



# Music Accompaniments in South Indian Temple Rituals

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## Abstract

The Construction of the Temple itself throws light on various details of different art forms practiced during those times. Temples which were built hundreds of years ago maintain the same sound quality and it is truly astonishing to witness that spectacular architecture. Pancharatra Aagamas also known as bhagavath shastra, mention about the importance of Musical instruments that are to be played during the invocatory prayers and during other temple rituals. Instruments like the temple bells, conch, tavil, edakka and many more are used as accompaniments for important temple rituals.

**Keywords:** *Temple Rituals, Karnatik Music Accompaniment, Temple Architecture, Musical Pillars*

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## Introduction

The association of Karnataka music with temples has been evident from times immemorial. Many ritualistic practices in temples involve musical support even today. South India is described as the land of the Temples. The Construction of the Temple itself throws light on various details of different art forms practiced during those times. The architectural beauty is not just about the beautiful carvings in those pillars but a source of knowledge to many aspiring music students. History behind these carvings gives us evidence of the then music and it helps us to understand the evolution of music at various stages. Temples have been a seat of music where many Vaggeyakaras have composed various forms of compositions on different deities.

This paper concentrates only on the musical ritualistic practices involved in south Indian temples and the accompanying instruments used to present them in temples.

There are many temples in south India which follow musical tradition in many rituals. All four kinds of instruments are involved in temple music i.e the chordophones, lithiophones, membranophones and aerophones.

The simple aarathi ritual involves ringing of the bell which is made out of a mixture of brass, zinc, copper and other alloys. Similarly, circumambulation during the offering of the food to the deity is accompanied by the mangala vadyas and other instruments like the bheri, tavil etc.

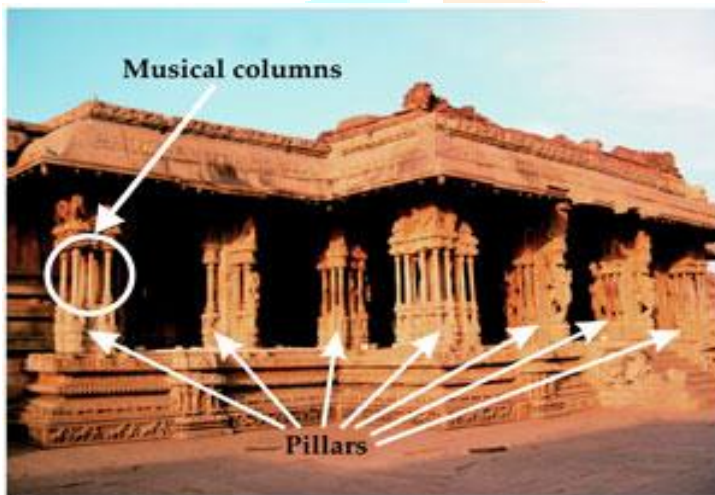
Every instrument used in temple rituals has its own significance and a few even carry interesting stories behind them. In south India, temples can be categorized mainly as Shaiva and Vaishnava temples by taking the karnatik musical ritualistic practices into consideration, there are a few age old temples which were built thousands of years ago where even today the musical rituals are being performed. Azhwars and Nayanmars have praised the deities of these temple in their Divya Prabandha Paashurams and Tevarams respectively.

## Musical Pillars

Many south Indian temples have music stone pillars which are crafted wisely to produce musical sound in them. Temples which were built hundreds of years ago maintain the same sound quality and is truly astonishing to witness that spectacular architecture. These architectural marvels have cluster of pillars that are carved out of huge stone blocks and when struck with two sticks produce resonant sound. Usually the performers stand upon either sides of the pillar and strike it hard to get that perfect sound from the musical pillar.

These stone pillars were played as solo instrument as well as an accompaniment. These pillars were used as accompanying instruments for dance performances where the jatis were played on the pillars. The tonal quality resembles that of Jaltarang.

It is interesting to know that these musical stone pillars are not quoted in the agama treatises. Hence we only see these stone pillars in the temples that were constructed during the late medieval period or the early modern period. The resonant stones were made use in southern part of India by the families of sthapatis in Temple construction. They initially started this work in Hampi where we find the musical stone pillars. Gradually the Sound and artistry in constructing these stone pillars improved. This is the result of the work on musical pillars in suchindram temple. The audacity and artistry are wonderfully sculpted in these pillars.



Source: <https://physicstoday.scitation.org/doi/10.1063/PT.4.0876/full/>

### Temple ritualistic practices in Aagamas and Samhitas

Pancharatra Aagamas also known as bhagavath shastra, mention about the importance of Musical instruments that are played during the invocatory prayers and other during other temple rituals. Importance of music, dance and musical instruments is stressed upon in this agama shastra. This is followed even today in Srirangam, Melkote, Kanchipuram and many other prominent Vishnu temples. It is in fact interesting to know that atonements are recommended if one fails to perform music, dance and play on a musical instrument in temples, which is by performing abhisheka in ghee, honey and milk if dance, music and instrumental performance are omitted respectively. Instruments like the Shankha. Venu, mardala, timila, dundubhi, pataha, jhallari, damaru,

dhakkari, naaga, panava and many more are accompanied during these rituals. 38 Instruments were being used in Srirangam Temple. Only a few are being played now.

