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Carnatic Fusion: Sites for Identity Reconciliation or Erasure?

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Abstract

Carnatic fusion is a cultural practice that has emerged over the last few decades as a way to present the mainstream Carnatic classical music to a wider audience in a more accessible and palatable manner. In this paper, I look closely at the trends and attitudes within Carnatic fusion practice through the case studies of three Carnatic fusion performers: Mahesh Raghvan, Jagadis Natarajan, and P.V. Bose. The existing research on Carnatic fusion is scarce and fails to connect it to the larger debates on globalisation and identity. My paper not only aims to explore the trends within Carnatic fusion but also aims to connect these trends to larger debates on globalisation and identity. The research method employed is case study, and the data analysed has been gathered primarily through interviews and secondary sources. Through multiple interviews with the artists as well as their public relation (PR) persons, the following study describes and contextualises Carnatic fusion music within discussions regarding globalisation and identity formation. Themes discussed include the extent of the use of social media in promoting Carnatic fusion, glocalisation, and A. R. Rahman as a primary figure of influence for young artists. The paper concludes that Carnatic fusion music is a manifestation of the multiple identities we have adopted in a globalised world. It connects aspects like performativity, democratisation, secularism, and individualism into the way we understand the realms of identity and

globalisation within Carnatic fusion music. In addition, it also addresses T. M. Krishna's critique that Carnatic fusion music is our desire to access everything while remaining indifferent to its context. The many aspects of their own music that the artists connect to their individual experiences, make the artists relatable and even aspirational to their audiences.

Keywords: Carnatic fusion, globalisation, identity, shared consciousness, democratisation

Introduction

This paper studies fusion music that employs Carnatic classical elements, and has grown popular over the recent years, especially within India. Kevin Fellezs defines 'fusion' as that which "articulates the ill-fitting intercultural mergings occurring at the breaches of cultures, mergings that have become increasingly central to individuals' mobile sense of belonging among competing sets of loyalties" (2011, p. 7). Fellezs (2011) discusses fusion music as a cultural practice starting from the 1970s, when Tony Williams, John McLaughlin, Joni Mitchell, and Herbie Hancock presented their fusion work. He argues that the work of the 1970s fusion artists was a result of hybridity that led to a bridging between genres instead of them being incorporated into the mainstream genre. Therefore, it is difficult to draw a generic/formal definition of fusion music, as it is a rejection of such definitions (Fellezs, 2011). In the context of Carnatic music, the genre is no stranger to foreign influence, particularly from the 17th and the 18th centuries (Krishna, 2016). However, works of L. Shankar and L. Subramaniam during the 1950s can be understood as initial attempts of fusion, as they are rooted in a notable philosophical assertion that identity, specifically cultural identity, can be rendered fluid (Krishna, 2016). T.M. Krishna, an acclaimed contemporary Carnatic singer, defines fusion music slightly differently – as the "melting together of elements of music"; a "fusing of the minds of the musicians and connoisseurs" – which leads to a transformation of identity and consciousness (Krishna, 2016, p. 281). Despite receiving positive responses over the years, Carnatic fusion has also been criticised by singers like Krishna (2016) for being a manifestation of our greed to access and enjoy everything without context. This paper aims to understand contemporary Carnatic fusion within the context of globalisation and identity formation, through case studies of three contemporary Carnatic fusion artists, namely Mahesh Raghvan, Jagadis Natarajan, and P. V. Bose. In doing so, the research also contextualises various views regarding the fusion music industry with reference to Carnatic music.

Carnatic fusion is a practice that is growing increasingly popular among young Carnatic artists in contemporary times. Artists use platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Instagram to demonstrate

their music as a unique blend of various genres and traditions. The artists have a considerable audience, from different demographics within India. In addition, their music is also popular with the Indian diasporic populations, and the artists often travel abroad to perform. Their music is seen as the manifestation of the artists' and the audiences' multiple identities which they have gained by living in a globalised world. In other words, their music is a simultaneous reflection of their local identities (that they relate to, by being a part of a locality) as well as their global identity (that they relate to by the virtue of having access to hegemonic cultural trends and traditions through work, school/college, or even the internet). Thus, Carnatic fusion is transforming the mainstream traditional genre, making it more accessible and palatable to a wider audience by making it relatable to them. However, this democratisation does not come without critique. Some opposition is a little more nuanced than the purist opposition. Acclaimed Carnatic singer, T. M. Krishna (2016) has criticised the attempts of these fusion artists as not "having a deeper understanding" of the genre. Thus, in a realm of conflicting opinions, the question arises as to what is the nature of contemporary Carnatic fusion. My research objective is to understand the attempts of contemporary artists performing Carnatic fusion in the context of these opposing views. Some related themes and questions I address are:

1. Exploring the relationship between the identities of Carnatic fusion performers and their music. (How can one understand the collective identity that is forming as a result of the interaction with this music?)
2. How are the artists presenting their fusion practice? What are the aspects of performativity?
3. What does democratising Carnatic classical music mean to the artists? Why use fusion to democratise Carnatic classical music?
4. Can Carnatic fusion be understood as –
    - an inevitable evolution of the mainstream genre?
    - several variations of the mainstream genre which reflect the plurality of identities, and will never become the mainstream?
    - both or neither of the above?

Review of Literature

Various aspects of popular music that have emerged as a response to globalisation are dealt with by John Connell and Chris Gibson in their book *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity, and Place* (2003). The authors elaborate on the significance of music, not just as entertainment, but also as a reflection of economics, politics, arts, and more importantly, social and ritual organisation and language of a society (Connell & Gibson, 2003). For instance, Indian classical music, which is based on cycles, has been interpreted as a reflection of the Hindu belief in reincarnation (which is seen as an endless series of cycles). Even questions of song ownership indicate the way a society has been organised (Connell & Gibson, 2003). Thus invariably, music can be used to understand the aesthetic qualities of a culture and its peoples' identities. Yet, such

a view claiming that traditional music of any culture imbibes the ethos of the society/culture it claims its origin from is problematic (Connell & Gibson, 2003). The authenticity of a fixed, pure identity of traditional music has been the subject of scrutiny for both external observers as well as the members of that culture. This preoccupation with a fixed authentic identity of a music, denies the community and its cultural identity any form of history, and renders its cultural elements, and even its existence, static (Connell & Gibson, 2003).

