



Bridge, Bow and Beyond: Tracing the legacy of Dr. L Subramaniam in global music



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Abstract

This paper explores the intertwining of biographical narratives and the construction of artistic legacy through the life and work of violin maestro Dr. L. Subramaniam. Renowned for his mastery of Carnatic tradition and pioneering contributions to global fusion, Dr. Subramaniam's journey offers a compelling case study in how personal history, artistic innovation, and cultural diplomacy shape a lasting heritage in the performing arts. The study charts his early training in a musically distinguished family, his parallel pursuits in medicine and music, his trailblazing collaborations with world-class musicians, and his role in founding the Lakshminarayana Global Music Festival. It examines how his extensive discography, pedagogical initiatives, and cross-cultural engagements have reinforced the violin's stature in both Indian and world music contexts. Through this lens, the paper highlights how biography informs artistic choices and how those choices, in turn, construct a sustainable legacy that transcends geographical and stylistic boundaries. The research employs a qualitative approach, combining biographical analysis with musicological review. Primary data is sourced from biographical accounts, recorded interviews, and archival concert footage. Secondary data includes critical reviews, scholarly articles, and media coverage. Analytical tools include thematic mapping of life events to legacy outcomes, content analysis of selected performances, and comparative evaluation of his work in Carnatic, fusion, and orchestral settings.

Keywords : Legacy, Dr. L. Subramaniam, Violin, Global Music, Carnatic Music, Tradition and Innovation.

Research Paper

Introduction

Music is a universal truth, but an individual experience. It lends itself to infinite imagination and serves as an impersonal language with a deeply personal meaning and impact. It has been one of the finest expressions of the collective human consciousness, a medium of communication with the transcendental, a way to celebrate the very life that we are. Every part of the globe has its own rich musical history, peppered with influences and influxes, a saga of relentless change, a memory of endeavour that has resulted, in many parts, in the creation of sophisticated musicological understanding.

One of such forms is Carnatic music, tracing its origins to the chants of Sama Veda. Though the form itself has undergone many changes, arriving at what it is now

through centuries of transformation; the fundamental essence, the deep philosophical purport has remained the same: Music is a worship of the Divine. (Fiveable) (Vedabala)

Tradition in this context refers to the foundation. A set of collective aesthetic values, shared meaning and purpose that guides an artists' artistry while providing them with a scope of rich individual expression. The grandeur of Carnatic music lies in the fact that it is capable of a strikingly personal and distinctive expression while adhering to the rules of musicological grammar. The meaning of tradition is also expandable to encompass the essential intellectual flexibility and natural curiosity of an artist. Spontaneity is essential to art, and in this context, global music is an important study.

Global music is a dynamic category that encompasses the diverse musical expressions of the world's cultures, transcending geographic and cultural boundaries (Gillett, Global Music). The term evolved from "world music," originally a marketing label from the 1980s with Western commercial origins, to "global music," emphasizing artistic exchange rather than commodification. Central to global music is the engagement of tradition as a vital medium for cultural dialogue.

It is important to mention that the integration of the violin into Carnatic music through the pioneering efforts of Baluswami Dikshitar as an example. It illustrates this cultural dialogue through its adaptation and use both as an accompaniment and a solo instrument within Carnatic performances (Verhulst). Research into Carnatic violin performance practices reveals nuanced intonational and improvisational techniques that reflect the tradition's deep expressive discourse, even as the instrument responds to contemporary influences (Kumar)

One such artist, in whose hands, the violin shone bright is Dr. L. Subramaniam, a globally acclaimed Indian violinist, composer, and conductor known for his pioneering contributions to Carnatic classical music and its fusion with Western and global musical traditions. Born in 1947, he mastered both Carnatic and Western classical violin traditions, achieving international recognition for his virtuosic performances and innovative compositions. In many ways, his legacy is closely intertwined with the idea of global music itself. Strongly rooted in Carnatic tradition to which he attributes his success, he has engaged with musicians like Yehudi Menuhin, Stéphane Grappelli, Herbie Hancock, Larry Coryell, Ali Keita, Jei Bing Chen, Jean Pierre Rampal, and Jean-Luc Ponty, expanding the reach and appreciation of Carnatic classical music globally. (D. L. Subramaniam, IN CONVERSATION - DR. L. SUBRAMANIAM)

Objectives

This paper aims to examine Dr. L. Subramaniam's artistry and its inalienable influence on global music. The objective is to understand, through qualitative study, his role and impact in elevating the status of Carnatic music in the ever-expanding genre of global music. His work in the field of Raga harmony has allowed him to adapt Carnatic ragas to Western orchestral music. He proposed a 36 mela system, through his research, and has used these concepts to write orchestral pieces which have been performed globally. The objective of this paper is to examine his work, and understand his legacy.

