

ACCOMPANYING VIOLINISTS THROUGH THE AGES

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Abstract

In today's scenario, a Carnatic Concert is almost inconceivable without violin as an accompaniment. And the experience of any concert is, to a great extent, determined by the quality of the accompaniments. This article aims to layout the journey of violin from its introduction into Carnatic music to its evolution in the field over the years as "the accompaniment" to any kind of concert and, the transformation of the art and artistes of accompaniment who have taken it up as a career through various generations.

Keywords: Violin, Accompanying Violinists, Women Violinists, Carnatic concerts

INTRODUCTION

Though Violin (Fiddle, then) as an instrument is in practice from A.C 13, it is considered that today's violin structure should have been conceived about 300 years ago. Even then, it was only during British's invasion to India through East India Company that it was introduced to the Indian musicians foremost to the Carnatic musicians in Chennai (Madras Presidency, then).

Under the patronage of Manali Sri. Muthukrishna Mudaliar and his son Manali Sri.Venkatakrishna Mudaliar, Sri. Muthuswami Dikshitar had the opportunity to attend the Band Concerts of the European Armed Forces that were stationed at the St.George Fort, Chennai. It was at the encouragement of Manali Muthukrishna Mudaliar that Dikshitar gave fuel to his idea of trying Carnatic Music in the Western instrument. He initiated his brother Sri. Baluswami Dikshitar and his student & Tanjore Court musician, Sri Vadivelu of the Tanjore Quartet to learn violin. Vadivelu learnt violin from a European Christian Priest named Schwartz and Baluswami Dikshitar was in tutelage under another European Violinist. Vadivelu being an extraordinary composer and musician, started experimenting the instrument in concerts. Initially, violin was used as an accompaniment for Sadir Concerts only, through Vadivelu. Meanwhile Muthuswami Dikshitar worked on his idea of adapting violin to Carnatic music as an accompaniment in place of Veena and other prevailing accompaniment instruments along with his brother Baluswami Dikshitar and Vadivelu. He made Baluswami Dikshitar accompany him on violin during his Veena concerts. Vadivelu experimented by accompanying Sri. Tyagaraja of the music trinity. Impressed by his abilities, Sri Tyagaraja started calling Vadivelu to accompany him during his singing sessions too. Vadivelu holds the primary credit in popularising violin to the then neighbouring states then such as Srivangoor, and making it an irreplaceable part of Carnatic music concerts. Baluswami Dikshitar holds the credit to have tuned the violin to the 'fifths' of Carnatic Music - P S P S as against the 'Western fifths' E A D G tuning to adapt to Carnatic Music.

Contemporary musicians to Vadivelu and Baluswami Dikshitar were Tanjore Court minister Sri. Varahappaiya and Sri. Krishnaswami Bhagavathar who were also trained in Violin from different European Teachers. Both Varahappaiya and Krishnaswami Bhagavathar also indulged in experiments of adapting the violin to Carnatic music.

It is after Sri Srikodikaval Krishnaiyyar, that the status of violin as an accompaniment to Carnatic Music concerts has been raised high on the bar. It is notable that he also belongs to Muthuswami Dikshitar lineage.

Violinists who were sought after and were knowledgeable following Vadivelu, Baluswami Dikshitar, Varagappaiya and Krishnaswami Bhagavathar are:

- Srivenkādu Sri. Sivarama Krishna Iyer
- Seerkazhi Sri. Narayana Swami Pillai (Accompanied Sri.Vallalar)
- Malaikotai Sri. Govindaswami Pillai
- “Sangita Kalanidhi” Kumbakonam Sri. Rajamanickam Pillai
- Marungapuri Sri. Gopala Krishna Iyer
- Dwaram Sri. Venkataswami Naidu
- Sri. Paapa Venkataramaiya

In the start of the violin era in South India, the concerts of Carnatic musicians did not have set boundaries or time limit. They were mostly manodharma based and extended for longer periods of time. It was only after Ariyakudi Sri. Ramanuja Iyengar, the concert pattern for Carnatic Music was defined and established. So, then, two kinds of accompaniment were expected for all vocal concerts: Melodic and Percussive.

Melodic Accompaniment’s primary role was to enhance the lead vocalist(s) singing, to support throughout in order to create an interesting impact on the audience.

A Percussive accompanist’s role on the other hand is to support the vocalist in maintaining the tempo, help them create grand endings and interesting interludes.