Connell & Gibson (2003) further discuss processes like large and small-scale migration, diffusion, and other forms of interaction between different cultural groups, which make it impossible to ignore the dynamic and complex nature of music evolution. In contemporary times, cultural integration and exchange are even more prevalent due to globalisation and an increased access to the internet (Gibson & Connell, 2003). A phenomenon like colonisation (especially by European countries) brought about practices in the world that necessitated the fixing of music into its spatial bounds. The practice of ethnomusicology was the study of music in primarily non-Western cultures and putting a rigid framework on ever-evolving musical forms (Gibson & Connell, 2003). In addition, commodification seeping into the music industry transformed music from cultural expression into a product to be sold. Thus, it is difficult to think beyond binaries like traditional and contemporary music (Gibson & Connell, 2003). These terms are especially used in discourses surrounding folk revivals. With the technological, commercial, and creative changes that emerged as a consequence of globalisation, the music and communications industries were also transformed. By the 1970s and 1980s, large transnational companies had a global outreach and hegemonised the music industry (Gibson & Connell, 2003). As a result, two simultaneous trends were witnessed. Firstly, there was the commercialisation of music, dominated by few major production houses. The second trend witnessed was the attempt of independent production houses trying to showcase ethnic/regional music that was in danger of being "ignored or maligned by the majors" (Gibson & Connell, 2003, p. 62). In this paper, I look at how these trends are reflected in the discourses that surround Carnatic fusion music.

Scholars like Simon Frith have focused on the notion of music as an extension and expression of identity (1996). However, according to Frith, this is an extremely simplistic notion that does not account for the interchanging performers and listeners within multiple genres (which essentially indicates the mixing and borrowing of multiple identity expressions from different cultures and histories). As Frith (1996) suggests, the problem,

"...is not just the familiar postmodern point that we live in an age of plunder in which music made in one place for one reason can be immediately appropriated in another place for quite another reason, but also that while music may be shaped by the people who first make and use it, as experience it has a life of its own" (p. 109).

Thus, music can also be mobile and exist independently of its original circumstances. Music creates an experience such that its listeners come together to assume a collective identity (Frith, 1996). Frith further argues that music, very similar to identity, is both "a performance and a story", that describes the "individual in the social", and the "social in the individual" (1996, p. 9). My paper is primarily based on this assertion, and looks at Carnatic fusion performers as individuals in a globalised world, and the globalised social identity as part of their individual identity.

The definition of "fusion" given by Fellezs, suggests that it is a cultural practice that actively rebels against the idea of a "stable identity" that can be safeguarded for its purity (2011). For Fellezs, the very existence of genre-mixing is tied to the notion that there are fixed identities and cultures (2011). This, he says, is impossible, as there are no fixed lines between cultures and identities. Fusion music was realised in the "differences in the different music genres and traditions, and it is between those real distinctions" (Fellezs, 2011, p. 227). Fellezs points out that fusion music prioritises flexibility, eclecticism, anti-elitism, and anti-purism. It also forces one to acknowledge the futility of understanding diversity as an "authentic" difference and rather forces one to recognise "the intersection between the global and the local – the 'glocal'" (Fellezs, 2016, p. 225).

Anna Tsing (2000) discusses the term "globalism", in her paper "The Global Situation", which she uses to refer to the "endorsements of the importance of globalisation as a multi-layered evolution", leading us into our future (p. 328). She argues that it is extremely important to approach this notion of globalism with criticality and challenge it when necessary (Tsing, 2000).

Bob White (2012) situates what is known as "world music" in the context of globalisation. He understands the term "world music" as the fusion or hybridisation of different genres and sounds (specifically discussed through case studies where the world music industry took non-Western sounds and genres and celebrated the fusion product as products of diversity and inclusion). He points at the role of technology, marketing, slavery, appropriation, and colonisation that enabled the mixture of styles and sounds (2012). Thus, what we now call world music is a product of a series of waves of movements, exchanges, and appropriations (White, 2012).

Works of Tsing and White together form a critique of fusion music as a cultural practice. However, White's critique is specific to the particular kind of fusion where the Western and non-Western genres are brought together by Western record label companies. He does not address the production of fusion work within post-colonial countries that utilise Western elements in their work.

T M Krishna traces the evolution of what are now understood as the principal concepts that give the aural form associated with Carnatic classical music – which includes the two elements of

raaga and *taala* (Krishna, 2016). He provides an understanding of how one can understand the mainstream Carnatic classical genre today, which includes fixed compositional forms and incorporation of Western origin instruments like violin, and clarinet. For scholars such as Margaret Kartomi (2014), performativity is an important aspect of understanding the socio-cultural aspects of music. Much of a certain music and the resulting collective identity is determined by the ways in which it is performed. Kartomi defines "performativity" as "the describable and analysable aspects of a performer's or group's competence or accomplishment while performing, including the sounds, movements, and gestures that the artist(s) produce" (Kartomi, 2014). Thus, a section of this paper will also be dedicated to understanding the collective identity reflected on the performative aspect of Carnatic fusion as well.

In his book, *The Grammar of Carnatic Music*, Vijayakrishanan (2008) focuses on the last two hundred years of development within Carnatic classical and its persistence. His central thesis is that, "Carnatic music, like language cannot thrive in isolated, minuscule groups. As long as the music fraternity remains small, below the critical mass, it will remain esoteric and will inevitably disappear" (Vijayakrishnan, 2008, p. v). According to him, one of the reasons behind the successful persistence of the Carnatic genre for the last 200 years is the democratisation of the genre. As a result, these compositions were sung not just in temples but in other spaces like concerts, outside India, music academies, etc., and by people belonging to different communities. This saw a shift in who could access this art form. From a time when particular families treated the art as their sacred heirlooms, it now belonged to a community (Vijayakrishnan, 2008). He substantiates his thesis through a linguistic and formal tracing of the genre, in order to understand the reasons behind its persistence.

