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Gesture in Musical Declamation: An Intercultural Approach

ABSTRACT

This paper draws parallels between gesture in South Indian Carnatic singing practice, and rhetorical gesture used by orators and singers in 16th and 17th century Early Modern Europe. The paper begins by referencing relevant historical literature on the performance practices. In doing so, it identifies declamation in music as an ideal musical framework for gestured performance. The paper then practically addresses the role of gesture in present cross-cultural music performance practice using an artistic project, conceptualized and implemented by the author. The author proposes that performances of textually driven, dramatically intensive musical forms, such as the Carnatic Viruttam and Early Opera, would benefit from referencing gestures from a constellation of the experientially known and the historically acquired. The research also invites a consideration of pertinent issues on gesture and women performers in the context of Carnatic music.

Aim and Research Framework

This study considers declamation in Carnatic music of South India and in 17th century Italian Early Opera through the lens of comparative historical musicology. The gestures used in these two cultures are scrutinized using theoretical and historical sources to build a cognitive substratum. Drawing on Crispin's (2015: 61) model of 'artistic practice as a process' in artistic research, the knowledge from the conceptual-theoretical substratum is applied to a practical intercultural framework. This approach also draws on elements of reflexive qualitative research in which 'the researcher becomes a part of the research process' (Flick, 2014: 17). The gestured declamations are documented and disseminated in the form of mediatized outputs. The study addresses the following research question: How to incorporate intercultural gesture in musical declamation using historical musicology and artistic practice as research?

Gesture in a Carnatic Concert

Gestures in vocal music serve as tools in communicating the semantic autonomy of the text. They also communicate the grace of the music to an audience and could aid in memory recall and self-expression on the part of the performer. Performers and teachers of music, over the centuries and across cultures, have recognized gesture as an inimitable part of represented and experienced music. Gesture in vocal and instrumental music is an emergent field of scholarship, as is evident from the edited volumes by Godøy & Leman (2010), and Gritten & King (2006, 2011). Over the years Jane Davidson has contributed significantly to the literature on gesture in music-making through her quantitative and qualitative approaches to performance analysis (Davidson, 1993, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2016; Davidson and Good, 2002; Clarke and Davidson, 1998). Gestures are regarded as an important parameter in performance analysis studies; as Rink (2014: 116) notes: 'The physical actions of the performer not only inform but shape the analytical awareness that may emerge."

Rahaim (2008, 2012) and Leante (2014) have contributed to the development of a distinctive body of literature on gesture in Indian vocal performance and pedagogy. In the context of pedagogy of Carnatic music of South India, Pearson's (2013) study is vital in understanding gesture-phrase interaction in Carnatic violin teaching. Fatone et al. (2011: 212) argue that Carnatic musical phrases are 'spaces' within which 'physical movements' occur in practice. Pesch (1999) and Krishna (2013) consider Carnatic vocal

gestures as spontaneous expressions, inspired by a confluence of factors including the *gurus* (teachers) body language, the text, and Raga movement.

In this study, I begin to address gesture in vocal performance practice of Carnatic music by firstly considering a typical Carnatic *kutcheri* (concert) stage set-up. The main performer is seated centrally on the stage with legs folded. The accompaniment, such as the violin and *mridangam* (percussive instrument) are positioned on either side of the main artiste, and the *tanpura*, a drone that keeps pitch, is wielded by a player seated just behind the main artiste. The microphone plays the important role of amplifying the voice across the concert hall. The noteworthy aspect in this description is the fact that thus positioned, the vocalist does not move around. The hand gestures and facial expressions of a Carnatic vocalist are, therefore, the only extra-musical communicators. These gestures, though limited, entrain the audience, heightening the emotional involvement that they may experience when the performer sings in an impassioned manner. The indeterminate, improvisatory nature of gesture in a Carnatic performance could be understood through the following description: "though linked to what is being sung," writes Matt Rahaim, "these movements are not determined by vocal action; nor are they taught explicitly, deliberately rehearsed, or tied to specific meanings" (2008: 325).

Carnatic musicians use their hands to metaphorically sketch the curvaceous and complex passages they navigate while singing. They also employ gesture to suggest, the importance of certain emotions underlying the text to the audience. The tip of the thumb connected to the index finger is used as a subtle gesture that indicates resting on a note or a prolonged holding of a particular pitch. When evocatively addressing a higher power, the singer uses louder tones and appeals skywards. When singing in the upper octaves, one can see the hands being raised higher, often above the shoulder, and the head tilted upward, as if in fervent prayer. It is common to see Carnatic singers close their eyes in meditative concentration, fixating their thought as well as that of the beholder, on either the subject matter that is being conveyed or on the feelings that the Raga (melody type) might invoke.

