

# The Evolving Art of Konnakkol

by Dr. Lisa Young

*For over 20 years Australian vocalist Lisa Young has been dedicated to konnakkol artistry. As a jazz singer who loves rhythmic expression, she has integrated konnakkol into her contemporary vocal style and compositions. A long time student of gurus Kaaraikkudi Mani (Chennai) and M. Ravichandhira (Melbourne), here Lisa shares with us a unique take on what she believes to be a highly creative, and continually evolving art form.*

*She wishes to acknowledge that this article reflects her experiences, study and conversations with Kaaraikkudi Mani and M. Ravichandhira over many years, and additional conversations for her PhD research with Suresh Vaidyanathan, Rajeswari Sainath and Lori Cotler. Reference details, her PhD and Masters theses, audio samples and links, are available from her website [www.lisayoungmusic.com](http://www.lisayoungmusic.com).*

**A**s an Australian composer and an improvising singer immersed in the development of an expressive vocal language, I have studied konnakkol since 1994. This rich and sophisticated style of vocal percussion language continues to be a profound and continuing influence on my body of creative work. From the Carnatic tradition, konnakkol is the performance art form of the intoned rhythmic recitation of solkattu, the vocalised rhythmic syllables of South Indian classical music and dance.

I began studying konnakkol in Melbourne in 1994 with mridangist M.

Ravichandhira. Through Ravichandhira, I became a student of his teacher, Guru Kaaraikkudi Mani, founder of the Sruthi Laya Kendra School in Chennai. From 1997 to the present day I have visited India for intensive study periods with Mani Sir, and been inspired by this sophisticated, expressive, rhythmic vocal language and its complex systems of musical metre and subdivision.

Over many years I have integrated konnakkol language and Carnatic techniques in my creative practice, for example; laya ratna akin to metric modulation and yati a rhythmic calculation designed to represent geometric shape. I often combine Western and Carnatic concepts, including raga and solkattu, as the foundation for melodic composition and improvisation. I continue to compose original konnakkol structures and also to integrate and adapt those composed by Mani, in a variety of ensemble settings. Over time, the solkattu language has become an integral part of my vocal performance, providing an additional rhythmic-based language that augments the melodic jazz-vocal 'scat' language, the wordless lingual syllables used for vocal improvising in the jazz tradition.

Many of my compositions and collaborative works are performed by vocal group Coco's Lunch, and my jazz/world music group Lisa Young Quartet. I also have a keen interest in choral music, composing works that combine Western and Carnatic techniques, which are performed by a variety of choirs worldwide.

## **Konnakkol Artistry**

The vocalised accenting of metre

in Indian music and dance has evolved over thousands of years, with metred recitation and accentuation of language traced to the sacred Vedic chants and prayers. In particular to the Sanskrit prosody (language rhythm, pattern and intonation) noted in the Sama Vedas, which are dated before 1000 B.C. Many scholars and musicians suggest that the documented evidence of the origin of solkattu syllables is traced to the Natya Sastra dated in the second century.

In the Carnatic tradition, as a means of aiding invention, composition and memorisation, musical ideas and structures are represented with phonetic syllables in drum strokes, dance steps, and melodies.

Solkattu is a complex language, embedded in rhythmic frameworks and numerical calculations, which engages the creative expression of infinite varieties of musical metre and pulse. Konnakkol is a recognised art form of principal study, traditionally performed within the Carnatic percussion section. As





an integral part of the Carnatic training, all percussionists learn to recite the structures set to a rhythmic metre that they will play on their instrument. Within a predominantly oral tradition musicians listen, imitate and memorise rhythmic patterns in solkattu. The rhythmic metre (tala) of the music is outlined using cyclic hand gestures (handclaps, waves and finger taps). The marking of the tala in this way is an integral part of the performance of Carnatic music.

The solkattu rhythmic vocal language has evolved within this oral tradition as an integral part of the overall development of Indian music and dance, where rhythmic recitations have developed alongside rhythmic patterns and percussion sounds.

Many of the syllables are broadly related onomatopoeically to the sounds of the mridangam drum. Players hear the syllables in direct relation to the sounds produced on the mridangam. Specific syllables, and a variety of interchangeable syllables, relate to each drum stroke.

Whilst being related to percussion pedagogy, it is well established that konnakkol vocabulary and performance is a unique entity, and is its own definitive musical expression that has had many influences, and over time has developed far beyond the imitation of the mridangam sounds.

The konnakkol concert language is expanded and influenced by Bharata natyam dance solkattu language, also referred to as dance jathis. There are many syllables and phrases common to both the dance and drumming traditions. Some exclusive syllables and patterns that are used in dance relate to specific rhythmic movements of the dancers' hand and footwork. Commonly a more basic form of solkattu is used in dance rehearsals. In performance, however, to enhance the effect of the program, the solkattu recitation is embellished and the dance steps are accompanied by a more striking vocabulary of syllables.