Padma samhita says that the musical instruments must be played during the pradasha and abhisheka pooja. The bheri plays a significant role during brahmotsava. Once the bheri is struck during brahmotsava, no one is supposed to leave the town until the ritual is completed. 9 Taalas that are mandated for this instruments are , Ahvaana, Pakshi, Yushmat, Mama, Panchama, Indra, Kumba vishwaksena and Maatraadeena.

It is believed that all the devatas come and witness this auspicious event and hence sama taala must be played in the east, paddhava taala in the south, malla in the south west. The taalas that are mandated to be played during the dwajaroohana to each god is as follows. Khaga taala – Garuda, Bali taala – vishwaksena, sama taala – kumudan, malla taala – 5 weapons of Vishnu and also for Vaamana, paddhava taala – kumudakshan, n=mangala raala- sankhukarna, jaya taala – sarvanetra, Bhadra Taala – sumukha and Aadi taala – Agni.

Ishwara samhita states specific instruments for specific gods that must be accompanied on while performing Dwajaroohana Pooja ( hoisting the flag) during Brahmotsava. The Jhallari for Vishnu, Kaamsya for Brahma, Pataha for Lakshmi, Harsva mardala for Bhudevi. Tantri for gandharvas, kahala for saraswathi, mardala for Chandra. Vedanta Deshika, a renowned SriVaishnavite Saint, mentions about bheri and Dundubhi in his work Yaadavaabhyudaya, in praise of Lord Shri Krishna.

### **Tradition of Music rituals in Prominent South Indian temples**

Among many South Indian Temples where musical rituals are being practiced only a few prominent ones where rare instruments are accompanied for musical rituals are mentioned here.

The Nataraja temple of Chidambaram has a stone chariot in front of the sanctum sanctorum, which has the sculpture of a person playing the panchamukhavadyam on it. This is not only played solo but is also accompanied by the shuddhamaddalam.

This instrument is slightly large compared to other avanaddha vadyas, hence it is mounted on a four wheeled carriage. The resonator of this instrument is common for all the five drums, the others vibrate by themselves if one drum is struck, and this is proved virtually by sprinkling sand particles or rice flour on the unstruck drums.

The Parasaiva class are the privileged people that play this instrument. They play at the Tiruvarur and Tirututarauppundi temple even today. A descendant of Tambiyappan, who was the disciple of Shri Muttuswamy Dikshitar plays this instrument in Thiruvarur.



source: <https://www.generalknowledgebook.com>

The Cheyyur temple in Tamil Nadu where Lord Kandhaswamy is worshipped has a unique music tradition where 72 music instruments are played for 4 long hours known as the Sarva Vaadya during the annual brahmotsava festival. This is also played in the temples of Thiruvanmiyur, sarangapani and kumbakonam.

The Brihadambal temple in Pudukkottai has a tradition of playing ashtadasha vaadyas (18 instruments) during festivals of the temple.

In Guruvayur temple, the instruments like Idakka, Nadaswara, Chengila along with a drone shruthi are played together. In the temples of Kerala, this instrument is usually played to accompany the ritual of circumambulation (pradakshina) while performing the offerings to Shreebali, shreebhutabali and utasava bali.

## Karnatik Music Instruments in Temple Rituals

### Naagaswara

This recent instrument is just 800 years old. It is known as the 'Mangala Vaadya' meaning auspicious instrument. There is no mention of this in kaamika gaanam( a work on music temple rituals). The 'vangiyam' mentioned in shilappadikaaram resembles this instrument. This is accompanied by Taval. Sangeetha ratnakara doesn't have any mention about this instrument. There is reference of magudi and bhujanga swaram. This instrument resembles the tone of these hence it was known by the name naagaswara. Naga and bhujanga means serpance. A sculpture of a snake charmer playing on the magudi instrument is seen in temple of Thirukuzhakundra in Chingleput district. In Vaishnava Temples Mukha vina (a miniature of nagaswara) is played during rituals performed at night. In Azhwartirunaghari temple, a stone mukha veena is still being played. The group of Naagaswara, taval, ottu and cymbals are collectively known as 'Melam' in Tamil.

### Conch

This is one of the ancient wind instruments used in temple rituals. The Panchajanya used by the Lord Shri Krishna himself makes this instrument very divine. Ramayana has reference to this instrument. This was mainly used in the battle field to rouse the fervor of the soldiers. Usually the Pandaram of the panichavan caste people play on this instrument.