The prevalent notion that women singers are expected to refrain from gesticulating adds a layer of complexity to the firmament of gesture in Carnatic music. While I

subjectively refer to this issue by drawing on over two decades of personal concert singing experience, this pressing matter has been problematized objectively by several scholars/musicians including T. M. Krishna (2013) and Indira Menon (1999). I am one of the many women singers who are implicitly expected, by gurus, critics, and audiences alike, to invoke feeling in music through serenity and self-restraint. T. M. Krishna discusses this issue by situating it in the broader context of 'male chauvinism' in Carnatic music: "Men were considered strong singers with a robust interpretation... women personified the feminine side of music; their music was about elegance, beauty and tenderness" (Krishna, 2013: 320).

Krishna goes on to argue that a 'cultivated demureness' in women Carnatic singers is a phenomenon that may be linked to the process of 'sanctification' of Carnatic music, orchestrated in the mid-20th century. The move towards recrafting the identity of Carnatic music has had a negative impact on the attitude of the system towards women singers in general, and those who express themselves with gesture, in particular (2013: 322). While the 'sanctification' process itself is discussed in a little more detail in the ensuing section on the history of gestured music, this blog post could draw attention to the dismissive and prejudicial attitude of certain concert-goers towards women performers who gesture in song:

> I get irritated when I see her [Aruna Sairam's] gimmicks on stage. Too much artificial expression and excessive movement of the hand puts me off... Totally at loggerheads with what Carnatic music stands for – a modest and serene expression of one's love for *God*. She has got an awesome voice and has had some excellent training for sure, but her arrogant body language which somehow is not camouflaged by her smile, spoils everything. M. S. Subbulakshmi for all the world-wide fan following and sweet voice always maintained a modest appearance on stage. (Sankar, 2009 Emphasis mine.)

It is useful to clarify here that the notion of gesture in the context of a Carnatic music performance is interestingly very different from that implied in traditional dance or musico-dramatic contexts. Gestures used in musical theatre such as *'Bhagavatha Mela'* and embedded story-telling traditions such as *'Kathakaalakshepa'* weave together normative gestures used in *Natya* (dance) and spontaneous, intuitive and musically inspired gestures.

Rationale for Exploring Gesture in the Carnatic Context

In the Indian context, gesture is best regarded through the lens of its traditional dance forms such as the Bharatanatya, Kuchipudi or Mohiniyattam.[1] Although the present discourse relates to the use gesture in singing, a cursory glance at the notions of gesture in the Indian performance scenario reveals that gesture is considered a dancer's domain, a realm into which the singer does not infringe.

Underpinning this statement are a set of facts on the nature of music for dance recitals. In a traditional dance performance, seated behind the curtains or unobtrusively on the sidelines, is a music party.[2] In mainstream Indian performance practice, therefore, the singer is a music provider whose corporeal expressions are secondary to the sonic outputs, whether the context is one of solo performance or otherwise. Thus, reflecting on 'music for dance' opens two implications: one, the voice is a palette of emotions that can 'act' using word and melody; two, a lexicon of gestures could be developed by the singer as a personalized tool-kit, thus opening up an additional identity for the singer: that of an embodied performer. When I consider Vatsyayan (1963: 33), 'music organizes sound to create aesthetic state, dance does the same through human form', I am compelled to claim that gestured music could be as potent a human form of communication as dance. The gestures of a singer are a visual manifestation of their musical persona and an embodied approach to Carnatic music could empower the performer and the audience.

Culturally diverse musical forms that have a common feature of being significantly dependent on the emotive content of the text, such as the *Viruttam* in Carnatic music and the *recitar cantando* (sung-speech style of rhetorical delivery) in 17th century Early Opera, may be combined with associated gesture to create an expressive artistic output. Such a hybridized form could present a Carnatic singer as an intercultural embodied performer.

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[1] These forms use *mudras* (emblematic depictions using fingers) and *hastas* (hand gestures) as prescribed in treatises on performance including the seminal *Natyasastra*.

[2] The singer vocalizes, while the dancer occupies center stage and expresses the passions through gestures and embodied movement. See Soneji (2012).

History of Gesture: Carnatic Performance Practice, Theatre and Films

A cursory glance into the past interestingly reveals that a confluence of embodied movement and singing was not entirely absent in the history of Carnatic performance, particularly with regards to pioneering women performers of the early twentieth century. T. Balasaraswati, a celebrated mid-twentieth century performer of both Bharatanatyam and vocal music, sang poignant poetry in a variety of South Indian languages including Tamil and Telugu, in a manner that fused the essence of the sister arts, *Nayta* (dance) and *Sangita* (music). Her style was hailed as unique. As she articulated the music, she employed graceful bodily movements, mudras, a range of facial expressions, and liveliness in manner, as Knight (2010) and Narayanan Menon (1963) both observe. Her impassioned renditions of repertoire such as *Padam* or *Javali* (love poems for the God) were vivid and exciting[3]. Balasaraswati is the grand-daughter of an exemplary musician, Vina Dhanammal and the representative of a long tradition of temple courtesans *(devadasis)* who were known for their embodied practice of Carnatic music and dance. However, the legislation on *devadasis* between 1930 and 1947 abolished the *devadasi* system. While the *devadasis* were considered the custodians of this kind of artistic depiction, they were shunned away by the powerful sections of society due to the tradition that considered them married to 'god'. As many an inquiry asserts, including the works of Soneji (2011) and Anandhi (2000), the community experienced disenfranchisement in the wake of post-colonial prejudices. T. M. Krishna (2013) argues that these events were closely tied to the redefining of Carnatic music as an art form for the elite. These developments also contributed to the emergence of organizations that would eventually become the custodians of Carnatic music, the *'sabhas'*. The performance practice that was originally associated with temples was recontextualized in the *sabha* settings. The tragic aspect in all this was that, the newly designed identity of the Carnatic form quelled the role of embodied expression in represented music - a loss for the art as well as artists. T. M. Krishna suggests that "this revisionism gave the music and its practices access to a moral high ground: it was not some tawdry act… but a divine act practiced by saintly figures and respectable personalities" (2013: 316).

