

## EFFECT OF COVID PERIOD ON CARNATIC MUSIC TEACHING

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### ABSTRACT

These are unprecedented times where our basic freedom of movement has been heavily impacted and curtailed all over the globe simultaneously. In the realm of music instruction, COVID lockdowns have forcibly pushed face-to-face interactions into the virtual space. This paper will delve specifically into the advantages and disadvantages of Carnatic music instruction when conducted online. The paper focuses on how online instruction of Carnatic music can learn from current experiences of both parties. It will suggest ways on how it can be made more efficient and better in the wake of similar situations of restricted movement that may possibly arise in the future.

**Keywords:** Carnatic music, Covid impact, Culture and heritage, Digital technology, Emerging music learning trends, Guru-shishya parampara, Music education, Musical expressions, Music tradition, Online learning, Recorded lessons for practicing, Researchers, Shifting learning systems

### INTRODUCTION

Music appeals to all ages from infants to the elderly. Carnatic music teaching styles have undergone shifts in different times through different learning systems. The emergence of COVID has deeply impacted all the different methods of imparting music education. The teaching of Carnatic music online is by no means a recent phenomenon. The South Indian diaspora has been instrumental in creating a demand for such a form of schooling. Rooted in their nostalgic need to stay connected with their culture and heritage, it is an established fact that numerous Indian parents settled in countries abroad have over the years created a market for online Carnatic music classes for their progeny (Krishnamurthy, 2012). Cutting edge advances in digital technology today have made this kind of exchange easier than ever before.

### STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

Various factors help and hinder the imparting and imbibing of music education online. Like all mediums there are both advantages and disadvantages involved. The following sections include views expressed by the author's students named Meera. R. Kumar and Vaigari. H at the Music Department at Avinashilingam University, as well as some others who are engaged in the learning and teaching of music online. They have expressed various factors that help and hinder their learning of Carnatic music after it has been shifted online due to COVID.

### ADVANTAGES

- Spatial Freedom – The removal of the need to be physically enclosed in the same space as a physical classroom, has enabled students to sign in and join classes from wherever they are based within the country or abroad. Two of the respondents interviewed for this paper are examples of the same. Mrs. Renuka Menon is 41 years of age and her son Jay is 8 years old. They are based in Bahrain and under the tutelage of

Mrs. Dhanya Sathyajith. Without the entry of technology in the instruction of music, this would have been impossible to implement effectively for both parties involved.

- Music for All Ages – Online classes have also translated into opportunities for those who may have missed the bandwagon to learn music during the earlier phase of their lives. For some, what had mostly seemed like a distant dream is now a living reality.
- Time Factor – Being able to join classes from anywhere saves time and money which would have otherwise been spent in daily commute. This in turn helps in getting into practicing mode right after, to solidify the concepts learnt.
- Individual attention – The focused close range teaching sessions make the students feel connected to the teacher and thus helps them to stay motivated.
- Personal Instruments – In the case of heavy musical instruments that cannot be carried across to classrooms from their domicile every day, these online classes enable students to be able to use and practice on their own familiar instruments in their home.

## DISADVANTAGES

- Difficulty Focusing – Watching a screen for a long span of time also ends up tiring the students. A short attention span that is typical of today's generation may have an adverse effect on the effectiveness of online teaching as well. This is because all of their other educational curriculum classes are also being held online.
- Frequent Distractions – While students welcome the advantage of not having to move out of their own spaces, the downside of this is that their homes and settings may also have frequent factors that distract them from focusing on the ongoing lesson. This is more applicable to younger age students.
- Lag Issues – Staccato video and sound occur making it difficult to keep *taalam*, or follow the instructor in real-time. This may result in both the student and the teacher trying to constantly keep in tandem with each other and the resultant frustrations associated with such frequent disturbances.
- Dropped Internet Connectivity – There may be areas where cellular range may be weak or extremely low. Repeatedly dropping internet connections can end up frustrating the students whereby they may end up lagging behind the proceedings, lose interest and disconnect.
- Economic Impediments – The use of technology heavily relies on the ability to be in possession of gadgets that are advanced enough to be used for online instruction and that allow video and audio recording. The vulnerability of the lower economic sections has only been further solidified during COVID times. The tectonic shift to online education has left numerous students feeling completely marooned because of not possessing the right kind of digital gadgets. Paying for a steady Wi-Fi connection may

be too much for some families. The dependence on online connectivity may thus be creating a new class of “haves” and “have not’s” in today’s context.

## TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES

### ADVANTAGES

- Remote teaching from any location – Just as for students, physical boundaries have been mitigated completely even for the teachers of music. COVID has ended up fueling an increase in the number of erstwhile in-person teachers who have now turned to digitally conduct their classes.
- One of several such cases, Mrs. Dhanya Sathyajith, a music teacher based in North Kerala, has started online music lessons during the COVID lockdown. She used to take offline classes for students during pre-pandemic times when she was in Oman. Today, sitting in the comfort of her home, she takes classes for around 14 students ranging in age from 6 years to 65 years, who are spread across various continents. Mrs. Sathyajith states that the very advantage of opting for conducting classes in this manner is that she can simultaneously teach up to 15 students if it is online. During in-person classes it was difficult to have more students because of physical space restrictions and travelling issues.
- Wider Reach to Enroll Students– Such erasing of boundaries has made the possibility of casting a wider net for students to enroll in such courses. Universities and Colleges can see this as an opportunity to enlist a diverse group of enthusiastic learners from all across the board, space and age restrictions notwithstanding.
- Technology Aided Teaching – The easy availability of technology-enabled musical aids have played their part in making such teaching more effective. As a case in point, Mrs. Sathyajith explains, as “Shruthi (tanpura) box is an inevitable part of teaching music. With online classes, initially I used to play my shruthi box loud as I can’t expect every student to buy one. But these days a lot of online shruthi apps like Tanpura droid are available which makes it’s easy for everyone to download and play while the class is going on.”
- Multitasking – Taking classes online makes it possible for teachers to manage other household chores while holding classes. Further, they can enroll themselves in multiple teaching institutions with a well-planned time pattern.

### DISADVANTAGES

- Unfamiliar Technology – Not all teaching practitioners may be comfortable with using gadgets or be well-versed in the latest software technologies. This calls for a serious analysis of the professional developmental needs, especially in College and University departments where faculty may be presented with training opportunities that they can avail of, in order to become effective instructors.

- Frequent Frozen Screens – One of the most common issues faced in online classes of music and performance arts is dropped internet connectivity. As a result, students may miss out on hand movements and gestures associated with the performance
- Missed Cues – The computer screen allows for only limited exposure as opposed to in-person lessons. One of the main drawbacks of this is the inability to observe reactions, facial tones and expressions and overall body language of the students. This curtails addressing students' comprehension issues, if any.
- Assessment Problems – The limited visibility that is typical of a video conference interface in terms of screen size and camera clarity, along with other background noise during the session may lead to difficulties in assessing which student is lagging behind. It is also a known fact that any performative art such as Carnatic music is also about holding one's body posture in a particular manner. Following various rhythmic patterns in a specific way in terms of finger movement and beating of the palm to keep taalam while performing vocally is key to accurate and well-rounded learning of the Carnatic music technique.
- Video less Sessions – Students who have bad internet connectivity or limited data on their phones, choose to attend lessons only on audio mode. This makes teaching challenging.
- Instrument-less Classes – In cases of learning a musical instrument, where the institution provided the instruments earlier, the students now have to be taught practical music lessons without having access to such instruments. This makes it difficult for the teachers.
- Changes in Learning Styles – Earlier students would sit cross-legged during music instruction in tandem with the Carnatic tradition. However, now, with online classes that is not happening.

## CONCLUSION

We have all been unwittingly thrown into a world with ever increasing possibilities of future contagions and other emergencies. A breakdown of freedom of movement during such times may be an inevitable fallout that we would need to contend with. It would be wise to learn fast on how to function effectively should remote teaching become the safest or most viable option in a post-COVID world.

Instructors would thus need to continue to develop sound remote teaching resources that include self-learning materials with clear and simple lesson plans and objectives (Upadhyay and Joshi, 2017). Both sides, as in, teachers as well as learners must also be well-versed in handling technology, including how to use a particular gadget or software, in order to make this online venture successful. Since the reach of and access to digital technology is limited to certain economic classes, using various kinds of inputs that ensure the widest possible reach

would be a crucial aspect to the success of such endeavors. This may include use of programs of music broadcast on radio stations – namely All India Radio that is now available online as well and that comprises stations regularly broadcasting special programs of classical music - television programs and watching and learning from uploaded works of maestros and other legendary performers on YouTube (Upadhyay and Joshi, 2017). One should also keep in mind students with learning disabilities and those who are differentlyabled. Lesson plans and course designs need to speak to these students as well. Instilling a sense of camaraderie and excitement, while they learn from their homes, instructors could encourage duo or group collaborations and assignments i.e., synchronous teaching (Wexler, 2020). This done in conjunction with asynchronous teaching where students individually build on their repertoire and skills through one-on-one instruction, would be effective in keeping them motivated and on track (Wexler, 2020). Also, instructors should work in a participatory process into their pedagogy that involves giving frequent feedback while continuously checking in with students as to their having grasped the intended content. Videoconferencing capabilities on Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp and the like are making it possible to instantly correct any slipups in rhythm, pronunciation, or pitch. It also allows for students to instantly clarify doubts in real-time. This would in turn help the students who feel that they are lagging behind to put in more effort and catch up with the rest of their counterparts. It is also best not to use too many varied kinds of apps or online tools and keep it simple, sticking to the options that both the student and teacher feel most familiar and comfortable with.

To conclude, knowing what is working and what is not quite on the right track, is the perfect platform from where to build and develop frameworks of instruction that will work more effectively. In their elaborate discussion of the challenges and opportunities emanating from the COVID-19 pandemic, Adedoyin & Soykan opine that,

“Despite the sudden migration of instructional delivery to online platforms by universities and other citadel of learning during this pandemic, provided the challenges experienced by faculty and students are well explored and transformed to opportunities, it is evident that online learning will be sustained and educational will become more hybrid” (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

The online teaching of music is poised at a stage where practitioners, instructors and students could compare notes on what is working and what is not in order to reach an optimal level of functionality on both sides.

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