
THEFT OF TAMIL MUSIC: THE EVOLUTION AND APPROPRIATION OF CARNATIC MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

The history and transformation of Tamil music, which has been foundational to the development of what is now recognized as Carnatic music. Tamil music, with its origins in the Sangam period, has a rich and ancient tradition that has deeply influenced the musical landscape of South India. The historical evolution of Tamil music and the subsequent appropriation and adaptation of these traditions by the Carnatic music trinity—Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshithar, and Syama Sastri—who are often credited with the creation of Carnatic music as it is known today. The Tamilisai trio—Sirkazhi Muthu Thandavar, Arunachalakavirayar, and Mari Muthapillai—who were significant figures in the Tamil music tradition, this reveals how their work laid the groundwork for the kirtan forms and other musical structures later popularized by the Carnatic music trinity. The Carnatic music trinity learned extensively from the Tamilisai trio and other Tamil musical traditions, adapting these elements into their compositions and translating them into Telugu and Sanskrit, thereby transforming Tamil music into what became known as Carnatic music. The Natya Shastra and Sangeetha Ratnakara, which are often cited as foundational to Carnatic music. This appropriation and rebranding of Tamil music under the label of Carnatic music is explored as a case of cultural appropriation, where the original Tamil contributions have been overshadowed by the later, more widely recognized Carnatic tradition. The need to recognize and celebrate the true origins of Carnatic music, which are deeply rooted in Tamil musical traditions, and to give due credit to the Tamilisai trio and other Tamil music scholars whose contributions have been historically marginalized. By bringing to light the historical and cultural theft of Tamil music, the rightful place of Tamil music in the history of South Indian classical music and to ensure that the legacy of Tamil music is preserved and appreciated for its true value.

Keywords: Tamil Music, Carnatic Music, Tamilisai Trio, Cultural Appropriation, Historical Evolution.

INTRODUCTION:

Tamil music, with its profound historical roots, is a cultural treasure that has significantly shaped the musical landscape of South India. Its origins can be traced back to the Sangam period, a time when Tamil music was not only a means of artistic expression but also a vital component of religious and social life. The rich and diverse traditions of Tamil music have evolved over centuries, influencing and being influenced by various cultural and musical developments. Today, this ancient musical tradition is widely recognized under the name Carnatic music, a classical music form that is revered throughout South India and beyond. However, the transformation of Tamil music into what is now known as Carnatic music is a story of both continuity and change, involving a complex interplay of cultural exchanges, adaptations, and, in some cases, appropriation. The term Carnatic music itself has become synonymous with the contributions of the so-called "Trinity of Carnatic Music"—Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshithar, and Syama Sastri. These three composers, who lived between the 18th and 19th centuries, are often credited with codifying and popularizing the structure and style of Carnatic music that we recognize today.

Yet, the origins of many of the forms and structures attributed to Carnatic music predate these figures and are deeply rooted in the Tamil musical tradition. The *Tamilisai Pitamakans*, comprising earlier Tamil composers such as Sirkazhi Muthu Thandavar, Arunachalakavirayar, and Mari Muthapillai, played a crucial role in developing the *kirtan* forms that laid the groundwork for much of what would later be celebrated as Carnatic music. These Tamil musicians and scholars were instrumental in shaping the early forms of devotional and classical music in Tamil Nadu, their work reflecting a synthesis of religious devotion, poetic expression, and complex musical theory. This aims to unravel the historical narrative of how Tamil music, particularly the contributions of the *Tamilisai Pitamakans*, was incorporated and transformed into what is now known as Carnatic music. The ways in which the music of Tamil Nadu was reinterpreted and rebranded by later musicians, including the Carnatic Trinity, who adapted these rich traditions into their compositions, often translating them into other languages like Telugu and Sanskrit. In doing so, to restore recognition to the Tamil origins of many aspects of Carnatic music and to highlight the importance of Tamil music in the broader context of South Indian classical music.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What evidence supports the claim that Carnatic music appropriated Tamil musical

traditions?

2. Why is it important to recognize the contributions of Tamil music scholars?
3. How does the psychological impact of music play a role in cultural preservation?

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF TAMIL MUSIC:

Tamil music's origins are deeply entwined with the rich cultural tapestry of the Sangam period, a classical era in Tamil history that spanned from approximately 300 BCE to 300 CE. This period is celebrated for its literary and artistic achievements, and it played a crucial role in shaping the foundation of Tamil music. The Sangam literature, comprising poetic works of profound depth and beauty, provides valuable insights into the musical traditions of the time. The texts reveal that music was an integral part of both secular and religious life, serving as a medium for storytelling, ritualistic practices, and the expression of emotions. The Sangam period saw the development of various musical forms that were closely linked to Tamil society's cultural and religious fabric, including the use of intricate poetic meters and rhythmic patterns that would later influence the structure of Tamil music. During this era, ancient Tamil music was characterized by its use of specific musical forms and instruments that were unique to the region. The Tamil musical system was well-developed, with distinct scales, modes, and rhythms that formed the basis for compositions. Instruments like the Yazh (a type of harp), the Veena (a stringed instrument), and the Murasu (a percussion instrument) were commonly used, and they played a significant role in both court music and popular folk traditions. These instruments were not only tools for entertainment but were also imbued with symbolic and ritualistic meanings. The compositions of this period often revolved around themes of love, valor, and devotion, and they were performed in various settings, from royal courts to village festivals.