T. M. Krishna (2016), as discussed above, defines fusion as the creation of an identity and shared consciousness. According to him, when multiple identities are brought together in the form of genres in a fusion musical piece, the result is a new shared consciousness. While he is not fundamentally opposed to fusion music, he is critical of the present practice of Carnatic fusion. He argues that although the artists are talented, they lack a deeper understanding of Carnatic music. For him, contemporary fusion has emerged as a result of our greed of wanting to experience everything, without any regard for the context (Krishna, 2016). When he describes fusion as a manifestation of our avariciousness to experience everything without the burden of context, he is reiterating Tsing's (2000) argument within the context of Carnatic fusion.

The works described in the literature review present contrasting views on Carnatic fusion as a site of identities in a world of globalisation. The work of Fellezs (2011) and Connell & Gibson (2013) prompts one to look at Carnatic fusion as a progressive rebellion and an open acknowledgement of the impossibility of fixed identity. Similarly, Vijayakrishnan (2008) presents an argument where fusion could be understood as a natural evolutionary path of Carnatic music, because of its democratising tendency. Through their works, Carnatic fusion can

be approached as a manifestation of the ever-evolving nature of the identity of Carnatic music performers and audiences. On the other hand, criticisms of fusion as presented by White (2012) and Krishna (2016) present Carnatic fusion as a manifestation of our need to experience everything without being accountable to our ignorance of its context. The existing literature does not fully engage with the debates outlined above. In addition, works of Krishna and Vijayakrishnan do not satisfactorily engage with the debates on globalisation. Similarly, the works of others that discuss globalisation and fusion, do not focus on Carnatic fusion. My research paper aims at understanding contemporary Carnatic classical fusion in the context of a globalised world.

Methodology

The objective of this research is to understand contemporary Carnatic fusion in the context of globalisation and identity formation. In this context, my research has employed a qualitative research design and is primarily based on three case studies of active performers of Carnatic fusion – Mahesh Raghvan, Jagadis Natarajan, and P. V. Bose. Qualitative research provides space for flexibility, opportunity to explore social factors, and a better understanding of the context (Ospina, 2004). Since there are a limited number of artists, conducting case studies of these artists is an appropriate method of collecting data to explore this phenomenon (George & Bennet, 2005).

Similar research that looks at fusion music in the Western context has been done by Kevin Fellezs (2011), who looks at four fusion artists – Tony Williams, John McLaughlin, Joni Mitchell, and Herbie Hancock. He discusses each artist, and traces their music, career and philosophy in order to formulate a definition of fusion music. Although Fellezs's method is instrumental in initially defining fusion, a similar study needs to be done in the context of Carnatic fusion. Similar to Fellezs, the current paper employs the case study method and looks closely at three Carnatic fusion artists – Mahesh Raghvan, P. V. Bose, and Jagadis Natarajan.

The case studies of each artist consist of data from personal interviews as well as their posts on social media, interviews by third parties, and other information that is publicly available. The interviews were conducted in two rounds – the first round focused on gaining a general understanding of the artists' journey, music, and philosophy (similar to Fellezs's case studies), and the second round aimed at a deeper understanding of the artists' responses in the context of the research theme. Since this paper also aims at understanding Carnatic fusion as it is presented, the artists' performativity has been recognised as an important aspect for consideration. For this reason, much of the artists' online presence through their music videos and online live performances (if conducted), has been considered in addition to the interviews.

Alexander George and Andrew Bennet (2005) divide the method of case study into three phases. The first phase of data collection for this study was based on informal conversations with the listeners of this kind of fusion (George & Bennet, 2005). In addition, social media posts, interview articles, etc., were periodically looked at to understand their public presence and the image they have constructed of themselves and their music online (Marwick, 2013). This was done to design a general framework of questions for the first round of interviews.

In the second stage, some of these artists, namely – Mahesh Raghvan, Jagadis Natarajan, and P. V. Bose – were contacted for an interview. They were chosen according to the type of fusion (the genres they are fusing with Carnatic classical), the instruments they play, and the duration of their practice as fusion artists. No cases were repeated (in terms of their fusion repertoire), in order to maintain a control on various variables and to ensure variation (George & Bennett, 2005). There were no age or geographical restrictions imposed, as Carnatic fusion itself is a relatively new music, where some first-generation artists are still practicing (Krishna, 2016). Keeping these points in consideration, the artists' consent was obtained either verbally or via email, and a suitable date and time was fixed on a preferred platform (either video conferencing or telephone). During the interview, the artists were posed with questions regarding their music and career. In addition, they were also asked to respond to some of the debates and conflicts within the discourse surrounding Carnatic fusion and fusion music in general. In the third stage, the interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically organised to draw patterns and trends between the themes. The analysis of the themes from the first round of interviews were further used to design the second round of questions. The second round also consisted of questions which were selectively posed to each of the artists. In the second round, the PR persons of the artists/band were also interviewed to get more perspective on the demographic of the listeners, performativity, and other issues. Conclusions have been drawn from these interviews in order to answer the research questions.

Limitations

Since the researcher lacked access to certain spaces within the musical industry, they could not include all artists practicing Carnatic fusion. In addition, the interviews were limited to online mediums of collecting data. Instead of attending concerts, meet and greets, and workshops held by these artists, their social media, blog posts, interview articles, and interviews (with the artists themselves, over phone or video call) have been used to answer the research question.

Carnatic Fusion in a Globalised World

As discussed above, the first round of interviews consisted of questions regarding the artists' musical journey, influences, performances, etc. The second round of questions were built from the first, and aimed at getting a deeper understanding of the artists' motivation, performativity,

etc. While the questions asked to each artist were mostly similar, since the interviews were semi-structured, they also deviated from one another to incorporate the flow of the conversations and their individual journey. In this section, the answers of the artists and their PR persons from their interviews have been discussed theme-wise. Additionally, the data collected from secondary sources was included in the analysis.

