



Carnatic Music Therapy (CMT): A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Carnatic music as an art form traces its origin to the vedic times. Ancient treatises such as nadayoga and ragachikitsa have highlighted the medical importance of music and the therapeutic benefits of various ragas. Even though, the scientific or biological basis has not been elucidated, there is enough evidence to cite the existence of Carnatic music therapy from the times of the saiva nayanmars . This review article sheds light on the historical origin and evolution of Carnatic music therapy from the past until the present.

Keywords: *Carnatic Music Therapy, Nadayoga, Ragachikitsa.*

INTRODUCTION



The Indian traditional healing system does not consider ‘health’ as just a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. The system also gives equal importance to spiritual well-being. For example, the chapter ‘anandavalli’ of Taittiriya Upanishad links ‘prana’, the vital life with the omniscient and omnipotent God. This is much similar to Greek philosophy, wherein they believe music to have a mathematical relationship with the Cosmos.[1] Importantly, this spiritual health is attended to only by the various arms of Traditional Indian Medicine, commonly called alternative medicine.

Unlike any other art form, Indian music is not viewed as an art form alone. The Indian tradition places it with other treatment systems like Ayurveda and Yoga to treat diseases. Indian music is also given an exalted status, considering it a feasible solution to attain salvation. Though modern music therapy usually traces its history to Plato and Confucius,[2] the Indian traditional music system equally has a hoary tradition. Furthermore, we had practitioners who demonstrated and documented the medicinal and healing aspects of traditional Indian music, which will be the subject of this paper.

The Traditional Indian Music - Historical Aspects

Music is an art imbued with the power to penetrate into the very depths of the soul. [1] Hence, it has the power to cure the physical, mental, and spiritual illnesses. The earliest reference to Indian music comes from the Vedas, the sacred texts of Hindus. The Vedas are four in number and one amongst them is the Sama Veda. This essentially has many hymns mentioned as a sloka form in the Rig Veda, the oldest of the four Vedas. However, the main point of difference between the Sama Veda and the Rig Veda is that the former is recited musically. This essentially shows that the ancient Hindus were well aware of the impact of music on a human’s composite well-being including all the realms, namely, physical, mental, social, and spiritual. Ancient Hindus also believed that music has the potential to control the intrusive thoughts of humans.[3]

A special treatise by the name ‘raga chikitsa’ on the beneficial effects of music also existed.[4] Sangita Ratnakara, a musical treatise written during 13th century stresses the concept of considering ‘nada’, the primordial sound as the ever-pervading God.[5] This text also discusses human anatomy, embryology, and the production of sound from the body. This concept was carried forward even to the medieval period. Tyagaraja Svamigal, a saint of the 19th century, well known for creating new ragas has many compositions on ‘nada’, considering it to represent the body of Lord Siva, taking a lead from the mentioned treatise.

‘Sangita Sudha’, a work written in the Seventeenth century and attributed to King Raghunatha Nayaka gives an account of music on various human emotions.[2] The palm leaf manuscripts of



CrossRef DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31426/ijrpb> **Indexed in CAS and CABI, Impact Factor: 0.64**

King Shahaji, who succeeded Raghunatha Nayaka serve as a record demonstrating the remedial effects of music in treating psychological problems.[4] Analysis of the literature available to us also shows music was not only used as a tool to alleviate physical illness but also used as a medium for metaphysical transformation. Before concentrating on the evidence available, a small introduction on Indian music is provided.

Indian Music - Structure and Concepts

There are two predominant branches of Indian music – Karnataka and Hindustani music. Though they differ in the way of presentation, the basic concepts remain the same. The basic unit of Indian classical music is the svaras. Svara or Svar is a Sanskrit word meaning a note of the musical scale.[6] They are seven in number- sadja, rishabha, gandhara, madhyama, panchama, dhavata, and nishadha. These svaras are also associated with the seven chakras present in the body, namely muladhara, svadhishtana, manipuraka, anahata, vishuddhi, and sahasrara respectively, thereby associating them with the human physiology.

A collection of svaras in various permutations and combinations create a ‘raga’. The ‘ragas’ form a framework for Indian music and are distinctive to this music. Though ragas are innumerable, they have been classified under 72 scales called as melakartas. Usually, a raga takes the svaras available in the melakarta in which it is placed. These ragas are also equated to ‘pann’, a term frequently used in Tamizh music literature.