Some examples of specific dance syllables that have crossed into

percussion based konnakkol vocabulary are words like gu-gu, ja nu and jham originated in the dance recitations and are now integrated into percussion-based recitation. Examples of this influence are heard in phrases like: | gu gu ta re ke ta tha ka | (instead of tha ka tha re ke ta ta ka) and ja nu or ju nu in | ta ka thi mi ta ka ja nu |.

Other elements that have shaped the development of the solkattu language and performance of konnakkol include the influences of Sanskrit and Tamil languages. For instance, Mani explains that Sanskrit language has designated light and heavy syllables, lending it to the rhythmic accentuation of vocalised metre. He emphasises that konnakkol is itself a language and that the syllables are related to Tamil language. "We can't say it's exactly Tamil or Telugu or Malayam, or Hindi: every syllable is slightly changed but it's related to Tamil and many other Dravidian languages".

As konnakkol artistry continues to evolve, a diversity of styles has emerged, due in part to differences in specific lineages and music schools, and also to the personal style of significant, innovative konnakkol practitioners who have added their own expressive interpretations to the art form.

In classical music concerts, a konnakkol artist performs the solkattu recitations, whereas in dance performances, the Nattuvanar artist - usually the head teacher of the dance school - recites the solkattu; they also play small hand cymbals as part of the accompaniment. Ravichandhira explained that the vocal recitation greatly enriches the dance performance. The voice can provide syncopated and displaced vocal passages, giving an added feature to the dancers' footwork. The voice also adds enrichment to the mridangam accompaniment.

Ravichandhira suggested that there have been many recent innovative developments in solkattu dance recitations. He explained that there is broad scope for the jathi

recitations in dance, as it is a visual art form in which the recitations come and go throughout the whole performance. By contrast, in the Carnatic concert tradition the konnakkol artist is not given as much scope, as there are numerous artists who share the concert platform. Many dance schools and professional dance performers now hire the best konnakkol artists for the nattuvanar role, as they highly value the sound effects, vocal timbre and skill level brought to the performance by such musicians, leaving the head teacher to add the hand cymbals.

Whilst musicians use konnakkol initially to learn the Carnatic rhythmic system and materials, konnakkol is itself a language. Once a musician has grasped the fullness of this language including the groupings, the phrases, structures and techniques of numerical calculation, metric modulation, expansion and reduction, it becomes the backbone of one's deep rhythmic knowing and conceptualising. The artists' thoughts are regularly occupied by solkattu phrases and structures. Konnakkol is their default system for rhythmic comprehension and their intuitive starting point for composition and improvisation.

### **Eternal and Internal Pulse**

Alongside my passion for the expression of this sophisticated vocal percussion language, I have been particularly drawn to the Carnatic music systems of tala and nadai where a breadth of attention is given to detailed rhythmic structures and subdivisions in a wide variety of odd and even metres or metred cycles. This detailed systematic approach to rhythmic materials is generally absent in western music pedagogy, and thus my Carnatic studies have influenced and enriched my rhythmic knowledge and expression.

In pulse-generated music (as opposed to rubato or alapana sections) there is usually an ongoing eternal pulse outlining the given metre. This is 'felt' or experienced in conjunction with at least one internal pulse layer







Lisa Young with her Guru Karaikkudi Mani

sub-dividing the beats. In Indian terms this may be thought of as tala and nadai. The internal pulse (nadai) may be altered in certain sections within a composition, or adjusted spontaneously by the improviser. Additionally in the Carnatic system, subtly embedded within the internal pulse, is a third rhythmic layer dictated by sub-groupings the solkattu language itself. The solkattu language places the beats into groups, usually in 2's, 3's and 4's for example as - tha ka | tha ki da | tha ka thi mi adding an independent layer of rhythmic sub-grouping, integral to understanding the Carnatic system. Thus a subdivision of 7 or 9 is not simply 7 individual septuplets or 9 nonuplets, as the interior language imposes a distinct rhythmic grouping system.

Switching the internal pulse of a given metre is used to great effect in Carnatic music. The technique of laya ratna, which literally means 'time' or 'speed shifting' in Tamil, is akin to metric modulation in Western music. When switching the internal pulse of the metre, the tala (or eternal pulse) remains steady, but the nadai (internal pulse) changes speed. Proficiency with this technique is an important part of a Carnatic musician's craft. A common laya ratna shifts from a subdivision of 4 to 6 to 8. Performing

these metric shifts is a fundamental element of the Carnatic tradition; it is a tool, which is used to virtuosic effect in performance.

In most Western jazz music, the metre or eternal pulse is given as a time signature, for example 6/8 or 4/4. The internal subdivision - if required - is either written descriptively as, for example: 'swung quavers' or 'straight 16ths', triplets etc, or described as a musical 'feel', such as 'swing' or 'shuffle'. Of course there are many layers of rhythmic complexity that create a sense rhythmic depth in jazz music, including concepts of metric modulation, polyrhythmic structures, rhythmic feel, and groove. But within the Carnatic pedagogy there is a fundamental relationship between a musician's instinctive ability to internally subdivide a given metre, and their ability to explore and interpret rhythmic complexity in performance.

