**STAGING THE STAGES: RESEARCH AS A MUSICAL JOURNEY**
**EUROPEAN PLATFORM FOR ARTISTIC RESEARCH IN MUSIC, ANTWERP, APRIL 20TH, 2017**

**CHARULATHA MANI**
**QUEENSLAND CONSERVATORIUM, GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY, AUSTRALIA**

**ABSTRACT:**
The experiential nature of artistic research presents itself in the dual frames of its conception and audience perception. The author, a vocal artiste of the Carnatic tradition of South Indian music, here re-imagines through her lens, 17th century Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi's writings for the voice in his musical dramas. The metaphorical 'laboratory' wherein she re-crafted the notated writings in her own idiom is recreated through this presentation. She converses with the audience, sings a notated phrase, sings her 're-imagined' version, expresses the challenges she faces in negotiating the cultural and linguistic barriers and in doing so takes them on a journey that elicits their empathy as well as participation in what turns out to be an orchestrated 'staging' of the various stages that the research-practice loop entails. Historically informed aspects of the research unfold naturally at each sign-post that marks a point of 'realisation' in the exposition. The differences in the nature of 16th and 17th century vocalisations and the present vocal techniques that are prevalent in canonical Western Art music are enunciated with example phrases from the aria. Research and practice at active interplay are witnessed by the audience who are invited to be more than just spectators; to be interlocutors in the genesis. The audience are questioned, encouraged to question, thereby sharing their considered feedback as the stages develop. The author/creator responds not only to the seminal artistic impulse from within, but also to the external reactions that her creativity elicits from others, in real-time. The stages interlock with one another; the informed product emerges. The objective of this presentation is to illustrate the transient nature of the 'production'. Albeit being better informed, it will further refine itself. The creator shall take this experiential engagement back to the sound laboratory. This encapsulated battery of creative ideas that flowed from the artiste to the audience and back through the artiste into the music shall manifest itself in a newer version. Such a circuitous route in dissemination is most suitable for artistic researchers; it ensures renewal and re-engineering of ideas.

**INTRODUCTION:**
It is heartening to be part of the EPARM conference that distils artistic research outputs from all over Europe for the benefit of the entire community of practice-led researchers. I am one of the three representatives from the Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, Australia, and am eager to witness the presentations from my esteemed colleagues and peers in the coming days.

I am a singer, born and raised in Chennai, Southern India. The music that I have learnt and practiced is known as Carnatic music. Raga-s that are modal melody types are the most charming feature of this system of music, and inflections (referred to as *gamakas*) are unique ornamentations that adorn the raga phrases, not unlike ornamentation in the Baroque Era of Western Art Music. This idiom is ingrained in not only my vocalisations, but also in my persona and is the lens through which I behold and respond to all other forms of music. It is my accent, in speech and spoken song (Bowen, 1999).

The research question that I broached to myself as I found exposure to other forms of music was: Does the fact that I belong to the Carnatic tradition of singing indicate that I should only sing songs that are written for that particular genre of music? As a singer-composer I felt a compelling need to explore.
I find myself enamoured by pieces for the voice that have been written in Western Arts Music across the ages. I was particularly charmed by the melisma and *passaggi* in Claudio Monteverdi's writings in L'Orfeo wherein he follows the *recitar cantando per stilo rappresentativo*. I find myself singing the declamatory 'spoken song' forms, humming them as I walk along, often with incorrect Italian pronunciation. The artiste in me is aware of a singularly enticing aspect: the fact that I 'like' the tune, enjoy listening to it, and wish to be able to express the words and their expressions through the melody that is channelled by my own embodied experience. This is how my journey into artistic research commenced, and soon I found myself in the 'thick of things'.

In this presentation, I wish to take you through a series of stages that have been sign posts in my journey in interpreting Early Operatic pieces for the voice, using an example, the *La musica prologo* from L'Orfeo. This involves 'staging the stages' from my laboratory to yours.

## STAGE 1:

Here we look at the three key markers: the tune, libretto, pronunciation. We know that Monteverdi was passionate about the 'words being the master of the harmony' and not its 'servant'. This is something that I have had to be mindful of in this experiment.

A few issues that cropped up: Tonic Pitch, and the Italian language. I am not a native speaker of Italian, and have had to work on the libretto, the meaning and how music can meld the melody with the affects. I have reduced the pitch (from D) and transposed it to the pitch I usually sing Carnatic music in, A. The tonic drone 'tanpura' is set to A now.