As Tamil music evolved, its influence began to extend beyond the confines of the Tamil region, impacting other musical traditions across South India. The sophisticated melodic and rhythmic structures developed during the Sangam period laid the groundwork for future musical innovations. The concepts of "Pann" (similar to the modern-day Raga) and "Tala" (rhythmic cycles) were central to Tamil music and were later integrated into the broader South Indian musical framework. Over time, these foundational elements of Tamil music became integral to the development of Carnatic music, the classical music tradition that would dominate South India in later centuries. The evolution of Tamil music also involved the synthesis of various cultural

influences, as Tamil society interacted with other regions through trade, conquest, and religious movements. The exchange of musical ideas contributed to the enrichment of Tamil music, leading to the development of new forms and the adaptation of existing ones. However, despite these external influences, the core elements of Tamil music remained distinctly tied to its ancient roots, preserving the unique identity of Tamil musical traditions even as they adapted to changing cultural landscapes.

In the origins and evolution of Tamil music are deeply rooted in the Sangam period, which laid the foundation for the sophisticated musical forms and instruments that would shape Tamil and South Indian music for centuries to come. The enduring influence of Tamil music on later musical traditions, particularly in the development of Carnatic music, highlights its significant role in the cultural and artistic history of South India.

TRINITY OF CARNATIC MUSIC VS. TAMILISAI TRIO

The classical music tradition of South India, known as Carnatic music, owes much of its development and popularization to the contributions of three iconic composers: Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshithar, and Syama Sastri. This trio, often referred to as the Trinity of Carnatic Music, lived and composed during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and their works have since become foundational to the Carnatic music repertoire. Thyagaraja is particularly revered for his devotional compositions, many of which are dedicated to Lord Rama. His kritis, characterized by their melodic beauty and spiritual depth, have a central place in Carnatic music. Muthuswamy Dikshithar is known for his sophisticated compositions that often incorporate complex musical structures and rich lyrical content, drawing from both Sanskrit and Tamil traditions. Syama Sastri, the eldest of the trinity, contributed significantly through his compositions, which are known for their rhythmic intricacies and devotional fervor, particularly towards the goddess Kamakshi. Collectively, the works of these three composers have set the standard for the Carnatic music tradition, influencing generations of musicians and composers.

In parallel to the Carnatic music trinity, the Tamil musical tradition, or Tamilisai, was shaped by another set of three composers, often referred to as the Tamilisai Trio. This trio consists of Sirkazhi Muthu Thandavar, Arunachalakavirayar, and Mari Muthapillai, who were pivotal figures in the Tamil musical tradition during the 16th and 17th centuries. Sirkazhi Muthu Thandavar is credited with creating the format for Tamil hymns and is known for his compositions that seamlessly blend devotion with musical innovation. Arunachalakavirayar, a poet-composer, is

celebrated for his work "Rama Natakam," which narrates the story of Lord Rama in a musical form that appeals to both the layperson and the connoisseur. Mari Muthapillai, a lesser-known but equally important figure, contributed to the Tamil musical tradition through his compositions that emphasized the use of native Tamil meters and forms, preserving the unique identity of Tamil music. The TAMILISAI Trio's works are characterized by their deep roots in Tamil culture, language, and religious traditions, making them central to the preservation and propagation of Tamil music.

When comparing the contributions of the Carnatic music trinity and the TAMILISAI Trio, it becomes evident that both sets of composers played crucial roles in shaping South Indian music, albeit from different cultural and linguistic perspectives. The Carnatic music trinity, while deeply rooted in South Indian traditions, composed predominantly in Telugu and Sanskrit, languages that were considered classical and were widely used in religious and scholarly contexts during their time. Their compositions, therefore, often reflect the influence of these languages and the broader South Indian Brahminical culture. On the other hand, the TAMILISAI Trio composed primarily in Tamil, and their works are imbued with the linguistic and cultural nuances of Tamil Nadu. The TAMILISAI Trio's focus on Tamil as a medium of expression ensured that their music remained accessible to the Tamil-speaking populace, thereby preserving and promoting Tamil musical traditions.