Childhood Experiences of Culture

As mentioned above, the three artists Mahesh Raghvan, Jagadis Natarajan, and P. V. Bose were first asked to introduce themselves and talk about their childhood experiences, formal training in music, and their influences. Jagadis Natarajan is a guitarist for an eight-membered band named Agam based in Bengaluru. The band's music is described as Carnatic progressive rock. Mahesh Raghvan, who is a solo artist also based in Bengaluru, uses an app on his iPad to produce music. Lastly, P. V. Bose, who is based in Pondicherry, is the lead singer of a band called Transwaras. Natarajan and Bose were born in south India, while Raghvan spent most of his childhood in Dubai. Nevertheless, all three of them had early connections with Carnatic music. Whether it was their family listening to it on a daily basis (as in the case of Natarajan), or the artists themselves receiving formal training (Bose), or both (Raghvan), all three artists had a childhood connection with the genre. Regarding formal training, only Bose and Raghvan received tutoring in Carnatic music, while Natarajan is a self-taught guitarist. This is reflected in the roles they play in music-making as well. Natarajan, with no formal training in Carnatic music, is a guitarist in his band, Agam and has not played a part in composing or singing the songs. As opposed to this, both Bose and Raghvan take a relatively active part in composing and producing fusion music.

When asked about the extent to which the cultural surroundings of their childhood influenced the music that they play today, both Bose and Raghvan agreed that the impact was immense. On the other hand, despite having favourable cultural surroundings to take Carnatic music, Natarajan seems to have maintained a distance from Carnatic classical music, and tended to gravitate more towards the guitar. This distance is evident through his role in his band – where he is not directly involved in composition.

Religion and Carnatic Fusion

The evolution of Carnatic music cannot be adequately addressed without looking at the role of religion. Carnatic compositions are filled with references to the pantheon of deities that are worshipped within the Hindu religion. According to T. M. Krishna (2016), the musician singing about his relationship with God and the listener acknowledging this relationship have historically formed the spectrum of the thought process within which the aesthetic content of the Carnatic classical genre could be located. However, he argues that it is necessary to divorce religion from

Carnatic compositions, at least in its most obtrusive fashion, to broaden the vision of our experience. Bose echoes this view when he talks about the goal of his music as the spiritual experience which the singer as well as the listener experiences listening to his music.

Krishna (2016) further talks about how the central aspect of the lives of the composers such as Tyagaraja, Muthuswamy, and Dikshitar was Bhakti and religion. The aim of these compositions was to quite literally express their feelings of devotion and love towards their chosen deity. Most compositions found in Carnatic classical music have been drawn from dance and religious music (Krishna, 2016). Carnatic compositions around the 18th century were performed as ritual performances during religious events in temples. The *raagas* sung during these performances were chosen on the basis of the ritual. Even when performed by devadasis and their troupes, Carnatic classical music was considered a part of the religious activities of the time (Krishna, 2016). In contrast to 18th century society, the significance of Carnatic fusion music of today's times seems to be considerably divorced from the notions of religion. Natarajan, when asked about the cultural significance of his band's music, talked about how limiting associating labels with his band's music makes the music irrelevant to a significant portion of their listeners. By distancing their music from any religious or spiritual connotations (here, Bose is to be excluded), the singers are opening it to a wider audience that listens to their music for various reasons. Divorce from religiosity is not the only explanation for why Carnatic fusion music can be understood as a democratising agent. The next section looks at how this widening of audiences is closely related to increased expressions of individuality.

Exercising Individualism and Democratising Music

When asked about what makes the band relatable to their audience, Aditya Kashyap (a band member of Agam, who also handles their bookings, social media at times) talked about not just the mixing of genres as a selling point, but also the lifestyles of the band members. To elaborate, most of the band members are also full-time employees in different companies. The fact that the members are able to pursue a career in performance arts while also being successful in their corporate jobs makes them relatable to a large young demographic, especially in Bangalore. When talking about the demographic of their audience, Kashyap further elaborates on how there is a large audience that is young, which aspires for this kind of lifestyle. In his words,

Someone who works at Infosys, but has given up painting or someone who is working in a start-up, but has really given up, sports or anything; and to see a bunch of people who are just taking on their passion and sticking to it for about 15 years now; and have tasted reasonable success while they continue their, work, career ambition on the side is definitely, something that, that, gels well with, with the people who like Agam (Kashyap, personal communication, February 8, 2021).

Similarly, Raghvan and Bose are also very clear about the influences of their individual experiences, which impacts their music. By understanding their music as influenced by their collective identity, but also by their individual experiences, the artists present themselves as more relatable to their audience. Their music is relatable precisely because it is seen as a unique blend of different identities that the artists and the audience relate to. This also makes it more approachable for an audience that come from a collectivistic tradition, but is now turning towards individualism (Mines, 1992). Thus, Carnatic classical music, with intact religious significance would not be as relatable to the modern audience as Carnatic fusion (which provides more space for reflecting individualised and relatable experience).

From the previous two sections, it is evident that Carnatic fusion is not necessarily a manifestation of our blind avariciousness to experience everything without the responsibility of studying the context. Instead, the space for individualism has created an audience that prioritises individuality, and relatability over grand religious or spiritual narratives. Thus, a music that is not given any labels can mean different things to different audiences, which does not necessarily indicate greed and disregard to context. At the same time, while democratisation of the music has taken place by refusing to give the music a label and by divorcing it from religion, the artists do not acknowledge the casteist history of the style. As Krishna (2016) mentions, Carnatic classical music has a history of being restricted to certain sections of society, which is also the reason why it needs to be democratised. In their efforts to democratise the style, artists do not acknowledge its political history, and by doing so, it can be argued that their mission is limited in some ways.

