

# Contribution of Travancore to Karnatic Music

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INFORMATION & PUBLIC RELATIONS DEPARTMENT  
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM  
2004



## Contribution of Travancore to Karnatic Music

February 2004

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Department of Information & Public Relations,  
Government of Kerala

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*Cover Design & Lay out*

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*Photographs*

C-Dit, I & PRD (Photographic wing)

*Typesetting*

Emmanuel Graphics

*Printing*

Kerala State Audio Visual & Reprographic Centre

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*Price: Rs- 135.00*

*Copies: 5000*

## Preface

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**I**nternational interest in Kerala increases year by year; the number of cultural tourists shows a proportionate increase. Apart from the geographical peculiarities, scenic beauty and varied cuisines, they, as a rule, show particular interest in the cultural heritage of the region. And the Department of Information and Public Relations has been sensitivised to this growing demand, and has taken active steps to document our rich heritage. A series of books and records in the audio-visual media, depicting the various aspects of our culture and its impact and reflection in art, fine arts, performing arts, architecture, is in the pipeline, and this is a part of the series. The Department has no tall claim that this is a complete, comprehensive or exhaustive work. Here the author concentrates on the contributions of Travancore, especially royal household, to Karnatic music: Of course there are some passing references to those from other parts of Kerala. The valuable contributions of the great artists and patrons of art from Kochi and Malabar region will be compiled and published shortly. By the time Kerala and the Information and Public Relations Department turn fifty in 2006, we sincerely hope that books detailing all the different aspects of our rich tradition and cultural heritage can be published. We wholeheartedly welcome constructive criticism, valuable suggestions and realistic comments on this work.

**G. Rajasekaran**

*Secretary and Director*

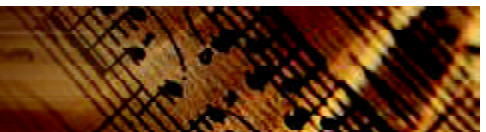
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## Foreword



**K**erala, the beautiful land of music, dance, folklore, drama and other art forms possesses a rich cultural heritage and tradition. Generation after generation, Travancore royal household extended patronage for art forms of Kerala. They dedicated themselves for the promotion of art forms, especially music and dance.

The book titled 'Contribution of Travancore to Karnatic Music' deals with the style of music prevalent in Travancore. The origin and development of music such as temple music and Karnatic music in Kerala and the influence of temples on Karnatic music are brought to the lime light.

The book concentrates on the contributions of kings of Travancore to the propagation of music and dance in Travancore. More importance is given to His Highness Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma, Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma Maharaja and other prominent kings. Contributions made by Irayimman Thampi, Kuttikunju Thankachi and K.C. Kesava Pillai are also being dealt with.

Further, the invaluable contributions of the scholars, often qualified as the gems of the royal court of His Highness Swathi Thirunal Maharaja are also mentioned.

The work is concluded with brief descriptions of modern composers and musicians who have played a prominent role in the development and propagation of Karnatic music in Travancore.

I would like to express my gratitude and sincere thanks to my gurus, teachers and scholars whose books and articles I have used for reference. I also express my sincere thanks to the Secretary and Director, Information & Public Relations Department, Government of Kerala for this assignment.

Last but not least, I am thankful to all music lovers and promoters of Karnatic music who have come forward with valuable suggestions.

Thiruvananthapuram

S. Bhagyalekshmy







India is a land of different cultures, heritages and traditions with so many barriers of caste, creed, religion, tribe etc. But, as a rule, unity in diversity is the motto of Indians. The broadminded nature of the Indian is evident in all spheres of life. This fact is evident in our culture, represented by music, dance, sculpture, painting, drama, literature and, above all, our life style. Every region in India from north to south and east to west has got its own rites and rituals, customs and manners to which any art form is used as an accompaniment. Music is also no exception.

