Of Swarams and Arpeggios

In his book *Wisdom of the Heart,* Alan Cohen tells a story of a tribe in Africa that uses music as a fundamental expression of one's identity. According to the myth, before a child is born, its mother hears in her mind a song, a melody that will become the child's anthem. For the rest of the child's life, their song is sung to them by the other members of the village at all important life events, and again at their death. As Cohen claims, "Our song reminds us of our beauty when we feel ugly, our wholeness when we feel broken, our interconnectedness when we feel alone and our purpose when we feel lost." My song is a complex blend of contrasting voices, influences for which I am the confluence. It is composed of two distinct musical styles – Carnatic, from my South Indian heritage, and Western classical, from my life in America. I grew up torn between the two seemingly opposite genres, in a struggle that reflected my conflicting identities as an Indian and an American. Over time, however, I have come to find personal meaning within their conjunction. Learning to hear these harmonies together has illuminated my own story, and taught me to love my cultures.

Though in a literal sense my life began in the United States, my musical journey actually began over eight thousand miles away. My ancestors did not arrive on the shores of this country on the *Mayflower*, but rather on a Boeing 747 in the 1980s, in pursuit of the American dream. When they began building their lives here, my parents had few material possessions and even less money. By all accounts, they were exceedingly poor; yet this was a poverty that neither felt. For, along with ambition, optimism, and tenacity, my parents claimed the riches of a cultural history that spans thousands of years. Their strong accents, religious rituals, and spicy cuisine are all fundamental parts of the inheritance that, since my birth, has been passed down to me. In keeping with this, my song opens with the sound of Indian music, echoing the voices of my forebears.

There is a well-known Sanskrit saying regarding the hierarchy of the most important people in one's life. First is *matha*, or mother; then *pitha*, or father; followed by *guru*, or teacher; and lastly, *deivam*, or god. My mother claims two of the most influential roles in my life – one as my parent, and

the other as my Carnatic music teacher. In accordance with the sacred, almost quasi-divine nature of a *guru-shishya* relationship, my musical history is subsumed into hers. While both my paternal and maternal families have strong connections to the art, my mother stands out as an incredibly talented vocalist. From her childhood, she showed such promise that her teacher, a premier Carnatic singer, lived with her family for several years to provide her with extensive training. By her late teens, she had given countless performances, including one on India's national radio. When she migrated to the United States, instead of leaving the pursuit behind, she brought her knowledge, instruments, and collection of music books with her. As a side occupation, she began teaching music classes on the weekends, to spread her passion through our community in California. As a matter of course, I became her student, placing the mantle of her pedagogical lineage squarely on my shoulders.

My willingness to bear the responsibilities of being my mother's disciple started out quite strong, before it was eroded by age and expectations. One of my earliest childhood memories involves me pleading with my mother to teach me to sing; I remember her gentle but firm insistence on waiting until my third birthday to begin classes. But my eager enthusiasm did not last. I persisted in lessons with her for over a decade, but I was a dreadful student. I stubbornly refused to practice or memorize my songs, had no patience for keeping *tala*, and would frequently be impertinent during class. Astonishingly, my patient mother succeeded in drilling a Carnatic education into my head anyways. I progressed along with her other students, sang in Hindu ceremonies at temples and in homes, and participated in community festivals. Yet, I would always lack what made my mother's singing so special – *bhavam*, a distinguishing kind of devotion, or emotion, felt in music. Hearing my mother sing is a breathtaking experience because of her connection with the lyrics, the rhythm, and the ragam. Whether she sang songs about Lord Krishna, or verses of Bharathiyar's poetry, she infused her melodies with such feeling that I was torn between admiration and envy. Though I had heard her example in every moment of my life, I could not emulate it. Thus, as I approached adulthood, I failed to appreciate Carnatic music. Its unique sound, full of curves and a distinctly Indian exoticism, could

not be more apparent than when juxtaposed against the other predominant musical culture in my life – that of Western classical music.

As different as the genres seem aurally, my zeal for Western music marked an even sharper contrast between the two. At the age of eight, I implored my parents to enroll me in piano lessons, and with their support soon began training in classical piano from a teacher who lived across the street. Perhaps it was the reduced pressure in learning from someone I was not related to, or perhaps it was a desire to fit in with the "very American" people living "very American" lives around me. Most likely, it was a combination of these reasons that made me a much more diligent student in piano than in *pattu (*an Indian word for music). I progressed rapidly, and on the encouragement of my teacher, took examinations from two separate certifying associations. By my sixteenth birthday, I had reached the highest possible level, obtained a full certification in theory, and was on my way to completing one in harmony as well. While I failed to remember the names of talas and ragams, I knew the detailed histories of composers like Chopin and Rachmaninoff, could reel off descriptions of all the church modes, and was well-versed in the structure of every Baroque dance. My parents were incredibly supportive of my endeavors, driving me two hours through traffic every Saturday so I could continue learning from the same teacher after she moved away. I embraced every role within my pianist culture that I could possibly take on. I performed in recitals, composed my own pieces, and listened to Debussy in every spare minute.

Growing up with the difficulties that face a child of immigrants, I yearned to westernize, a desire which compromised my musical education and divided my family. Never mind that I had been born in California, or that I spoke English with no accent; I would never be a "true" American. As one of the most significant heirlooms in my life, Carnatic music became the primary scapegoat for my sense of not-belonging. For many years, I believed Western classical music and Carnatic music were mutually exclusive. Grappling with a sense of exclusion, I naively hoped that if I sang choral music instead of varnams, my brown skin would lighten in the eyes of the people around me. I learned the

“Star-Spangled Banner” by heart, and never bothered to listen to India's national anthem. While this brought me closer to my schoolmates, it placed the Pacific Ocean between myself and my family, as though we were America and India, continents apart.

In the last year, however, finding common ground between Carnatic and Western music has at last enabled me to bridge the gap between my two cultures. After arriving at MIT, I ached for the CDs of Unnikrishnan and Bombay Jayashree that would play in the car on family drives, and acutely felt the lack of a cassette tape playing the *Suprabhatham* in the mornings. Above all, I missed the way that hearing alapanas emanate from my mother's music room would set my feet to dancing. Homesick, I began listening to some of the Carnatic songs I remembered, and discovered the distinctions weren't so clear as I thought. A pentatonic scale is the same as *Mohanam ragam*. Solmization remains the same, whether I sing with “do-re-mi” or “sa-re-ga.” Church hymns are meant to be sung with the same devotion as Hindu bhajans. To my delight, both thillanas and sarabandes inspire me to dance.

Since beginning my collegiate journey, I have resolved to learn Carnatic music properly. My relationship with my mother has strengthened despite the three thousand miles separating us, as I finally understand her spiritual connection with Indian music. As on the surface I grow into an adult, my love for my heritage grows stronger within me, bringing me closer to my family and my ancestral homeland. Through the connections between Indian and Western music, I have learned to embrace my identity. I am neither an Indian, nor an American. I am Indian-American, with a hyphen that makes all the difference.