It was after the introduction of violin in the 19th century that it became ‘the melodic accompaniment’ of any Carnatic concert. Accompaniment in Carnatic Music is based on a shared tradition of music, with loads of anticipation and alertness.¹ Today, apart from a lot of experimentations, violin as an accompaniment is an inseparable part of the carnatic concert world. There are a lot of instances where due to the absence of the accompanying violinist,

¹ “The most thrilling aspect of being an accompanist is this spontaneity and the ability to play ball with an unpredictable musician. Almost 90 per cent of the musicians that we play with aren’t completely decided about their scheme when they get on to the stage. They themselves change on the spot from what they had on mind. In Carnatic music, one has to be spontaneous. It’s not rehearsed music.” – Akkarai Subhalakshmi

the concerts were to be cancelled or were not well received among the audience. It is due to one of the reasons that Violin is one fine instrument which fits very well to the terms “Harmony” and “in agreement” which literally make up the meaning of the word “concert”.

GENERAL STATUS

In olden days, accompanying artistes’ status quo was not in par with the main artistes. The perception of the violin accompanist was never equal in the eyes of the audience and even to certain musicians. Also, self-portrayal by the accompanying artiste was very humble despite the expertise they had in their forte. This could be a reflection of their role as an accompanist. As an accompanist, one was expected only to play along the vocalist and never to overdo beyond the set invisible boundaries.

This prevails in the recent times as well, but we do see a lot of improvement in this area compared to the past. Most violinists were accompanists then. That is, apart from very few famous violinists, who gave main concerts, others got meagre to no opportunities as main artistes. Even with ‘popular’ violinists, since consumption of concerts featuring violinists as main artistes was low, the ratio of concerts they were offered for playing the “lead” in comparison to “accompanying” was very less. This negatively impacts the artiste in two ways: One, the artistes’ high capabilities as an individual and main performer gets shadowed away and secondly, with respect to the availability of endless learning possibilities that the artiste will get to experience if he/she were both main artiste and an accompanist. The artiste might succumb to the fact that his/her individuality will never be known and hence the need of learning and honing skills in terms of ‘urupadi padantharam’ might seem unnecessary unless they are also into teaching.

In the recent times though, the status of an accompanying artiste is much better perceived and considered in par with the main artiste. Artists have grown to share stage in more respectable ways and the musical dialogues have also become inclusive of the violinist and two way, each inspiring the other. Violinists have gotten the privilege to just stay as main artistes and not accompanists in these times, which is a luxury when compared to yesteryears.¹ Example: The legendary violin duo Sri Ganesh - Sri Kumaresh, who almost never accompanied any vocalist.

This also denotes the change in audience perception that they have become more accepting of having violin concerts as solos and duets. But even in today’s times we see that the audience has more thirst for vocal concerts as against violin concerts. This could be attributed to the fact that the audience might connect more with the lyrics as oppose to just the melodic structure. Even then, when there is a violin concert, only songs with lyrics are expected to be presented, expecting the violinist to bring out the exact intonation of the sahitya through what

¹ "I feel that solo play gives greater scope for development." - G J R Krishnan

is called the “sahitya vil” (a phrase to denote playing like that of voice). Sadly, songs without lyrics¹ and unfamiliar compositions are not received well.²

In today’s scenario, the role of Sabhas in presenting violin concerts during prime slots is bigger as oppose to the audience’s preference. It is pathetic to see that Sabhas are merely after “ticket collection” as against promoting instrumental talents and fine music as patrons³.

Today’s vocalists, most of them try and follow respecting violinists, mridangists and upa pakkavadyam artistes as co-musicians and not mere accompanists. It is indeed need of the hour as “the experience of a Carnatic music concert is to a greater extent determined by the accompaniments”. In other words, accompanists can ‘make’ or ‘break’ a concert.⁴

But, in the area of remuneration, awards and accolades, cash prizes awarded to the violinists, lies a huge gap. Violinists are not recognised for their ability to play the instrument well as an individual musician, but only as a n accompanist as “best accompanist / accompaniment”.

For example, “Sangita Kalanidhi” considered very prestigious, has been awarded to only 13 Violinists so far in the entire span of 90 odd years of awarding since its inception in 1929.

STYLES AND APPROACHES

Usually, the violinist repeats the vocalists as such. In yesteryear concerts, not every accompanying violinist had or was expected to know a large repertoire. Since it was only playing along, they aimed at approximate reciprocations of the music produced by the vocalist⁵.

General expectations out of an accompanying violinist in the past were:

- Violinists are expected to have singing knowledge as well. They are expected to know a certain amount of keerthanais and techniques of bowing and fingering to play every raga.
- When accompanying, violinists should be supportive to the vocalists’ singing and play ‘along’. Even during their solo chances of playing manodharma aspects such as: ragam, tanam, neraval and kalpana swaram, they are expected to be within confined

1 “A full-fledged recital of only ragas seemed rather incomplete without words, atleast to this writer” – V Balasubramaniam on Ganesh – Kumaresh duo’s Raga Pravaham concert.

