



Role of Women in the Preservation and Transmission of Carnatic Music

Contribution of Women Musicians to the Continuity, Pedagogy and Cultural Memory of Carnatic Music

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Abstract : Women have played an indispensable role in the preservation, transmission, and evolution of Carnatic music. Their contribution is not limited to performance alone; it extends to oral pedagogy, repertoire preservation, stylistic continuity, devotional expression, family-based transmission, and the social legitimacy of music as a culturally respected art form. From the early temple and household traditions to the modern concert stage and academic classroom, women have served as custodians of musical memory and continuity. Their role has often been simultaneously visible and undervalued: visible in the artistic accomplishments of iconic performers, yet underrepresented in historical narratives that privilege male composer-saints, male gurus, and institutional authorship. This paper examines the role of women in the preservation and transmission of Carnatic music through four interrelated dimensions: the domestic and oral sphere of learning, the development of performance traditions, the safeguarding of compositions and bani-systems, and the institutional expansion of Carnatic pedagogy in the modern era. Special attention is given to the contributions of distinguished women vocalists such as M. S. Subbulakshmi, D. K. Pattammal, M. L. Vasanthakumari, T. Brinda, T. Muktha, Mangalampalli Kalanidhi, R. Vedavalli, Sudha Ragunathan, Bombay Jayashri, Aruna Sairam, S. Sowmya, and others, whose artistic legacies shaped the repertoire, aesthetics, and pedagogy of the tradition. The paper argues that women have functioned not merely as performers, but as principal agents of continuity, cultural preservation, and musical education in Carnatic music.

IndexTerms - Carnatic Music, Women Musicians, Oral Tradition, Guru-Shishya Parampara, Music Pedagogy, Devotional Music, Cultural Preservation, Concert Tradition, Female Vocalists, Indian Classical Music.

I. INTRODUCTION

Carnatic music is one of the most refined and enduring classical traditions of India. Its survival over centuries has depended on more than compositions, theory, and performance technique. It has required a living chain of transmission, where music is taught, heard, internalized, performed, and re-performed across generations. Women have been central to this continuity. Their contribution has been especially significant in the preservation of oral learning, the maintenance of family traditions, the refinement of devotional repertoire, and the transformation of Carnatic music into a modern concert and educational discipline.

In the historiography of Indian classical music, women are often discussed in two limited ways: either as celebrated performers who reached the stage of public recognition, or as symbolic figures in devotional and temple culture. Both perspectives are incomplete. Women have also been teachers, transmitters, archivists of memory, sustainers of bani traditions, and mediators between the domestic and public spheres of music. Through mothers, grandmothers, gurus, and senior performers, the art has been preserved not only in institutions but also in homes, kacheris, sabhas, and cultural communities.

This paper explores the role of women in the preservation and transmission of Carnatic music with special reference to historical continuity, pedagogy, performance, and cultural legitimacy. It argues that women are not peripheral participants in the tradition; they are among its most important custodians. Their presence has ensured that Carnatic music remained not merely an elite performance tradition, but a living cultural system rooted in discipline, devotion, and memory.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: WOMEN AND MUSICAL CONTINUITY

The role of women in Carnatic music must be understood in the wider context of Indian musical history. In traditional South Indian society, music was transmitted through multiple channels: temple rituals, household instruction, royal patronage, guru-disciple systems, and devotional movements. Women were active in all these spheres, though their contributions were not always equally documented.

In domestic settings, women were often the first teachers of music. They sang lullabies, devotional songs, wedding songs, and festival compositions that formed the first musical environment of a child. This early exposure created the foundation for later

formal training. For many musicians, especially in hereditary and music-oriented families, the mother or grandmother served as the earliest and most influential guide. This mode of transmission is crucial because it embeds music within memory, language, and emotional experience.

In the temple and devotional sphere, women participated in ritual and musical culture through bhajan, keerthana, and devotional recitation. The bhakti traditions of South India allowed music to become a form of spiritual expression that transcended rigid social boundaries. Women's voices were especially important in these traditions because devotional singing permitted a mode of public participation that could be morally and culturally legitimized.

Later, as Carnatic music developed into a concert art, women became increasingly visible on the public stage. Yet even when women entered formal concert spaces, they carried with them the pedagogical values of the domestic and devotional world: discipline, oral memorization, emotional depth, and reverence for the composition.

Thus, women have historically functioned as transmitters of music across three domains:

1. the household,
2. the devotional sphere, and
3. the public concert arena.

The continuity among these domains explains why women are indispensable to the survival of Carnatic music as a living tradition.

III. WOMEN AS CUSTODIANS OF ORAL TRADITION

Carnatic music is fundamentally an oral tradition. Even though notation exists, the art cannot be fully captured through written symbols alone. Gamakas, sruti alignment, rhythmic nuance, tonal shading, and emotional interpretation are transmitted through direct listening and imitation. Women have historically been central to this mode of transmission.

