

Sociology of Listening: Case of the Nagaswaram

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A discernible trend in both Carnatic and Hindustani systems of music over the last three or four decades is the high popularity gained by the instrumental genre. As it has introduced a new concert structure by pushing the instrumentalist upstage as soloist and changing the status of the percussionist, so did it through the many instrumental innovations for sustained tonal longevity and resonance, amplitude and roundness, also serve the purpose of catering to the need for 'sound'.

This is in consonance with the common experience and perception of sound that, when relieved of the austerities of the pitch-specific note in the scalar condition, it takes on a pronounced affinity for the evocative associations of tone and the sensuousness of tonal colour. The perception of the melody of note-sequences within its linear development gives way to that of the euphony of tonal configurations dispersed within a sonorous field. An aspect of this can be seen in the orchestral accompaniment to film songs where many kinds of stresses and variations are in the form of 'sympathetic' counterpoint and cross-rhythmic harmony, or in the background scores from shot-sequences where it is meant for mood-creation with resort to the ring of the timbre and the feel of its texture.

The way this new 'sound' needs the institution of films and mass media for its operational support and the recording industry for its propagation, in turn, brings to bear on it something of the functional rationality of those media and endows it with a certain 'modernity'. When music is performed, it is an event located within a social space and experiential context, informed by a human reference and its cultural dimensions. Once pushed out of this social space, it is the reusable cultural artifact of processed, packaged and delivered sound within the production-distribution network of the audio software industry. The relative spatial-temporal independence of listening to recorded music, especially in its loudness and ambient acoustic projection, creates its own listening habits, response to tonal colours and psycho-acoustic spaces that help break down subjectivity. Contrast this response to structural relationships among tonalities and timbres, intensities and tempi, with the act of listening to a live musical performance which is directional in its addressing an enhanced subjectivity.

Added to this is the fact of the relative impersonality of the instrumental tone that creates a kind of enhanced formalism, making it a kind of pure sonic design on its own terms which, as the western musicologist, Peter Kivy¹ argues, can properly be considered a decorative art. This accounts for the phenomenal popularity of a

brand of synthetic instant music, particularly conducive to the cross-cultural ambience of international performances, assuming the format of instrumental ensembles. Many of the instruments that are ill at ease in adapting themselves to the changed situation are, in the process, relegated to the background as they sound quaint and obsolete to the new sensibility. The diminishing popularity of the South Indian wood-wind instrument *nagaswaram* is an interesting case in point.

The traditional image of the *nagaswaram* is as an accessory in temple rituals, used by a temple functionary from a lower caste in his hereditary vocation which is totally in the routine service of the temple and has little to do with music as practised elsewhere. Apart from its regular invocatory function during the daily pujas in temples, *nagaswaram* is an instrument whose auspicious strains are a requisite for solemnising and gracing any ceremony in the South. But paradoxically, the instrument that is required to grace ceremonious occasions is itself disgraced customarily on account of what is construed as ritual pollution caused by contact with lips. By this criterion, instruments like the flute should also be held in low esteem given the mode of playing which entails lip contact. But, maybe because of its cult associations with the warbling wood notes of Lord Krishna, the flute is free of any such ritual taboo. The low-brow associations of *nagaswaram* on account of its folk origin and links with folk ways, its inherent loudness which is held to be a function of what is dubbed as lung-power, as well as its open-air and public performing contexts, have all gone to earn it a distinctively non-Brahmanic musical identity. A Brahmin playing *nagaswaram* is generally unheard of.

Ashok Ranade² notes that inventories of musical instruments indicate the kinds of instrumental sounds accepted by a culture and the music-mindedness or otherwise of the people, pointing to a discernible hierarchy of musical instruments and categories of sound as they are artifacts as well as objects with symbolic significance.

When a noted South Indian musicologist and critic says about *nagaswaram* that the "South Indians may like the sharp acid tone of the instrument and may not wish to sugar coat it",³ he is not so much trying to state an objective quality of the instrument as to find a musical referent vis-a-vis a certain concept of classicism understood as cultural excellence.

Contrast this with what one of the most perceptive and discerning critics of Hindustani music, Prakash Wadhera, has to say on *nagaswaram*: "What is true of the *shehnai* is equally true of its southern brother, the *nagaswaram*—strange instruments whose tone may suggest one thing while the player may coax out of it an utterance which is contrary to its natural tone and genius. Maybe that the haunting charm of these instruments rests in the antithesis between pathos and pleasure"⁴.

