

A kind of integrity

A Southern Music: The Karnatik Story

By T M Krishna

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NAKUL KRISHNA

Carnatic music is the traditional classical music of south India, goes the cliché. Like all clichés, it expresses one truth while concealing another. In *A Southern Music*, the young Carnatic singer T M Krishna has produced a collection of essays that signal a widening doubt about the two key adjectives in that characterisation: 'classical' and 'traditional'.

Krishna is no dilettante. His music is difficult, demanding, and relentlessly serious. He has acquired a reputation for outspokenness against the Carnatic world's hostility to non-Brahmins, non-Hindus and women and the essays in this book contain several incendiary remarks on these matters. But his heterodoxy can be traced beyond his political opinions to an aesthetic philosophy and an interpretation of musical history that are these essays' main focus.

It is one of Krishna's central contentions that contemporary Carnatic musical practice stands in an awkward relationship with its own history. Carnatic music's origins clearly go a long way back, perhaps in some respects all the way to the Vedic age. But this early history does nothing to explain just how Carnatic music came to take the form familiar to its contemporary admirers.

Here, Krishna goes well beyond the usual platitudes to offer a narrative of artistic evolution through the medieval and early modern periods. He speculates intelligently about how the tradition might have developed in the hands of the now forgotten musicians relying on the patronage of one of the south Indian monarchies that flourished even as the over-studied Mughal Empire was on the wane.

It is, perhaps inevitably, obscure just what was special about the moment in the late 18th century when this musical tradition acquired its familiar form, but Krishna's account suggests that the most important truth about Carnatic music might be not its antiquity, however real, but its modernity. Indeed, in Krishna's narrative, Carnatic music might be one of the greatest achievements of India's modernity. Like so much in modernity, the radically new can come to be mistaken for the timelessly old.

The late 18th century saw the birth of the three composers whom subsequent convention would exalt as the 'Trinity': Tyagaraja, Muttuswami Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri. Their melodic and poetic achievements gave expression to that famously indefinable notion, the 'raga', in the form of a musical corpus that was extensive yet staggeringly inventive. Krishna has no quarrels with the conventional estimations of their genius; readers unfamiliar with him can do worse than to look for recordings (they are easily located on the internet) of him singing their compositions if they have the slightest doubt about his respect for the tradition. When he departs from convention, he does not do so out of petulance or ignorance.

Like any other musical form, much Carnatic music performance is competent and unimaginative. But nothing in Krishna's singing is mechanical; in his hands, familiar pieces of music are made new again by an intuitive act of reimagining. It is important to acknowledge his seriousness. In Krishna, one finds an

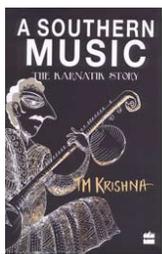
attempt to return to Carnatic music the spirit of experiment and challenge that characterised that formative moment in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Krishna brings a 21st century sensibility to bear on a musical tradition at risk of resting on its now wilted laurels, all the while seeking to preserve its "integrity" (a word that recurs in these pages).

A Southern Music opens with a long, somewhat discursive, section titled 'The Experience', before moving on to the punchier essays on 'Context' and 'History'. Krishna is not at his best in

argument quite inappropriate for an introductory primer. It is possible that this uncertainty in register is the consequence of an editorial failure to clarify just whom this book is for. But a more generous interpretation too is possible: Krishna is trying to take apart the whole Carnatic tradition as a preliminary to putting it back together again, having clarified to his satisfaction just where its essence is to be found.

An early passage captures many of Krishna's central ideas (and some of his penchant for the grand assertion):

Art music is about giving the idea



There are questions to be asked here about the implicit distinction between the aesthetic and the sacred. The distinction has a certain resonance in the context of (say) the Enlightenment in Europe, with its attempt to draw clear lines between the sacred and the secular. But India and Hinduism have stubbornly resisted attempts to enforce such distinctions.

