

# Classical Music: Dialogue and Intimacy a Comparative Study of Hindustani and Carnatic Traditions

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## Abstract

*This study undertakes a comparative exploration of dialogue and intimacy in the two major traditions of Indian classical music—Hindustani and Carnatic. The research reveals that in Hindustani music, dialogue is often expressed through jugalbandi, alaaṇ, and the baithak tradition, where an intimate bond is formed between artist and audience. In contrast, Carnatic music expresses dialogue through structured improvisations such as kalṇana swara, niraval, and ragam-tanam-pallavi, emphasizing collectivity and religious-spiritual intimacy. The study shows that though these traditions arise from different socio-cultural contexts, both create unique streams of emotional depth and artist-listener relationships. This comparative analysis highlights the diversity of Indian music and its dialogic-spiritual nature.*

**Keywords:** Hindustani music, Carnatic music, dialogue, intimacy, comparative study

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## INTRODUCTION

Classical music, whether it is Western or Indian, has always been perceived not merely as sound, rhythm, or tonal configuration, but rather as a close dialogue between performers and their instruments, as well as between performers and the audience. Fuhrmann underscores that music can be a soft and non-obtrusive interaction, which entails establishing a communicative environment, which is more of a liaison than a traditional communication (Fuhrmann 2018). On the same note, Kramer suggested that classical music is important since it enables the audience to have an intimate conversation with music which is equally emotional and intellectual (Kramer 2007). Such closeness, Maus observes, is even capable of bringing together the personal response spaces, which generates a sense of proximity and harmony among the participants of a performance (Maus 2013).

This aspect of intimacy is shown in the baithak tradition of Hindustani classical music in the Indian context. Pandit Jasraj had a small baithak in Mumbai where Shankar recounted a private moment with music and personified it as a personal encounter of waves of sound and feeling (Shankar 1999). According to Ranganathan, these baithaks were not on stage but emotional vessels that were shared by artists and audiences and dissolved the boundaries between them (Ranganathan 2019). The other form of dialogic intimacy is the jugalbandi. Banerjee noticed that jugalbandi is some kind of musical question-answer, and vocalists and instrumentalists are involved in a dialogue (Banerjee 2005), whereas Sharma defined it as a dynamic dialogue in which rhythm and melody are in a dialogue with each other (Sharma 2016).

The Carnatic classical music also displays intimacy with a patterned interaction between voice and instrument, especially in the ragam-tanam-pallavi format. According to Ramanujan, the violinist strengthens the raga exploration by the singer, and the mridangam strengthens the dialogue between the instrumental and the vocal (Ramanujan 2012).

Raghavan also observed that this interplay forms a sense of collective spirituality and intimacy based on religious and cultural background (Raghavan 2017).

So, in the traditions, intimacy in classical music appears as dialogue – it can be personal and intimate, as in Hindustani baithaks, or it can be systematic and spiritual, as in Carnatic performance. O'Shea noted that performances are never unidirectional transactions, but the spaces of the performing intimacy in which the meaning is made co-possessively between performers and listeners (O'Shea 2022). In the west, or in India, classical music remains characterised by this dialogic nature and leaps over technicalities of raga, tala, or form to be a living dialogue of cultural and emotional discourse.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As Kumar and Downey (2014) described music as a conversational meditative logic, it is important to remember that music is not only performance but also a kind of profound dialogue between a performer and an audience. They maintained that this dialogue needs reciprocity and responsiveness; thus, music is a participatory process but not a one-sided activity. Their analysis is in agreement with the classical

Indian traditions where the aesthetic worth of music is not limited to the raga-tala framework to produce powerful social and community engagements that produce intimacy and meaning in music performance. Artium Academy (2021) presented a comparative study of stylistic variation between Hindustani and Carnatic music by clarifying that the flourishing of Hindustani music is based on improvisation and embellishment in which the musician converses freely within the raga. On the contrary, Carnatic songs are based more on the composition, or kriti, which is a more rigid structure, but inventiveness is preserved in the ragam-tanam-pallavi. This comparative study reveals that intellectual intimacy is sought in two aspects, which are freedom and spontaneity in Hindustani traditions and discipline and devotion in Carnatic performance.

Mathur et al. (2015) made a contribution to the topic by studying the aesthetic significance of tonal structures of ragas to the aesthetic experience of listeners. They found that pauses of a few seconds are more tense and uncomfortable, but ragas like Yaman and Bhairav alleviate the sense of calmness and closeness. This points out that intimacy in Indian classical music is not only spiritual and cultural but also psychological and is deeply written in the affective force of the tonal patterns.