2 “Chennai is different, in the sense that vocal music has more listeners than instrumental. It requires an extra effort to play compositions that the audience is not familiar with. Rasikas abroad, however, love instrumental music. So, the audience for instrumental concerts is sizeable there”. - Akkarai Subbhalakshmi

3 “Sabhas should reserve at least 25 per cent of the slot space for instrumental concerts. Now, it is hardly one to two per cent. For them, it is just a question of ticket collection. They assume that the audience prefers only vocal music.” - Akkarai Subbhalakshmi

4 “It is all in the vocabulary that we use. In today’s world “main” and “accompanying” connote primary and secondaries. Preferred phrase is “co-musicians”. But even then we can’t have awards for musicians and co-musicians. That leads us back to square-one or the failed idea of a unified award. - T M Krishna

5 “... the art of accompanying the vocalist reached a new peak. Before my tome, most violinists had fixed a style of their own and followed it all times, with the result that their playing could complement only certain vocalists. For example Papa Venkataramiah was a perfect foil for Ariyakudi but not for GNB. But with my new style, I could play for anyone and everyone, I could support Madurai Mani’s sarvalaghu sukham and discrete alapana, GNB’s effortless briga-laden sparklers, or Alathur’s laya fireworks. Listeners themselves began to notice the birth of a new tradition of violin accompaniment.” - Lalgudi Jayaraman

limits. Example: If the Vocalist's raga alapana is for 15 mins, the violinist is not expected to exceed the 15 mins. Ideally 10-11 mins is appreciated. Similarly if madhya sthaya sancaras are sung in neraval, the violinist should not be playing thara sthaya sancaras. Similarly, 2 avarthanams of Kalpana swram means, reciprocation is also expected in 2 avarthanams¹.

- When the vocalists stop singing at any point, violinists are expected to fill in the gaps by playing sangatis of that particular line of the composition.

Though these expectations out of a violinist as an accompanying artiste remains the same, in today's scenario, the violinist 'holds' space to introduce new patterns, change kala pramanas or change ragas during the musical dialogues by way of inspiring the main vocalist and getting inspired in the process which leads to a different level of concert experience not only for the audience, but also to the performing musicians².

The violinist is expected to repeat the vocalist but the space for him/her as an individual artiste to bring forth creative ideas is also accepted widely. This way, it becomes a creative idea play, with no specific roles attached to each of these artistes. They are not stereotyped or limited to a certain outlook.

Example: While presenting korvais in kalpanaswaram section of the main / sub-main composition, it is now widely a practice to give the violinist an opportunity to put his creative brain on display. Thus 2 mukta korvais for one climax is accepted which is both interesting and inspiring to the audience as previously said, violinist's 'accompaniment role' on stage is entirely based out of anticipation and alertness.

For a violinist to be able to retain their individuality in vocal concerts, it is mandatory that a prior relationship is established between them and the main artiste through various practice sessions before a particular concert or through various concerts over a period of time. This ensures that both artistes understand each other's thought processes and approaches without having to be too surprised to be responding well during a crucial moment of a concert as well as better appreciate and accept each other.

LEARNING PROCESS

Usually, solo violinists who excelled well were picked for accompanying various artistes³.

¹"At least the vocalist needs is (mridangists) to create a build up to an applause at the climax of a long neraval or kalpanaswara section. The vocalist also does not mind the applause we get after the tani. But if a violinist should play a raga alapana better than the main artiste, that may not be appreciated." - K V Prasad

²"It's not about replicating long stretches and repeating the swaras. That would be mechanical. We have to match the idea, the essence of the swaras, the patterns and styles employed. That's the principle of accompaniment. It comes from deep understanding, empathy and practice." - Akkarai Subbhalakshmi

³"An accompanist got a chance to perform in a concert only if senior vidwans acknowledged his talent. And veterans formed a tight circle, which was not easy to break through." - T N Krishnan

Earlier, initial lessons, a set of padantaram, bowing and fingering style and techniques for different ragas, speeds and octaves essential for a violinist along with a basic idea of accompaniment like reflex playing and reciprocation were taught. Padantharam accumulation by a violinist is expected to be done both in vocal and violin as it would help bring out the 'bhava' very well. In the yesteryears, the violinists learned compositions gradually and based on their individual development as a player of the instrument. Also, urupadi padantharam was a gradual learning process accumulated through constant accompaniment to various artistes. It is by this way the violinists learnt various bani-s and mastered them as well. Manodharma was purely the artistes' work based on their practice, listening to concerts, their Gurus' concerts and taking correction from their Gurus.

In today's trend, all the knowledge that the Gurus gathered over a huge span of period, under various circumstances, by accompanying various artistes, by vigorously practicing for days or months together to gain mastery are transferred to the students in condensed format. The crux or essence of the huge learning process is taught in a nutshell. Violin Gurus these days train their students to be both main artistes and accompanists from a very young age. They are vigorously trained in various songs, taught rare kritis, compositions of various composers, raga, neraval, tanam, kalpanaswaram playing techniques and intricacies for different educes of the song and for all songs taught¹.