Influence of A. R. Rahman

A.R. Rahman can be considered to have a significant influence on fusion music in India. Both Raghvan (currently in his late twenties) and Natarajan (currently in his early thirties) spoke about listening and being inspired by A. R. Rahman while growing up. A. R. Rahman's music became increasingly popular in India during a time when there were major leaps in technology of producing music (Krishna, 2016). Additionally, he was also a popular figure who used Carnatic *raagas* in his film music. Rahman's music also significantly influenced south Indian film music, where Malayalam, Kannada, Tamil, and even Telugu film industries grew closer to Carnatic connections (Krishna, 2016). His popularity has often been attributed to his music's combination of Western sounds with traditional Indian instruments. In this way, his music appealed to an audience that was proud of its own traditions and music, but also fascinated with the outside world (mainly the West) during the times when India was making a mark on a global scale (Krishna, 2016). Thus, artists like Raghvan and Natarajan, who grew up during a time when Rahman was extremely popular, can also be understood as being heavily influenced by the shifts and leaps in Indian musical aesthetics brought about by him. In addition, Raghvan's endeavour to establish the iPad as a legitimate instrument can be understood as heavily influenced by advances

in technology of music production during the time when one of his inspirations rose to fame. A. R. Rahman is also known as an Indian composer who introduced and popularised Indian music to the Western world (Jackson, 2010). Thus, this idea of using technology and Western music while composing their fusion pieces in order to reach a wider audience (an idea that will be expanded on in a later section) can be traced partially back to their inspiration – A. R. Rahman.

It is also interesting to note that while much of A. R. Rahman's music has been for movies, the artists make a distinction between the fusion in their own music and the fusion seen in film music. The finer points of distinction between the two kinds of music made by the artists are irrelevant. However, what is evident is that despite being rooted in film music, independently produced Carnatic fusion music has evolved to separate itself from these ties. Yet, the severance of ties from film music does not mean a dissociation from a figure like A. R. Rahman. Rahman's music is regarded highly for its use of technology, pop tunes and regional music. His works are considered a unique blend of Indian and global music. The idea of blending different genres, while also using technology (specifically in Raghvan's case), seems to be the point of inspiration for the artists. Thus, even during the interview, while distancing one's own music from film music, Rahman's composition for films like "Sowkyama Kannai" (Raghvan) was cited as an inspiration.

Film Music vs. Independent Music

As mentioned earlier, the artists make a distinction between their fusion music and the fusion seen in Indian film music. While it is true that in terms of objective, these two kinds often vary, it is also important to note that at times the lines get blurred. According to Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti (2008), Bollywood is a result of a tug between tradition and modernity for the global south countries in the face of globalisation (which is especially represented in the works of composers like Rahman). A similar tug of war between tradition and modernity can be found in Carnatic fusion music of the three artists discussed in the study as well. The artists are very vocal about the dichotomy of tradition and modernity that they faced while they were growing up. For instance, Natarajan and Aditya Kashyap (a band member of Agam, who also handles their bookings, social media at times), during their interview, talk about their childhood when they were exposed to a lot of Carnatic music, and then eventually in their college, coming in contact with other Western genres and bands. To quote Kashyap,

I think the identity that Agam's music espouses is that of someone who has been brought up in a traditional household with a lot of exposure to Carnatic music; an archetype is that of a child with really strict parents who push them to school, but also are deeply orthodox at home. And then in college, you break free and tradition takes a backseat. There are times when you want to abide by these traditions et cetera, especially when you are home but there are also times when

you want to go on your own or with your friends and have a drink in the nearest pub (Kashyap, personal communication, February 8, 2021)

Thus, in this excerpt, one can see the tension between tradition and modernity present in both Carnatic fusion and Bollywood music. In other words, both kinds of music are coming from a place of conflict between tradition and modernity. This further blurs the lines between the two kinds of music. However, the differences between the two kinds of music can also be attributed to the awareness of the conflict to some capacity in the case of independently produced music (specifically with respect to the three case studies being discussed). All the three artists are well aware of a conflict between tradition and the modern that they are trying to actively accommodate within their music. For Natarajan and Raghvan, this conflict is not just something they see in their audience, but also in themselves. On the other hand, for Bose, the conflict is something he witnesses in the Western audience that tries to access Carnatic mainstream music.

Use of Social Media

Among the three artists, Mahesh Raghvan is the only artist to have a PR person, who manages his bookings, promotions, etc. On the other hand, both Agam and P. V. Bose do not have public relation support. In the case of Agam, the members take turns in managing their social media and taking care of the bookings. Raghvan's and Natarajan's bands have accounts on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Agam's music has been described as Carnatic progressive rock by Rolling Stone (Tagat, 2018). Their Instagram account is dedicated to promoting their live performances and posting short teasers, etc., of these events. There are also short videos of the band performing. In addition, the band has several posts of pictures with their family members as well (Agam, 2019). Most of their music videos like *Mists of Capricorn (Manavyalakincharathate)*, *Rangapura Vihara*, etc., show the lead singer Harish Sivaramakrishnan singing and the band members playing their respective instruments around him (Agam, 2009). Moreover, backup singers and percussion artists, who are also a part of the set, feature in these videos. In other words, the music videos have a set that is organised very similar to a stage in a rock concert (Agam, 2009). However, videos like that of the song *Manavyalakincharathate*, are more dramatic, and include added effects like filters, and slow-motion (Agam, 2009).

Mahesh Raghvan's videos range from those that focus solely on the iPad he is using (earlier videos), to produced videos, where he is seen playing the iPad along with his fellow musicians (Raghvan, 2014). Unlike that of Agam's, Raghvan's videos are less dramatic, and usually feature him sitting or standing (Raghvan, 2014). In neither of these artist/artist groups, is there an attempt at depicting a storyline, as we see in many pop music videos. In addition, the songs of the artists can be seen being used as background music (especially the songs of Raghvan) in

devotional videos (relating to the Hindu religion) that, for instance, show pictures of temples, etc. Raghvan is also relatively more active on Instagram compared to Agam, and P. V. Bose. He often hosts live sessions and posts interactive stories for his followers as well. During his interview, Raghvan's PR person, Niranjan also highlighted the use of social media before a release, in order to encourage audience engagement.