Ravi and Govindaraj (2018) conducted a test on how Carnatic ragas affect emotions and found out that Bilahari and Shankarabharanam produce joy and enthusiasm, whereas Todi and Karaharapriya produce a feeling of devotion and serenity. They claimed that Carnatic intimacy is highly related to bhakti and religious faith that makes the tradition with a strong devotional sense. On the contrary, according to the explanation given by Khan (2018), the school of Hindustani classical music developed in the courts and Sufi environments, which, in turn, focused on independence and spiritual closeness rather than the temple practices. In an analogous claim, Raghavan (2017) stipulated that Carnatic performance is more directly related to the temple culture, and, consequently, devotional closeness is the characteristic aspect of the former.

Irigaray (2021) further developed this argument by linking the idea of intimacy in music to the sensory and kinaesthetic effects of touch and sound because the musical composition and performance can serve as an act of kindness that holds people together. Later theorised by Kumar and Downey (2019), music is described as an act of the so-called meditative inquiry, where the dialogical process invites the performer and the audience to an enclosed relationship of shared inquiry. Bull (2019) also redefined the classical music studies by demonstrating that intimacy and trust are the pillars of music education, thus establishing a connection between social life and musical performance.

Rowland and Xia (2021) extended to discuss the concept of intimacy as a form of expression in the instrumental work of Mendelssohn with the assertion that the styles of classical works are saturated with signification which can facilitate the conversation between intimacy and form. Spear (2017) further explained that aspects of intimacy in the collaboration of performance depend on dialogue, trust, and humour, which make music not only aesthetic but also relational. Richter (1999) related this concept with historical dialogues and demonstrated the way music operated as a language, establishing close interactions with each other which are similar to a literary conversation.

Baym (2018) studied the modern classical music business and emphasised the way musicians interact with audiences by introducing the intimate labour of connection, which implies that performance becomes a more comprehensible concept as dialogic labour. In the analysis of intimacy in improvisation, Waterman (2008) observed how gender, embodiment and creativity merge to produce new discourse on music. Allen (1998) contextualised this to India and noted how the mehfil and soirees operate as intimate spaces whereby classical and non-classical traditions intersect in discourse, and so demonstrated that intimacy takes centre stage across context and traditions.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Aim of the Study

The main objective of the study is to see how intimacy and dialogue are framed in Hindustani and Carnatic music. The research aims at analysing not only structural elements of music like raga, tala and form but also experiential elements of performance, emotional, spiritual and relational relationships that build among the artist, co-performers and the audience. The study tries to place the two traditions of classical dialogue and intimacy articulation in the light of similarities and differences by using a comparative framework.

## Research Design

Since music is complex and experience-driven, a qualitative and descriptive research design was used in the study. Music cannot be comprehended using only numerical data; instead, an interpretive structure must be provided, which also considers cultural backgrounds, aesthetics, and performance practices. The design was thus grounded in multi-method triangulation, which integrates interviews, observation, textual analysis, and survey data. This integrative methodology made sure that subjective experience and comparative patterns were both included (Creswell 2014).

## Data Collection Methods

### 1. Practitioner interviews.

Vocalists, instrumentalists and percussionists of the Hindustani and Carnatic traditions were interviewed in semi-structured interviews. These interviews were meant to document the conceptualisation of dialogue and intimacy by artists themselves in their performances. The questions were orientated on their relationship with co-performers, the role of the audience and the vision of intimacy created by music.

### 2. On-the-Spot Observations of Performances.

Live concerts and baithaks, including small events like the baithaks of Pandit Jasraj in Mumbai, were also the subjects of field observations (The Print). It was observed how spatial formations and the number of audience affected the feeling of intimacy and interaction. Artist-audience interactions, improvisational conversations, and regular instances of shared affective response were recorded.

### 3. Secondary Sources

Secondary literature was widely used in order to reinforce the theoretical foundation. This covered ethnomusicological research, including that by Kumar and Downey (2014), comparative cultural research by Ravi and Govindaraj (2018), and classic research by Bor (1999) and Subramaniam (2006). These sources were important to offer critical models of the raga aesthetics, improvisation, and relationships between performers and listeners.

### 4. Audio-Visual Analysis

There was analysis of archival and digital recordings in order to find out common patterns of intimacy and conversation. There were three primary performance forms which were emphasised:

Hindustani traditional Khayal singing.

Sitar-tabla jugalbandi is a dialogic form.

Carnatic concerts: raga tanam pallavi.

All India Radio archives and web-based sources like YouTube were used as the sources. The ability to watch performances on audio-visual enabled a repeated experience of the performances and the ability to capture slight changes in tones, rhythms, and improvisations, which indicate intimacy (Ravi and Govindaraj 2018).