### Temple Bell

This instrument is considered to be the divine in temple tradition. This is accompanied during important ritualistic practices involving aarati, food offering to the lord, burning of the incense and even during temple processions, during the yagnya. This is usually accompanied by the priest himself or by an assistant known as the 'paricharaka' while performing the above rituals. The priest usually chants shlokas or mantras during these events. The sounds of the temple bells have a vibrating and divine force to them. The daily ritual( aradhana ) is offered to the deity in the garbha gruha and this instrument is used as an accompaniment while chanting the mantras. The sound of the bell resonated with the mantras enhances the spiritual experience to the people present in that ambience.



This is considered auspicious and dispels evil forces by welcoming the divine. Since the sound of the bell disengages the mind from continuous flow of thoughts, it is also used to accompany during meditations.

## Cymbals

This is a taala metre usually used in melam concerts. Melam has an important role in temple music. Without the naagaswara and tavil music, no prominent temple rituals take place in most of the south Indian temples. This is usually played by striking the two taalas together. This is also used during bhajana rendition. One of the important features is that, it is easy to play and gives a clear picture about the eduppu to the main artist in melam music.

Ariyar Padal is one of the important music rituals that is sung by Ariyars in front of the lord during main events at a few temples in south India. Temples in Srirangam, Kanchipuram and Melkote follow this tradition even today. While singing the ariyar padal, the person singing this strikes these cymbals. The Ariyars usually wear a kulavi( hat ) on top of their head which is decorated with beads and stones made out of silk or velvet cloth. This hat also covers the ear which is designed like the ear and earring attached to it, just like the Karnakundalam (silver kavacham to the ear) adorned to the lord in temples.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/pg/arayarswamigal/photos/>

## **Tavil**

A traditional Karnataka music ensemble Periya melam has Nagaswaram as the main instrument, tavil and cymbals along with the drone are the accompaniments. This melam is considered to be very auspicious and is usually played during temple rituals in almost all of south Indian temples.

In this melam there will be 2 naagaswaram players accompanied by 2 tavil players, 1 player on the cymbal, 1 keeps the drone instrument. Sometimes conch and kinikittu is also used as accompanying instruments. Tavil is sometimes accompanied to the raga aalapanai during temple processions. This is a barrel shaped percussion instrument. This is played by using the hands and stick.

## **Idakka**

In many prominent temples of Kerala, Idakka/Maram is used as the lead instrument it is also known by the name 'Valanthala Chenda'. Idakka is usually used in kottipadi seva as well. This unique instrument has the ability to produce all the mnemonics of the mrudanga. This can also be played in two octaves. Many stalwarts have developed the technique to even accompany a varnam and other compositions with this instrument.

## **Mrudanga**

Kathakaalakshepam and bhajana paddhati have been prevalent in Temples from times immemorial. This instrument is used as an accompaniment to it. The literal meaning of Mrudanga is Clay Body. Many opine that the original production of the Mrudanga was made by using Clay and later Wood was used and it continues even today. The right head of the Mrudanga has 3 concentric layers of animal skin covered on the either sides also known as vettuttattu, kottuttattu and utkaraittattu. the left head has 2 rings where the outer ring is of buffalo's skin, the inner one is made from the skin of Sheep. Along with these, the right head has a black paste which is permanently fixed. This is a combination of manganese dust, tamarind juice, boiled rice. Some even use a particular composition of fine iron fillings and boiled rice. A place in Tanjore district called the Vallam a stone known as the kittaan is found. This is powdered and used along with boiled rice. A thick white paste is applied during the performance for better sound quality. This instrument is played in two hands and no other equipment is used. Hence it is an Aatata vaadya.



## Acoustics in Temple

Temples of south India are mostly built with good acoustics. The structure of these temples has spaces that are designed to perform music and dance. The semi closed or closed spaces inside the Temple allow the sound to reverberate and echo at a decent level. Choosing the right spot to sit and perform a song or an instrument allows the listener to enjoy the effect of natural tonal quality. Regular artists are appointed to perform in these temple halls even today. It is common to see a few interested devotees who offer sangeetha seva to the deity in these halls.

### Conclusion

Temples have been a learning spot for many musicians where the elders have passed on the knowledge of the art of vocal, instrumental, and dance forms through the traditional practices performed during special occasions. Special musical forms like the Gatha nibandham and Saamaja are confined to temple music alone.

A few instruments like the Naadaswara melams which were confined to be played only during festivities are now being seen in concert platforms. Veena, Mrudanga, and a few other instruments were only seen during the Saamagana chanting and are now performed in main concert stages.

The art of accompaniment in temple rituals has its one unique feature of divine bliss that is obtained by the performer and the listener. The rhythmic pattern and melody are very unique by themselves when it comes to temple music. Preserving and performing these musical ritualistic practices are no doubt a challenge but are being carried forward by the younger generations.

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