This observation, coming as it does from a Hindustani music critic, is significant as it shows the response of a sensibility that is not touched by the kind of prejudice that might characterise his southern counterpart's attitude. If the nuances of the very instrumental sound and its haunting charm that Wadhera experiences are lost upon a Carnatic music-lover conversant with its grammar, the reason should be

sought in a sociology of music related to cultural conditioning.

It was only with the legendary Rajaratnam Pillai in the second quarter of this century that nagaswaram earned the prestige of being a concert-worthy instrument—a recognition which the high-brow prejudices of chamber music tradition had grudgingly to concede at last. Before him what was considered “the lean and flashy songs that grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw” were not accorded the dignity of art-music.

“The nagaswaram is temple furniture and its player has even by appearance to evoke a religious atmosphere. The nagaswaram player is traditionally a ‘naked fakir’ clad in loin cloth from below the waist and in holy ash above. His head is tonsured and holy beads hang in garlands round the neck”, says T. Sankaran⁵ referring to the olden days.

This ritual aspect of the instrument and its antiquity is amply borne out by some stone nagaswaras, probably made as offerings to those temples, as in Adi Kumbheswara temple at Kumbhakonam and in Adi Natha temple at Alwartirunagari in Tamil Nadu⁶ and in Omallur and Ettumanur temples in Kerala. Of these, the one in Adi Natha Temple that is similar to the *mukha veena*, as tradition has it, was the offering of a Nayak King and was used as an accompaniment in the Bharata Natya recitals in the temple.

Though he was never called upon to play outside the religious and ceremonial contexts, the nagaswaram player could in those days find ample scope and leisure for elaborate raga alaps during the daily pujas and circumambulations, as well as along the procession routes in which the deity was taken out during festivals, with long halts at each of the portals. This last was particularly meant to serve as an occasion for the nagaswaram player to display his virtuosity, which he took full advantage of. These festival processions turned out virtually to be musical sessions, heard by swelling crowds in rapt attention. At a time when the rigidities of caste prevented large sections of people from entering the temple, leave alone listening to music, it was through nagaswaram by virtue of its inherent loudness and the outdoor and open-air conditions of its performance, that common people could get to listen to art music. Outside the elitist enclaves of the chamber music tradition (when the vocal music concert and the immediately preceding bhajana system were yet to emerge), it was the nagaswaram players who preserved the rich heritage of music through their temple service. Without these nagaswara vidwans, there would be no Carnatic music today, asserts the eminent Carnatic vocalist, Cuddalore Subramonium.

The introduction of the violin some time around the mid-19th century helped to develop within the concert format of the latter day a new concept of accompaniment played in the *anugati* style, which has come to stay. Before that, instruments like veena and flute, which had otherwise had a kind of referral status in relation to singing, used to be part of vocal recitals. These recitals were mostly in the form of musical discourses called Harikathas or Bhajanas. This collaboration proved to be mutually influential. The instruments were free from emulating the vocal mannerisms, but performed within the ambience of vocalism and in unison with it.

After the introduction of the violin and later of the public address system, both of which served to standardise the concert format, the relation between the vocal and instrumental styles became more interdependent within a hierarchy as determined by the former. The tendency that was common around this time towards lowering the tonic *shadja* on the part of the vocalists had its immediate impact on the instruments, leading to many instrumental innovations to cope with the change in *sruti*. But the nagaswara *bani* has remained largely unaffected by these changes, and the nagaswaram has the singular distinction of preserving its high pitch and the pristine purity of the traditional style mainly because it stayed away from vocal associations all along. In turn, the fact of its not being accommodated within the instrumental hierarchy of mainstream vocalism was, on the face of it, an expression of elitist disapproval that took as its term of reference an ill-defined notion of classicism as a cultural absolute—an attitude peculiar to the Carnatic scene, no matter Kerala or Tamil Nadu.

In some of the distinctive features that are unique to nagaswaram can be seen the vestiges of its age-old tradition. For example, a typical nagaswaram recital, whether within the recent concert format or otherwise, starts first with the rhythm beat marked by cymbals, the *sruti* played on the drone pipe, and the percussion accompaniment on the *tavil* (called *dolu* in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh), in the same order, prefacing the nagaswaram. Then only does the playing proper start. Similarly, there are percussive passages called *nadais* during the course of the alap, and prefacing it, though the alap itself is rhythm-free. This distinctive feature of nagaswaram recitals may be a reminder of the vocal tradition of earlier times, when a much shorter version of the present-day mridangam used to make the rhythm during the alap.

