

1 The Pressing Need: An Interrogation of Practices

What we believe to be the sound of early opera today is, in all probability, very different from what it was some 400 years ago. We do not know how their voices sounded or how exactly they may have delivered ornamentations. We know from the notations and historical evidence that they sang with great virtuosity and that there was a culture of profuse ornamentation and improvisation. The ways of approaching the uncertainties in how early opera sounded present an exciting opportunity for research from a musicological and historical perspective. Further, early modern Europe was a centre for great mobility with travellers from the East bringing with them not only tangible artefacts and musical instruments but also intangible cultural heritage. In light of this cultural complexity at the time, exploring early opera through the lens of the music of a cultural other, not least from the East, becomes a promising and rewarding enterprise.

As a primary part of my recently completed doctoral research, I explored the musical declamation style of Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi in relation to a comparable sung-speech style of spontaneous exposition of poetry in Karnatik music of South India, the *Viruttam*. I explored Monteverdi's writing for voice in *L'Orfeo* (1607), widely considered to be the first operatic masterpiece ever written, using the vocal style typical of Karnatik music (Mani, 2019a). The research adopted historical and comparative musicology, and artistic research as its methods. My position as a Karnatik vocal performer from Chennai, India, with over two decades of performance and teaching experience in traditional and intercultural contexts, served as a suitable vantage point for this research. My transition to becoming a composer and intercultural performer in my current home of four years, Brisbane, Australia, was also embedded in the inquiry.

As a migrant woman from postcolonial India to a settler colonial state, I found myself seeking ways to disinvest from colonially conferred modes of being, knowing, and performing, and a peek into a culturally diverse historical time in Western music offered me a window of opportunity to do so through music. It was at the interstices of the musico-poetic and performative, in both Karnatik and early operatic singing styles, that I positioned my work as *interrogative artistic research in music* (Mani, 2020b). This methodology model ensured that the creative processes that framed the research triggered reflections not only on the divergent musical materials, tools, and techniques, but also on the dominant narratives that have come to frame the beliefs and identities of the performance cultures at interplay.

Much scholarship has demonstrated the intersections of historically informed performance practices and artistic research, particularly in the context of

Monteverdi's early operas (Davidson, 2015, 2016; Kaleva, 2014; Lawrence-King, 2014). Davidson describes the role of historical knowledge in creating her production of *L'Orfeo*, *Monteverdi Reclaimed*:

With their own interpretations of period treatises on music and rhetoric, the members of the production team (including myself) acted as the possessors of historical knowledge during rehearsals. Our job was to translate this knowledge into a meaningful experience for the performers and explore practical means for the performance company to acquire this historical knowledge. (Davidson, 2015, p. 102)

I notice that she clearly demarcates between roles here; the production team are designated as possessors of historical knowledge, and performers are designated as receivers and processors of this 'translated' knowledge as experience. Artist-researchers, however, can acquire knowledge from theory *and* experience it in practice, thereby becoming active agents in such 'translation', bridging the cognitive and the subjective. They can, through interrogation of the theories of such knowledges and the assumptions therein, also become agents of disruption, catalysis, and change. Whitney's (2015) definition of practice-based research speaks to these ideas and takes me back to the issue at hand, namely, methods that look to musicology as the first port of call: '[Practice-based research is] research developed and led by professional musicians as principal researchers on some aspect of their professional practice that involves their own performance as an integral part of the investigation' (p. 93).

When one's own practice becomes central to an investigation, and informants from musicology and history become companions to such an investigation, insights and impact can flow from the personal to the public; from the self-centric to a sociocultural and even political paradigm. In a time when ways of being and knowing across music performance and education are being reconsidered with the aim of 'decolonising' practices, it is worthwhile to unpack the colonised state of the canonical, even in master narratives that surround Western art music. The freedom to *choose* elements from music of the past and bring these selections into their interpretation in the present, one might argue, lies with the performer. However, for fear of being sidelined from the centre to the margins, performers are still waiting in the wings; still looking for permission – perhaps from proxy gatekeepers to dead composers, from a certain rung of society to which they feel beholden, or even from their institutions. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to give oneself permission to step out of the boundaries into newness. Interrogative artistic research affords such an opportunity within the safety net of academia. Choosing what to bring, and how to bring it into contemporary contexts, when undertaken from such a position, might be

a gentler way for those living within the confines of convention to hurdle into the contentious zone of non-conformance. Such an act is a signifier of respect for the past, a critical evaluation of historical evidence, ‘independent thinking’, ‘positivistic enthusiasm’, and an openness to possibilities in the present, as Taruskin (1995, p. 5) argued a few decades ago.

