

Learning the Art of Konnakol

Lisa Young

This year I have begun to pass on my love of the art of konnakol to keen students, mainly vocalists it seems, who are inspired to learn this wonderful tradition. It's an incredible art form for all musicians, but particularly for singers who love to improvise with their voice, develop their sense of rhythmic complexity and expand their 'scat' language. It's a lengthy study however, and one which I have dearly enjoyed in both India and Australia since 1994. I study with Guru Kaaraikudi Mani, in Chennai, India, and my first guru was M. Ravichandhira, in Melbourne.

This article sets out to explain a bit about the tradition and history of the rhythmic 'solkattu' language.

Music and the arts have played a prominent role in the manifestation of Indian culture. Since ancient times Indian music been associated with religious devotion and been connected to temple rituals and social functions. It is important to acknowledge the long and rich history of this highly sophisticated system of music. For thousands of years at the core of its growth there has been a dedicated and almost scientific approach applied to the development of Indian music.

Konnakol is the performance art form of the intoned rhythmic recitation of solkattu, the vocalised rhythmic syllables of South Indian music. It is a sophisticated style of vocal percussion, and a recognised art form of principal study that is traditionally performed within the Karnatic percussion section. The origin of the Tamil word 'Konnakol' comes from the Telugu word (another Dravidian language) 'Koni' which means 'to recite' or 'to say'. This word was adopted in the Tamil language and put with the word 'Kol' which means 'to rule' or 'to reign'.

Solkattu is used as a vocal reference for all Karnatic percussion instruments. However, it is usual and appropriate to refer to it in relation to the mridangam drum, as the mridangam is considered the principle percussion instrument in Karnatic Music.

As a language solkattu has developed in vocal imitation of the percussion sounds and patterns played thus - each drum stroke has a corresponding vocal sound. Over time and with the influence

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of many innovative artists, it has developed a language well beyond the scope of the sounds of the Mridangam.

Aside from its merits as an individual art form, Konnakol is an integral part of the extensive training required to master the Mridangam - and all percussion instruments - providing the basis for understanding the rhythmic complexities of the Karnatic tradition. Musicians communicate rhythmic ideas to each other using Konnakol and they also use the vocal patterns to practice ideas whilst clapping the talam (cyclic meter) with their hands. Konnakol is the medium used for giving teaching instructions in percussion lessons, with corrections in lessons given vocally. The student then repeats the syllabus, both in Konnakol and on the drum. It is the basic language for percussion composition, and artists often first conceive ideas in Konnakol, and then transfer the piece to the instruments.

Whilst no precise pitches are given for the reciting of Konnakol, the drone of the tambura functions as a referred tonal centre for the recitation. The patterns are learnt orally and the inflections and accents are mimicked in connection with the drum sounds. Traditionally, well known phrases have common accents embellishments and dynamics, but there is plenty of scope for an advanced artist to develop a personal interpretation and to use improvisation.

Classical Indian music is predominantly an oral traditional with students listening and imitating, then committing the syllabus to memory. Students rarely ask questions during lessons, rather they are devoted listeners. In the last 100 years or so, notebooks have been used as a memory aid for students, but they are not used in performance. Today, if students own a recording device they may also record lessons to assist their progress.

Traditionally in the study of Indian classical music there is a highly formal relationship between guru and student and it is considered an honor to receive lessons in music. Historically the system of gurukula existed, where the student would live with the guru as part of the family during the years of study. Today students rarely live with gurus (unless they are relatives) but the relationship remains formal and Indian teachers are very much revered. The guru is often thought of as a spiritual guide as well as a musical one. Particularly in India, students often travel long distances to learn from a

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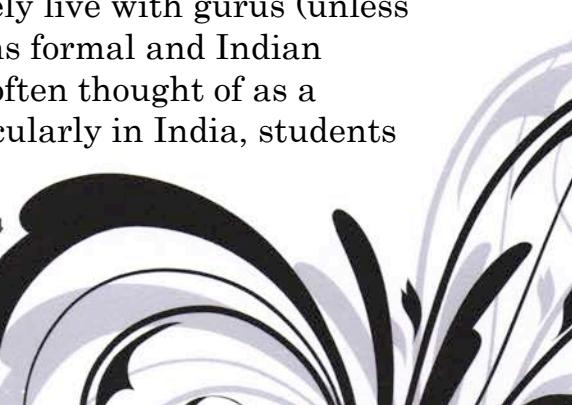
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particular guru teaching a favored tradition. Mridangam is a very popular instrument for young boys to learn. They start classes around the age of seven, and usually have two or three half hour lessons per week.

As with all classical Indian musical traditions, it takes many years of study to be able to understand and perform the complex variations of the music. When interviewing M. Ravichandhira he suggested that in the non-traditional setting in foreign countries there was a minimum of 10 years study for proficiency to be reached, but in the traditional setting in India it is achievable in 5 years.

Students work towards an 'Arangetrum' - a debut recital - where they have the opportunity to display their talents in a formal concert setting. In many ways this is a celebration of all their hard work and announces them as an artist of concert standard to the community. Families go to great personal expense to make this an exquisite and memorable event, inviting hundreds of people and including the most highly respected artists as associate performers and guests of honour. In Australia it is commonplace to 'fly in' the associate artists and revered guests of honour from India.

Over the last 100 years there has been a diminishing number of artists pursuing principle study in Konnakol. This is probably due to the diminished employment prospects for Konnakol artists as they are these days seen as an extra - rather than essential - member of the percussion section.

Lisa Young is currently completing a PhD in Music Performance at Monash University Melbourne Australia where she received the Monash-Pratt Post Graduate Award for her study.

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