

## Musical Club of Hartford – September 29, 2022

### Introduction to South Indian Classical Music – David Schonfeld

Let me start with the requisite thank-yous:

- to President Bill Warner-Prouty for his kind introduction,
- to the members of the Musical Exploration Committee for approving my proposal,
- to Mike McElroy the church sexton for putting in extra time helping me with set-up, and of course,
- to all of you who showed up to attend a presentation on such an unlikely topic.

I'm guessing that many Musical Club members have little interest in non-Western music. Even those of you who chose to come this morning are probably skeptical that you will learn how to listen to Indian music—much less learn to appreciate it. It is my goal to surprise you on both counts and to reward you for having made the effort to show up.

In the 9 years that I have been its chair, the Musical Exploration Committee has normally chosen outside experts or professional performing ensembles for our Explorations. Today we are returning to what may have been the original concept that our Club's founders had for these Explorations. I quote from the Red Book:

*Club members may be engaged to present programs displaying a particular knowledge or skill which the membership in general would find beneficial. Members are not paid an honorarium.*

(You'll be reassured to note that, should I do a poor job today, at least the Club will not have wasted any money on me!)

I will be taking you this morning on a journey to a culture far distant in space. But preparing this presentation has been for me a nostalgic journey through *time*. You know me as an oboist, clarinetist, and choral singer, but back in 1969, I had the opportunity to learn South Indian classical music, in a non-credit course at Yale, where I was a graduate student, then for two years as a private student of visiting artists at Wesleyan University, and ultimately in India, on a Fulbright Scholarship. I was extremely fortunate to have had these formative experiences. While I never developed real expertise as a performer, I did become immersed in this culture. It is this “particular knowledge” that I want to share with you today.

I need to insert a disclaimer at this point. Between 1971 and 1983, I made 4 separate trips to India and lived there for a total of 4½ years. But I haven't returned to India since. A lot has changed in 40 years. From what I have read and what friends have told me, I would hardly recognize the country now. So be warned: some of what I tell you today may be seriously out of date!

Had I attempted this presentation 10 years ago, it might have been a dry and boring lecture, full of

unpronounceable terms and difficult concepts. However, thanks to YouTube, it is now possible to survey the practice and theory of Indian music in a varied, colorful, and immediate way. In the course of today's exploration, we will watch and listen to a number of video and audio excerpts. Please keep in mind that a traditional South Indian music concert can last up to 3½ hours--with no intermission! A single item on such a program could run over 45 minutes. Given our time limitation this morning, I won't be able to expose you to the full experience; you'll have to attend a real concert for that. My hope is that, if and when you do have the opportunity to attend a concert of South Indian music, you will be able to listen with more discrimination and not be totally clueless.

But I have a deeper motive. By focusing on this one particular non-Western system, I would like to show you that Europe has no monopoly on “classical music”. Classical music cultures have evolved in other continents based on entirely different systems of melody and rhythm. As classical music buffs, we should make an effort to understand them, or at least have a better idea of what we are missing.

You will be confronted this morning by many words and names in Indian languages, especially Sanskrit. Many of these are polysyllabic and intimidating to pronounce. Hindu culture has names for everything, but I don't want these to get in the way. I will try to use English equivalents wherever possible, but feel free to ask me to translate or explain any word that you would like to know. I haven't studied Sanskrit, but have picked up some words through osmosis. Two Indian words that we cannot avoid are *raga* and *tala*. I'm sure you've heard these already. I'll do my best to explain them in a little while.

Before we dive in, I would like you to imagine that you are visiting India and make the acquaintance of some lovers of Indian classical music. They arrange for one of the local music clubs to invite you to give a one-hour presentation on *Western Classical Music*. Would you give a historical overview? Would you focus on a few great composers? great performers? Would you try to differentiate the traditional style categories: Baroque, Classic, Romantic, etc? Would you relate musical tastes to historical, economic, and societal changes? How deeply would you delve into tonality, harmony, musical forms, instruments, performing ensembles, vocal technique? Would you refer to treatises and scholarly works or stick to sounding music? Would you concentrate on opera, since it is the most visual and all-encompassing genre? Would you dwell on liturgical music and the role of the Church in music history? How far back in music history would you go? How far into contemporary practice would you take your story? These are just a few hard decisions you would have to make.

I face the same daunting challenge, but in reverse. Obviously I will have to make a lot of generalizations and leave a lot of things out. For this, I apologize. As you can tell, my remarks to this point have been carefully scripted, but this is where the formal presentation ends. I have been preparing for this session for more than 3 years and I have enough material on hand for a semester course. Unfortunately, we have only one hour together. How we use it depends to a great extent on you.

As I get into my presentation, I will begin asking you questions. Your responses will guide me in deciding what to cover and in what detail. I expect we will run out of time long before we could have a formal Q/A period, so feel free to ask questions as we go along. I will do my best to give you honest answers. That said, let's dive in.