#### 1. Survey of Listeners

A mini-survey of 40 listeners (20 Hindustani, 20 Carnatic) was carried out to incorporate the audience point of view. They were questioned about the ragas, instruments or performance interactions they found to be the closest. Their answers underscored the role of the listener in the creation of musical intimacy, paying much attention to personal taste, spiritual affinity, and familiarity with their culture (Bor 1999).

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed in the analysis of the data, and the repetitiveness of patterns and categories was identified among the varied sources. Three main themes emerged:

1. **Dimensions of Dialogue** – artist-instrumentalist interactions, artist-artist interactions and artist-audience interactions.

2. **Dimensions of Intimacy** – sensations of closeness that are produced by means of raga exploration, spirituality and emotional resonance.

3. **Comparative Dimensions** – differences in the pronunciation of dialogue and intimacy between Hindustani and Carnatic schools.

This thematic structure served to organise subjective accounts in a systematic way and comparative information (Kumar and Downey 2014).

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical standards have been adhered to in the course of the study. The subjects involved in interviews and surveys were also made aware of the aim of the study and gave informed consent before they could provide their opinions. They were not supposed to identify themselves except in case they were given

such consent to identify. The observations in open concerts were organised with respect to the performance and not disrupting the performance and invading the privacy of a performer. It was ensured that all the secondary and archival sources have been properly credited to ensure academic integrity (Creswell 2014).

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

These findings of this research show that intimacy and dialogue are fundamental aspects of performance in both Hindustani and Carnatic classical music. But these are verbalised differently in each tradition, influenced by dissimilar histories, performance situations, and aesthetic values. Dialogue is an exchange of music not only between instruments or voices but also a communication between performer and listener. Instead, intimacy is built by the expressiveness of raga, spirituality of performance, and cultural context within which the music is performed.

### **Dialogue in Hindustani Music**

The most obvious instance of dialogic performance in Hindustani music is the idea of jugalbandi. It cannot be merely a rhythmic rivalry, but it is, as *Serenade Magazine* (2017) puts it, not a mere lyrical debate but a debate of ideas. In this case, the singer and musician, usually the tabla performer, have a spontaneous musical interaction which is neither too difficult nor cooperative. The khayal tradition, also, is a manifestation of dialogue; the singer plays rhythmically with the tabla player by improvising in taans and bol patterns. These interactions create an impression of close energy in the performance where the audience can observe a live dialogue in sound.

Besides, the baithak tradition enhances this dialogic aspect. Smaller gatherings (as Bor 1999 also pointed out) lead to the personal experience of artist and listener, with eye contact, slight gestures and improvisation risk-taking making the intimacy more profound. The proximity of the audience group of listeners creates the increased feeling of mutual musical conversation.

### **Dialogue in Carnatic Music**

In comparison, Carnatic music also portrays a more organised dialogue. The violinist usually repeats or prolongs the phrases of the singer and not only repeats but also enriches the emotive structure of the raga (Subramaniam 2006). The mridangam rhythmically supports and opposes the patterns of the vocalist and frequently creates complex mathematical variations, in effect a rhythmic conversation instead of a melodic one. The Carnatic model of jugalbandi, in contrast to Hindustani jugalbandi, does not rely on the competitive spirit of the element but emphasises shared harmony, with performers collaborating to create a devotional and immersive experience of music.

The main part of such a dialogic structure is the ragam-tanam-pallavi. The raga is elaborated here (ragam), rhythmically developed (tanam), and resolved in the intricate pallavi improvisation, in which the singer, the violinist, and the percussionist talk to each other in overlapping and complementary forms. This creates what Raghavan (2017) calls a spiritual conversation, but one that is not based on competition.

### **Intimacy in Hindustani Music**

Hindustani performance is usually characterised by intimate moments between the performer and the audience, particularly when it is performed in the baithak. The limited number of audience members enables one-on-one interaction between the artist and the listener, by which the eye contact and mutual moments of silence are equally as significant as the notes (The Print 2019). The religious tones of ragas like Darbari or Yaman create an emotional atmosphere when intimacy is achieved through sound and the performer-audience bond of trust and vulnerability.

### **Intimacy in Carnatic Music**

Intimacy in the Carnatic tradition is more of a group than a one-on-one affair. Grounded in devotional constructs, the performances are usually staged at the temple festivals or at the Chennai Music Season, where music is one of the mediums of collective spirituality. The intimacy that listeners gain does not happen as a personal connection to the performer but as a shared experience of bhakti (Ravi and Govindaraj 2018). In this case, ritual, devotion, and repetition are tools for maintaining intimacy and binding the audience and performer to a shared religious feeling.