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[3] Balasaraswati (1978: 111) writes, 'The mudras of mantra sastras are same as the hand gestures in Bharatanatyam' and discusses *'Sringara'*, the emotion of love. Also, see Poursine (1991).

The history of musical expression in the context of Indian music, however, is informed by the oldest surviving authoritative Sanskrit treatise on Indian theatre and performance, the *Natyasastra* (NS). The NS, attributed to the sage Bharata, among several other things, is a discursive work on 'action' in performance.[4] This text, surviving as manuscripts containing around 6000 verses arranged into 36 chapters, is said to have been created between 200 BCE to 200 CE. The verses in NS collate music, acting, instruments and dance in the context of 'stage', accordingly reinstating the need to tie these elements together, not only for a historically informed approach to performance, but also for a moving, empowered, and unfettered one.

Gesture in Theatre and Films

By briefly examining the history of musical drama in the Tamil language, the vernacular of Tamil Nadu, we understand that, in the early twentieth century, staged productions featured theatre performers such as K. B. Sundarambal and Vasanthakokilam who, in addition to being exceptional Carnatic singers were also gifted performer/actors. They vocalized roles from Indian mythology with convincing stagecraft. The stories for the plays were derived from treatises such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Interspersed with dialogue, delivered in a manner of elevated speech, the plays featured declamatory songs.[5]

With the advent of films, some of these phenomenal singer/actors would go on to become movie stars (Baskaran, 2013: 130). M. S. Subbulakshmi (MS) is one such example. One of the most celebrated singers of Carnatic music, MS began her musical career by acting and singing in movies, including *Seva Sadanam (1938), Savitri (1941)* and *Meera (1945)*. George (2016) in an overview of her life as a musician, suggests that her confidence and ability to entrain stemmed from her earlier stint in cinema and musical theatre. MS, despite her success on the silver screen, entirely detached herself

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[4] *Rasa* (emotion) in music, dance and drama, has been studied by numerous scholars including Schechner (2001), Brown (2005) and Mason (2006). Nair (2014) mentions dramatic devices, *'angam',* that refer to interactions between body movements and delivery of text. Madhavan (2016: 100-131) mentions *'tauryatrikam'* as a 'collective' for dance, music and percussion.

[5] My nonagenarian grandmother fondly recalls the touring theatre visiting her little village of Kodumudi in Southern India in the late 1930s. The advertisers used to bellow the names of the key performers for the night through street loudspeakers. M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar and T. R. Rajakumari were very popular for their sung play *Pavalakodi*. She recounts the grandeur in make-up, costumes and jewelry. The excitement in witnessing the singer/performer come alive on stage would be palpable, she recalls.

from the singer-actress image and immersed herself into the traditional framework of the Carnatic *kutcheri.* Based on these incidents that shaped the history of Carnatic practice as we know it today, I argue that, if Carnatic *kutcheri* music is to be approached as a historically informed performance, it would have to incorporate gesture.

Viruttam: Musical Declamation that Invites Gesture

A musical form that could invite the use of gesture, planned and spontaneous, within the paradigm of Carnatic music identifies as the *Viruttam.* A *Viruttam* is a form wherein selected verses from poignant poetry are declaimed by the singer. The nature of the text dictates the internal meter, syllabic extensions or contractions, punctuations, pauses, sighs, and vocal dynamics. Musically and rhetorically, *Viruttam* appropriates features from oration, versification and classical rhetoric. A persuasive stylized speech-like song that does not fall under the constraints of a time signature, but allows for a free-flowing pulse-based steering forward-movement, characterizes the *Viruttam.* "This technique is about presenting poetic verse in the free-flowing form without tala.… Before rendering it in the musical form, he [the musician] should have absorbed the text of the poetry… every word in the text." (Krishna, 2013: 132).

