

## Music's Imprint on Life: A Hindu Perspective

By Lakshmi Narasimhan (with inputs from her family)



Music has been an integral part of society and culture since time immemorial. Many use it as a means of relaxation and enjoyment, while others find passion in its theoretical technicalities. Music has also woven its way into Hindu religion and spirituality. Through this article we will aim to explore how science explains the feeling we get when we all listen to music that we enjoy. We will also consider on how music, religion and the philosophy in the Vedas are intertwined.

Frederick Delius has called music an "outburst of the soul". Confucius has observed that the sounds associated with the form produce "a kind of pleasure which human nature cannot do without". Oscar Wilde has noted that it is the art "which is most nigh to tears and memory". Listening to the music we love actually stimulates production of the feel good chemicals such as dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin in our brain. It has also been shown that just the anticipation of our favorite passage also stimulates the production of these chemicals. In the human species music predates writing by about 20,000 years and is wired into our brain. Such findings help us to explain why music is of such high value across all human societies. It is therefore not a surprise that music has played an integral role in religion.

Sound and music possess a central place in Hindu theory and practice and Hinduism is essentially a sonic theology. Unlike a number of other religious traditions that emphasize silence, the Hindu rituals incorporate many sounds. Instruments such as drums, bells, gongs, cymbals, conches, flutes and a vast array of vocalisations play a central role in the worship experience. Author Guy Beck, has argued that music participates at every level of the Hindu cosmos.

*"Samavedadidam geetam sanjagraha pitamaha"*- meaning, our ancestors obtained music from the Samavedas. Vedic music is the earliest instance of the deep relationship between Hinduism and music. The Rigveda relied on recited hymns (richa). The musical changing of the hymns in the Samaveda, can be considered to be the origin of saptaswaras (7 notes), which are the building blocks of music.



Music and sound have played an important role in the practice of Hinduism. Priests were educated from early childhood, and entrusted with upholding the correct transmission and pronunciation of the Vedic hymns. Particular care had to be taken because the way the hymns were recited was as important as the actual words, to please the Gods.

In Hindu belief, music is considered a spiritual bridge between our exterior form of existence and the formless world of Spirit. There is the concept that all reality resides in sound vibrations and that the physical world is a manifestation of different frequencies of this vibration. Therefore, humans are also essentially vibration, and subject to the laws of sound. 'Om' is the universal sound. One of the most revered texts in Hinduism is the *"Bhagavat*

*Geeta*" which means *the song of God*. This itself reflects the importance of song and music in Hinduism.

In Hinduism music is not restricted to just humans. Many Gods are associated with music. For instance, Lord Siva is depicted with the drums, Goddess Saraswati with the Veena, Lord Krishna with the flute and Sage Narada with the tanpura. There are legendary stories of Lord Krishna hypnotising the whole of Brindavan with his flute. Residents of Brindavan dropped what they were doing and went to listen to Lord Krishna playing the flute. When Lord Siva performed his Tandavam, cosmic dance, Nandi was the percussionist.



Philosophically, the four aims of human life are dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Dharma is the aim of righteousness, artha is the aim of wealth and prosperity, kama is the aim of enjoyment and moksha is the liberation of the ways of the world. Music is recognized as a divine art that awards all these four aims to both the performer and listener.

In Kaliyuga, music has made God more accessible to the common man. All over India, great saints like Tukaram, Namdev, Gnyaneshwar, Meerabai, Kabir, Tulsidas, Jayadev, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Thyagarajah, Purandaradas and Dikshitar have contributed immensely to the culture of devotion through music.

These saints composed various songs in the local language in praise of the Lord. Many would wander the streets singing and dancing to the songs, captivating their audience. Ancient Rishis like Valmiki and Vedavasya have also talked about the benefits of keeping such good company. Satsangs are one of the ways of associating with like minded devotees. "*Sat*" means truth and "*Sang*" means company. Music is a very important aspect of satsangs. Very often at these satsangs, people praise the Lord via the songs composed by the great saints. Music plays a very important role in most religions, whether it is the organ playing in churches, choirs singing, Sufi music or the bhajans and keertans sung in satsangs. In conclusion, music gives a person the feeling of having his or her own personal conversation with God.

Gold Coast Hindu Cultural Association aims to promote such valuable Hindu culture among the present and future generations in South East Queensland ([www.GoldCoastHindu.org](http://www.GoldCoastHindu.org)). The proposed "Hindu Cultural and Education Centre" would be the physical abode of the GCHCA where activities such as classical literature, music, dance and spiritual education will be nurtured.

*"Music is the highest form of art, and for those who understand it, the highest form of worship"*

*Swami Vivekananda*