During the interview, P. V. Bose expressed disinterest when asked about his social media presence. He also implied that he found social media to be a narcissistic platform, unsuitable for a singer like him. Thus, his approach towards social media, and the notion of expressing his art through the platform, is relatively more orthodox when compared to the other two younger artists.

Thus, like other musicians in non-Carnatic genres (especially in mainstream pop culture), the artists utilise their social media platforms in different capacities. Social media is an important platform for the artists to not just share their music, but also their lives and values (whether it be familial, or their friendships with musicians they have or are collaborating with) which further creates engagement with their viewers. In the case of Agam, since the band members are not full-time musicians, they find it difficult, and even unnecessary to have a more active social media presence, although there is a clear attempt at using it to develop their image. As opposed to this, Raghvan is a singer who routinely engages with his followers, especially on Instagram, by posting pictures with fellow musicians, or posting snippets of his music, and even photos of his personal life.

Evolving and Preserving Simultaneously

Natarajan and Raghvan (as well as their respective band member/PR person) agreed with the idea that Carnatic fusion has evolved from the Carnatic mainstream genre. As opposed to this, Bose expressed the view that Carnatic music is a vast ocean that we keep discovering, rather than a cultural element that evolves over time. Despite these differences, all three artists gave utmost importance to preserving the "essence" of Carnatic classical music. For Natarajan and Raghvan, *Raaga* was the most important aspect of this, followed by *taala, gamaka and shruthi*. On the other hand, Bose discussed *raaga bhaava* (the emotional aspect) as the most important aspect of preserving the "originality" of their fusion compositions.

Thus, in their opinions, one can see the conflicts that arise when attempting to understand music as an indicator of culture. As elaborated by John Connell and Chris Gibson (2003) in their work *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity, and Place*, studying music as a cultural indicator also means that one has to fix its identity within spatial and cultural bounds. Ethnomusicology has focused on defining how a music is distinct and dynamic to its particular sociocultural context. What is also central to the tradition of ethnomusicology scholarship is that music of a culture is

unique and intrinsic to it, rather than being a product of various forms of direct and indirect cultural exchanges and interactions (Gibson & Connell, 2003). While talking to the artists, there is a similar sense of wanting to fix the identity of Carnatic classical music in its supposedly unchanging "essence", which happens to be *raaga, taala, and bhaava*. Yet, at the same time, the artists also hesitate to agree with the notion that the identity of Carnatic classical music has only one way of being expressed (and that is, the way it is expressed in the mainstream genre). Raghvan and Natarajan (as well as Niranjan and Kashyap) justify their music by emphasising the importance of a music's evolution. This evolution is necessary for them because music needs to reflect the changes in society and therefore be relatable to its audience as well. For Kashyap, Agam's music takes "purely intricate and complex compositions that were written five hundred to thousand years ago" and sets it "in a format that is far more relatable to this generation." (Kashyap, personal communication, February 8, 2021) Similarly, Raghvan expressed the importance of making a distinction between the Carnatic mainstream genre and Carnatic fusion music.

Thus, the dichotomy of holding on to "tradition", by fixing its essence in certain elements of the music (*raaga, taala and bhaava*), while also attempting to democratise it and bring in a wider audience seems to be a common goal among the artists. Nevertheless, even though there is an attempt at fixing the essence of Carnatic music, the younger artists are also aware of the difficulty of doing so because music has to evolve in order to survive. For Bose, the boundaries outlined by cultural and academic discourses attempting to define and differentiate Carnatic mainstream genre from other genres do not matter since he sees the primary objective of music (which is *bhaava*) as achievable even without them. Nevertheless, he did acknowledge a way of differentiating Carnatic music from other genres by looking at the grammar and aesthetic specifications. Thus, there is a simultaneous agreement and disagreement with the fact that the Carnatic mainstream genre has an essence that is intrinsic to its identity and yet, this essence might be subject to evolution (although Bose remains indifferent to it).

Aspects of Performativity and the Audience

As mentioned before, Agam's music videos show the band performing its music on set and the camera focuses on different members at intervals. The lead singer Harish stands in front of the mic throughout the video (Agam, 2005). In addition, the positions of the members are very similar to the way a Carnatic classical concert format places its artists. In other words, the singer is situated in the middle, while the guitarists fan on either side of him, followed by the percussion and keyboard artists (Agam, 2005). During the interview with Natarajan and Kashyap, it was revealed how the band's performance is very much dependent on the crowd they are performing for. For instance, the repertoire of the band would include a few A. R. Rahman covers and other film music if they are performing for a corporate crowd, who are not necessarily familiar with Agam's music. In contrast, for a college crowd, the band is more likely

to perform originals and even improvise with jugalbandis, as the crowd is likely to be more responsive. Similarly, for Raghvan, while performing, the venue as well as the audience matter. He talked about how he often considers the geographical location of his venue. Thus, for instance, if he is performing in Kerala, he includes a few Malayalam covers. At the same time, Raghvan's repertoire remains generally unchanged when he is performing for an audience in the United States. According to him and his PR person Niranjan, his audience abroad are of mostly Indian origin and are familiar with pop and Carnatic numbers, both of which he covers. Bose talked about having performed fusion only for a Western crowd. As opposed to this, he collaborated with Hindustani artists for an Indian crowd.

What is also interesting about the audience of Natarajan and Raghvan is the fact that they span over a large age group. Both the artists talked about having an audience ranging from children to older people in their sixties and seventies and about how the parents of the children in their audience routinely express their gratitude over having a band whose music acts as an introduction to Carnatic classical music for children. As Kashyap said during his interview, Agam's music is appealing also because it reflects "holding on to tradition while leading a life suited for our modern lifestyles" (Kashyap, personal communication, February 8, 2021). Raghvan also talked about getting similar responses from his audience.