Scope

Though there are many orchestral works that Dr. L. Subramaniam has composed, for the sake of this paper, I have limited the scope to the study of Shantipriya, a symphony in three movements composed by him. The version that I have used for my analysis is the symphony performed with Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra, at the Royal Opera House, Muscat. The video is on YouTube. (D. L. Subramaniam, Shantipriya - Movement 1 w/ Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra). (D. L. Subramaniam, Shantipriya - Movement 2 w/ Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra) (D. L. Subramaniam, Shantipriya - Movement 3 w/ Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra) A brief examination of his other works and his Carnatic renditions has also been presented.

Review of Literature

The review of literature has shown that Dr. L. Subramaniam's music has been the subject of scholarly inquiry and critical acclaim, particularly focusing on his orchestral compositions such as 'Fantasy on Vedic Chants.' This piece is noted in academic research for its innovative synthesis of Carnatic melodic traditions with Western symphonic form, reflecting Subramaniam's dual mastery of Indian and Western classical music traditions. Scholarly analysis highlights how 'Fantasy on Vedic Chants' builds around the pivotal Vedic tritone motif, constructing a rich tapestry of tonal colours and textures that create new possibilities for orchestral integration of Carnatic and Western idioms (BOROŞ-LAZĂR)

Academic discourse has emphasized Subramaniam's ability to maintain the scalar integrity of ragas while exploring novel harmonic and textural avenues, thus enriching the Indian musical vocabulary on a global stage. His doctoral research, which culminated in his book Raga Harmony, theorizes a method for incorporating Indian raga scales within Western harmonic constructs, facilitating composition that bridges cultural systems (L. Subramaniam). This approach offers a framework for musicians of differing traditions to engage collaboratively while respecting the distinct musical logics of each.

Research Gap

Scholarly literature positions Dr. L. Subramaniam as a pioneering figure in global music who deftly negotiates the interface between tradition and innovation. His works, especially 'Fantasy on Vedic Chants', stand as exemplars of intercultural musical dialogue, advancing



both academic inquiry and audience appreciation of Indian classical music's global dimensions. My paper adds to the existing body of literature by offering a review of Shantipriya, using it to shed light on Dr. L. Subramaniam's contribution to global music.

Methodology

The paper takes a qualitative approach. I collected data from Dr. L. Subramaniam's interviews spanning over three decades. These were sourced from websites like YouTube. I had also gathered various concert footages and recordings to conduct my analysis. I have also let my brief interaction with Dr. L. Subramaniam himself help my understanding of his legacy. Scholarly articles, journal and press reviews were also considered for my data. I have mapped major life events and their impact on his perceived legacy, basing my analysis on Dr. L. Subramaniam's own autobiographical accounts.

Research and Analysis

Dr. L. Subramaniam's life and music embody a profound intertwining of tradition, personal experience, and musical innovation, reflecting a complex narrative shaped by early influences, loss, and spiritual exploration. (J. H. Meunier, *Violin from the Heart*) His personal life also deeply influenced his musical journey. The passing of his first wife, Vijayashree (affectionately known as Viji), who played a crucial role in supporting his concert preparations—including tuning, string changes, and bow maintenance—left a profound emotional and musical impact. It was only after encouragement from close friends and colleagues that he returned to composing.

The symphony's movements exemplify Subramaniam's mastery of Raga tradition and his innovative compositional approach. The first movement of Shantipriya employs the Raga Charukeshi, revered in the Lakshana-granthas for its capacity to convey pathos, devotion, and a profound yearning for the divine. The first movement is replete with rich harmonic structures which he created for the raga. An examination of the notation reveals complex layering of multiple instruments, building on the concepts of Vadi, Samavadi and Anuvadi. The cadenza, played by Dr. L. Subramaniam himself, employs Western bowing techniques like staccato, legato, spiccato to name a few. These are coupled with Manodharma aspects such as Alapana, Tanam and Swara Prasthara. There is also a notable use of Yatis and Muktayis, accentuated with the presence of Mridangam and Morsing, two traditional Carnatic instruments.



