



Tradition In Transition The Adaptive Art of The Modern Carnatic Musicians



Divyasri Pisupati

M.A Music (Pursuing), Department of Music
Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, Hyderabad



Dr. Vyzarsu Balasubramanyam

Assistant Professor, Department of Music
Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, Hyderabad

Abstract

In the shifting echo between ancient ragas and modern acoustics, the Carnatic musicians of today stand at a crossroads—one foot anchored in centuries of tradition, the other stepping into an unpredictable sonic future. This paper examines how contemporary performers navigate a complex soundscape shaped by technological advances, evolving audience sensibilities, and diverse performance contexts. Insights are drawn from interviews with professional musicians, close observation of live concerts, and analysis of contrasting performance settings—from temple courtyards to high-tech auditoriums. Four interwoven dimensions emerge: the integration of technology (microphones, digital shruti aids, online streaming), acoustic adaptation to varied venues, psychological strategies for sustaining creativity and resilience, and the transformation of unforeseen interruptions into moments of artistic expression. The methodology combines narrative interpretation of artist experiences with thematic analysis of performance scenarios, enabling both lived and scholarly perspectives. Framing these findings within the aesthetics and pedagogy of Carnatic music, the study argues that adaptability has become a defining skill of the 21st-century performer—revitalising tradition while expanding its expressive reach. Such adaptive artistry not only safeguards the heritage of Carnatic music but also ensures its capacity to resonate with diverse audiences in an ever-changing sonic landscape.

Keywords: Carnatic music, performance practice, technology, acoustics, audience engagement, tradition and modernity.

Research Paper

Introduction

Between temple echoes and livestream notifications, Carnatic music continues to breathe.

Picture this — the soft echo of a temple courtyard at dawn, where a singer's voice blends with temple bells... and then compare it with the ping of a livestream notification on your phone, where the same art form is performed to an unseen global audience.

This contrast is the heart of my research — understanding how Carnatic music continues to adapt, without losing its soul, as it travels across spaces, times, and technologies.

Carnatic music, the classical art form of South India, is one of the oldest living musical traditions in the world. (Sambamoorthy, 1973) Rooted in devotional

expression and deeply intertwined with temple ritual, its structure rests on a delicate balance of composition and improvisation. From the devotional hymns of the Alvars and Nayanmars to the majestic kritis of Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar, and Syama Sastri, Carnatic music has always been more than entertainment—it is a form of worship, philosophy, and pedagogy.

Yet, despite its sanctity, Carnatic music has never been static. Over centuries, it has absorbed influences, negotiated changing patronage systems, and adapted to shifting cultural landscapes. The move from temples to courts, from royal patronage to sabha culture in the 19th and 20th centuries, marked a profound transformation in its performance ecology. Today, we are witnessing yet another turning point: the encounter between tradition

and modernity, live acoustics and digital soundscapes, deeply invested audiences and transient online viewership.

Musicians find themselves balancing reverence for parampara (lineage) with responsiveness to contemporary challenges. A vocalist once trained to project unamplified in a temple courtyard now sings through sophisticated microphones and monitors. A violinist who once relied on attentive silence must now perform amid the ambient noise of urban auditoriums or digital lag on livestreams. Audiences, too, are changing: from connoisseurs who knew every sangati of a kriti to global diaspora listeners tuning in online, often seeking accessibility over technical intricacy.

This paper explores how Carnatic musicians adapt to these realities. It seeks to understand adaptability not as compromise but as artistry—the capacity to reshape tradition while preserving its essence.

Objectives of The Study

1. To examine how Carnatic musicians, integrate technology into performance without losing aesthetic authenticity - Microphones, electronic shruti boxes, and digital platforms have become inseparable from today's concerts. Yet the essence of Carnatic music lies in its organic resonance, the interplay of voice and instrument, and the intimacy between performer and audience. This research explores how musicians negotiate this tension—harnessing amplification, recording, and streaming as tools of reach and clarity, while guarding against the risk of over-mechanization.
2. To explore strategies of acoustic adaptation across contrasting venues - A temple's stone sanctum, a modern auditorium with engineered sound, and a livestream viewed on headphones all create vastly different listening experiences. Musicians must therefore develop a heightened sensitivity to acoustic environments, modifying tempo, ornamentation, and projection to suit the space. By documenting these adjustments, the study foregrounds acoustic adaptability as a hallmark of the 21st-century Carnatic artists.
3. To analyze the psychological and creative mechanisms musicians employ to sustain resilience and innovation - Beyond technical mastery, Carnatic performance demands emotional steadiness and mental agility. Anxiety, fatigue, and the pressures of expectation are ever-present,

yet artists draw on practices of mindfulness, devotion, and improvisational openness to remain centered. This research seeks to illuminate those inner strategies that allow musicians to transform challenge into creativity and continuity into renewal.