The musical form *Viruttam* has much in common with earlier dramatic singing practices, in that it privileges textual meaning. The underlying constructs of the *Viruttam* necessitate an embodied involvement of the singer. This could also be substantiated by referencing the origins of the *Viruttam* (Gurumurthy, 1994). The *Viruttam* is said to have its origins across the broad contexts of musical theatre, dance, liturgy, as well as *Harikatha*: the performing art of storytelling that interweaves monody, dance, drama and musical interludes.[6] C. Saraswati Bai and C. Banni Bai were two women performers who 'overcame male prejudices' and established themselves in the storytelling tradition that represented a confluence of music, gesture and drama. Pesch observes:

> In Harikatha, exceedingly diverse elements drawn from traditions of India,
> have been dramatized by learned performers (bhagavathar) and interlaced
> with attractive songs, accompanied by gestures (mudra), facial expression

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[6] In Harikatha a single *Bhagavathar* sings and acts. Performing art forms such as *Koodi Attam, Talamadale, Yakshagana* and *Bhagavatha Mela Nataka* are thematically related to *Harikatha*: several characters appear, dressed in finery, act and sing.

(abhinaya) and rhythmic movements (nrtta) derived from the techniques of dance and drama. (1999: 170)

Using gestures, deliberate as well as spontaneous, early exponents could regulate, restrain and then cathartically release the underlying lyrical and raga-based emotions ever so gently in musico-dramatic contexts; a craft from which the *Viruttam* could also benefit.

Musical Declamation in Early Modern Europe and Rhetorical Gesture

My broader research interests lie in drawing parallels between declamation in early 17th century Italian musical drama, and the *Viruttam* form. Music, oration and poetry were considered 'sister arts' in Early Modern Europe. Composers who were influenced by humanism wished to revive the music and tragedies of Greek antiquity by adapting them to a modern, monody-based style, the *stilo moderno* (Palisca, 1985). It was at this time that Claudio Monteverdi, acknowledged as the father of Opera, came upon a style of composition which he referred to as the *Seconda Practica*, a practice that privileged the primacy of text over rules of harmony. Impassioned delivery of poetry as intoned speech, congealed with musical features such as dissonances, and the figured bass, buttressed by visually compelling gestures made his musical dramas the defining models for the genre of 'Opera'. Hailed as the first Opera, Monteverdi's *'L'Orfeo'* (1607) was interestingly premiered before the *Accademia degli invaghiti*, an elite gathering of nobles and scholars who were experts in oration and versification. The sung-speech form of declamatory writing was a representation of natural emotions in music, known in the Florentine circles as the *recitar cantando per stilo rappresentativo* (Pirrotta & Povoledo, 1994; Carter, 2002). An investigation into the visual aspects of the *rappresentazione per recitar cantando* (musical drama represented through sung speech) reveals extensive literature on gesture in Early Modern Europe. Gesture in the context of 17th century Italian sung-speech has several features in common with historical gesture in represented music in the South Indian context. Toft (2014) encourages Opera singers of the present age to embrace their past through gesture, just as I seek to revisit the embodied past of Carnatic music using gesture.

> The eyes and ears became the windows to the soul, and orators and singers drew upon a vast arsenal of skills to help them penetrate deeply into the soul, moving it to experience whatever passions the text contained. I encourage

singers today to acquire the same skills that singers in the sixteenth century possessed and to re-create those practices that allow us to place our intuitive emotional responses to both solo and part songs in a framework derived from the documents that transmit sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century culture to us. (Toft, 2014: 198)

Actio: The sixth limb in Classical rhetoric

There is a vast body of literature on *'actio'*, action in speech and song, particularly originating from England and Italy, around the 16th and 17th centuries. Heywood (1612), Wright (1604) and Bulwer (1644) are primary sources that throw light on the facial, head and hand movements prevalent at the time. Fraunce's (1588) writings on the varied kinds of tilts of the head while singing and Le Faucher's (1657) overview of gesture for vocal music, drawing on Bulwer's earlier work, are also informants of the close ties between persuasive declamation and singing at the time.

> Bend and wrest your arm and hands to the right, to the left, and to every part, that having made them obedient unto you, upon a sudden and the least signification of the mind you may show the glittering orbs of heaven and the gaping jaws of earth… [so that] you may be ready for all variety of speech. (Bulwer, 1644: 246 – 47, as cited in Toft, 2014: 185)

Rhetorical devices used in oration were widely employed by singers of the 16th and 17th centuries, for expressive appeal. In Castigliano's (1528) *Il Cortegiano*, dealing with aspects of body language befitting a courtier, he advised graceful nonchalance *(sprezzatura)* in an orator/declamatory performer. This attribute became associated with the art of noble singing, *'il nobile sprezzatura'*, as Caccini's (1602) preface for *Le nouve musiche* would indicate. In the preface to his musical drama, *'La rappresentazione'*, Emilio Cavalieri (1600) suggests that singers use entraining facial expressions while enunciating musical text.

Quintilian, in his 1st century CE treatise on Classical rhetoric shares his views on how an orator/performer could effectively identify and use the following as devices to heighten drama in the delivery:

- Points at which to pause and breathe.