In addition to choosing a repertoire that would appeal to their audience, one can also observe aspects in their onstage performances that set the artists apart from Carnatic classical concerts, as well as rock/pop concerts. For instance, Agam's live performances usually take place on a relatively bigger stage (when compared to stages for Carnatic classical concerts), in venues that are typically where Western genre and indie bands perform. At the same time, according to Kashyap and Natarajan, Agam usually starts their performance with a Ganesha rendition (typically seen in a Carnatic classical performance). The members also include jugalbandis between, for example, the guitar and the drums. When it comes to Raghvan's performances, Niranjan, during his interview talked about the importance of creating a visual experience in addition to the music. He talked about instances where he employed traditional dancers for the performance as well. Thus, what is evident is that even though most of the venues at which Carnatic fusion artists play are typically where Western artists play (such as music festivals, pubs, etc.), their typical concert format includes influences from the Carnatic classical format as well.

Different Generations and Glocalisation

Fusion music for all the three artists serves the purpose of democratising music. When asked about the purpose of fusion music, the three artists used phrases like "making Carnatic music palatable to a larger audience", "making Carnatic music attractive to the younger generation", "attractive packaging" (Bose, personal communication, August 29, 2020; Raghvan, personal

communication, August 6, 2020; Natarajan, personal communication, October 2, 2020). In the case of Bose, he talked about making Carnatic music comprehensible to foreign audiences (primarily Western), while Raghvan and Jagadis talked about serving a more "relevant" or "attractive" version of Carnatic music to the current generation. This disparity is notable as it indicates a shift of focus of the artists from trying to take Carnatic music to a global audience (as we see in the initial Indian fusion artists like Ravi Shankar and L. Subhramaniam), to artists reintroducing the classical composition to the younger generation. Bose's fusion music, similar to the objective of the generation of musicians like Ravi Shankar and L. Subramaniam (whose contemporaries are a strong influence on Bose), is an attempt to represent Indian music on a global scale, and to a global audience. On the other hand, Raghvan and Natarajan, are already influenced by Western music and through their music, are creating a fusion that brings together their global and local identities. They find the dominance of Western music in the public popular music sphere in India to be problematic, and are therefore attempting to reintroduce Carnatic music within public spaces (which otherwise belonged to limited spaces which were predominantly accessed by a south Indian population belonging to certain religious and caste identities). This difference in the objective is a direct influence of their life experiences and can be seen reflected in their respective music as well. The music composed by Natarajan's Agam, and Raghvan clearly acknowledge the experimental nature of their music. Even during their interviews, both artists explicitly referred to non-Carnatic influences on their music. In many of the articles featuring them, Agam has been described repeatedly as a "Carnatic progressive rock band," "Carnatic rock band," "Carnatic meets heavy metal," and similar words (Tagat, 2018; Ramakrishnan, 2015). In Mahesh Raghvan's music, one finds numerous covers of pop music that has trended in India. By doing so, both the artists admit the influence of Western music on them as a part of their identity. As opposed to this, P. V. Bose does not acknowledge the Western influence on his music as a part of his own identity. Although he acknowledges the influence of Hindustani classical on his music as a part of his identity growing up, he sees the Western influence as a necessary tool to familiarise the Western crowd with Carnatic classical music. By the virtue of being experimental in their music, Raghvan and Natarajan indicate the tentative balance between their Western and Carnatic identities that they are trying to maintain. As opposed to this, Bose is not concerned with experimenting or balancing multiple identities. He is concerned with introducing his Carnatic identity in a more palatable manner to the West (indicates comfortability with his Indian Carnatic identity).

Roland Robertson (1994) discusses the concept of glocalisation as a more refined and nonlinear understanding of globalisation. Globalisation has been understood as a homogenising process where the hegemonic culture takes over local and ethnic cultures. In response to this idea, Robertson presents arguments made by scholars of the heterogenising effect of globalisation, where local responses to hegemonic culture arise as supposed contestations to hegemony.

Thus, artists utilise the practices found in the Western genre to promote local music (especially Bose). This is further elaborated in the responses of the artists, where they discuss the ways in which they present and perform their music (the section on *Performativity*). Some social media platforms, if not all, like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, are used by them in order to promote their music (section titled *Use of Social Media*). The performance venues of Agam include spaces where primarily Western music is played (pubs, indie music festivals, etc). As opposed to this, the venues played by Mahesh Raghvan are far more diverse, ranging from schools to pubs and music festivals. All these suggest the syncretic origins and evolution of Carnatic fusion.

Music and Identity

As seen in various instances throughout the paper, the artists' identities are reflected in the music they perform in various ways. The identities that they represent are drawn from their personal experiences. Yet, their individual experiences are common enough for a large number of audiences who are drawn to their music. During his interview, Kashyap discussed an archetype that is, according to him, common among their listeners,

I think the identity that Agam's music espouses is that of someone who has been brought up in a traditional household with a lot of exposure to Carnatic music, an archetype is that of a child with really strict parents who push them to school, but also are deeply orthodox at home. And then in college, you break free and tradition takes a backseat (Kashyap, personal communication, February 8, 2021).

Thus, even though the artists are drawing on their experiences, their music has an audience that can relate to the fusing of the identities and genres which is indicative of the commonness of these fused identities. As Connell and Gibson (2003) argue, a music's identity is fluid due to cultural exchange constantly happening at various levels in a society. However, the advent of technology and globalisation accelerated the influence of music belonging to hegemonic cultures, namely that of the United States of America. There have been some challenges to Western hegemony in India. For instance, the "cassette culture" in North India simultaneously contributed to hegemonising, while also decentralising Western music (Connell & Gibson, 2003). The cheap manufacturing and distribution of cassettes led numerous regional and local musical genres to thrive. In addition, this culture had agents within Indians, who reworked and appropriated commercial music, as well as regional and local music (Connell & Gibson, 2003). Similarly, in the context of Carnatic fusion music, the use of various genres within these tracks is indicative of the presence and accessibility of these foreign genres that have deeply impacted not only the artists, but also its audience. The key component for the appropriation of both commercial and local music, in the cassette culture, was the cheap cost of production.. This is something Carnatic fusion has in common with the music that emerged under the cassette