The interaction between the two traditions is particularly significant when considering how the Carnatic music trinity is believed to have learned from the TAMILISAI tradition. It is widely acknowledged that the Carnatic music trinity was influenced by the musical practices and compositions of the TAMILISAI Trio. This influence is evident in the adoption of certain Tamil musical forms, rhythms, and melodic structures by the Carnatic music composers. For instance, many of the Carnatic compositions that are now considered classical were initially based on Tamil devotional songs and hymns that were popularized by the TAMILISAI Trio. Moreover, the Carnatic music trinity is known to have translated some of these Tamil compositions into Telugu and Sanskrit, making them part of the broader Carnatic repertoire. This process of translation and adaptation not only expanded the reach of Tamil music but also integrated it into the wider South Indian classical music tradition, thereby enriching Carnatic music with the linguistic and cultural elements of TAMILISAI.

In the relationship between the Trinity of Carnatic Music and the TAMILISAI Trio is a testament to the interconnectedness of South Indian musical traditions. While the Carnatic music trinity is often celebrated for its role in establishing the classical tradition, it is important to recognize the

foundational influence of the Tamilisai Trio, whose contributions ensured that Tamil musical traditions were preserved and propagated even as they were integrated into the broader Carnatic music framework. This comparative analysis highlights the symbiotic relationship between these two musical traditions and underscores the importance of understanding the cultural and linguistic contexts in which they evolved.

THE APPROPRIATION OF TAMIL MUSIC:

The appropriation of Tamil music into what is now known as Carnatic music is a complex process that has been the subject of much scholarly debate. It is widely acknowledged that Carnatic music, while now a distinct classical tradition, has its roots deeply embedded in the ancient musical practices of the Tamil people. This tradition, however, did not evolve in isolation. Over time, it absorbed influences from various other musical traditions, resulting in a fusion that some scholars argue has overshadowed the original Tamil musical forms. The claim that Carnatic music is a fusion of Tamil music with other influences, particularly those from Sanskrit and Aryan traditions, is based on the observation that many of the foundational elements of Carnatic music, such as its ragas and talas, have clear parallels in older Tamil music. The adaptation and integration of Tamil musical elements into a broader South Indian context, which included influences from other parts of India, particularly the North, were pivotal in shaping what is now recognized as Carnatic music.

Key texts like the *Natya Shastra* and the *Sangeetha Ratnakara* play a significant role in understanding this appropriation. The *Natya Shastra*, attributed to the sage Bharata, is one of the oldest and most influential treatises on music, dance, and drama in India. While it is often cited as a foundational text for classical Indian arts, its relevance to Tamil music lies in its codification of musical theory that was prevalent across ancient India, including the Tamil regions. The *Natya Shastra* provides a framework for understanding the musical scales, rhythms, and aesthetic principles that were later integrated into Carnatic music. However, it is important to note that the *Natya Shastra* itself drew upon a diverse range of regional musical practices, including those from the Tamil-speaking regions. Thus, while the *Natya Shastra* is often viewed as a pan-Indian text, its influence on Carnatic music also reflects the incorporation of Tamil musical elements into a more standardized form.

The *Sangeetha Ratnakara*, authored by Sarangadeva in the 13th century, is another crucial text in the history of Indian music. This text is particularly significant because it attempts to reconcile

and systematize the diverse musical practices that existed in different parts of India during its time. The *Sangeetha Ratnakara* includes detailed discussions of ragas, talas, and other musical forms that are central to Carnatic music. However, it also acknowledges the regional variations in these practices, including those from the Tamil region. The Tamil influence is evident in the way certain ragas and talas, which have their origins in Tamil music, are described and codified in the text. The *Sangeetha Ratnakara* thus serves as both a source of appropriation and a record of how Tamil musical traditions were adapted into the broader framework of what would later become Carnatic music.

The adaptation and incorporation of Tamil music into Carnatic music can be seen in several ways. One of the most notable examples is the transformation of Tamil devotional songs and hymns into kritis and other forms that are now central to the Carnatic repertoire. Composers such as Thyagaraja and Muthuswamy Dikshithar, who are part of the Carnatic music trinity, are known to have drawn heavily from Tamil musical traditions, particularly in their early compositions. These composers often took existing Tamil songs and reworked them into more complex compositions, incorporating Sanskrit and Telugu lyrics to appeal to a broader audience. This process of adaptation not only helped to preserve Tamil music but also ensured its integration into the Carnatic tradition. However, this also meant that the original Tamil elements were often subsumed under the larger structure of Carnatic music, leading to the perception that Carnatic music is a more pan-South Indian tradition, rather than one that is specifically rooted in Tamil culture.