The musical system of India is deep rooted in our culture, traditions and customs and is associated with our social set up and day to day affairs. It is on account of this association and relationship that *Desi Sangeetha* is unique in its characteristics. *Desi*, as the term means, is the style of music peculiar to each *desa* or territory. It can be considered as an offshoot from *Marga Sangeetha* codifying the musical style of different

regions developing as a definite system

Kerala, being a land of rich cultural heritage and tradition, had a highly developed system of music of different strata and variety from very ancient times.

“Keliyaadum Kalakalkkellam Keralamennoru veedundivite”<sup>1</sup>

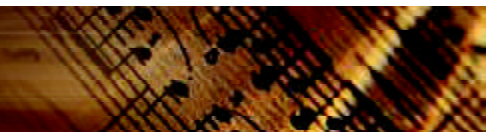
This famous quotation about Kerala is hundred per cent true. The Travancore area of Kerala is believed to have inherited its musical heritage from the Aryans who predominated here.

The period from 1750 to 1850 can be considered as the Golden Era in the history of India as well as Indian music. This was a transition period in various territories and states of India. Further, even before the advent of the British, *Dravida Bhasha*, a Dravidian language, developed in the southern peninsula of India; i.e. in the region that became the states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu,



Kuthiramalika at Thiruvananthapuram that witnessed the performance of leading artistes

1. “കേളിയാദും കലകൽകല്ലാം കേരളമെന്നൊരു വീടുണ്ടിവിടെ”



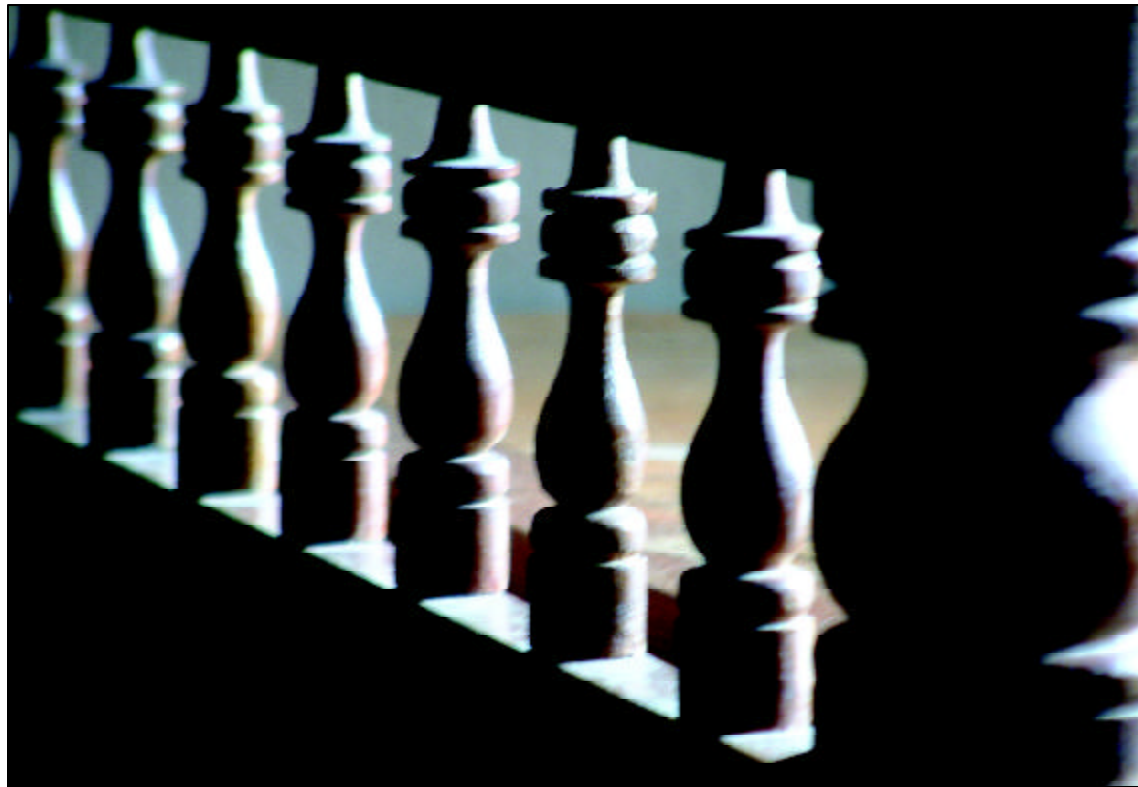
Karnataka and Travancore. The region of Tamil Nadu was a combination of Kerala and Tamil Nadu known as *Thamizhagam*. The languages here had close affinity between the two. *Thamizhagam* constituted of Chera, Chola and Pandya kingdoms. All these kingdoms shared the same style of music known as *Tamil* music. The *Sangam* literature which emerged by about the 3<sup>d</sup> century A.D. refers to the style of music and dance popular during that time in the Tamil region.

