

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ROYAL PATRONS

Some of the early seats of music were Tanjore, Thiruvaiyaru, Mysore and Travancore.

The royal patrons such as Raja Raja Chola, Raghunath Naik, Shahji Maharaja, Tulajaji I and II were great connoisseurs of music at Tanjore. Some of these kings were not just patrons but were musicians and musicologists themselves. Tulajaji I had authored the work 'Sangita Saramrita', Shahajis 'Shahaji Ragalakshanamu' was a work on the science of music.

The rulers of Mysore were among the most influential patrons of Carnatic music, sustaining a continuous tradition of royal support across several generations. The court of Krishnaraja Wodeyar III was distinguished by the presence of eminent composers and musicians such as Veena Kuppayyar, Mysore Sadashiva Rao, and Subbaraya Sastri, continuing the musical legacy established by earlier rulers, notably Chikka Devaraja Wodeyar. This tradition of patronage reached a significant high point during the reign of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, under whom celebrated artistes including Mysore Vasudevacharya, Bidaram Krishnappa, and Veene Sheshanna served as court musicians. The early twentieth century witnessed the continuation of this legacy under Jayachamaraja Wodeyar, himself a composer, who extended patronage to leading musicians such as Veena Balachander, Chowdiah, and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, among others. Alongside Mysore, Travancore emerged as another important centre of royal patronage, exemplified most notably by Maharaja Swati Tirunal, whose contributions as both composer and patron occupy a central place in the history of Carnatic music.

Late 19th cent and Early 20th cent, marked the beginning to Madras becoming the hub of Carnatic music. some of the crucial reasons for Madras becoming the heart of music are, decline of princely courts and traditional patronage, Madras becoming the administrative, educational, and cultural capital of the Madras Presidency, educated urban elites developing interest in music, lecture-demonstrations, and concerts, improved transport because of which musicians from different regions converged in Madras. Founding of All India Music Conference held in 1927, founding of Madras Music Academy in 1928, AIR madras expansion in 1930 paved way to the birth of December music season and there has been no looking back since.

Patrons in Madras

The patrons of Madras, perfectly bridged the royal patronage and sabha culture, when the royal patronage started declining. They were the early urban patrons who patronised musicians, dancers and scholars. They even honored musicians such as Arunachala Kavirayar with Kanakabhishekam. Some of the prominent patrons in madras were Manali Muttukrishna Mudaliar, Manali Venkatakrisha Mudaliar alias Chinniah, Kovur Sundara Mudaliar and Pachiappa Mudaliar.

SABHA CULTURE

CHENNAI – DECEMBER MARGAZHI FESTIVAL

From the establishment of sabhas, such as Parthasarathy swami sabha (1900) Madras Music Academy (1928), The Indian Fine Arts Society (1932), Narada Gana Sabha (1958) music has flourished and developed both practically and theoretically in Madras, now Chennai. December music festival is the biggest music festival in the whole world. In December, the month of Margazhi (tamil calendar), from the interval from mid-December to the beginning of January marks the apex of the concert calendar, with parallel performances organized by all major sabhas. Almost from 8am till 10pm there are concerts happening back-to-back at all the sabhas simultaneously. In the recent years this has extended to early morning concerts, and so, concerts now begin in some venues at 6am. This is called December Margazhi Festival. it is considered very prestigious for upcoming artists to get opportunity to perform at this time of the year. Young musicians prepare specifically for these concerts as many rasikas come from across the globe just to listen to concerts and this is the best time for artists to get exposure to newer audiences and thus they can either make a good progress in the career or if they underperform, things can go south for them. The artists prepare more than usual because this time of the year performances are judged and rasikas share their opinions amongst each other and media also reports the concerts. So, it is very important time of the year for artists. This is the time when sabhas also gear up, get a huge audience turn out and their businesses are met with in this time of the year. Though there is no official statistics of people who come to Chennai just to attend the festival, it can be approximately said that atleast 5000 people come to Chennai from countries like US, UK, Australia, Canada during this time to attend music festival. In recent years, a group of japanese have been spotted, who come all the way to be part of this festival.