The distinctive instrumental identity of nagaswaram can also be seen in some forms of musical composition like *mallari* that are exclusive to it. *Mallari* does not have a text and is composed of rhythmic solfa syllables (*jatis*) and rhythmic mnemonics (*solkettu*) that self-gather into complex rhythmic figures and syncopations. It is only played in Gambhira Natta raga and set to Khanda Nadai talk, making it particularly fervent and virile in movement. This in course of time gave rise to some unaesthetic practices like *raktimelam* which carried the rhythmic part to its impossible end by working up to a thunderous crescendo.⁷

Another manner characteristic of the nagaswaram treatment of *niraval* and *swara prastara* is to render it in phrases of progressively diminishing gradations as between the main player and his support—a stylistic method which of late has been adapted by the shehnai maestro Bismillah Khan.

Nagaswaram is associated with long-winding forays into raga alapana, which in olden days used to go on for hours. It is because of its particular ability to dwell at length on the swaras, bringing out all their shades, that it can go on unfolding the ramifications of the raga structure. An incident illustrative of this was narrated to me by the young nagaswaram virtuoso, Thiruvizha Jayasankar. Some time in the early fifties, Rajaratnam Pillai was slated to perform in the Suchindram temple in Tamil Nadu on three consecutive evenings. Each day he would begin by taking up

some minor raga, and then would go on to elaborate his favourite Todi alap right through till midnight, each time presenting a different delineation of the raga.

Though the term nagaswara is found as early as the second century A.D., the instrument probably assumed its present form as in common use in the different regions of the south only much later. The instrument that is now known as nagaswaram has had its prototype in all the four south Indian states, with regional variants known under different names. The *mukha veena* of Tamil Nadu, the *kurunkuzhal* of Kerala and the *mouri* of Karnataka were all of the same form and function, much as each was shorter like the shehnai of the north. But one common feature was that they were related to the folk culture of the respective regions.

Even as the shehnai, that was made a chamber music instrument by Bismillah Khan, draws its sustenance from the rich folk traditions of the Purab-ang, the nagaswaram is deeply rooted in the folk traditions of the South, the vestiges of which it still retains. Hearing the *magudi*, the snake charmer's tune, played on the nagaswaram is a vivid reminder of its link with the folk ways of this earthy tradition. The Tamil prototype of nagaswaram, *mukha veena*, was used in the Bharata Natyam recitals in ancient days and is still the leading instrument in many of the folk orchestral ensembles like *neyyandimelam*.

The inherent loudness of nagaswaram proved to be a severe disadvantage with the advent of the public address system and the shift to the concert milieu. The noncompatibility with both of them made it accord ill with the changed habits of listening and psycho-acoustic spaces. While the thrust of the process of modernisation of Carnatic music was, by and large, towards securing it a more secular aesthetic and performing milieu, the nagaswaram could not disengage itself, at least in the popular imagination, from the image of its age-old ritual service.

The prejudice against nagaswaram is almost as old as its history. It is said that the Brahmin musicians who were in the line of the great Trinity's discipleship were reluctant to accord nagaswaram an equal status among other instruments mainly because of its proneness to *sruti* lapses, a certain manner of alap that was long-winding and prosaic, and the loud rhythmic syncopations with *tavil*. The real nature of this stigma is not far to seek. In the early decades of this century, when the Thyagaraja Aradhana ceremonies were riddled with factional feuds over the authority of groups, the one convention that was unanimously followed was a strict ban on nagaswaram players and women singers performing on the stage. It seems that it was only after 1930, when the Thiruvizhimizhalai brothers, the eminent nagaswaram vidwans of the day with an exceptionally large repertoire of Kritis, took charge of one of the groups that the ban was gradually relaxed⁸.

True, the nagaswaram in the hands of a not-so-accomplished player—with frequent *sruti* lapses, lack of tunefulness and the over-stretched *swara* ramifications in alaps—can sound blunt and gross. A certain lack of grace and suppleness in tonal inflections and tonal sweeps leads to an ungainly behaviour in the slow movements, and a trilling in the high register which coupled with an obtrusive loudness can make for unpleasant hearing. However much all these have gone to make a case against nagaswaram, there is more to the prejudice against the instrument than

musical sensibility or aesthetic predilection. The tendency to view anything loud as unseemly and unbecoming of a person of refinement was possibly a fall-out of the Victorian values of the British which the anglicised middleclass internalised. This notion had a conceptual correspondence in traditional Indian idealistic thought with its body-mind or gross-subtle dualism. Nagaswaram served as the implied other against which was posited the cultural self-image of the votaries of chamber music. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that, contrary to popular belief, the tendency among vocalists to lower the ground *shadja* preceded the actual introduction of the public address system at least by a couple of decades and had no causal relation to it. If anything, the lowering of pitch was collateral with the systematisation of the chamber music tradition in the south.