Today, there is a pressing need to reconsider the history of Western music from a global perspective, not least to contextualise and critically appraise its cultural and ethical complexities in the light of the current superdiverse societies that we, as music practitioners and audiences, currently inhabit (Westerlund, 2019). From the perspective of a coloured woman’s living and working in academia in a Western country, musical hybridity, I advance, is not only enacted in the liminal spaces between diverse cultures and their musics as we understand them today, but also in the ever-changing space between history and the present: our histories and our present; our overt cultures and those of others, as enacted in the complexity of the present. Musical cultures which are perceived as overtly disjointed today may have had a lot in common in history as, for instance, Irving’s (2010) groundbreaking work on globally considered history of Western music establishes.

Many performance practices across cultures that are currently revered as ‘traditional’ are edifices of convention that have been constructed over the years in response to a wide and complex gamut of sociocultural parameters. For instance, the Karnatik music tradition emerged from a nationalist, politically driven, systematic decimation of the embodied practices of hereditary female temple performer-courtesans, the *devadasis* (Soneji, 2011; L. Subramanian, 2006). Ethically, then, Karnatik music is a form that has been appropriated; culturally, however, it is now the single most powerful representative of the classical music of Southern India to the world (Krishna, 2013, 2018). We continue to confront this paradox as long shadows of the past relentlessly taunt the apparent neoliberalist growth trend in Karnatik performance culture. The *#MeToo* movement in Karnatik music is an example. It brought forth the distraught voices of many female music students and performers who were taken advantage of and exploited by powerful male performers, organisers, and *guru(s)*. No doubt the *guru(s)* who behaved in such a deplorable way were celebrated within the performance culture and beyond for their allegiance to conventional approaches – from how a piece of music should be sung to how a (female) performer must dress, look, gesture, and sound. However, perpetuating a performance culture of supplication and adherence to misappropriated notions of convention may be tantamount to fettering oneself to the implicit power structures of patriarchy and the hegemony of master narratives. When we strive to sustain practices from history, I call for a critical and ethical approach.

Today, we live in an age of distributed creativity and collaborative interactivity: between people, cultures, machines, and ecosystems (e.g. Haraway, 2004). In such an age, to be true to an artistic work that has been handed down to us in unbroken succession through history is not so much to fetishise the murky details that surround it as it is to regard it with fresh co-creative eyes – with eyes that have contended with the complexities of the present and are ready for romanticising the past, even if it might just be a means of escape into a fleeting moment of fantasy with history as a co-conspirator. It calls for a spirit of adventure that could enter into an interpretive dance with the work rather than a passive and wary ‘gazing’. In a way, such an approach to music from the past answers Leech-Wilkinson’s (2017, para. 2) recent provocation: ‘[S]cores can generate powerful experiences not just in ways that are taught, heard, recorded and approved now, but in imaginably and unimaginably different ways. So why are they not allowed to?’

Whether the work is a composition of Karnatik composer Thyagaraja (handed down orally) or the operatic work of Claudio Monteverdi (handed down and interpreted over time as and using versions of the score), as practitioners dealing with these materials in our creative spheres of enterprise, we have a right to *responsibly* reinterpret them. Such interpretation needs to occur in a manner that is nurturing to the work, in a way that compels the artist and audiences to spend more time with the work, in a way that ensures participative enjoyment of every beautiful detail and that results in the making of a bespoke co-created version of it. The values and judgements ascribed to rightful and aesthetic interpretations of works from the past are contentious at best. However, subjectivity comes to one’s rescue in such cases; a rightful interpretation could be engendered through minimal improvisation or with pronounced departures. It could involve newer approaches to performing established material or steer established approaches into unknown terrain. It could thwart the established every step of the way, yet, it could be meaningful for the present.

For instance, a female Karnatik performer, who is currently actively discouraged from gesturing and moving on stage could sidestep convention and stand up for her rights. She could express herself corporeally as she sings. While this is indeed a blatant disregard of *convention*, it is a welcome interrogation of all that had historically shamed the performing female body in Karnatik music through an embracing not only of the corporeal, but also of the perished *devadasi* tradition of singing and dancing (Soneji, 2011). I make this point also to highlight the important distinction between convention and tradition. Convention has overtones of imposition and compulsion; tradition on the other hand has always been understood as dynamic, responsive to sociocultural factors, and grounded in historical fact (Mani, 2020a). The seated position,

conventional in current Karnatik performance practice, is quite the opposite of tradition. The *devadasis* historically danced while singing, and continued this practice over centuries at least, until they were forced to abandon their traditional form of practice in the wake of the Karnatik music reform of the early twentieth century. Their embodied manner of presentation is the ‘true’ Karnatik tradition or norm, but has been lost to us due to social injustices against the community in the wake of the nationalist movement in India (L. Subramanian, 2006). This loss of tradition is lamentable, as it has stripped any element of drama or emotion from the performance practice of Karnatik music of today; an example of tradition losing to the politics of convention, much to the detriment of the artform. As Leech-Wilkinson (2017, para. 8) notes in the context of Western art music: ‘There is artistry in promoting convention, no doubt, but it is art without originality. It reassures, it does not challenge. Is that what we want from art? Doesn’t art involve offering new ways to see aspects of ourselves, not old ways of reassuring ourselves that all is well?’