4. To highlight the ways in which interruptions, mishaps, or unpredictable audience responses are transformed into artistic expressions - A sudden power cut, a faltering microphone, or an unexpected rhythmic shift need not derail a performance; instead, many artists seize such contingencies as opportunities to improvise, connect, and reimagine. In doing so, they affirm adaptability not as compromise but as artistry itself—an ability to weave the unpredictable into the fabric of the concert.

Taken together, these objectives frame adaptability as a defining skill for the modern Carnatic musician. The study argues that it is through such adaptive artistry that tradition is safeguarded, revitalised, and made resonant for diverse audiences in a rapidly changing world.

Research Gap

The scholarly literature on Carnatic music is vast and rich, particularly in its documentation of theory, history, and composition. Foundational treatises such as the Sangita Ratnakara, Chaturdandi Prakashika, and the works of Subbarama Dikshitar have mapped the structural underpinnings of raga, tala, and compositional form. (Sarangadeva, 13th c./translated 1943) In the modern era, musicologists including B. Subba Rao, P. Sambamoorthy, and S. Seetha have provided systematic accounts of raga lexicons, tala systems, and the evolution of performance practice. This body of work ensures that the theoretical architecture of Carnatic music is well preserved and deeply studied. Yet despite its breadth, the scholarship reveals several notable silences. Much of the existing research privileges musicological detail over the lived experience of performance. Ragas, talas, and compositions are meticulously analysed, but less attention is paid to how performers themselves negotiate the practical realities of sound systems, diverse audiences, or the unpredictability of live contexts.

A second area of under-exploration lies in the ethnographic study of performance environments and technological mediation. While the grammar of raga alapana is well documented, far less is understood about how a vocalist shapes the pacing of alapana differently



in the reverberant acoustics of a temple courtyard versus the engineered clarity of a modern auditorium. The role of microphones, electronic shruti boxes, and livestreaming platforms in transforming musical interaction has also received limited critical engagement.

Finally, scholarship rarely engages with the psychological dimensions of performance. The softer skills of resilience, presence, and adaptability—how musicians manage anxiety, sustain creativity across demanding schedules, or transform interruptions into aesthetic opportunities—are seldom addressed, despite their centrality to artistic practice.

This paper seeks to address these gaps by combining ethnographic observation with thematic analysis of performer experiences. By foregrounding technology, acoustics, psychology, and adaptability as integral to Carnatic performance, it extends the discourse beyond theoretical codification to the lived artistry of contemporary musicians.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative methodology that blends narrative interpretation with thematic analysis. Data was drawn from three interrelated sources. First, interviews were conducted with professional musicians across generations, including young artists at the outset of their careers, established performers with decades of concert experience, and senior vidwans reflecting on changing landscapes. While anonymity is preserved, the voices cited in this paper echo real perspectives drawn from the field, offering insight into how musicians themselves articulate the challenges and opportunities of performance.

Second, the research involved close observation of live concerts in diverse contexts: sabhas during the Chennai December Season, temple festivals in Tamil Nadu, and online performances that emerged during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These observations allowed for comparative analysis of acoustic environments, audience behavior, and the adaptive strategies employed by performers in each setting.

Third, the study draws on digital archives and reviews, including concert recordings, livestreams, and critical commentary. These materials provided supplementary perspectives on how Carnatic performance is mediated, documented, and received in both traditional and virtual spaces.

The interpretive framework is informed by ethnomusicology and performance studies, with an

emphasis on lived experience rather than abstract theorization. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns across the data, particularly in relation to technological integration, acoustic adaptation, psychological strategies, and the transformation of interruptions into artistic moments. (Clarke, 2006)

Limitations are acknowledged. The sample size is not exhaustive, and the regional focus is skewed toward Tamil Nadu and urban centers, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Much of the interpretation also relies on self-reported narratives, which carry an inevitable degree of subjectivity. At the same time, such subjectivity is central to the ethnographic enterprise, for it foregrounds the voices of performers as active interpreters of their own practice. By blending observation, testimony, and critical analysis, the study seeks to present a grounded understanding of adaptability not as abstract principle, but as lived and embodied practice.