KERALA - SWATI SANGEETHOLSAVAM

As the name suggests, Swati Sangeetholsavam happens in Kuthiramalika in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. This is a ten day festival dedicated exclusively for Swati Tirunal Maharaja. Therefore, the compositions sung are that of Swati Tirunal only. This happens in the month of January, under the Travancore royal family trust. The ambience is exquisite, the palace's wooden interiors, open courtyards, oil-lamp illumination, and proximity to the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple create an atmosphere that consciously evokes the ethos of royal court performances. This setting fosters an intimate and contemplative listening environment, markedly different from modern auditorium based concerts, and reinforces the festival's emphasis on tradition, restraint, and aesthetic continuity.

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CHEMBAI SANGEETHOLSAVAM

Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, was an icon in the field of Carnatic music in Kerala. While he was alive, he would invite artists from across the country to come and perform in front of Guruvayurappan who is the presiding deity of Guruvayur temple. He conducted for 6 decades until he died in 1974. After his death, guruvayur devaswom continued the legacy in his memory. The festival spans over a period of 2 weeks culminating on Guruvayur Ekadasi. On this day, many musicians perform the thyagarajas pancharathnam in unison.

KARNATAKA

In Karnataka, the Ramanavami Music Festival of Bengaluru stands out as the most prestigious classical music festival, while events such as the Purandara Dasa Aradhana and the Ganakala Parishat's annual classical music conference occupy important positions within the state's classical music landscape.

ANDHRA PRADESH

In Andhra Pradesh, the Sri Tyagaraja Sangeetha Mahotsavam held at Tirupati is regarded as the most prestigious classical music festival, owing to its association with Saint Tyagaraja, its traditional performance ethos, and its role in sustaining temple centred Carnatic practice. Annamacharya sankeerthana festival is also another important festival dedicated to the composer, Annamacharya.

NORTH INDIAN MUSIC FESTIVALS

Among North Indian classical music festivals, the Sawai Gandharva Bhimsen Mahotsav occupies a unique position as a predominantly Hindustani festival that has nevertheless provided an important platform for Carnatic musicians, thereby fostering a pan Indian classical aesthetic. Dover Lane Music Conference (Kolkata) has occasionally featured Carnatic music. Eminent Carnatic musicians such as M.S. Subbulakshmi, Balamuralikrishna, D.K. Pattammal, T.N. Krishnan, and Lalgudi Jayaraman have performed at predominantly Hindustani classical music festivals including the Sawai Gandharva Bhimsen Mahotsav and the Dover Lane Music Conference, underscoring the pan-Indian stature of these platforms.

THE DARBAR FESTIVAL - UK

The Darbar Festival is one of the most prestigious Indian classical music festivals outside India, held annually in the United Kingdom, primarily in London. Founded in 2006 by Sangeeta Isvaran, the festival is dedicated to the promotion of pure classical traditions of India, encompassing both Carnatic and Hindustani music, along with classical dance.

Darbar Festival is distinguished by its curatorial rigor, emphasis on rāga-based performance, and its commitment to presenting senior masters alongside outstanding younger artistes. Carnatic musicians have regularly featured at the festival, performing full length classical concerts in acoustically refined, attentive listening spaces. In addition to performances, Darbar also organises lecture demonstrations, workshops, and educational outreach, thereby contributing to the transmission of Indian classical music traditions to global audiences.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In the United States, festivals such as the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival, the various Thyagaraja Aradhana celebrations across Chicago, Georgia, California, and other regional Carnatic music festivals have played a crucial role in sustaining performance practice and cultural continuity within the community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. The data for the study were collected through participant observation, informal discussions, and semi-structured interviews with musicians, organisers, and rasikas associated with major Carnatic music festivals.

The research also employs a case study method by examining selected festivals in India and abroad, including the December Music Season in Chennai, Chembai Sangeetholsavam (Guruvayur), Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival, USA.

Field observations focused on performance structure, artist-audience interaction, repertoire selection, improvisational scope, and opportunities for emerging artists. Interview responses and observational data were analysed thematically to understand how repeated stage exposure within festival circuits contributes to experiential learning and artistic growth in Carnatic music.