- Points of punctuation (comma, semicolon, full stop, *esclamazione*, and questions) as short stops between phrases.

- Repetition for emphasis.

- Lower or higher voice levels depending on intensity of subject matter.

- Modulations in voice, variations in tempo, agitation, and speaking 'aside', softly.

- Head, facial, hand and embodied movements that complement emotion. (without being overtly demonstrative)

Accordingly, the fathers of classical rhetoric divided the subject of rhetoric into five distinct areas: *inventio, dispositio, elocutio* or *decoratio, memoria,* and *pronunciatio.* In *inventio*, the orator found and researched the topic that he wished to expand upon, *dispositio* was about ordering the information, *elocutio* dealt with choosing appropriate words and phrases that would complement the delivery, while *memoria* involved memorizing for public delivery. *Pronunciatio* governed the use of dramatic devices that enhanced the impact of the actual delivery. *Actio,* aptly nominated as the sixth limb of classical rhetoric, would ensure effectiveness and transferability of the delivery.

Just as dance-based theatrical forms, such as the *Kuravanji* and *Harikatha,* were the forerunners of represented music in India, ostentatious visual representations of music, the *intermedi,* were considered by some as the forerunners of Opera (Palisca, 1989). The *intermedi* were popular in provinces such as Florence even as early as the late 1400s. Intermedi were essentially short capsules of drama in music, which were interspersed in stage plays to break the monotony of spoken word, and to provide colorful entertainment. *Intermedi* were marked by elaborate costumes, and noisy stage machinery, designed for grand entrances of actor/singers (Carter, 2002).

It is noteworthy, that like the Indian theatre actors, who were also spectacular singers (as discussed in the earlier section), the singers of the 16th and 17th century musical dramas were fine actors. They honed their skills in the tragicomedy productions of the times, known as *Commedia dell'arte.* Possessing a good grasp of stagecraft, they were sought after by composers and *doges* (dukes) not only for their vocalizing abilities, but also for their compelling acting skills and charming personalities. Monteverdi's second

opera, Arianna (1608), had the title role being played by the well-known *Commedia dell'arte* actress of the time, Virginia Ramponi Andreini. Anna Renzi (Ottavia in Monteverdi's 1943 opera, Poppea), in her adventurous stint in Venice, was highly regarded as a performer, not least for her acting abilities. Arianna's lament, the only surviving part of the opera today, it is said, was delivered with great emotional investment on the part of the singer, as understood from Federico Follino's account of the premiere:

> ...in ogni sua parte riuscì `più che mirabile, nel lamento, che fece Arianna sovra lo scoglio, abbandonata da Teseo, il quale fu` rappresentato con tanto affetto, e con sì` pietosi modi, che non si trovò ascoltante alcuno, che non s'intenerisse, ne` fu` pur una Dama, che non versasse qualche lagrimata al suo bel pianto. (Follino, 1608: 29)

> ...the marvelous lament which Arianna made on the rocky outcrop, abandoned by Teseo, performed as it was with such affection, and with such piteous gestures that there was not a single listener whose heart was not touched, nor was there a single lady who did not shed a small tear at her exquisite lament.

The purpose of this discourse is not so much to illustrate the parallels between the two forms of musical declamation and their histories, but rather to reinforce the fact that in researching the histories of these genres, I have realized that gestures have been highly regarded as performance parameters in both of these styles. Theoretical research into the historical practices of gestured declamation in both the Indian tradition as well as in Early Opera has yielded this as a key finding. The ensuing section of the paper relates to the artistic processes that include the interpretation of the researched knowledge using artistic practice as a method and the generation of new insights and therefore new knowledge in the form of an artistic output.

The Cross-Cultural Project: Artistic Paradigm
While the role of gesture in Early Opera inspired me to experiment with gesture in my own practice, the turbulent history of gesture in Carnatic music gave me reason to pursue this line of research. An artistic project on realizing the *Viruttam* form, combining elements of music, gesture, drama and compositional devices from the

Carnatic and early 17th century declamatory traditions, was a fertile ground for me to imbibe, and implement a hybridized assortment of gestures that were drawn from a range of: a) spontaneous gestures from Carnatic *kutcheri* practice b) embodied gestures from Carnatic performance history c) and 17th century rhetorical gestures.

I analyzed the historical and practice-based literature by juxtaposing them against the problematized issues. In the practical paradigm, I experienced the artistic processes against the relief of the knowledge drawn from historical musicology. I have drawn on performance-based case studies such as those of Kaleva (2014) on Monteverdi's *Arianna* and Davidson (2016) on Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* in adopting a process-intensive approach.