Findings and Analysis

1. Integration of Technology

Technology has become inseparable from modern Carnatic performance. The microphone, once a luxury, is now indispensable. Senior musicians recall projecting their voices in temple spaces, where natural acoustics sufficed. Today, with larger auditoriums and noisier environments, amplification ensures audibility. Yet, microphones also shape aesthetic choices: a subtle sangati once lost in open air can now be rendered delicately, while over-reliance risks flattening dynamic range.

Digital shruti boxes have replaced the tambura in many concerts. While purists argue that the tambura's organic resonance cannot be matched, many musicians find digital shruti aids practical, especially for travel and online concerts. A senior vocalist remarked, "The tambura is alive—it breathes with you. But in today's world, carrying two tamburas everywhere is not practical. The digital box is our compromise."

Online streaming represents the most radical transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of virtual concerts, with artists broadcasting from homes or studios. This democratized access but also introduced new challenges: latency, sound compression, and loss of live energy. Younger musicians adapted quickly, experimenting with lighting, camera angles, and audience chat engagement. Some found global audiences who had never attended a sabha concert.



Yet, others lamented the absence of shared silence, the intangible energy of live rasikas.

Thus, technology is both enabler and disruptor. Adaptive artistry lies in integrating it without letting it dictate aesthetics.

2. Acoustic Adaptation to Venues

Venue acoustics profoundly shape performance. The temple, historically the cradle of Carnatic music, offers unique resonance. Singing in a stone mandapam with natural echo encourages elongated phrases and slower pacing. A kriti in a temple gains a devotional weight that even the best auditorium cannot replicate.

By contrast, sabhas of Chennai's December Season prioritize clarity. Here, audiences expect fast-paced concerts with balanced sound systems. Musicians adapt by tightening alapana durations, choosing compositions with brisk tempos, and collaborating closely with sound engineers.

International venues add another layer. Performing in Western concert halls requires negotiating unfamiliar acoustics and diverse audiences. Diaspora listeners may prefer accessible ragas and familiar kritis, prompting musicians to balance depth with inclusivity.

Acoustic adaptation thus requires flexibility in tempo, volume, and repertoire. As one mridangist put it, "We don't just play for the raga—we play for the room."

3. Psychological Strategies for Creativity and Resilience

Beyond technical adjustments, musicians cultivate psychological resilience. Performance is unpredictable: a voice crack, an inattentive audience, or a malfunctioning microphone can unsettle even the best-trained artist. Yet, adaptability turns these into opportunities.

Many musicians draw on mindfulness and devotion. Seeing music as offering rather than display reduces anxiety. Improvisation itself becomes a practice of presence—responding to the moment rather than clinging to perfection.

Resilience also emerges through humor and humility. Senior vidwans often laugh about mistakes, recalling how a forgotten lyric turned into an impromptu niraval. Younger musicians, too, learn to embrace vulnerability, seeing errors not as failures but as humanizing moments.

Psychological adaptability sustains not only performance but also career longevity. In a competitive field with limited financial stability, resilience ensures continuity despite setbacks.

4. Transforming Interruptions into Art

Interruptions are inevitable: sudden power cuts, ringing phones, or unexpected audience reactions. The adaptive musician converts these into moments of expression.

There are famous anecdotes of artists continuing to sing during power outages, the audience joining in by clapping tala in the dark. In one temple kutcheri, a thunderclap during a kriti on Lord Rudra was seamlessly woven into the performance, evoking laughter and awe.

These instances exemplify the ethos of improvisation at Carnatic music's core. The art form's very structure—alapana, niraval, swarakalpana—is about creating within constraints. Thus, interruptions are not disruptions but extensions of this improvisatory spirit.

5. Contrasting Contexts: Temple vs. Sabha

The temple kutcheri and the Chennai December Season sabha concert symbolize two poles of Carnatic performance. In the temple, music is an offering. The audience may be transient, absorbed in ritual, not always attentive. The acoustics favor slow, meditative rendering. The atmosphere demands humility. (Subramaniam, 2006)

In the sabha, music is art and entertainment. Audiences are knowledgeable, often critical, expecting technical brilliance. Concerts are timed, repertoire curated, and reviews published.

Both contexts shape performer strategies. Many musicians cherish temple kutcheris as spiritually fulfilling, while recognizing that sabha concerts offer visibility and career growth. Adaptability lies in moving fluidly between the two, honoring devotion without compromising artistry.