This provocation from Leech-Wilkinson is entirely valid and remains central to my inquiry. Old ways that reassure us that all is well are servants of convention and therefore the nemesis of the critical dismantling of those aspects of convention that may be untenable, whether artistically or ethically. Permission to cohabit with a work can come wholeheartedly only from within the performer’s being. Giving ourselves permission to live with a slice of musical history through keeping alive the key performative quality of creative impulse rather than reverence, in a way, anthropomorphises the work and imbues it with human qualities. We respond warmly to these qualities, we conspire with them, we ‘become’ them, and we co-opt them into newer zones of play (Davidson & Correia, 2001).

As the world changes, so must convention; so must ways of knowing and expressing music such that it enfranchises the traditional but disengages with the inappropriate or impractical. If performance is to be accepted as a ‘primary mode of signification’, as Cook (2015, p. 14) advocates, and not text, it must be that singular tool that connects us to our immediacy in this world and become an ontological locus of investigation, from the ground up. If this ideal informs our reclaiming of work from the past as in and for the present, that could offer one rightful way to disinvest in the canon.

Further, strategising for and staging performance are both dovetailed acts and magic wands that performer/curators wave at the world to interrogate it or shock it, as they deem necessary. It is in response to the sociocultural stimuli around us that we reconfigure lived performance practice and epistemologies that propagate such practice into the future. Therefore, originality, creativity, and socio-cultural interrogation together have the power to reinvigorate performance

practices of the past in the present from the grass-root levels across both theory and practice, that is, from musicological analysis to artistic research and through to performance. Preparing work *for* performance could then be historically inspired, historically romanticised, historically pluralised, and historically interrogated. These complementary positions are tropes to approaching historically informed performance without burden or guilt – just the way it ought to be, here and now.

The notion of altering the aesthetic of a certain musical form – whether the Karnatik musico-poetic form, *Viruttam*, or Monteverdian declamation – using elements from another, entails a shift in the identity of the form as well as in the identity of the artist engaged in such a blending.¹ This concomitancy in ‘shifts’ is one method to ensure that we invest ourselves holistically into those new ways to approach art, ways that we seek. The performer and work transitioning into the new, in tandem, also brings to the fore the differences between musical forms, cultures, and compliance models as much as it does the similarities. The sites of convergences and divergences systematically enable a brewing of frameworks of interrogation. Crispin’s (2015) notes that new approaches to composition in Western art music, such as co-creativity, serve to interrogate identity of established forms by challenging composer hegemony and narrowing the gulf between the composer and performer: ‘The hermetically-sealed nature of these claims [of compositional hegemony] is increasingly being challenged, not least by the incursion of improvisational and co-creative practices into the arena of composition’ (Crispin, 2015, p. 319).

The question of the ontology of a historical work of art has been debated over decades in the field (e.g., Goodman, 1976, pp. 113–121) and particularly in opera (e.g., Abbate, 2004; Calcagno, 2012, pp. 17–20). The overall text-versus-act debate in Western art music has resulted in the emergence of criticisms of *werktreue*, *texttreue*, and text-fetishism (Goehr, 1992; Taruskin, 1995). In parallel, however, the question of what convention is and how it links to or deviates from tradition in Karnatik performance practice is an under-researched area (Krishna, 2013, pp. 9–15). In opera, tensions arise at the interstices of text-work-act, and in Karnatik at the interstices of prescribed convention and the freedom of self-representation. It is at these interstitial zones of tension that hybrid practices could reinvigorate through an active reimagination of practices of the past. Haynes’s (2007) comment, ‘when you say something differently, you say something different’, (p. 19) strikes a chord with my current research towards hybridising Karnatik elements and early opera.

¹ Viruttam is an exposition of Tamil poetry in Karnatik raga and is delivered without rhythmic cycles. The poetic metre dictates the time in this form. The Viruttam form is expressive of poetic emotion. To learn more about the Viruttam, see Krishna (2013); Mani (2019a).