The libretto we are going to work with today:

Io la **Musica** son (I am Music)

ch'a i **dolci accenti** so far **tranquillo** ogni **turbato core** ((who) with sweet accents can calm every troubled heart)

 **ed** or di nobil *ira*, ed or **d'amore** (now with noble anger, and now with love)

posso *infiammar* le più gelate **menti**. (can inflame the most frozen minds).

Italicised, Red: forceful vocalisation.

Green: Sweet

Musica as a persona: Morally instructive, high level rhetorical style.
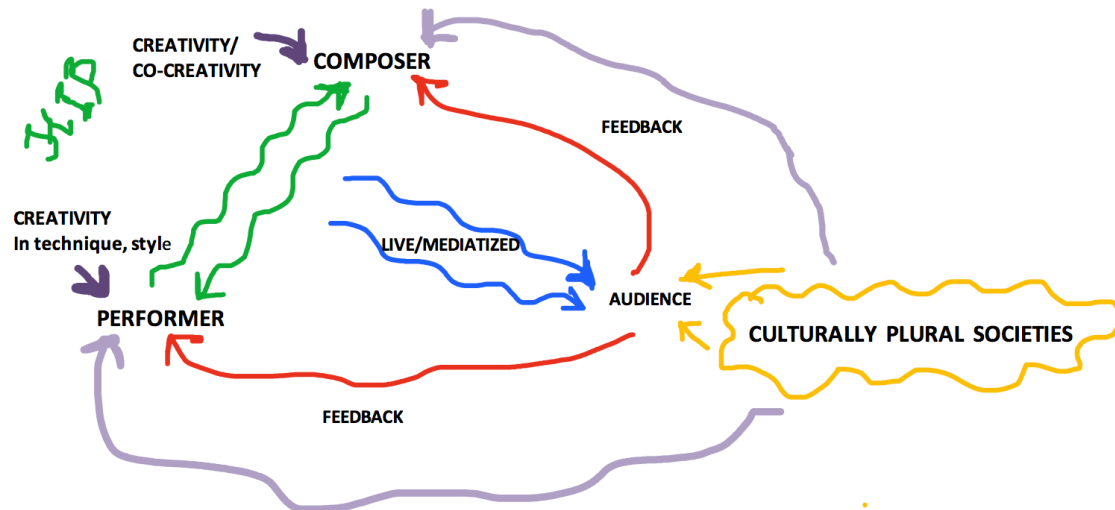
I have marked out some of the words that may be pivotal. Deciding through practice where and how the Carnatic touches and melisma can reinforce Monteverdian 'words over harmony' ideal is where the 'negotiation' of the 'tensions'between his composing and my re-imagining actually happens.
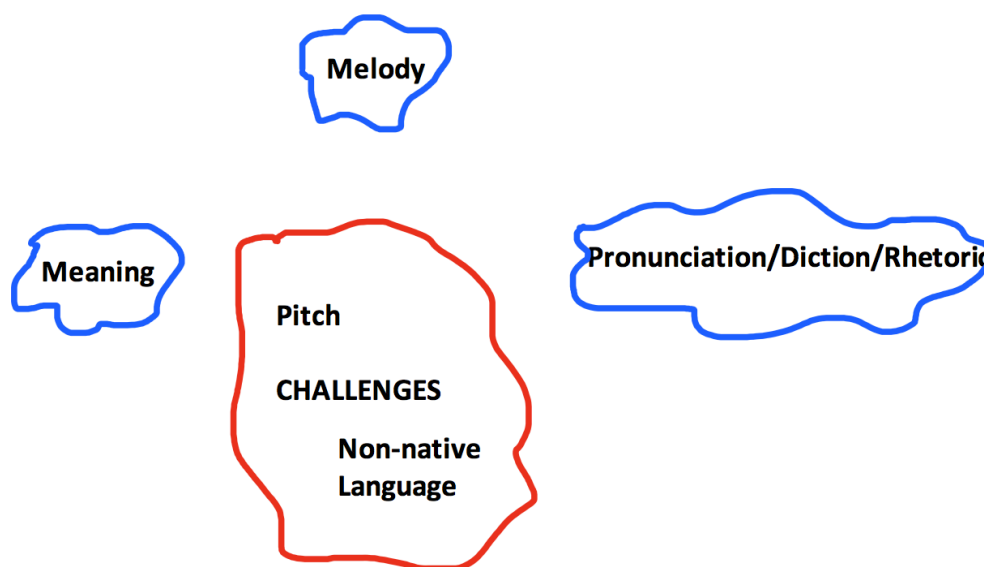