In the appropriation of Tamil music into Carnatic music is a multifaceted process that reflects both the richness of Tamil musical traditions and the broader cultural exchanges that took place in South India over centuries. While Carnatic music today is recognized as a distinct classical tradition, its origins in Tamil music and its subsequent adaptation and incorporation of various influences highlight the dynamic nature of musical evolution in this region. Understanding this process requires a careful examination of key texts like the *Natya Shastra* and *Sangeetha Ratnakara*, as well as a recognition of the ways in which Tamil music has been both preserved and transformed within the Carnatic tradition.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TAMIL MUSIC:

Tamil music holds profound psychological and cultural significance within the Tamil community, serving as both a medium of emotional expression and a key component of cultural identity.

Music, in general, has always played a vital role in human societies, but in Tamil culture, it takes on a unique psychological importance. It is intertwined with the everyday life of the Tamil people, offering a means to express a wide range of emotions, from joy and devotion to sorrow and longing. Tamil music, with its roots in ancient traditions, has been used for centuries in various aspects of life, including religious rituals, festivals, and even in the passing down of stories and history. The melodies and rhythms of Tamil music have the power to evoke deep emotional responses, reinforcing cultural values and social bonds within the community.

Culturally, Tamil music has been a powerful tool for preserving and expressing Tamil identity. Through the ages, Tamil music has acted as a repository of the region's rich heritage, encapsulating the language, religious practices, and philosophical thoughts of the Tamil people. The lyrical content of Tamil music often draws from classical Tamil literature, such as the Sangam poetry, which emphasizes themes like love, valor, and devotion. This deep connection between music and literature has allowed Tamil music to serve not just as entertainment, but as a medium for cultural education and the transmission of Tamil values and traditions across generations. Additionally, Tamil music has historically been a voice of resistance and resilience, especially during times of cultural and political upheaval, helping to maintain a sense of identity and continuity among the Tamil people.

The influence of Tamil music on Carnatic music is another aspect of its cultural significance. As Carnatic music developed, it absorbed many elements of Tamil music, including its scales, rhythms, and melodic structures. This integration not only enriched Carnatic music but also helped preserve key aspects of Tamil musical heritage within a broader South Indian classical framework. Even as Carnatic music began to incorporate other influences, the core of its melodic and rhythmic foundation remained deeply rooted in Tamil musical traditions. This preservation is evident in the use of Tamil language compositions in the Carnatic repertoire, the adoption of Tamil folk rhythms, and the continued reverence for Tamil musical forms such as the *pann*, which have been adapted into the Carnatic system.

The role of Tamil music in preserving Tamil heritage is particularly crucial. Through its integration into the more widely recognized Carnatic tradition, Tamil music has found a way to survive and thrive even as cultural dynamics have shifted over centuries. The continued performance and teaching of Tamil music, both in its pure form and as part of Carnatic music, ensure that the cultural and historical legacy of the Tamil people remains vibrant. This

preservation is not merely about maintaining a tradition; it is about fostering a living cultural practice that continues to shape the identity of Tamil people today. Tamil music, therefore, serves as both a psychological anchor and a cultural bridge, linking past generations to the present and ensuring the continuity of Tamil cultural identity in the face of modern challenges.

CONCLUSION:

Carnatic music, while widely celebrated as a classical art form in South India, has its true origins deeply rooted in the rich traditions of Tamil music. The journey of Tamil music, from its ancient forms to its influence on the development of Carnatic music, reveals a story of cultural and musical appropriation that has often been overlooked. The contributions of the *Tamilisai* trio—Sirkazhi Muthu Thandavar, Arunachalakavirayar, and Mari Muthapillai—were pivotal in laying the foundations for what would later evolve into Carnatic music, a genre that has traditionally been credited to the trinity of Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshithar, and Syama Sastri. The transformation of Tamil music into what is now known as Carnatic music was not just a simple evolution but involved significant cultural shifts. The adaptation of Tamil compositions into Telugu and Sanskrit, coupled with the integration of these works into a broader classical framework, gradually overshadowed the distinct identity of Tamil music. This process has led to the underrepresentation of Tamil contributions within the Carnatic music tradition, despite their undeniable influence.

Recognizing the roots of Carnatic music in Tamil traditions is essential for preserving the cultural and historical integrity of this art form. It is not only a matter of honoring the legacy of the Tamil music pioneers but also ensuring that their contributions are acknowledged and celebrated within the broader context of South Indian classical music. This acknowledgment allows for a more comprehensive understanding of Carnatic music and ensures that the rich heritage of Tamil music is not lost but rather preserved and passed down to future generations. Ultimately, by re-examining the origins of Carnatic music and highlighting the role of Tamil music in its formation, open the door to a richer and more inclusive narrative. This perspective not only enriches our understanding of Carnatic music's history but also enhances the appreciation of Tamil music's enduring impact on South Indian culture.

Yathum Oore Yaavarum Kelir

"All places are my home; everyone is my kin," reflects the universality and interconnectedness

of all cultures, including music. It reminds us that while traditions may evolve and influence one another, their roots remain interconnected, and recognizing these connections enriches our shared cultural heritage.

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