When it comes to generational learning it is only fair that the successors are gifted with advanced training and playing opportunities, be it self-taught or learnt. For, the very fundamental concept of generational learning is improvement over the existing base². Example: Lalgudi Sri. GJR Krishnan and Lalgudi Smt. Vijayalakshmi. It is to be noted they both form the fourth generation violin artistes in their illustrious family lineage which means that the learning possibilities that GJR Krishnan and Vijayalakshmi had were innumerable and at the same time, refined.

Also, in today's scenario, the violinists are from very early stages of their playing, made to accompany to recorded cassettes³ or live musicians or their guru's singing⁴, as way of practice to improve their alertness, overall reception and understanding levels.

In a way this is beneficial, but the thrill of learning 'on the go' and attaining revelation of one's own fruits of hard work when their capabilities (especially during the "amateur stage") are brought out in the most unexpected circumstances is lost.

¹"I started when I was about to five and by the time I was ten years old I learnt nearly 200 Kirtanas and to play in the way raga and swarams." - GJR Krishnan

²"Each generation has to carry on, building on what has been constructed by the earlier one." - Lalgudi Jayaraman

³"... Swamynathan also found a way out, an unusual innovation: All India Radio (AIR) classical concerts be it Carnatic or Hindustani. He asked his daughters (Subhalakshmi and Sornalatha) to practise along with the classical concerts whenever AIR aired them. His command to his daughters was simple: 'play along as if you are the accompanist, and be focussed'. And, he wouldn't tolerate any lapse in concentration." - Akkarai Swaminathan's interview

⁴"...Kanyakumari, he explains, never taught by playing the violin – she would sing. The students would figure out how exactly to play it with Kanyakumari stepping in only if needed. - L. Ramakrishnan

“WOMEN” VIOLIN ACCOMPANISTS

Like that of the general societal status of women over the years, Gender discrimination has been an inseparable part of the Carnatic music world too. Until the latter half of 18th century, only male violin accompanists were present in the Carnatic music concert scenario. It was only in the 1850s Smt Akkammal, the maternal grandmother of Smt. M S Subbulakshmi and her contemporary Smt. Thayammal initiated taking up violin on stage as women artistes. Though a lot of the then forward families, hereditary families and families who had male artistes considered teaching the art forms to their girls, it was merely for knowledge purposes and not to nurture the artiste in them. Women accompanying artistes were not prevalent in the Carnatic concert scene and also not all male main artistes were accepting of women accompanists¹. This in turn negatively contributed to more women taking up violin as their main profession². But in recent times this has changed to a certain extent and there are considerably more number of women violinists who are main artistes, accompanists and teachers compared to the yesteryears³.

It was after a lot of talented women artistes who took up accompaniment as their main profession, the scene changed from male domination. Artists who contributed to this highly are:

- Smt. Abhirama Sundari
- Papanasam Smt. Bala Saraswathi
- Smt. P S Saradhambal
- Prof. Karpagam
- Smt. S Ambujam
- Smt. Dwaram Mangaidayaru
- Smt. Lalgudi Rajalakshmi
- Smt. Srimathi
- Smt. Savithri Sathyamoorthy
- Smt. T Rukmini
- Smt. Lalitha Raghavan
- Smt. Radha Narayanan

1 “In the case of women accompanists, they feel that even if they are as good as their male counterparts, many male artistes do not prefer them because of their gender. There is definitely some truth to this. As a male singer myself I can only think of one reason for such attitudes — chauvinism.” - TM Krishna

2 “...Female accompanists are never able to achieve the same level of recognition as the male. There is no logical or rational justification for ignoring good female accompanists.” - TM Krishna

3 “...One’s choice of accompanists must be on the basis of quality as perceived by the singer or the main instrumentalist.” - TM Krishna

But it is to be noted that even today, even after witnessing a huge line up of famous, talented women accompanists in the carnatic music world it is disheartening to accept the fact that women are not treated equally in terms of opportunities, basic respect, appreciation, encouragement and pay cheques¹.

In conclusion, in the overall scenario there are a lot of improvements in terms of better treatment of accompanying violin artistes, acceptance of more women accompanists, more opportunities to violinists for main concerts, better acceptance in case of extraordinary playing as an accompanist, better compensation, emergence of a lot of main artistes who provide equal treatment to today's accompanists and so on. But there still is a "long road ahead" of us, together as music fraternity in 'adapting equality' in all senses when it comes to treating and perceiving accompanying violinists as talented individual musicians.

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¹ "As female musicians we lose out because of our gender. There are artistes I would love to play for (but) who, I know, would never have a female accompanist. But I have no regrets. I am happy to have some of the top-notch musicians performing with me." - Akkarai Subhalakshmi