- **REDUCE PITCH**

- **LISTEN AND WORK ON PRONUNCIATION**

An overarching question arises: How can the re-imagination emerge as a product that reflects 'Praxis'as a dynamic interplay between artistry/intuition/practice on one hand and historical evidence/conscious thought/theory on the other? Achieving this elusive balance that Artistic research demands and hinges upon is as much a goal of this experiment as of any other effort in artistic research itself as a growing discipline.

**THE COMPOSER-PERFORMER-AUDIENCE MATRIX : HEGEMONY HOMOGENISED?  (Crispin, 2015, p.318)**

CREATIVITY/
CO-CREATIVITY          COMPOSER

                                        FEEDBACK

CREATIVITY
In technique, style        LIVE/MEDIATIZED

                                        AUDIENCE

PERFORMER                                   CULTURALLY PLURAL SOCIETIES

        FEEDBACK

**ARTISTIC RESEARCHER AS A CROSS CULTURAL COMPOSER-PERFORMER-IMPROVISER**

The complex inter-relationship between a composer and performer and its ever-changing nature in the present-day contextualisation of artistic research in music, has been debated upon, wrestled and reconciled with by learned scholars including Henk Borgdorff (2012), Darla Crispin (2015), and Stephen Emmerson (2017). Emmerson likens the performer-composer chemistry to a well-adjusted 'dance'. When the performer is also a co-creator and takes the liberty to improvise and build on a composer's ideas she is faced with complex questions, not least around the prevailing notions of Historically Informed Practice and *Werketreue* around present Western Art Music, WAM (Cook, 2013).  Constraints that lurked thickly over the Early music performance paradigm such as treating the score as authoritative and strictly prescriptive, as well as, the need for reproductions to be 'faithful' to the composer, have mercifully come under scrutiny and vehement criticism over the last few decades (Taruskin, 1995; Haynes, 2007; Wistreich & Potter, 2013). Comforted by such scholarship that has in many ways opened doors for innovators, and experimental artistes, I too have become venturesome and set foot into the domain of artistic research as a performer-composer-improviser. The descriptive rather than prescriptive nature of Baroque writing, the implicit nature of communication between the performers of that era, and the 'thin writing' that urges a contemporary performer of the idiom to reach out above and beyond the sheets of music towards a higher performative ideal, have been invaluable informants in my cross-cultural realisations.