Carnatic Music Therapy in The Past

As mentioned earlier, the concept of music was never a theoretical concept alone. It was always put into practice. There were many Saints who used their musical hymns as a vehicle to treat various illnesses. Tirugnanasambandar, a saint poet of 7 CE has composed many hymns, as an ode to Lord Siva. It is said that he has revived two dead subjects who were bitten by a snake. Both happened at different points in his life and the ‘pann’ used in both instances were different.[7] Tirunavukkarasar, a senior contemporary of Tirugnanasambandar has said to have revived from a form of stomach ailment by singing a hymn, composed by himself, again set to a ‘pann’.[7] Sundaramurti Nayanar, a saint belonging to 8 CE is said to have given life to a dead child by composing a poem and singing it in front of his Lord.[7]

Venkatamakhi, a literary scholar who lived during 16 CE is said to have treated a stomach ache of a king by composing a poem and rendering it musically.[8] He was a musical genius and had many disciples. One of the disciples in his lineage was Ramasvamy Diksitar.[8] It is said his child became blind at a younger age and he got back vision to his child by composing a song and



dedicating it to Lord Vishnu. His son, Muthuswamy Diksitar too was a composer and is well known for composing on various themes using many old ragas. He has a composition 'bruhaspate', composed to cure the stomach ailment of his disciple.[8] Contrastingly, this composition was not composed on a deity, but on the planet Jupiter. Since he was good in the field of Astrology, he was able to alleviate the malefic effects of Jupiter seen in the horoscope of his disciple.

A Scientific Approach

The life and the works of the above-mentioned musicians were well documented. Hence, it is imperative to consider these as historic documents underscoring the efficiency of music therapy. Though, an element of devotion towards their beloved deity is also involved, since they have rendered their hymns set to music, the involvement of the music cannot be denied.

An attempt was taken to link these events with the science of Ayurveda.[9] An explanation was offered through the science of Ayurveda for many of the incidences associated with Tirugnanasambandar and Tirunavukkarasar.[9] It suffices to take up one of these, music as a treatment of snake bite. Ayurveda predominantly revolves around the concept of 'dhatu' and 'dosha'. Whereas the term 'dhatu' can roughly correspond to the word 'tissues', 'dosha' can be roughly translated as 'factors that causes problems'. Vata, 'pitta', and 'kapa' are the three 'doshas' and rasa, rakta, mamsa, medas, asthi, majja and shukra are the seven 'dhatus'. These 'dhatus' and 'doshas' in turn represent one or more of the primordial elements, namely, fire, water, air, earth and ether. By this association, the human body finds a projection in the Universe. The health of these seven 'dhatus' are of paramount importance to the health of a person. Any pathology of these 'dhatus' results in excess or deficiency of a tissue resulting in a disease.

Rajamanikkar describes the travel of the venom into the system from its site of entry based on the concepts of Ayurveda.[9] The venom once enters our body mixes with the blood (rakta) and gets spread to all parts of the body. This completes one cycle and this destroys or afflicts one of the 'dhatus'. Completion of seven cycles of this process results in the tribulation of all the 'dhatus'. The final stage denotes the infiltration of all the tissues with the venom. The musician-saints sang a musical verse at this stage and revived those affected subjects. This shows music has some effect on the 'dhatus' and/or effect on the primordial elements. Since our body is projected as a part of this Universe, the sound or 'nada' having an effect on these 'dhatus' through the universe can be speculated. But, the way by which it exerts its effect is to be studied by further research. Since more than an instance has shown its effect and was demonstrated by more than a single individual, in-depth research is to be instituted involving all the involved disciplines.

Carnatic Music Therapy in the present scenario

We have many studies to demonstrate the effects of music therapy on various illnesses. The impact of music therapy on mental well-being is proven well. A study by Kumar showed learning music



CrossRef DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31426/ijrpb> **Indexed in CAS and CABI, Impact Factor: 0.64**

positively enhanced alpha waves in Electroencephalogram.[10] It has been found to reduce sadness by giving new tasteful, physical, and social encounters for the patients.[11] A study by Pasiali et al., suggests a positive role of music therapy in high-functioning adolescents with neurodevelopmental delay.[12] Hence, the effect of music on mental development is well proved irrespective of the confounding parameters like age, population studies, raga used, type of music employed etc.

Regular exposure to music in the form of listening or as a music therapy also has a positive impact on other body systems. Whereas listening to the raga Desi todi causes a significant reduction in the systolic and diastolic blood pressure,[13] listening to the raga ‘anandabhairavi’ has a significant impact on the reduction in the post-operative pain.[14]

The adjunctive music therapy is also effective in patients with advanced deteriorating diseases. A report by Sundar and Sumathy shows the additional use of music therapy in conjunction with routine therapy decreased the anxiety levels.[15]

Further Insights

It is conclusively proved that listening to music has benefits that can improve the general well-being of the patient. It is now pertinent to conduct further trials to increase the level of evidence available to us. Though all the ragas sung in Indian classical music have pronounced effects, it is essential to identify the unique therapeutic effect of these ragas individually, if present. Maybe, well-collected evidence through scientifically conducted trials might encourage the physicians to use music therapy as an adjunct to other therapeutic avenues.

Acknowledgement: The authors humbly thank **Dr. Subhashini Parthasarathy**, senior Carnatic musician, musicologist and music researcher and **Mr. Ashwath Narayanan Rajagopal**, independent Carnatic music performer and researcher for their valuable guidance and support in the preparation of this manuscript.

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