

Ragas and Scales as parallel concepts in Carnatic and Western Classical music

Dr. Udaya Kiran. K. T.,
Assistant professor, Dept.of Music,
Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvarur

1

Abstract

Music represents the culture of a nation. It is also the expression of people. Carnatic and Western classical music have many similar and dissimilar musical concepts which make them comparable yet distinct in their presentation. Ragas are the embodiment of Carnatic classical music, while scales are epithet of Western classical music. In this article these two concepts are compared and elucidated for the clear understanding of their features, scope and role in performance.

Keywords: Ragas, Scales, Carnatic, Western, Classical, Melody

Objectives:

- To present the concept of raga and the scale in a simple way.
- To compare and analyse ragas and scale based on common features and distinctiveness.
- To bring out the salient features of Carnatic classical music and thereby provide explanation to scale enabling students and practitioners of intermediate stages to understand them.

Methodology:

The present article aims at comparing the raga with Western scales and analysing them in an uncomplicated manner. The methodology used here would be comparative analysis.

Ragas and Scales as parallel concepts in Carnatic and Western Classical music

Music represents the culture of a nation. It is also the expression of people. Carnatic and Western classical music have many similar and dissimilar musical concepts which make them comparable yet distinct in their presentation. Ragas are the embodiment of Carnatic classical music, while scales are epithet of Western classical music. In this article these two concepts are compared and elucidated for the clear understanding of their features, scope and role in performance.

Objectives:

- To present the concept of raga and the scale in a simple way.
- To compare and analyse ragas and scale based on common features and distinctiveness.



Sri Venkateswara University Tirupati

International Conference

" Modern Cultural Influences On Performing Arts And Fine Arts "

Pranav Journal Of Finearts

Volume :1 Issue : 2 December 2022

Special Issue

- To bring out the salient features of carnatic classical music and thereby provide explanation to scale enabling students and practitioners of intermediate stage to understand them.

Methodology:

The present article aims at comparing the raga with Western scales and analysing them in uncomplicated manner. The methodology used here would be comparative analysis.

Scope:

The present article aims at bringing out the conceptual similarities and dissimilarities between ragas and scales and their role in carnatic and western classical music respectively. The textual resources are consulted to substantiate the concept, element, parameters and the like. The present article deals with the present form of both raga and scale hence, the history and evolution does not come under the scope of this study.

The raga as name, concept, technical term, has evolved through many centuries and has undergone several changes reaching the present form. The scales have also undergone a few significant changes from early period of western classical music to the present times. Though the use of scale has significant role during medieval and modern period of the history of western classical music the basic principles of scale still remain same and the innovations are based on the same idea or different interpretation of the ideas related to scale. Raga and scale are conceptually similar as both provide a platform for musical form and set a few basic rules/principles. Both are different as the interpretations for both varies largely. Raga is the melodic contour in Carnatic classical music whereas, scales are outlines for melody (the leading line/melodic part of a composition). In terms of number of notes both have categorisations based on notes occurring in ascending and descending. Eg: Audava is the term used to indicate that the raga comprises 5 notes in both ascending-descending. Pentatonic indicates that the scale has 5 notes in both ascending and descending in western scale. Similarly, the term shadava/diatonic, sampurna/heptatonic are used in parallel music systems.

Some parallel concepts in Carnatic classical and Western classical music pertaining to ragas and scales:

The first note of the raga is adharashadja in Carnatic classical music. Its parallel concept in Western classical music is 'tonic. Grahbhedha an advanced concept in Carnatic classical music has its counterpart in Western classical music named as 'Tonic shift of melodic notation. Murchana of Carnatic classical music can be compared to modes of Western classical music. Major scale of Western classical music has Shankarabharana as parallel raga in Carnatic classical music. Keeravani has its counterpart as Harmonic Scale in Western classical music. Natural minor of Western classical music corresponds to Natabhairavi of Carnatic classical music. Melodic minor of Western classical music comprises of two ragas in ascending and descending. Gaurimanohari in arohana and Natabhairavi in avarohana of Carnatic classical music.



Comparing Swaras and Notes:

Swaras are building blocks in Carnatic classical music. Notes are foundation of melodic structures or compositions in Western classical music. As discussed earlier, the first swara is considered the adharashadja in Carnatic music. Tonic note is the basis for a composition to be presented on either instrument or voice. The second swara is named Rishabha while it is named Second in Western music. Third swara is called Gandhara while it is known as Third in Western music. Fourth swara is known as Madhyama while it has the name according to its position as Fourth. Likewise, Panchama is Fifth, Daivata is Sixth, Nishada is Seventh. These swaras have symbolic short names as Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Da, Ni in Carnatic music and Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti in Western music. The basic difference is that, the swaras are enunciated/sung even in advanced level of performance in Carnatic classical music. Notes are sung predominantly during elementary practice in vocal/voice. Swaras are written on the notation in Carnatic classical music while the symbols representing notes are written on staff notation in Western classical music.

