

**A** Hi! December. The month of music and dance, when the weather is pleasant, silk saris can be worn and Chennai's beautiful people are busy at the Sabhas, to see and be seen. The Tamil month of Margali beginning on December 15 celebrates Andal's Thiruppaavai and Manikkavachagar's Thiruvembavai, when the air is full of music and romance. Living in Chennai, I too am inspired to write about music, the soul of Carnatic culture. As we listen to the range of the human voice and the depth of Indian music, it is amazing to think of its age, beauty and its enhancement by a variety of influences—folk, classical stylisation and cross cultural.

Indian music claims origin from the Rig and Sama Vedas, the latter being the Rig set to music. There is mention of musical instruments such as the gargara (probably a string instrument), aghati (cymbals), and a variety of drums, flutes and veenas. But music and dance have existed among all tribes and peoples all over the world. Pre-Vedic cave paintings show scenes of dance, which must have been accompanied by music. The Harappan sites have yielded cymbals, flutes and whistles, while the seals show harps and long drums. Several deities were associated with music: Saraswati with the veena, Shiva with the damru or udukkai (drum), Vishnu with the conch and Krishna with the flute. The gods were given the simplest folk instruments: the ektara, dhamaru, conch and flute. Ravana was a great veena exponent. Narada, in the first century, could play the flute and was also accompanied by the tambura.

Bharata, in the second century, describes instruments and their uses extensively. He had four classifications: ghana (solid) or idiophones, avanaddha (covered vessels) or drums, sushira (hollow) or wind instruments and tata (stretched) or string instruments. He also mentions the kutapa or orchestra. Tamil Sangam Literature mentions five classes of instruments: the human voice, leather instruments, gut instruments, hollow instruments and metal instruments. The most common word for instruments is vadya, although atodya, turya and karuvi are also used. Bharata's classification is as relevant today as it was in the second century.

The earliest instruments mentioned in Tamil literature are the yal (or yazh: harp), kudal (or kuzhal: flute) and madalam (drum). The most popular ancient instrument was the yal, a harp based on the bow, crossed with strings. The vil (bow) yal even appears on the Harappan seals, although we do not know what it stands for. The instrument disappeared in the 10th century and with it, probably, a certain system of music. For, each instru-

# Unchanging musical tradition



**CREATIONS**  
Nanditha Krishna

ment profoundly influences the system of music. In the last fifty years we have seen the changes in music wrought by the electric keyboard, which gives varying rhythms and sounds to which the composer and singer must adapt and change their entire styles. The use of the bow as a musical instrument lives on in the villadi vaadyam used for the *villupaattu*, an inter-active folk medium combining music and story telling with this huge adaptation of the bow.

After the 10th century, the veena became more popular, even though it was known from the Vedic period. In the 11th century, the Sufis introduced the duff, sitar, sarod and shehnai in North India. A violin-like instrument was used in the 10th century, but the present western violin was adapted to Carnatic music in the 19th century by Baluswami Dikshatar of Madras.

The number and variety of instru-

ments, especially folk instruments, is endless. All classical music and its accompaniments had humble folk beginnings before they were accepted on the concert stage. A newspaper report last week bemoaned the adaptation of "filmi" tunes by children at Children's Day functions. I abhor the obscene lyrics and unnatural gyrations that go with film songs. They are better suited to be aerobics, but hardly keep our stars slim! But the tune, after all, is good music—and some of the best too. If a teacher rewrites the song with patriotic messages, she should be congratulated for her creativity. After all, film songs are the "folk" songs of contemporary culture, and find more adherents than classical music, especially among the young. In recent years, western instruments like the clarinet and mandolin have been accepted in classical Carnatic music. Culture develops as people discover and adapt to their needs. The assimila-

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tion process never ends.

Classical arts are invariably derived from folk arts, and a close study of temple sculpture will reveal a dancer moving to the rhythm of a folk instrument. Since we cannot know the sounds that were produced in the past, I searched the earliest stone constructions in the South, to find out what musical instruments were used. There was not much at Mamallapuram, but at the Kailasanatha Temple at Kanchipuram, dedicated to Shiva, the arts have a prominent place and a variety of instruments can be seen.

A Kinnara—Kinnari couple—painted on the wall of one of the shrines plays on the flute and the cymbals, both basically folk instruments. After all, Krishna was a cowherd. In this mural, the flute is held on the side of the face, like the pictures of Krishna and unlike the Carnatic music way of holding the flute in front. The conch appears only as an attribute of

Vishnu. The conch was rarely used in Northern Tamil Nadu, although it was a popular instrument in Madurai and the region to its south, where it is harvested from the Gulf of Mannar. The third wind instrument is the windpipe, a long trumpet described by Bharata as the thundaki, which first appeared in Gupta and Chalukyan sculpture.

Several types of string instruments—forerunners of the veena—have been identified in the temple. Veenadhara Shiva holds a single string ghoshaka veena across the chest and shoulder, with a gourd at the upper end. This instrument also appears in the paintings and sculptures of Ajanta, Badami and Mamallapuram and other Pallava sites, indicating its popularity in that period. Another single string veena found in the temple is the veena alapini, without the gourd, a forerunner of the later svaramandala of medieval India. The

single string veena—the ektara—is still used by wandering minstrels in the countryside. The sculptures of Harihara and Gangadhara are portrayed holding kinnari veenas with two gourds, one on either end, the earliest known representation of the kinnari veena and the prototype of today's veena. The fourth string instrument is a tambura held by Goddess Saraswati on her lap. It is a string instrument with a single gourd, held across the lap of the Goddess and not vertically as is done nowadays.

No concert is complete without percussion instruments, which are probably the oldest musical instruments. Three types of percussion instruments are found in the Kailasanatha temple. The simplest is the ghatam, the common mud pot, known to the literature of that period as the dadyura, played by Tandru during the dance of Shiva. A variation of the dardura consists of three equal-sized pots piled one on top of another. Another percussion instrument is the vertical drum pair, with one larger than the other, placed in front of the player, who crosses his hands to play on this instrument. Such drums are to be seen in Gupta, Vakataka, Chalukya and Pallava sculptures, and are the forerunner of the tablas. Interestingly, although the popular percussion instrument in Carnatic music today is the mridangam, the mridangam is not to be seen in early sculpture, and the tabla is no longer used in Carnatic music. The third type of percussion instrument is the damaru or udukkai, seen in Shiva's hand, which produces a rattling sound and accompanies him as he dances the ananda tandava, the dance of creation. The udukkai is commonly used in rural areas to call people to assemble for entertainment.

This early Pallava temple also contains two types of ghanas or solid instruments to keep the beat. One is a pair of cymbals consisting of two discs with a hole in the centre through which passes a string. One type of cymbals has circular discs, the other a pair of small cups. The other ghana is the bell or ghanta.

So what did a Pallava concert sound like? A flute, veena, tabla, ghatam, cymbals and a tambura to accompany the singer. Does it sound familiar? Go to any concert in one of Chennai's sabhas this December, and watch the instrumentalists and the singers. If the instruments have not changed, the music would hardly be different, then and now. Shut your eyes and imagine that you are in the court of Narasimhavarman II, Rajasimha Pallava, who built the Kailasanatha Temple to celebrate the Lord of music and dance—Shiva. Is there a sense of deja vu?

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