In many families, music was not first taught as a formal subject but as part of cultural life. A child absorbed ragas, talas, and devotional songs through repeated listening. Mothers and grandmothers sang regularly, thereby creating a natural musical environment. This type of informal transmission is one of the most powerful forms of preservation because it creates deep familiarity before formal discipline begins.

Women gurus have also shaped the oral tradition through direct teaching. The legacy of T. Brinda and T. Muktha, for example, is especially important in this respect. Their singing reflected a conservative and highly nuanced bani style in which compositions were preserved with extraordinary fidelity. Likewise, R. Vedavalli, known for her pedagogical seriousness and stylistic clarity, represents the continuity of oral transmission in the modern era. Their work demonstrates that women have not merely performed compositions but have acted as guardians of stylistic authenticity.

Oral transmission in Carnatic music is not only about reproducing notes. It is about preserving:

- the phrase structure of a raga,
- the tonal logic of a composition,
- the emotional character of a kriti,
- the compositional grammar of a bani,
- and the interpretive style of a school.

Women have played a major role in keeping these dimensions intact.

IV. WOMEN AND THE PERFORMANCE TRADITION

The rise of the modern Carnatic concert stage in the twentieth century is inseparable from the contributions of women performers. Women did not merely enter the concert platform as participants; they helped define its ethos, repertoire, and aesthetic legitimacy.

1. M. S. Subbulakshmi

M. S. Subbulakshmi became a cultural symbol of Carnatic music's spiritual and artistic dignity. Her singing was marked by devotional purity, tonal discipline, and universal accessibility. She helped present Carnatic music as an art that could be both deeply classical and widely appreciated. Her performances of devotional works, including compositions associated with temple worship and national cultural identity, strengthened the place of music as a spiritual and ethical force in public life.

2. D. K. Pattammal

D. K. Pattammal broke important boundaries in repertoire and performance authority. She was widely respected for her intellectual approach, precision, and bold inclusion of heavy and complex compositions in mainstream concert platforms. Her role was significant not only artistically but also socially, because she helped normalize women's presence in what had once been a male-dominated concert culture.

3. M. L. Vasanthakumari

M. L. Vasanthakumari contributed a highly expansive and expressive style. Her artistic imagination, musical flexibility, and charismatic stage presence made her a major force in the evolution of public Carnatic performance. She brought vitality to the concert stage and helped expand audience engagement with classical music.

4. T. Brinda and T. Muktha

These two vocalists are crucial for understanding bani-based preservation. Their music retained extraordinary fidelity to older stylistic lineages. They were important not merely as performers, but as living archives of a style that preserved older interpretive habits, especially in composition and gamaka treatment.

5. R. Vedavalli

R. Vedavalli represents a disciplined and scholarly approach to Carnatic performance and teaching. Her contribution lies not only in concert performance but also in training students, preserving compositional authenticity, and maintaining a high standard of classical rigor.

6. Sudha Ragunathan, Bombay Jayashri, Aruna Sairam, S. Sowmya and others

These contemporary women vocalists have helped bring Carnatic music into wider public and global circulation. Their contributions include concert performance, teaching, recording, lecture-demonstration, and cultural representation on national and international platforms.

Together, these women demonstrate that performance is itself a form of preservation. By repeatedly performing, interpreting, and teaching compositions, they sustain the living archive of Carnatic music.

V. WOMEN IN THE PRESERVATION OF REPERTOIRE

Carnatic music is rich in compositions, many of which survive because of repeated performance and oral recall rather than only written documentation. Women have played a major role in safeguarding repertoire.

Several categories of compositions have been preserved through women's performance traditions:

- kritis of the Trinity,
- divya nama keerthanas,
- Annamacharya keerthanas,
- javalis,
- padams,
- thillanas,
- bhajans,
- and devotional songs associated with temples and domestic practice.

Women performers have often given special attention to lyrical clarity, emotional expression, and compositional integrity. This matters because Carnatic repertoire is not simply a set of songs; it is a complex textual-musical archive. When a performer consistently presents a composition, that composition remains alive in public memory.

Women also helped preserve rare and less common compositions. Senior women musicians have traditionally maintained older pieces that are not always part of the most commercialized concert circuits. This includes delicate padam traditions, less frequently performed compositions, and regional devotional works. Their commitment has protected the diversity of the tradition.

In this sense, women function as curators of repertoire. They do not simply inherit music; they conserve and transmit it.

VI. WOMEN AS TEACHERS AND GURUS

Perhaps the most underappreciated dimension of women's role in Carnatic music is their function as teachers. The tradition of guru-shishya parampara depends on deep personal instruction, and women have long been significant as gurus.

Women gurus have often trained their students with:

- strict attention to sruti,
- careful raga development,
- disciplined voice culture,
- repeated memorization,
- and proper understanding of sahitya and tala.

Their role becomes especially important in the formation of the next generation of musicians. A teacher does not merely produce performers; she transmits a worldview. In Carnatic music, that worldview includes reverence for the composition, respect for tradition, and responsibility toward cultural continuity.