Variants of Swaras and Notes:

Swaras are seven in number and so are notes. Their variants form different ragas in Carnatic and Scales in Western music respectively. Each swara excluding shadja and panchama has two variants.. Each note excluding tonic and fifth has two variants. The lower variant of the swara is known as 'Prakruthiswara and their counterparts in Western music have slightly different criteria for grouping. The notes occurring in major scale are called 'Natural notes. This interpretation differs from the one found in Carnatic music. Here, the term natural refers to notes occur in major scales eg: Pressing the keys in order starting from 'C key up to the next octave would result in natural notes. This combination is also applicable to other pitches (not the key combination as it differs according to the pitch selected) as well. The higher variant in Carnatic music for swaras is called as 'Vikrutaswara. In Western classical music, the name for a given note is compared with notes occurring in major scales and then referred as sharp or flat depending on their position. Eg: If a note is higher than the given natural note position then it is called as sharp. If it is lower than the given natural note it is referred as flat. Both systems diverge in this aspect related to swaras and notes.

Names of ragas and scales:

Names given to raga are more of a language specific. Name given to scales such as major, minor is generic. Raga names could be the names of region such Kambodhi/Kamboji (believed to have originated from Cambodia/Kamboja), Gurjari, Saurashtra, are to name a few. There are stories, myths, anecdotes associated with raga names like the raga Suruti could have been originated from a region called 'Sorata and so on. Though the names of modes and other ancient systems which could have been popular earlier might have had the names associated with such geographical trace but the present names have more of a generic nature. The early Western systems of scales can be compared to 'Grama' 'Murchana' system of Carnatic classical music (then Indian music), the similarity could be little with regard to name. However, the principles of music could have some similarities in both systems.



Ragas and Scales as expression:

Ragas are embodiment of expression in Carnatic classical music. Ragas evoke various moods and feeling. Change of a swara or a variant could drastically change the shade of a raga and the composition or improvisation based on that particular raga. Scales play a significant role in shaping the tone colour of a musical phrase or composition and improvisation which is not as common as in Carnatic classical music. A musical phrase is constructed on a single line melody in Carnatic classical music. A musical phrase involves not only the melody but also the harmony, chords and any other related parameters which could add to the tone colour of that phrase in Western classical music. Raga in Carnatic classical music is independent of pitch I.E., A raga can be sung or played without specifying any pitch or shruti. Eg: A raga name is hardly mentioned with its shruti as Todi in C or 1 shruti and so on. The scale in other hand is always mentioned with its pitch as prefix. Eg: C major, G minor and so on. A composition in Carnatic classical music can be performed in any shruti depending on the convenience of musician. A composition is by and large performed in the pitch suggested by the composer in Western classical music. A raga is melodic contour while a scale is melodic outline. Thus, the raga is not just a musical concept. It is an aesthetic expression ranging from group of swaras to in-depth feeling when performed appropriately. A scale is the basis to compose a musical piece and a parameter to decide the movement of a composition, pitch, basic structure and the like. The way musical performance is featured in Carnatic classical music and Western classical music would throw light on this aspect. A Carnatic classical music is featured in concert invite as "Music Concert by XXX (Name of the Artist)". Western music concerts are featured in concert invite as Today's musical performance will feature Bach, Beethoven and Chopin Pianist XXX (Name) and so on. The emphasis is more on artist in Carnatic classical music while the emphasis is shared between the composer and the performers in Western Music. This makes it clear that, the raga is handled by different musicians in different ways in different concerts. Also, by the same musician in different ways at different concerts and situations. Whereas, Western classical concerts are planned without drastically changing the way the compositions are composed and presented. In simple words, Musical compositions are not extensively improvised, modified or altered with tempo change and the like.

Conclusion:

The idea of comparing ragas with Western classical music is an approach where the reader is introduced to scales through the concept of raga. The explanations are based on a few common features of both music genres. The idea is to bridge both audience of Carnatic and Western classical music through common concept of raga and scale, thus bringing out the cultural significance and musical distinctiveness. The names given to raga represents South India in particular whereas, the names given to Western Classical Scales have their identity with the European culture which is considered as the origin or the birth place of Western Classical Music. The major findings of the article would be that, the names, musical features, note/swara combinations have their root in the culture they belong to. The usage or the application of new ideas are essentially inspired by the cultural and musical aspects which are specific to the region.

The observations made in this here, are based on author's hands on experience in Carnatic classical vocal, instrument and exposure to Western classical and various other music genres. Literary resources are considered for interpretation and accuracy of the information. The



comparative analysis of both raga and scale and related parameters gives the overviews of concepts as both raga and scale are neither completely similar nor they are totally different. Both have common platforms on which musical ideas are structured. Both systems of music (genre) are greatly influenced by the culture of that region. Names, nemonics, principles of both genres have undergone many changes to reach the present form. Carnatic classical music has the adaptability thus accepts new compositions based on conventional ideas/principles. Western classical music is predominantly time period based hence, scholars have no common opinion regarding considering a composition as classical.

References:

Textual resources:

The Elements of Western music for students of Indian Music, Sambamoorthy P, KMBC Publishers, 01/01/1961. English.

The Oxford Companion to music, (Dictionary), Allison Latham, The Oxford University Press, 26/03/2002, English.

Web resources:

Scales in Western classical music;

<https://www.britannica.com/art/scale-music>

11/12/2022.

What is a scale;

<https://www.abc.net.au/classic/read-and-watch/music-reads/ask-russell-what-is-a-scale/13748822>

11/12/2022.

Basic difference between Indian and Western classical music;

<https://www.darbar.org/article/east-and-west-three-basic-differences-between-indian-and-western-classical-music>

11/12/2022.