Krishna may well be right that it is the integrity of the art form that is the primary consideration, but we need a reply to the critic who conceives of that integrity as transcending the usual lines between the aesthetic and the sacred

these opening essays. While they are commendably free of the florid, Latinate and oft-parodied style of so much popular criticism (full of 'mellifluous renditions' and 'cascading intricacies'), they are high on grand assertions and severely short on examples.

As in the writings of the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti (whose influence on Krishna is richly evident), one is persuaded not because of his arguments but because one can recognise in what he is saying something one has long suspected. The examples, elaborations and arguments do come later in the book, but it will take a patient and sympathetic reader to make the connections between the pleonastic utterances of the early chapters with the superb clarity of the later ones.

Large stretches of the book have him patiently lay out definitions of basic concepts well known to anyone likely to read this book. Others consist in opinionated passages of

of emotion a representation in music. ... Music is a piece of art, which creates an aural world of emotions. The lyrical content may be religious or social, but that is not the musician's focus.

'Art music' is Krishna's preferred term for what is usually referred to as a 'classical' form. Over the course of the book, the term becomes a way for Krishna to challenge what he sees as the growing hold of certain misconceptions about the nature and possibilities of the Carnatic tradition.

One of Krishna's favoured themes is a call to restore to Carnatic music something of the diversity of performance styles that characterised it in the 19th century and earlier. He regrets the stultifying effect on concert practice of the influential 20th-century innovation, the standard 'kutcheri' format for Carnatic performance and craves a more open-minded, less frenetic, concert schedule.

Krishna is certainly aiming to

provoke, and many in the Carnatic music universe have risen to the bait. His unapologetic, often forceful, mode of argument is likely to alienate some of his readers. Still, everyone stands to gain if his position is seriously discussed with evidence and counterargument rather than defensiveness.

The most intriguing of Krishna's heterodoxies is his attitude to the essential religiosity (or otherwise) of the Carnatic tradition. It is one implication of his conceiving of it as an "art music" tradition that the tradition's relationship with the various forms of Hindu piety becomes a strictly contingent matter, in some cases accidents of history. The essay in which this case is made ("The Shrine and the Song") shows Krishna at his argumentative best.

His point of view, he says, is "not aesthetic but aesthetic". In his view, the aesthetic dimension of Carnatic music is both chronologically and logically prior to its religious dimension. The aesthetic standards of an art musical tradition were in place before that tradition became the vehicle for religious expression. The great Carnatic composers never thought piety a substitute for musicianship. Composers wrote in praise of patrons just as they did in praise of gods and goddesses, and performers and patrons through history have set great store by pure musical skill as displayed in competitive displays of virtuosity.

These are strong considerations, and Krishna's case is strengthened by his recognising that the question of the "inherent" religiosity of Carnatic music is beside the point. The real questions are historical—what were the many ways in which musical practice have been intertwined with the religious life of south India? And practical—how should a contemporary performer respond to the religious aspects of Carnatic music?

The chief consideration, to Krishna's mind, is again the "integrity" of the music. It is fatal for a musician to try to bypass the music and reach for the 'spirit' behind it, as if the music were some kind of optional extra. Attend to the music itself, he urges, and all else will follow.

There are questions to be asked here about this implicit distinction between the aesthetic and the sacred. The distinction has a certain resonance in the context of (say) the Enlightenment in Europe, with its attempt to draw clear lines between the sacred and the secular. But India and Hinduism have stubbornly resisted attempts to enforce such distinctions. Krishna may well be right that it is the integrity of the art form that is the primary consideration, but we need a reply to the critic who conceives of that integrity as transcending the usual lines between the aesthetic and the sacred.

It is to Krishna's credit that his answer to his practical question is tentative and personal:

We should see it as possible to engage with Karnatic music without the religious factor, at least in its overt and overbearingly obtrusive manifestations. I move in this direction, as I believe religiosity narrows our vision of experience. Need it be so for everyone? Krishna does not say, and his lack of dogmatism on this point is to his credit. If his book succeeds in having an influence on the practice of Carnatic music, it is best that it should be by opening up possibilities, not by closing them down.