## STAGE 2:

With this in the background, we move on to stage 2: Interpreting the original score in my voice.
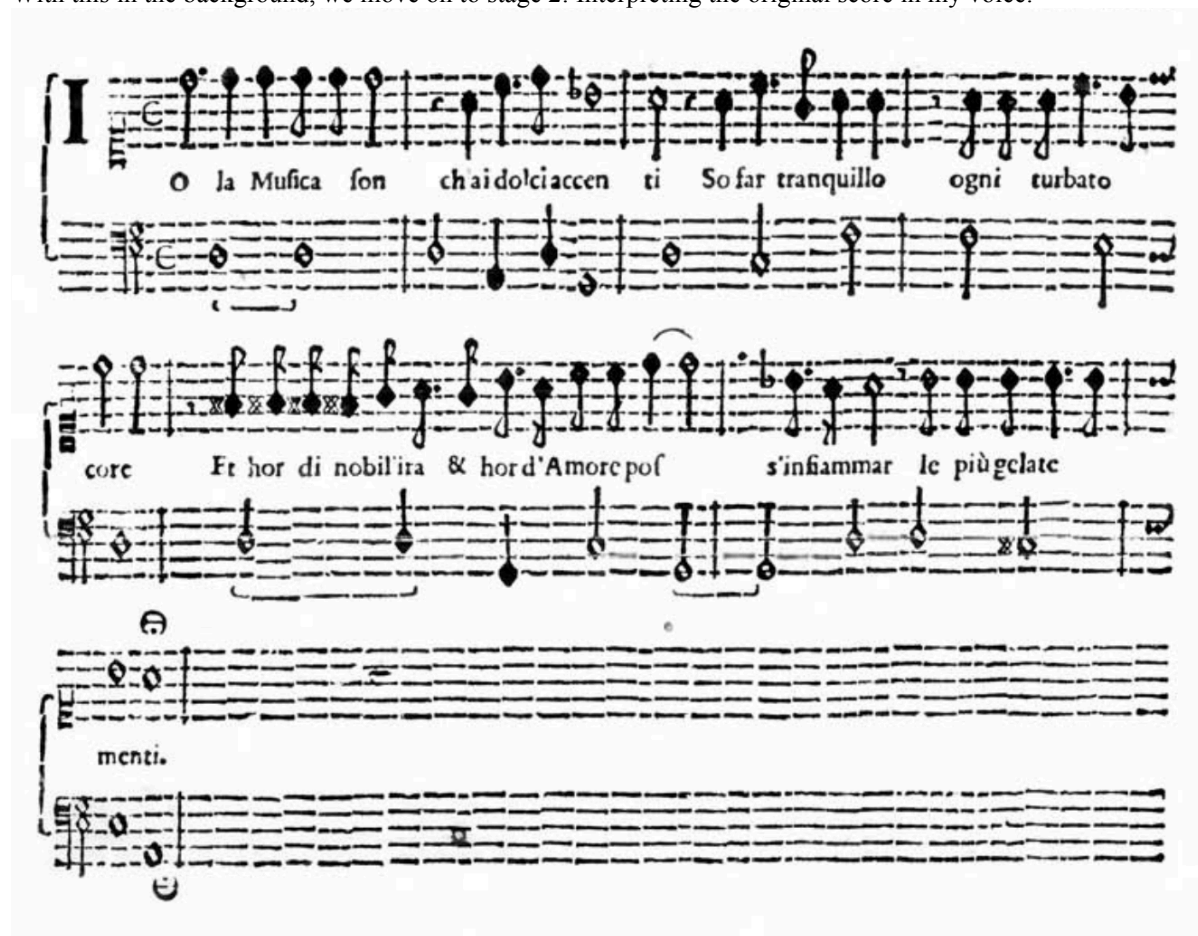


I am aware that when I sing this piece it sounds very different from what you may have heard from a normative operatic voice. It is not unlike accents in speech: to every person, it appears that it is the other who has an accent! (Bowen, 1999)

The question then is, will re-imagining it from a lateral system of music such as Carnatic, help clarify, to some extent, many of the dilemmas in the areas of vocalisation such as the *cantar alla gorgia* that practitioners of historically informed performance face in relation to the voice, today?

I am reassured by the treatises on improvisation and vocal ornamentation in the 16th 17th centuries including Maffei, and Mancini (Potter & Sorrel, 2012) that a singer was expected to interpret, improvise and cast his or her personal signature into a composition. Letters written by Monteverdi on singing and criteria that govern the competence of singers (Wistreich, 1994; 2007) are illuminating in this regard as well.

As I start imbuing the melody with the Carnatic nuances, it begins to sound different and this takes us to stage 3, the zone of re-imagination.

## STAGE 3:

The question that I ask myself and you, is: **How much improvisation is too much? How do their placements affect intelligibility of the words?**

I am now going to expand upon the first four phrases of this declamation and have your response at each instance. You will notice, that the hand gestures are an integral part embodied performance, not least in the context of Carnatic music. Being a traditional art form, in Carnatic concert practice, women singers are seated and are expected to restrain themselves from moving to the music. I find expressing my musical imagination using my hand as a metaphorical paint brush liberating.

Let us together determine the degree of Carnatic improvisation that I may be able to apply to these phrases. I will be presenting you with a few possible re-imaginations. You could help me in realising that elusive 'balance'