Significantly, solkattu develops a musician's rhythmic intuition, which can be easily transferred into any musical situation, aiding comprehension and transference of pre-composed ideas and concepts, and engaging the invention of new music with improvisation and composition.

The Konnakkol Specialist

Sadly, the number of specialist konnakkol artists who work with this art form as their principal study has diminished over the last hundred years. Ravichandhira, Mani and Suresh all concurred on the notion that a specialist konnakkol artist is almost a thing of the past now and is not considered an essential member of the percussion section. Mani described the role of konnakkol recitation in concert performance as the "trimming on the tree", explaining there is often no need for a specialist konnakkol performer in the percussion ensemble, as members will perform sections of konnakkol to show variation from their percussion instruments. Suresh agreed and further clarified that as time has gone by and with budgetary pressures, "The size of the percussion section has shrunk" and a konnakkol specialist is viewed as being of lesser importance than the percussionists.

Given that all Carnatic percussionists learn the solkattu system, it is understandable that some percussionists choose to develop their solkattu skills in order to recite konnakkol in concert, or 'trade' konnakkol breaks, alternating between two or more musicians.

A Universal Rhythmic Language:

Since the 1950s, there has been a gradual flourishing of interest in and respect for the Carnatic rhythmic language system abroad. Solkattu is recognised worldwide as a system for mastering rhythmic materials and concepts, useful for all musicians wishing to make advancements in this area. This has led to an established dedication by a broad range of musicians for the art of konnakkol, which in turn has seen the Carnatic system introduced in some Western universities as part of the music materials curriculum, sparking the production of a variety of konnakkol manuals and DVDs. There is growing scholarly research into the broad use of konnakkol (or solkattu) in creative musical practice. A range of vocal artists incorporate konnakkol as part of their vocal performance practice, Lori Cotler, Sheila Chandra, Suba





Sankaran and myself have each contributed a body of work in this direction, demonstrating the way the konnakkol art form continues to evolve and be adapted by a variety of Western and non-Western artists. The performative excellence enjoyed in traditional concerts, and collaborative projects between Indian and Western musicians, continue to fertilise the growing global interest in this art form and demonstrate its suitability for adaptation in contemporary performance practice.

As a musician's tool, konnakkol (solkattu) has a broad range of practical functions, offering a multi-layered use of this systematic vocalised rhythmic language. Konnakkol has merit as an individual performance art form, as an integral part of the extensive training for musicians, vocalists and dance performers, and as the language for teaching instructions in percussion lessons, providing the foundation for comprehending the complex rhythmic structures of the Carnatic tradition.

As a musician's companion, artists (both Indian and Western) fluent in konnakkol move beyond its original pedagogical role to employ its use as a highly creative tool, in which konnakkol provides a conceptual framework for metred numerical calculations, improvisation, composition, rhythmic comprehension and analysis, transference of musical ideas, and expression of musical pulse.

Along with timbral and pitch variations in contemporary konnakkol delivery, I explore intoned and pitched konnakkol as a fully integrated vocal and musical expression in a Western contemporary vocal or jazz context, embedding konnakkol and wordless lingual sounds within this format to create a unique 'vocal sound-bank' as the basis for my vocal expression. This style of pitched konnakkol is a distinctive feature of my creative practice. In this process, my compositions integrate konnakkol language and concepts as melodies, riffs and the language for improvised passages. My recent works for



example *The Eternal Pulse*, *Tha Thin Tha* and *Other Plans*, demonstrate the adaptive and evolving use of konnakkol in contemporary performance practice. In these works I am applying the tools of both the Carnatic and jazz traditions to create a form of musical expression that is not simply an 'East meets West' graft. Rather, these processes are a mode of creativity, which involve an understanding of both musical traditions in the development of a performance language and style.

### **Conclusion:**

As a vocalist embracing two musical cultures, I believe that konnakkol combines an intellectual and intuitive approach to rhythmic comprehension and acts as a faithful companion to my creative musical undertakings. It is at the foundation of my rhythmic experience and knowledge, assisting my rhythmic analysis and comprehension in both

Carnatic and cross-cultural projects. I enjoy using timbral variations, atypical syllables, applied vocal techniques and personal interpretation in konnakkol recitation, and I hope my creative works that integrate konnakkol demonstrate the way an artists' aesthetic preferences may influence the evolving adaptations of the konnakkol art form and language. Whilst the role of the solo konnakkol artist may be diminishing in India, certainly many musicians and institutions in the West are investigating and including a core study in konnakkol. I hope that this stunning art form will continue to thrive, evolve and be adapted by both Carnatic and Western musicians. Again I say, may it be our default system for rhythmic comprehension and our intuitive starting point for composition and improvisation.





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# The First Melody

Vol III Issue 9 Pages 32 July 2017 ₹ 100

India's Monthly Classical Music Magazine



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