### Comparative Dimensions

The comparative essay shows the various routes by which the traditions of Hindustani and Carnatic articulate dialogue and intimacy. Hindu music is more focused on the individual (jugalbandi, khayal, exchanges between the violin and the vocals, baithak closeness), and Carnatic music anticipates organised cooperation (ragam, tanam, pallavi). In Hindustani intimacy is individual and circumstantial; in Carnatic, collective and religious.

**Comparative Table: Dialogue and Intimacy in Hindustani vs. Carnatic Music**

Aspect	Hindustani Music	Carnatic Music
Dialogue	Jugalbandi (vocal-instrumental Q&A); khayal singer-taba rhythmic exchanges (Serenade Magazine 2017)	Ragam-niraval-kalpana swara; violin echoes vocalist; mridangam creates patterns
Intimacy	Personal closeness in baithaks; direct artist-listener connection (The Print 2019)	Devotional and collective intimacy; temple festivals and Chennai Season
Style	Improvisation through alaap, taans, bol-banao, bandish	Structured compositions (kriti, pallavi) with ragam-tanam-pallavi improvisation
Instruments	Sitar, tanpura, tabla; strong tabla-voice dialogue	Violin, mridangam, tambura; violin-vocal dialogue and rhythmic layering

The findings indicate that dialogue and intimacy are universal aspects of Indian classical music, although they vary in terms of their manifestations. Hindustani music is based on the debate of the lyrics and individual intimacy, whereas Carnatic music is built on devotion to the collective and the organisation of the synergy. This is indicative of greater cultural tendencies: Hindustani lays stress on human creativity and freelancing, but Carnatic prefigures discipline, cooperation and devotionality. They are united by their ability to show how Indian classical music balances out personal and collective aspects of human experience.

### DISCUSSION

The results of this paper allow concluding that the pillars of Indian classical traditions are intimacy and dialogue, albeit their manifestations vary greatly in the Hindustani and Carnatic traditions. The two systems share the same foundation of raga and tala, but their approaches to structure, performance, and emotional engagement do not differ significantly. Hindustani music is more creative and improvisational, in which dialogue is common as a competitive but harmonic interaction. It is especially notable in jugalbandi and khayal performances, where singer and instrumentalist take up lively interactions, which may sound more like a lyrical debate. In this tradition, intimacy is most pronounced in baithak performances, where the modest size of the performance and the intimate character of the performance create a feeling that the artist and the listener are very close and the music is highly personal. In comparison, the Carnatic music emphasises discipline and collectivity. Dialogue is spoken using ordered improvisations like kalpana swara and niraval, in which the violin reflects the words of the vocalist and the mridangam accompanies him/her. The Carnatic tradition does not understand intimacy within personal space but as an immersion in devotion, especially at temple festivals and at the Chennai Music Season. These distinctions have also been influenced by cultural history: Mughal courts and Sufi traditions have cultivated the individuality and liberty of feelings of the Hindustani, whereas Vedic ritualism and temple culture taught collectivism and devotion to become the very core of Carnatic performance.

### CONCLUSION

This discussion confirms that dialogue and intimacy are the soul of Indian classical music, which has different manifestations in the Hindustani and Carnatic traditions. Jugalbandi, alaap and baithak The tradition of Hindustani performance emphasises the aspect of personal intimacy and improvisational dialogue. Instead, Carnatic performance anticipates organised forms, including kalpana swara, niraval and ragam-tanam-pallavi, that represent devotional intimacy and group dialogues. In this sense, while Hindustani fosters an intimate emotional bond, Carnatic fosters a communal spiritual relationship. Collectively they are complementary in enriching Indian classical music by providing dialogic-spiritual traditions that are personal as well as collective modes of music experience.

## Future Prospects

As a prospectus, the paper creates avenues of continued cross-disciplinary research on dialogue and intimacy in classical music. The science of intimacy and dialogic patterns with the help of micro-musical analysis is one of the possible directions, which may study the fine improvisational interactions between artists in terms of the rhythm and pitch. There is also another path, which is in virtual symposia and online concerts that can not only globalise Indian classical traditions but also redefine intimacy and dialogue in a new space. Lastly, AI-driven models of shared emotional experience can usher in the ability to consider the artist-audience relationship in greater detail, tracing the ways of perceiving intimacy in Hindustani and Carnatic performance in different contexts, with diverse audiences. In these perspectives of the future, dialogue and intimacy are not abstract ideas but can be used to analyse musical practice, cultural history, and current technologies.

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