### Evolution of music in Kerala

Owing to cultural assimilation and mingling with other cultures, Kerala represented three different characteristics of antiquity, continuity and synthesis enhanced by the influence of genuine, primitive survivals from pre-historic age. Herein the theatrical performances were of high religious value and aesthetic experience. Kerala possesses a rich cultural heritage and tradition of music, dance, drama, painting, sculpture and architecture. These forms developed and established as Kerala art forms having its own characteristics and individuality.

Kerala, being the bedrock of different fine art forms, combined in it different classical and folk art forms. Kerala which is believed to have been created by Parasurama, as per mythology, is also a land of variegated fine arts forms.

Music in Travancore developed from three sources i.e., Temple music or *Sopana Sangeetham*, Kathakali (see box) music and Karnatic music.





## Temples as centers of musical excellence

Temples or *kshetras* are considered as the treasure houses of Karnatic music. Musical forms, through highly religious and sacred, combined certain elements of folk music. Here one can find the fusion of acting, dancing and meditation. Temple music termed as *Sopana Sangeetham* was part of temple worship. The most prominent among Sopana Sangeetham, *Ashtapadi*, is sung by *Marar* to the accompaniment of *Edakka* in front of the sanctum sanctorum. *Sopana Sangeetham*, as the style is referred to, is an offshoot of *Naadodi sangeetha* or folk music used to be sung during temple rituals. In short, Sopana Sangeetha is ritualistic music in

the most perfect form.

*Tauryatrika* - union of three art forms - is a combination of the three major art forms namely *sangeetham*, *nrittham* and *natakam*. Dravidian music can be considered as the cluster of *Tauryatrika* which formed the foundation for *Sopana Sangeetham*. Many of the folk songs used in temples, especially of northern region of Travancore, were associated with ritualistic customs and rites of rural folk. Folk music is exceptionally rich in vividness and variety regarding themes, lyrics, diction and style.



Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple, Thiruvananthapuram



### Musical and theatrical forms popular in Travancore

Travancore that later formed a part of modern Kerala, owes its theatrical origin to our ancient ritualistic forms in both music and dance. The theatrical forms that emerged in Kerala were highly socio-religious and associated with temple rituals and ceremonies. *Theyyam, Mudiyyettu, Thira, Padayani, Sarpam Thullal, Sarpam Paattu, Kalam Pattu, Theeyaattu, Bhagawathi Pattu*, etc have specific songs set in peculiar *talas* and *ragas*.



Chaakkial koothu

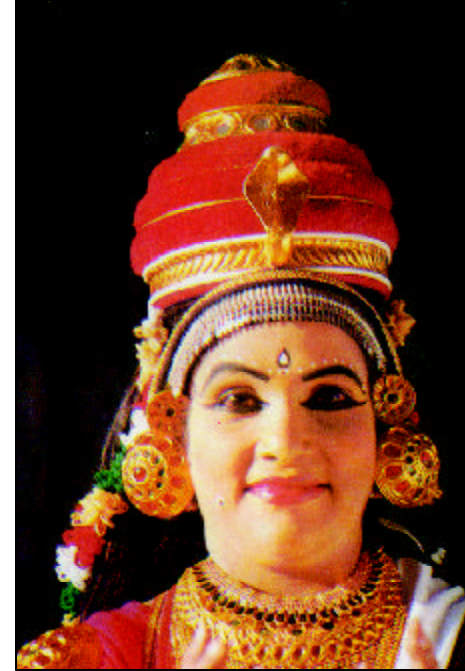
In addition, there are socio-folk type of songs used for non-religious festivals. These festivals are associated with harvest or mundane life, and are non-devotional in nature. Such songs include *Ezhamuttu Pattu, Thullal, Kurathi Attom, Kaikottikkali etc.*