Content selection for declamation

My selection of poetry for the project was influenced by the history of the *Viruttam* as well as the history around the compositional practice of the *recitar cantando* style. In the *Viruttam*, the verses need to be communicated to the listener with the intent to 'move' and 'delight' (analogous to *movere* and *dilettare* in high and mid-level rhetorical styles respectively). To present a mixed style that could move and delight, I turned to one of the many points of origin of the *Viruttam*, liturgical verses. Whether a *Viruttam* is sung in a concert setting with embellishments and *melisma* (like the 'elaborate strophic variation model' of Monteverdi's) or as a recitative in a temple ritual, the 'affect' of the poetry (*bhava*) is at the epicenter of the representation. In Southern India, Tamil spiritual verses, including the *Tevaram* and *Divyaprabandham* are sung in *Shaivite* (devoted to Lord Shiva) and *Vaishnavite* (devoted to Lord Vishnu) liturgical settings respectively. *Alwars*, the devotee/composers, sang numerous *Vaishnavite* hymns between the 7th and 11th centuries A.D. One of the prominent *Alwars*, the only woman composer/devotee among them, was Sri Andal. Sri Andal composed thirty verses of poetry in the 11th century A.D. These verses were addressed to her friends, the *gopis*, who were also devoted to Lord Krishna (Chabria & Shankar, 2016). The emotions that surface in Andal's writings are not confined to the realm of *'Bhakti'* (devotion, surrender), but rather cover a wide spectrum of emotions. She exclaims, cries, passionately declares her love, chides, complains, regales, laments, sighs, alludes to mythology, instructs and laughs, as she dynamically communicates her zeal for worship to her friends and fellow villagers. This outpouring is known as the 'Thiruppavai'.

The *Thiruppavai* have been sung and recorded by a prominent artiste of Carnatic music, Sri. Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar, who tuned the thirty verses into thirty different ragas.

However, some liturgical experts and linguistic scholars believe that in his version, the melody takes precedence over text and emotion, in several instances. Furthermore, it has been noted that certain lines have been split such that, the melodic movement is privileged over the meaning. In such instances the message conveyed becomes incomplete or misinterpreted. I interviewed the notable *Thiruppavai* scholar, Dr. M. A. Venkatakrishnan, who specifically pointed out certain verses (Verse 15) that could be sung differently; in a manner that conflates the poetic dictum with the expressive intent of Andal. Based on his inputs, and on my personal artistic preference, I selected five octet verses from the set for composition as musical declamation. The five verses chosen have significant dramatic content and startling dialogues within their textual structure, which could manifest as moments of intense and heated exchanges between Andal and her friends.

That Andal's *Thiruppavai* are devotional is unequivocal, but she goes through a broad spectrum of emotions that express the verisimilitude of life. Belonging to an age where women did not have much of a voice in society, Andal may be recognized as an audacious persona who deems it her birthright to be demonstrative and unhindered in her expressions. I felt compelled to peel back the several layers of inhibition that I had acquired, over the years, in playing the role of a self-controlled, calm Carnatic singer. I decided to articulate, gesture, sway and vicariously experience Andal's melodrama.

Interpretive processes

I composed tunes for the selected verses. I transliterated the lyrics of the verses from Tamil to English, informed by five sessions of meetings with Dr. M. A. Venkatakrishnan in Chennai in December 2016. I then identified keywords/phrases in Tamil and English that referenced the points in the poetry that needed reinforcement through gesture. Verse 15 is selected as an exemplar for the purposes of this paper. The affective phrases from verse 15 were identified and have been underlined in *Table 1*. Drawing on Davidson's (2016: 179) approach to recreating *L'Orfeo* with rhetorical gestures, where 'the singers were encouraged to learn specific postures and gestures to accompany

affective phrases' by referring to Bulwer's 1644 treatise on gesture, *Chirologia or the Natural Language of the Hand*, I engaged in identifying the specific gestures that mirrored, most effectively, the affective phrases. In creating an 'epistemic object' (Crispin, 2014: 142-144) that could be ploughed into the artistic experimental system, I drew up a tablature mapping the phrase – emotion – gesture combination, referring to Bulwer's (1644; 2003) lexicon of rhetorical gestures, and Toft's (2014: 188-196) interpretation of them. *Table 2* shows each of these pivotal affective phrases/words, and the rhetorical gestures that they could be aligned with. The tabulation lists ten to fifteen pivotal rhetoric gestures, with overlap.

I drew from a decade of training in *Bharatanatyam,* and consulted with dancer colleagues on how best to integrate certain key *Natya* mudras with the corresponding rhetorical gestures. Soneji's (2012) depictions were most useful in this exercise. From the *Natya* tradition, I used a combination of *Samyuta* (double-handed) and *Asamyuta* (single-handed) *hastas*. *Hastas*, the palm and finger gestures, such as the *'Soochi'*, to point at someone or something, mapped to *'Indico'*; *'Pataka'*, to portray stillness and being, mapped to several palm-based rhetorical gestures including *'Castigo'* and *'Benevoletiam Ostendit'*; '*Vandanam'*, palms folded together in prayer, mapped to *'Oro'*, and the *'Mushti'*, the clenched fist to signify anger and strength, mapped to *'Minor'*, to name a few. I choreographed key portions of the piece, phrase by phrase. I also allowed for moments in the piece that were self-reflecting and introspective. It was in these moments that the spontaneous, experiential gestures came to the surface.