CONCLUSION

Music festivals occupy a central position in the ecosystem of Carnatic music, functioning not merely as performance platforms but as dynamic cultural institutions that shape artistic development, aesthetic values, and collective cultural memory. While pedagogy and practice lay the foundation for a musician's growth, it is sustained exposure to the stage that transforms training into artistry. In this sense, festivals provide musicians with the most valuable and irreplaceable

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resource in the Carnatic Music. Each performance becomes an experiential site where musical ideas are tested, refined, accepted, or discarded, contributing incrementally to an artist's growth.

Performance in Carnatic music is inherently complex and often unpredictable. Even under similar circumstances, a concert may not yield the desired artistic outcome, as the success of a performance depends on a confluence of factors such as acoustics, audience receptivity, accompanying artists, time of performance, and the musician's own physical and emotional state. Carnatic music, being fundamentally creativity centric, demands spontaneous aesthetic decision making. The realisation of manodharma, whether in rāga ālāpana, niraval, or kalpanā swaras, is contingent upon the interaction between the main artist and the accompanists, whose musical sensibilities, responsiveness, and creative alignment significantly influence the outcome. Consequently, creativity cannot be standardised or guaranteed, making each concert a challenging and unique artistic endeavour.

Historically, eminent musicians such as Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and K.V. Narayanaswamy cultivated a relatively stable repertoire, which they performed repeatedly across diverse venues and audiences. This process of repetition allowed them to experiment extensively, internalise musical ideas deeply, and arrive at artistic clarity and refinement. In contrast, contemporary musicians operate within a technologically mediated performance culture, where concerts are frequently recorded, archived, and circulated widely. While this has enhanced accessibility and documentation, it has simultaneously constrained the freedom to repeat repertoire, as listeners increasingly expect novelty and variation. This shift poses a significant challenge, as perfection in Carnatic music is traditionally achieved through repetition and gradual evolution, rather than constant reinvention.

In this context, music festivals play a critical role by offering multiple performance opportunities within condensed time frames. For young musicians, festivals provide the space to experiment with new ideas, assess audience and peer response, and revisit those ideas in subsequent performances. An improvisational concept that may not succeed in one concert often requires several attempts, under varying circumstances, before it attains coherence and confidence. Until such ideas are tested repeatedly, mastery remains incomplete. Each concert thus functions as an evaluative moment, an examination where some creative choices succeed while others falter, collectively contributing to the artist's experiential wisdom. The sheer volume and diversity of performance contexts available within festival circuits enable musicians to explore a wide range of permutations and combinations that are otherwise unattainable in limited concert settings.

Beyond individual artistic growth, music festivals play a vital role in the cultivation and transmission of culture. They serve as spaces where shared values, aesthetic norms, and performance conventions are reinforced through collective participation by musicians, rasikas, scholars, and organisers. Festivals such as the December Margazhi season in Chennai, Swati Sangeetholsavam in Kerala, and Chembai Sangeetholsavam at Guruvayur consciously preserve cultural continuity by situating music within historical, religious, and architectural contexts. These settings reinforce the inseparability of music from lived cultural practice, enabling audiences to experience Carnatic music not merely as an art form but as an expression of cultural identity and heritage.

For senior musicians, festivals provide opportunities to present new compositions, rare repertoire, and innovative interpretative approaches, thereby contributing to the evolving canon of Carnatic music. At the same time, the presence of younger artists ensures the continuity of tradition through renewal and reinterpretation. A well-balanced festival, therefore, must consciously feature artists across generations, facilitating mentorship, stylistic dialogue, and the organic transmission of knowledge.

In conclusion, music festivals are not merely sites of performance but laboratories of creativity, repositories of cultural memory, and engines of artistic evolution. They offer musicians sustained opportunities to hone their skills through experience, allow creativity to mature through repetition and reflection, and foster cultural growth through collective engagement. By accommodating artists at different stages of their careers and by nurturing both innovation and tradition, music festivals ensure the growth, sustenance and continuity of Carnatic music as a living cultural practice.

Thus, music festivals emerge not merely as platforms for performance, but as enduring cultural ecosystems that nurture artistic excellence through experience, sustain creative exploration, and ensure the continued growth and transmission of Carnatic music as a living and evolving tradition.

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