Figure 1: The harmonic patterns in Charukeshi.
(L. Subramaniam)

As can be seen in the image, the tonal possibilities developed in the raga, used for the first movement, employ the use of Vadi, Samavadi, Anuvadi relationship between the notes. Some of the harmonic possibilities in the raga include SGP, SD, R, SMP, GN# (Kaishiki Nishada), R.

These tonal possibilities have been employed over and over again across the first movement. The harmony builds in tempo and pitch towards a powerful crescendo, which employs the Carnatic Mukhtayi pattern. The first movement contains a striking amalgamation of Western and Carnatic improvisational techniques, impression and tonality.

The second movement transitions seamlessly to the raga Natabhairavi, which is derived by flattening the third note of Charukeshi: using the Sadharana Gandhara, creating melodic continuity and thematic cohesion while also altering the mood completely owing to the significant change in Raga Bhava. In fact, the movement highlights the altered third. The violin solo also emphasizes the Gandhara, creating a definite shift in musical experience. The flow of the music itself is, in parts, set to a harmonious Trishra Gati, contrasting the rhythm of Chaturshra which was employed in the first movement. It also features a quick Tanam in the Raga followed by various harmonic explorations. The movement is notable as one hears Dr. L. Subramaniam playing subtle harmonics on his violin and juxtaposing them with Carnatic Gamakas. His method of sounding the same phrase in three different octaves creates an emotional depth to the piece, adding symbolic meaning to the musical idiom.

The third movement introduces the concept of Graha Bhedam—an advanced musical technique rooted in Carnatic music, that alters the tonic note of a Raga while preserving intervallic relationships, thereby allowing



the performer to invoke multiple Ragas from a single scale. This is also called the modal shift of tonic. Using the Raga Mohanam as a base, this technique unfolds into four other ragas, including Madhyamavati, Hindolam, Suddha Saveri and Suddha Dhanyasi showcasing his deep engagement with classical Carnatic theory and his innovative expansions there of.

Raga	S	R1	R2	G1	G2	M1	M2	P	D1	D2	N1	N2
Mohanam	S		R2		G2			P		D2		
Madhyamavati	N1		S		R2			M1		P		
Hindolam	D1		N1		S			G1		M1		
Suddha Saveri	M1		P		D2			S		R2		
Suddha Dhanyasi	G1		M1		P			N1		S		

Table 1: Derivation of different ragas from Mohanam using Graha Bhedam. For the purpose of the above Table, I have refrained from using the 16 Swarantargata Sthanas found in Carnatic theory, and have used the common 12 Swaragata Sthanas.

The symphony itself derives strongly from his work on Raga Harmony. It is a concept where we can create multiple tonalities using only Swaras or notes of the raga. Since some of the ragas have unusual intervals, the polytonal possibilities can create newer tonalities, which are not commonly used in the traditional concept of Western Harmony. (L. Subramaniam)

Biographical analysis further revealed how certain events have strongly shaped Dr. L Subramaniam's musical legacy. His father's encouragement to push the violin beyond traditional Carnatic boundaries encouraged him to incorporate Western bowing techniques and orchestral forms, facilitating the global recognition of the Carnatic violin and expanding its expressive potential. His rigorous training combined with natural curiosity led to novel presentations of Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi, a traditional improvisational form, infusing it with fresh vitality. Even in Carnatic renditions, one can notice his cross-bowing, Western bowing techniques for Tanam sections and dizzying speeds of Kalpana-Swaras that are often rendered with trills and sautillé.

Discussion

Dr. L. Subramaniam's life and artistry are profoundly shaped by a deep spirituality and rigorous musical tradition, reflecting a symbiotic relationship between personal experience, faith, and innovation. His connections with spiritual masters like Sri Sathya Sai Baba and Sri Swami Ganapati Sachchidananda have influenced his creative work, including musical therapy projects that underscore his belief in music's therapeutic and transcendent powers. Beginning violin training early under his father's tutelage, his career spans around seven decades, marked by complex, emotionally resonant compositions that honor Carnatic music while expanding its global reach. He distinguishes between playing what one can and what one wants to play, emphasizing that authentic musical expression transcends technical skill to convey a spiritual mental state where unity and liberation are experienced. This intention is embodied in works like Shantipriya, which symbolizes peace and the transcendent power of music to evoke spiritual harmony among listeners.