Certain dramatic dance forms are accompanied by appropriate songs. Such dance forms include *Sanghakkali* or *Yatrakkali, Chakkiaar Kootthu, Krishnaattom,*

*Vijayanrittham, Arjunanrittham etc.*

An important fact to be noticed is that folk music formed the basis for the present Karnatic music. Whenever a conflict arises between *lakshyas* or practical aspect and *lakshana* or theory, *lakshna* was always altered and interpreted in a way as to suit the *lakshya*. Folk music also formed the basis on which many later *lakshanakaaras* analysed different streams or branches of music.

Two other major theatrical art forms of ancient time are *Koodiyattom* and *Koothu*. *Koodiyattom*, one of the ancient Sanskrit drama forms prevalent in Travancore also, combined in it *Touryatrikas* - drama, music and dance; that is, *Koodiyattom* originated and developed as a separate art form having classical integrity and individuality. This art form made use of specific *ragas* and *talas* peculiar to music of Kerala. These *ragas* strictly followed the time theory concept. Some of the *ragas* figuring in *Koodiyattom*



Nangiar koothu





are of Keralite origin, namely, *Muddavelaadbooli*, *Sreekanta*, *Indalam*, *Kanakkurinji*, *Muralindalam*, *Puranira* etc. The characters are flat and each character is supposed to sing particular ragas.

### Sopana Sangeetham

The style of music having its origin in Kerala as differentiated from the music of other parts of Thamizagam and North India, is termed as *Sopana*. This is the music of Kerala which is pristine and having its own individuality and uniqueness. As the name suggests, the music is related to *Sopanam*, or steps to the Sanctum sanctorum of Kerala temples. The significance of the name given for this style of music is multi-faceted. The singers who are known as 'Maaras,' used to sing *Ashtapadi* to the accompaniment of *Edakka* played by themselves. They stand in front of the *Sopanam*, or steps of the *Srikovil* or the sanctum sanctorum of the presiding deity. This is known as '*Kottippaadi Seva*' (service by singing to the accompaniment of the percussion instrument) in the temples of Kerala. The style of singing is in slow tempo or *vilambitha laya*, just like the ascending and descending of the *Sopana* or steps, developing gradually, step by step. The style of modulation of tones can be compared to the rise and fall of sea waves in a rhythmic, beautiful manner. This



Edakka player





Chakkamkulam Appu Marar, who won the Pallavoor Appu Marar Award instituted by Government of Kerala, playing the 'chenda'

style came to be known as 'Sopanam' style of music.

There exists another opinion regarding the significance of the name. The term 'Sopanam' has its roots in the Sanskrit word 'Sobhanam' meaning dance or *nrittha*. The music used for *nrittha* was given the name as *Sobhaana Sangeetham*, gradually changing to 'Sopaam Sangeetham'. This style was also termed as *Bhava Sangeetha*, *Hridaya Sangeetha* and *Samaya Sangeetha*. It is music full of *bhava* (mood) emanating from the heart and is time honoured. *Sopana Sangeetham* has influenced *Desi Sangeetha* and *Karnatic* music, to a great extent.

*Sopana Sangeetham* is evolved by codifying the essential and good elements of the music of the *Vedas*, folk as well as temple music. During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, when *Ashtapadi* singing was implemented in the temples of Kerala, they were rendered in the *Sopana* style of singing. But originally, *Tyaani*, also known as *Taaivaani*, and *Dhyaani* are sung along with *Ashtapadis*. *Tyaaani* is a form having 8 lines. These are also to be sung in specific *ragas* and *talas*.

