

# Distinctive Characteristics of South Indian Classical Music--in Contrast to Western Classical Music

David Schonfeld, November 30, 2023

1. Indian classical music is based on melody (*raga*).
2. A raga is more than a scale: it is an inventory of melodic possibilities.
3. Hundreds of different ragas are in common use. Serious music lovers can recognize and identify most of them.
4. Ragas are of two very different basic types: organic (motivic) and synthetic (scalar).
5. Not all the “notes” in a raga are straight tones; some are in constant motion, in a characteristic oscillation.
6. There is no concept of counterpoint.
7. There are no harmony parts or chords, only a *drone* (tonic and perfect fifth).
8. A drone instrument (traditionally a *tambura*, but increasingly an electronic device) is essential, even when practicing.
9. Musical time is divided into cycles of *tala*.
10. There are many classical talas, but only a few are in common use (8, 6[3], 7, and 5 beats).
11. Tala and tempo remain constant throughout a given song (and any improvisation based on that song).
12. Drum accompaniment is not mandatory but is almost universal.
13. Songs can be, and have been, notated, using a syllabic, rather than staff-based system, but songs are taught by imitation, rather than by relying on notation.
14. All music is performed from memory.
15. Music pedagogy is remarkably uniform; the system appears to work very well.
16. Music students learn *solfege* from Day 1 and use it extensively, even in performance.
17. Drummers learn and practice useful patterns, along with their syllabic representation, but improvise exclusively when performing.
18. (Almost) all performances involve what we would call a “chamber ensemble”.
19. If there is a vocalist, s/he is *ipso facto* the principal performer.
20. The accompanying instrument *par excellence* is the *violin* (adopted about 200 years ago).
21. The only instrument that occasionally performs solo is the *vina*.
22. All instruments are acoustic, but, in larger halls, *all* ensemble members use amplification.
23. Most concert performers belong to a specific (Brahmin) caste.
24. Historically, performing musicians were predominantly male. Females are now well represented among vocalists, vina players, and (increasingly) violinists. Percussionists and flutists are still, with few exceptions, male.
25. There is no concept of an orchestra; melody instruments concertizing together play the same tune.
26. Vocalists are not categorized by voice type and range (e.g., SATB).
27. Female vocalists use only the “chest voice” (alto range) for classical music, and few

- men sing in what we would consider a tenor range.
28. All compositions are *songs*, containing lyrics.
  29. There are well over a thousand songs in the core repertory, most dating back to the 1800s.
  30. These songs have been passed down orally, through generations of disciples.
  31. There are relatively few song types, all based on similar structural units.
  32. Song lyrics are almost exclusively Hindu devotional poems.
  33. Song composers write their own lyrics (typically in the regional languages, like Telugu and Tamil, but also in Sanskrit).
  34. Tala cycles map to the lines of the poems, typically 1 or 2 cycles per line.
  35. Instruments have no separate repertory apart from these songs.
  36. Instrumentalists know the lyrics to, and can sing, all the songs they play.
  37. Music in South India has an ancient history, but the music that is performed today, and the manner in which it is performed are only about 200 years old.
  38. South India has yet to experience the equivalent of our “early music renaissance”.
  39. Although composed songs are the core of the repertory, the essence of the style is *improvisation*.
  40. The great composers are venerated, but performances are all about the *artists*.
  41. The tonic, or key note, is not intrinsic to the song, but is chosen by the principal performer.
  42. The chosen tonic remains unchanged throughout an entire performance.
  43. There is no concept of modulation, although the raga may be changed in certain very specific contexts (both compositional and improvisational).
  44. Professional performers normally do not rehearse together.
  45. Concert programs are not pre-announced.
  46. Printed program sheets or brochures are not distributed.
  47. The concert program is determined by the principal performer, usually in advance but sometimes on the spot.
  48. Accompanying musicians may not always know before going on stage what ragas and compositions they will be playing.
  49. Concert performers sit *cross-legged* on a raised platform; they do not stand or sit on chairs.
  50. Concerts may last up to three and a half hours.
  51. There is no intermission; the drone persists from start to finish.
  52. Every full-length concert includes an extended drum solo.
  53. Temple musicians draw from the same repertory but use louder, outdoor, instruments and play while standing or walking.
  54. Temple musicians are exclusively male, usually non-Brahmin, and play shirtless.
  55. South Indian classical music shows little Western influence, despite centuries of British rule; and relatively little merging with Hindustani classical music despite geographical proximity.