To see how unconscious motivations seek an aesthetic legitimacy, it is of interest to look at the writings of a leading Carnatic music critic. While reviewing the performance of a young veena player, he writes: "Shanmugapriya is a popular raga with close links to the nagaswaram. Happily [the young veena player] did not exploit this link but provided an alapana which was in tune with the dignity of the veena".⁹ It is a question whether a raga as such is 'popular' on account of its associations with a certain instrument, and whether there is a 'dignified' manner of rendering it in accordance with a certain other instrument. The implied antithesis between the popular and the dignified as aesthetic categories reflects the cultural separatism of a dominant group.

The same critic writes on another occasion, this time while reviewing an eminent young Carnatic vocalist: "As a vocalist with a free moving voice, he generally has one eye set in the direction of the quantitative nagaswara *bani*. With another eye looking in the direction of the qualitative expressiveness of the veena, he has always tried to establish an invisible meeting point between the two. It is impossible to make these opposite elements meet"¹⁰ Here also the categories, one of the gross and quantitative (involving labour that is physical) as against the other of the subtle and qualitative (involving expression, that is mental) are posited as bipolar entities.

This illustrates the observation of Ashok Ranade as to how the established patterns of describing musical events along with the prevailing hierarchy of musical forms "provide clues to a highly stratified society struggling to find cultural correlates to music and musical correlates to culture".

The history of nagaswaram is unique in that, without being privileged to be a chamber-music instrument, it found its way straight in the latter day to the concert platform, where it is, however, languishing now. In the hands of its greatest master and innovator, the late Rajaratnam Pillai, nagaswaram had become an instrument of great finesse and subtlety to a degree unusual among other instruments and still maintaining its instrumental identity distinct from conventional vocalism. The instrument that he had used, called *nadu bari*, is lengthier in size and shape with its pitch ranging from D to D sharp. With a rich and resonant tone and a mellow roundedness, especially in the lower register, he could blend *brigas* and *gamakas* with the proficiency and ease of breath-throb, which was the hall-mark of his blowing technique and *tuthukaram* (use of the tongue in note-syllable conjunc-

tions). Among vocalists, the late G.N. Balasubramoniam had a style that was strongly reminiscent of several aspects of the nagaswara idiom that he had imbibed. Listening to some private recordings of Thodi, Bhairavi, Kedaragowla, Abheri etc. rendered by another maestro and the only disciple of Rajaratnam Pillai, the late Karukuruchi Arunachalam in the fifties, one tends to think that he had anticipated much that was to emerge in the vocal style of the following period.

All said, the achievements of these late masters could do little to counter the popular image of the instrument as it lingers through the same old preconceptions and prejudices in the minds of the new generation of concert-goers who either do not remember or care to be reminded of them. In any case, the period that saw the flowering of the nagaswaram art producing such distinguished masters as P.S. Veeraswamy Pillai, T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai, Karukuruchi Arunachalam and Vedaranyam Vadamurthy can be seen to be located within the cultural context of the Dravidian revival that was part of the Tamil ethos of the mid-20th century. □

NOTES

1. Quoted in Philip Alperson, "The Arts of Music", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, (Summer 1992).
2. Ashok Ranade, "Perspective Studies in Music", *Sangeet Natak*, 80 (April-June 1986).
3. Narayana Menon, "The Man and his Music", *Times of India* (December 1, 1985).
4. P.W., "Peerless Player of the Shahnai", *The Hindu*, (February 23, 1990).
5. T. Sankaran, "T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai: Reminiscences", *Sangeet Natak*, 6 (October-December 1967).
6. V.M. Narasimhan, "Temple Curiosities: Some Strange Musical Objects", in *Readings on Music and Dance*, ed. Gowry Kuppaswamy and M. Hariharan (B.R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1979).
7. I have greatly benefited from a discussion with Thiruvizha Jayasankar, the eminent nagaswaram maestro from Kerala, on some technical and stylistic aspects of nagaswara art which I have referred to.
8. Similarly, Bangalore Nagarathammal who played a decisive role in organizing the Thyagaraja Aradhana festival and building the shrine over the saint's samadhi, around 1925, was instrumental in relaxing the ban on women-singers.
9. N.M.N., "Leave talent scouting to the experts", *The Hindu*, (March 24, 1989).
10. N.M.N., "Laya mastery often turns into an ego trap", *The Hindu*, (March 17, 1989).