culture. Social media has been an instrumental platform where all the three artists perform and post their music to gain followers. In fact, as mentioned earlier, social media has not only been a platform for their music, but has also helped them build a certain image that resonates with their listeners. Thus, as Kashyap says, the reason for the band's success is also their personal journey and relationship with music, which resonates with a certain kind of archetype one sees in the Indian middle class, especially in the southern part of India. Additionally, while the scope of this paper does not stretch towards inquiring into the socio-cultural identities of their audience, what is evident from the conversations with the artist is that a large number of their listeners listen to them because of the music's close connection to their "roots". Parents of young listeners are grateful for this kind of fusion music as they see it as their child's introduction to the mainstream Carnatic genre. Therefore, one can conclude that Carnatic fusion and its popularity among its listeners also comes from a sense of having lost something from their culture, and having gained it back in the form of popular music.

Carnatic fusion music is also reflective of the individual agency that is being exercised by the artists while they compose and perform their music. The discourse surrounding Carnatic fusion music (as we have seen previously) often described it as a "unique" blend of different genres, which do not fit into any of the mainstream genres. This supposed exercise of individual agency, where Carnatic classical music (often associated with its collectivistic tradition) is being bent to the will of the individual makes it relatable. Within the individual journeys of the artists, what is also important is the influence (conscious or otherwise) of popular music, an element which makes it more relevant to today's generation, according to them. Thus, when Raghvan and Natarajan emphasise the influence of A. R. Rahman on their music, one cannot avoid the legacy of Rahman, and his music's popularity among the Indian audience. Thus, it is because Rahman's music was so influential that Raghvan and Natarajan are also able to share his legacy, albeit on a smaller scale.

The fusion of genres does not end at composing the songs, but also in the way it is performed on stage. The performances of the artists take elements from the performance cultures of both Carnatic classical and Western performance traditions, thus making it novel and yet familiar for its audience. This further fascinates an audience that feels largely alienated from Carnatic mainstream music. By doing so, the artists are also disassociating their music from the religious connotations that underlie Carnatic classical music. In addition, they refrain from defining the purpose or cultural significance of their music into one narrative. By keeping it open, the artists are broadening the horizons of the audience's interpretation, thus making it palatable for a wider audience. It also lets the audience hold onto their traditions, while also finding reflections of their own experiences in the fusion music they listen to. Thus, the often-oppressive nature that the Carnatic mainstream is accused of due to its close association with religion, is done away with.

Lastly, when asked about the future of Carnatic fusion music, the artists talked about the numerous and diverse interpretations of Carnatic fusion. Even the three artists discussed in this paper are diverse in terms of their interpretations of Carnatic fusion. Thus, it would be difficult for Carnatic fusion to be classified under one genre as there are many interpretations of the same. Even the idea of Carnatic fusion as an evolution of the mainstream genre prompts us to rethink the bounds of a genre (which is also something Carnatic fusion challenges). Therefore, as Fellezs (2011) argues, it is futile to define fusion, as its origin lies in challenging them.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, Carnatic fusion music is a result of tradition and modernity coexisting in India. This was evident through various instances where the artists interviewed talked about the exposure to Carnatic music (at a young age) as well as Western pop music, and the influence of artists like A. R. Rahman (who is known for bringing together Western sounds, Indian regional sounds, as well as technology). The close association of their music with film music (with respect to the common presence of fusion) can also be an indication of the popularity of the two kinds due to their hybrid nature. However, it should be noted that despite having certain commonalities with film music, the artists also make a distinction between Carnatic fusion and film music.

Heavily influenced by their individual experiences and surroundings, whether in terms of receiving training or in the form of popular figures who inspired them, the artists differ in their objective of music making, and targeted audience. For instance, the younger artists express a heavy influence of A. R. Rahman during their childhood and youth which was also the time when India was opening up to the West and Western culture. This has also inspired them to make music for an audience that, like them, feels alienated from their "roots" (represented by Carnatic classical). They further this task by divorcing the sacredness of religiousness from their music (which is evident in their refusal to put labels on it, and also performing in diverse locations), and associating personal, yet relatable individual experiences and journeys with it. Democratising Carnatic classical is an important aspect of an objective that all the three artists share. By making it more relatable and personalised, and by not imposing labels, the artists are taking a step towards democratising it.

A major criticism is of Carnatic fusion music is that it is a representation of our need to experience multiple things without the burden of context. Yet, the numerous interviews suggest that one of the appeals of Carnatic fusion music is its ability to bring together multiple spaces of identity that the artists and the audience inhabit. In addition, it provides a space for its audience to exercise their individuality by leaving their music's significance to open interpretation. Unlike the mainstream Carnatic classical music, whose history is deeply intertwined with religion, and religious practises, Carnatic fusion music provides itself as an alternative that lets its listeners

hold onto tradition, while also accounting for their own experiences in the contemporary world (either unique or common). However, this is not an adequate response to the criticism, as the artists do not explicitly acknowledge the music's history of being in the hands of certain privileged sections of society.

Another larger point of commonality between all three artists, apart from their lack of acknowledgement of the music's history, is that their music can be seen as responses (though of different kinds) to globalisation and what is believed to be its hegemonising effect. The term globalisation has been discussed as instrumental in encompassing these responses, which challenge the linear homogenising effect of the West but also reproduce the elements of Western pop culture (as a way of gaining entry to the global level).

Thus, the goal of Carnatic fusion for these artists seems to be two-fold. The first is based on the idea that any music is bound to evolve over the years in order to survive the test of time. Thus, Carnatic fusion is a glaring instance of such an evolution. The second is based on the idea that Carnatic mainstream music is losing its patronage due to people finding it relatively less relatable. Thus, Carnatic fusion is a way of attracting and introducing the aesthetics of the mainstream genre, in an attempt to increase patronage for the traditional mainstream genre.

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