In my daily practice during the preparatory period, which spanned around a month, I interspersed these gestures with personal facial expressions that were innate to my natural singing practice. I modified and improvised upon the combined expressions, assimilating them into a stream of personalized movement, as suggested in Gritten & King (2006). I was inspired by the readings of Calcagno (2002) on the voice-led imitation of natural emotions in Monteverdi, and applied *sung-speech* principles to my singing. I also considered Bulwer's recommendations that hand gestures must not change frequently within the text and that their change must correspond to the introduction of new affectations.

To situate these activities within the rigorous framework of methodology, I drew on Crispin's approach to Artistic Research as a process:

> The artist-researcher's internal dialogue between subjective musical instinct and cognitive rationale is both a valuable methodological tool and, potentially, something that can contribute to the output of the research process. (Crispin, 2015: 79)

Accordingly, I video recorded the rehearsals and reflected on them. These reflections were part of the process that guided my conscious engagement with the gestures, the music, and the text in a reflexive manner. I recognised the knowledge that I had gathered in engaging with the two systems of music through theory and practice, and channelled the insights acquired to craft my interpretations, thereby generating a cycle of new insights. The circuit of knowledge-interpretation-knowledge situated the practice in a research paradigm (Austbø, Crispin & Sjøvaag, 2015). I also used talk-aloud protocols during and after the practice sessions to narrate my experiences and observations (Davidson & Good, 2002).

Initially, I had experienced certain difficulties in executing the sequenced gestures in real-time, and these were voiced in the talk-aloud protocols.

> There is a lot going on! I need to remember the words, the feeling evoked, and the gesture, while singing…focusing on my voice production as well. Recalling the gesture as I sing is a struggle. I sometimes stop, think and start again. It all needs to come together, naturally. I am trying to connect the gestures with the real emotion and induce a connection to the music… (Author, Talk-aloud Protocol, 3rd April, 2016)

This resonates with Kaleva's field observations while using rhetorical gestures:

> This 'fitting in of the gestures' initially slowed down the tempo. The slower tempo during the initial rehearsals was due to the time needed to remember and execute the gestures. This affected the continuo realization; specifically, that of the harpsichord, which had to 'fill in' the chords because the instrument does not sustain. All the musicians in this project remarked that including the gestures and working with them made the overall performance of the music more deliberate. (Kaleva, 2014: 227)

A harpsichord was used to realize, support and guide the harmony that the vocal line presented. I conducted three sessions of rehearsals in conjunction with a Brisbane-based harpsichordist, Juanita Simmonds. A transcribed excerpt from the talk-aloud reflection relates to this final phase:

> As we approach the final rehearsal I feel a unison in my gestures, voice, and the bass realization. I felt the uncertainty melt way and am focused on the whole rather than the fragments of gesture. (Author, Talk-aloud protocol, April 29th, 2016)

In an interview soon after the recording, the harpsichord accompanist stated that even as she referred to the text, score and meaning, she found it very helpful to be informed by the gestural cues.

> The expressed gesture was very useful for me… I felt connected to the text, the drama and emotion. I do not understand Tamil, but I could feel the intensity. I felt that I could easily transfer that experience on to my playing. (Juanita Simmonds, Personal interview, May 24th, 2016)

During the filming and recording of the media, my attire consisted of traditional Indian formal wear, the silk *saree*. I wore makeup and appropriate jewelry. I performed standing up. The recording was carried out in May 2017 at the 'Immersd' recording studio, at the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia as part of my doctoral research work. Constraints in time and resources did not allow for a live performance. However, the video clips were screened before a small audience of around 20 members in August, 2017, in Brisbane. The audience members consisted of those acquainted with Carnatic practice as well as Western musicians and students of Western music. For ethical reasons, the audience members were not treated as a source of data for the study. Their observations indicated that some of them thought it was 'engaging' and 'new', while others found it 'theatrical' and 'hard to follow'. A discussion around the compositional aspects of this work is beyond the scope of this paper.

The video clip appended shows the artistic output for verse 15 in Raga *Lathangi.*

Verse 15: 'EllE iLangkiLiye': Context

This hymn is a dialogue between Andal and her friend, who is deep in slumber. Andal tries to wake her, chiding her. As the conversation progresses, Andal grows tired of the clever repartees that counter her sincere pleas. She is annoyed at her friend's tardiness, and at her own haplessness, which is delaying the entourage for the morning prayers. In the phonetic interpretation of the Tamil text, capitals are used to represent elongation in vowels, and hardness of sound in consonants.