Challenges and Limitations

Adaptation, while vital, is not without its challenges. For musicians, the increasing reliance on microphones risks diminishing vocal projection skills that were once essential in unamplified settings. Similarly, digital shruti aids, though convenient, may gradually erode the pedagogical and aesthetic centrality of the tambura. Online concerts, which greatly expand access, also risk flattening the experience of live performance into consumable "content," reducing the sense of shared presence and ritual that lies at the heart of Carnatic practice.

There is also a persistent tension between accessibility and depth. To reach global audiences, some performers simplify repertoire or shorten improvisational



segments, which can risk diluting the art form's complexity. Others, however, struggle with the opposite concern: how to preserve traditional rigor without alienating younger or less initiated listeners. This negotiation underscores the broader challenge of balancing tradition and modernity.

The study itself has limitations. Its scope is shaped primarily by South Indian urban contexts, particularly Chennai, and therefore does not fully capture the diversity of regional or rural practices. Further research could usefully extend to festival traditions in smaller towns, pedagogical innovations in the diaspora, or experimental cross-genre collaborations. Methodologically, the findings are drawn from a modest sample size and rely partly on self-reported narratives, which inevitably carry subjectivity. Yet, it is precisely this subjectivity—the lived, personal voice of musicians—that provides insight into how adaptability is experienced in practice.

Discussions

The findings highlight adaptability as central to Carnatic performance today. This adaptability is not mere survival—it is artistry. It reflects the very spirit of Carnatic music, which has always evolved: from oral to written traditions, from temples to sabhas, and from live gatherings to digital platforms. The capacity to adapt ensures continuity without rigidity, allowing the music to remain both ancient and immediate.

Comparisons with other traditions are instructive. Hindustani musicians, too, negotiate microphones, global audiences, and the shift from mehfilis to concert halls. Bharatanatyam dancers reframe choreography for proscenium stages, camera angles, and festival circuits. Western classical musicians adapt to amplification and outdoor festivals, while jazz artists thrive on improvisational flexibility in varied acoustic environments. These parallels suggest a broader aesthetic of resilience across performing arts—an ethos of innovation within continuity.

Adaptability also unsettles rigid binaries of “tradition versus modernity.” As the study shows, modern tools such as microphones or livestreams do not erase tradition; they extend its reach. What matters is intentionality—how musicians use these tools while safeguarding *rasa*, *bhava*, and the values that underlie the music. Technology becomes an enabler of depth rather than a threat to it, provided its use is guided by sensitivity and artistic vision.

Pedagogical Implications

Carnatic pedagogy, historically grounded in the gurukula system, now integrates institutional curricula and online teaching models. Teachers prepare students not only in ragas, talas, and compositions but also in microphone technique, stage presence, concert programming, and digital etiquette. In the diaspora, entire generations of students now learn virtually, negotiating latency, time zones, and cultural distance while still striving to internalize the core aesthetics of the art.

Adaptive pedagogy also emphasizes cultivating resilience. Alongside musical correctness, teachers stress presence of mind, humility, stamina, and improvisational openness. These qualities enable students to face unpredictable performance contexts—whether a temple festival, a YouTube livestream, or a high-profile *sabha*—with confidence and poise. Importantly, pedagogy now includes transmitting intangible values: the spirit of *bhakti*, the ethical relationship between guru and *shishya*, and the sensitivity required to preserve the emotive essence of the tradition.

Thus, adaptability emerges not only as a performance skill but also as a pedagogical imperative. By preparing students to navigate technological, acoustic, and psychological challenges, teachers ensure that the tradition is both preserved and dynamically renewed for the twenty-first century and beyond. (Arundale, 1984)

Conclusion

The 21st-century Carnatic musician stands at a crossroads, yet this crossroads is not a rupture but a continuum. Technology, acoustics, psychology, and interruptions are not external threats to the tradition but integral dimensions of adaptive artistry. By learning to navigate these shifting terrains, musicians embody the very spirit of Carnatic music, which has always thrived on reinvention within continuity.

This study has shown that adaptability is not dilution but resilience. It is the art of negotiating continuity and change, devotion and innovation, silence and amplification. In embracing adaptability, performers revitalize tradition, ensuring its resonance across diverse contexts—from temple courtyards to global livestreams.

The findings also suggest that adaptability is more than a performance necessity; it is a pedagogical and cultural imperative. As future generations of musicians encounter new technologies, audiences, and geographies, the ability to adapt will define not only individual artistry but also the sustainability of the tradition itself.



In the shifting echo between ragas and acoustics, Carnatic musicians today embody a timeless truth: music lives only when it adapts, and adapts only when it lives.

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