*Sopana Sangeetham* is also believed to have some resemblance with the *khyal* singing of Hindusthani music wherein *Vilambitha* style of singing is followed. Further *Karnatic* music in Kerala is also believed to have developed on the footings of *Sopana Sangeetham*. However, in *Sopana Sangeetham*, devotion or *Bhakti* is of prime importance. Hence lesser importance is given for *swara sancharas*, *gamakas* and detailed *alapana* or improvisation. Limited *alapana* will be accompanied by playing the *Edakka*. The Octave or *tessitura* of singing will be limited to one octave generally. Being sung in a swinging manner, priority will be given to *Andolita Gamaka* with swinging type in its ascent and descent. However,





the fundamentals of Karnatic music such as *sruthi*, *swara*, *raga* and *tala* can also be found in *Sopana Sangeetham*. Main difference is on the usage, style and *prayoga* (application). *Ragas* used mainly are *Desakhi*, *Srrekandi*, *Nalatha*, *Malabari*, *Banli*, *Samantha*, *Malobosvi* etc. *Sopana Sangeetham* can be considered as *Kalpitha Sangeetha* i.e., one set to specific norms whereas in Karnatic music, *Manodharma* is given importance.



Musical instruments of  
Kerala - *Maddalam*

commented, "Kerala has a highly developed musical style as early as the people of this land".

In *Sopana Sangeetham* moods or *Bhavas* are indispensable. Even the selection of *ragas* and *talas* depend on these. *Ragas* set for songs will be highly compatible with the thematic content and

### Characteristic features of Sopana Sangeetham

*Sopana Sangeetham* owes its origin and evolution to the ancient *Thottam paattu*, *Kutthiyotta paattu*, *Pulluvan paattu* and many other ritualistic musical forms. As the famous Malayalam poet Mahakavi Uloor



Musical instruments of Kerala - *Kombu*



aesthetic aspects of the songs. The beginning will be on *Graba Swara* and rotating in and around *laya* in *vilambita*, one or two swaras and then gradually moving on to the next step as used in *Andolita Gamaka* in a swinging movement, like the movement of the waves.

*Sopanam* to propitiate the Lord or the Deity for obtaining *moksha* or salvation. But in stage music an actor or a singer is enacting the role of the Lord.

In temple style, people are the devotees whereas in the stage people are *Rasikas* or art lovers. In the former, God is real



Musical instruments of Kerala - *Panchavadyam*, favourite among music lovers of Kerala

Based on usage and *prayoga*, *Sopana Sangeetham* admits of two major divisions -- temple music and stage music. In temple music the singer or the performer will be standing in front of the

and the performer is the devotee whereas in the latter, a person creates the impression of God's presence amongst the audience.

Another fascinating feature found in *Sopana Sangeetham*



is the presence of two or more *swaras* in addition to the accepted 12 *swaras* in *Karnatic* music. These two *swaras* are referred to as *Kairali Gandhara* and *Kairali Nishada* which can be found in folk music of Kerala.

*Sthaaya* style of singing is another peculiarity of *Sopana Sangeetham* and octave selection is also based on *Bhava and Rasa*. Modulation of *swaras*, specific vibrations given to certain *swaras*, tempo variations based on *bhava* are significant qualities of *Sopana Sangeetham*. *Karnatic* music prevalent in Kerala has adopted many good qualities of *Sopana Sangeetham*. However, the style of singing will be crude, blunt by insistence on adhering to ancient traditional style of singing. Nevertheless, with the emergence of *Karnatic* music and its influence on *Sopana*, the originality of *Sopana Sangeetham* is fading gradually. Nowadays original style of *Sopana Sangeetham* can be heard only in certain temples of Kerala such as Ettumanoor, Ambalapuzha, Kaviyoor, Thiruvalla and a few others. *Kathakali* music which was presented originally in *Sopana Sangeetham* style is slowly being shifted to *Karnatic* style. ●



Thimila