Women teachers also contribute to pedagogy by balancing authority and sensitivity. Their presence in the music classroom often creates a learning environment that combines discipline with emotional care. This is particularly important in classical music, where musical maturity cannot be reduced to technical ability alone.

In many families and institutions, the mother-guru identity is especially important. A woman may be simultaneously:

- a parent,
- a performer,
- a teacher,
- and a cultural guardian.

This multi-layered role strengthens the continuity of Carnatic music across generations.

VII. WOMEN, DEVOTION, AND CULTURAL LEGITIMACY

Carnatic music has always been closely associated with bhakti, devotion, and sacred expression. Women have played a major role in maintaining this spiritual dimension. Their performances frequently emphasize devotional compositions, religious contexts, and emotional surrender.

This is significant because devotion gave women a legitimate space in classical music culture. In many historical contexts, public performance by women required cultural and moral justification. The devotional framework of Carnatic music helped provide that legitimacy. Music became not merely entertainment, but an offering. The woman singer could be perceived as a custodian of sacred sound rather than merely a public entertainer.

This devotional legitimacy shaped:

- temple performance,
- household music,
- religious festivals,
- and concert aesthetics.

Women's singing often preserves the intimate emotional character of bhakti, particularly in compositions that express longing, reverence, surrender, and divine dialogue. This has made women's voices deeply influential in the emotional culture of Carnatic music.

VIII. MODERNITY, MEDIA, AND GLOBAL TRANSMISSION

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries brought recording, radio, television, cassettes, CDs, online platforms, and streaming services. Women were central to this new phase of transmission. Their voices became archived, circulated, and studied across distances far beyond the concert hall.

Modern media made it possible for female vocalists to become cultural icons with wide reach. Their recordings now serve as:

- learning tools,
- archival resources,
- performance models,
- and historical evidence of stylistic continuity.

This media presence has also changed the idea of preservation. Earlier, preservation depended heavily on oral continuity within families and guru lineages. Today, it also depends on recordings, digital archives, and online circulation. Women musicians have been especially important in this transition because many of their performances now serve as permanent pedagogical resources for students and researchers.

Women in Academic and Institutional Music Education

In addition to performance and recording, women have contributed significantly to the institutionalization of Carnatic music through universities, music colleges, cultural academies, and government-supported educational programs. Many senior women musicians have served as lecturers, professors, research supervisors, syllabus designers, and curriculum contributors in higher education. Their involvement has strengthened the academic study of Carnatic music and ensured that traditional knowledge is systematically documented and transmitted within formal educational structures. Through workshops, lecture-demonstrations, research publications, and curriculum development, women have expanded the scope of Carnatic pedagogy beyond the traditional guru-shishya model while preserving its essential values.

Digital media has globalized Carnatic music, but the quality of transmission still depends on the authority of the performer. The presence of women in this digital archive ensures that Carnatic music continues to be learned, heard, and valued across generations and geographies.

IX. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite their immense contribution, women's role in Carnatic music has often been underrepresented in formal historical writing. There are several reasons for this:

1. Histories of music often prioritize composer-saints and male gurus.
2. Women's domestic teaching is often undocumented.
3. Temple and household transmission is less visible than institutional authorship.
4. Female performance may be celebrated without recognizing pedagogical authority.

This leads to a distorted understanding of the tradition. The true history of Carnatic music cannot be written without women because much of the tradition's continuity depended on them.

Another challenge is that women's contributions are often acknowledged selectively. A performer may be praised for artistry, but not always for teaching, preserving repertoire, or shaping bani traditions. Similarly, women's domestic transmission of music is rarely treated as a serious form of cultural labor, even though it is one of the most important mechanisms of preservation.

A more accurate history of Carnatic music must therefore move beyond performance celebrity and recognize women as intellectual, pedagogical, and archival agents.

X. CONCLUSION

Women have been foundational to the preservation and transmission of Carnatic music. Their contribution spans the household, the temple, the classroom, the concert stage, and the digital archive. They have preserved repertoire, transmitted bani traditions, trained students, maintained devotional culture, and expanded the public legitimacy of Carnatic music.

From M. S. Subbulakshmi and D. K. Pattammal to T. Brinda, T. Muktha, M. L. Vasanthakumari, R. Vedavalli, Sudha Ragunathan, Bombay Jayashri, Aruna Sairam, S. Sowmya, and many others, women have ensured that Carnatic music remains both continuously inherited and continually renewed. Their role is not supplementary to the tradition; it is constitutive of the tradition itself.

A proper understanding of Carnatic music must therefore recognize women not only as performers but as:

- preservers of repertoire,
- transmitters of pedagogy,
- custodians of oral tradition,
- and agents of cultural memory.

The enduring vitality of Carnatic music owes much to the commitment, artistry, and discipline of women. Their contribution is one of the strongest reasons why the tradition continues to live, teach, and inspire in the modern age.

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