Table 1. Lyric and meaning

Line from Thiruppavai Verse 15	English transliteration
ellE! iLangkiLiyE! innam uRangkudhiyO!	Andal: <u>Hello!</u> Parrot like pretty girl! <u>Still sleeping?</u>
sillenRu azhaiyEnmin! nangkaimIr! pOtharkinREn	Friend: Do not call me in such chilling tones! I will come, in my own time.
vallai un katturaigaL paNdE un vAy aRidhum!	You are well-versed in coming up with excuses for your laziness, enough with that!
VallIrgaL nIngkaLE! NAnE thAn Ayiduga	You are stubborn! (Aside, <u>crestfallen</u>) Maybe it's my <u>bad luck to be arguing</u> with you!
Ollai nI pOdhAy unakkenna vERudaiyai?	Andal: Come on now, get ready to leave! What else could be this interesting!
ellArum pOndhArO? <u>pOndhAr</u> pOndheNNikkoL	Friend: What about the others? Have they all left? Andal: (Exasperated) Yes! They have all left already.
vallAnai konRAnai mARRArai mARRazhikka vallAnai <u>mAyanaip pAdElOr</u> empAvAy	Andal (<u>entreats</u>, <u>with devotion</u>): Awake dear girl, and sing the praises of the magical Lord who destroys powerful demons and evil-doers.

Table 2. Phrase-emotion-gesture matrix

Key Word/phrase	Emotion/content conveyed	Rhetorical gesture (Bulwer plate number, letter)	Gesture description
Elle! …Innum	Addressing, with emphasis, urgency	Castigo (3.2, E) Indico (3.4, F) Impatientia prodo (3.2, L)	Chiding using palm Pointing with index finger Touching forehead, impatience.
Sillendru……pOdarkindrEn	Cool and stubborn	Terrorem Incutio (3.4, G)	Index finger pointed upwards, intimidating.
Un VAy aridhum	Annoyance, accusation	Castigo (3.2, E) Auxilium fero (3.2, B) Indignatione timeo (3.2, R)	Using palm facing the addressee. Clasping wrist of one hand with another. Drooping hand (all signify irritation nervousness).
Vallirgal	Anger, accusation	Minor (3.1, Y)	Clenching the fist, to threaten.
Nane thAn	Self-depracation, acceptance, crestfallen, helpless	Benevoletiam Ostendit (3.3, R) Tristi animi signo (3.1, K) Despero (3.1, H)	Both palms directed towards self, accepting. Intertwined fingers of both hands, anguished. Palms of both hands flaccid.
Unakenna	Questioning	Veto (3.4, L) Attentionem poscit (3.5, N)	Pointing with a curved finger, disapproving. Index finger, pointed upward, front facing addressee, warning.
Ellarum	Referring to the outside	Indico (3.4, F)	Index finger, pointed outward, moving.
Pondhar	Exasperation, dislike	Terrorem Incutio (3.4, G)	Index finger, pointed upwards, side facing the addressee, irritation.

KondrAnai, vallAnai	Slaying the violent demon, making a case	Minor (3.1, Y) Distinguet (3.5, G) Contraria distinguet (3.5, Z)	Clenching the fist, referring to power. Two fingers distinctly separated. Thumb touching the index finger tip, palm pointing upwards.
mAyanai pAdelor empAvAi	Devotion to God, surrender	Admiror (3.1, D) Hortatur (3.3, G) Supplico (3.1, A) Assevero (3.1, S) Benedictione dimittit (3.3, Z) Oro (3.1, B)	Palms forming a 'U', admiring. Palm open, thrown up in proclamation. Palms upward, facing each other, advising. Palms overhead, facing addressee, declaring. Palms facing addressee in blessing. Palms touching, facing each other, in prayer.

Outcomes and Future Research Possibilities

The interpretive approach yielded certain themes that warrant deliberation. These are reported here as outcomes, in addition to the artistic outcome. The most prominent learning experience that emerged was the fact that remembering and executing the deliberately sequenced gestures was an act that required practice and time. Furthermore, I realized that my actions surfaced as an integrated whole that referenced the studied gestures, but expressed them as an experienced extension of the vocalization. In creating this artistic output, I experienced the intertwined existence of music, theatre, and embodied performance as a collective. This study therefore addresses pertinent concerns such as these: 'While performance-oriented scholars spurn music, music-oriented scholars generally spurn performance' (Auslander, 2006: 261).

The overarching theme that emerges from this study is that a gesture-based approach to music-making is an empowering act, not least for women performers. The feeling of empowerment that I derive from a gesture-based engagement with music not only benefits my own practice, but also propels it into the broader context of several

similarly conceived practices that collectively hold the power to reconfigure the role of women in performing arts today (Cusick, 1994).

The next stage of this study would involve dissemination of the artistic output to a broader community by publishing the videos online with supplementary lyrics in Tamil and English. A broader qualitative study could assess the audience reactions to this project. Accordingly, a live performance before a multicultural audience is in the planning stages. Further research in the field of gesture and music, particularly in the context of women performers, could address latent issues on gender in performance, particularly in the Indian context. In facilitating a symbiotic co-existence between the sister arts as well as between intercultural musico-dramatic forms, this hybridized approach to music and gesture anticipates cultural integration on one hand, and gender equality on the other.

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