A hallmark of Dr. L. Subramaniam's innovative contribution is his pioneering work, Raga-Harmony, which is his doctoral thesis and has also been published as a book. It explores harmonic structures and tonalities in Indian classical music. He has synthesized Carnatic ragas with Western harmonic frameworks by creating a thirty-six mela system integrating concepts from Govindacharya's seventy-two ragas system. This affords rich harmonic possibilities, combining the normal and augmented fourth: Suddha and Prati Madhyama within a single raga. This gives scope for categorising some ragas and scales that cannot be correctly categorized under the Sampoorana Mela Paddhati of Govindacharya. These include North Indian ragas like Basant Bahaar, Behag, Lalit, Gaud Sarang, Hameer and Shyam Kalyan which have both the Madhyamas given equal prominence in the scale. It also covers Western blue scale, and Locrian mode, which have both the perfect and augmented fourths. (L. Subramaniam)

Nonetheless, I argue that while Raga-Harmony expands traditional scalar boundaries, it departs from the authentic Raga form by not fully incorporating the essential Gamakas—ornamental oscillations crucial to Raga identity.



Without gamakas, melodic essence and emotional nuance can be diluted; thus, this approach can be seen as expanding the idea of a scale rather than preserving the living tradition of Raga as characterized by its movement and expression.

His international acclaim underscores widespread recognition and respect across cultures, from his concerts in Japan to performances at the United Nations' 50th anniversary celebrations. Critical reviews affirm his creative mastery; legendary violinist Yehudi Menuhin praised Dr. L Subramaniam's music-making as uniquely inspiring, and publications like *The Times* have lauded him as one of the finest musicians encountered. His foundational grounding in Carnatic music roots his innovative endeavours, enabling him to engage with diverse musical traditions while cultivating what he terms the "fruit of fusion". (J. H. Meunier, *Violin from the Heart*)

Shantipriya offers a glimpse of an aesthetic within an aesthetic. Seated amidst the Western, is the Carnatic. The visuals are truly remarkable. One gets to see a traditional Carnatic Kutcheri style of seating in a Western orchestra. When all violins are tuned to the GDAE tuning and held up to the chin, Dr. L. Subramaniam's violin rests on him, in the Carnatic way. It is a heart-warming sight to see the homecoming of the Western violin with an Indian voice. This seemingly simple scene speaks volumes on cultural diplomacy. In a world with changing geopolitical landscapes, the soft power of Bharat shines through Her artists. It is important to embrace tradition. One actually does not lose, but gains so much when rooted firmly within one's tradition, as seen in Dr. L. Subramaniam's life.

His legacy emphasizes the indispensability of a strong traditional base: mastery of technique and deep familiarity with one's cultural grammar are prerequisites for meaningful innovation and intercultural musical dialogue. This principle resonates as a guiding paradigm for aspiring musicians. Carnatic music, as demonstrated by Dr. L Subramaniam's trajectory, offers a profound foundation that nurtures passion, technical precision, and expressive depth. At its core, the tradition is not proprietary but belongs to a spiritual lineage of Saints and composers like Tyagaraja, Shyama Shastry, Ramadasa, Annamacharya and others—who viewed music as a sacred crystallization of consciousness, a pathway for understanding the cosmos, and a means for self-dissolution and spiritual worship.

Dr. L. Subramaniam's music embodies a seamless integration of spiritual inspiration and technical excellence, advancing the Carnatic violin tradition onto the global stage. His work challenges the boundaries of classical Indian music while revering its spiritual essence, inspiring listeners and musicians alike to transcend technical confines and experience music as a universal language of liberation and unity.

In essence, music across traditions has always been a medium of higher emotions. A note, played by itself, cannot be confined to the boundaries of any system. It is self-luminous. A musician therefore becomes a bridge between what the mystics call 'The Great Silence' and our human world. Music then is the translation of Silence into Sound. In Dr. L. Subramaniam's journey one can see the inevitable upheavals of life, but also notice the grace with which they can be channelled to express an undecaying truth. Music is not just an artistic expression capable by a select few, but a language that can be spoken by everybody and everything. Science now is revealing the impact of music on plants and even subtle elements. Music, is the very nature of who we are. As poetically expressed by a Saint, "music devoid of devotion is fruitless".

In conclusion, music and musical legacy offer inspiration to pursue one's own voice. Dr. L. Subramaniam's legacy is just this: music needs to be felt, not understood.

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