between word / melody and improvisation?
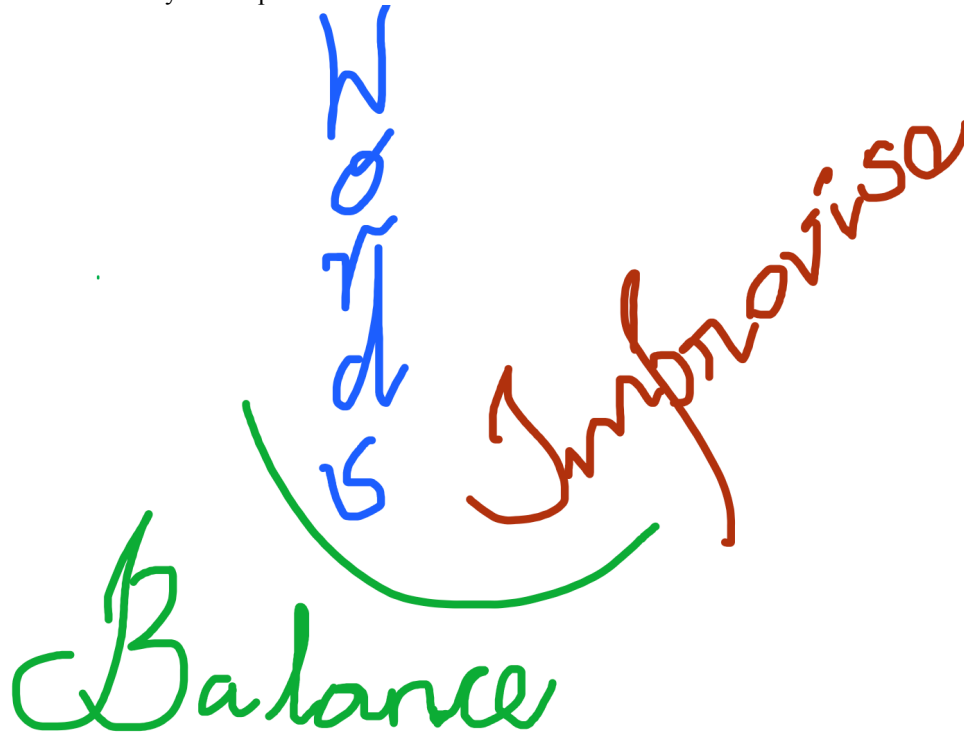


You may notice that in certain instances I try to keep with the actual note positions that Monteverdi has written out, applying ornamentation surrounding them (Swift, 1990; Jayalakshmi, 2002)

In certain others, I re-compose as I re-imagine. You may have noticed in 'core' I completed the phrase as a Raga and started the major third in 'ed ordi nobil ira' with an accent of another Raga (Kapi). I have also ventured to introduce Raga Bahar in the phrase 'turbato core': a turbulent heart is placated with a meandering melisma that this raga introduces.

I am mindful of the fact that the high-level rhetorical style of which this particular declamation is part of (Steinheuer, 2007) is not to be trifled with and that overtly infiltrating its framework with florid melisma and ornamentation might deprive it of its seriousness and morally instructive quality. The markers of historically informed performance may have a restrictive effect on imagination and creative interpretation, but sometimes they can be liberating. Finding common ground is the fulfilling, yet daunting part of Artistic research. When a composer plays the role of a performer/singer, real-time changes in dissemination can be implemented, and the circuit to and from the audience is a vital auxiliary limb that powers the feedback loop.

The power point presentation contains a slide embedded with around a minute of music that has been realised in collaboration with a harpsichord player, Gunnhild Tonden; my heartfelt thanks to her for participating in my journey. While I am keen to engage with a harpsichord accompaniment in this declamation, but I might also consider augmenting the aural experience using the Indian plucked instrument, the Veena.
Further stages are sign posts that are visited not before re-evaluation, re-imagining and reframing each one of the earlier formative stages that have in turn been informed by the inputs that the audience and collaborators have presented me with. I am indeed grateful to you all for being such an accommodative, patient and responsive audience. Every stage that an artistic researcher faces shall be a whetstone for his or her artistry, a testing ground, an arena to invite feedback. As my research into 'Re-imagining Monteverdi from a South Indian musical vantage point' continues, my processes shall refine themselves, and I will continue to mine the ore for precious insights that I may then plough, invest and multiply through my efforts. I thank AEC and EPARM for this platform to portray my research as art.

**References**:
Borgdorff, H. (2010). The production of knowledge in artistic research. In M. Biggs & H. Karlsson (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* (pp. 44–63). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
Borgdorff, H. (2012). *The conflict of the faculties: Perspectives on artistic research and academia.* The Hague: Leiden University Press.

Bowen, J. A. (1999). Finding the music in musicology: Performance history and musical works. *Rethinking music* (pp. 424- 51).

Crispin, D. (2015). Artistic Research in/as Composition: Some Case Notes. In *Patterns of Intuition* (pp. 317-327). Netherlands: Springer.

Dahlhaus, C. (1983). Foundations of music history. Cambridge University Press.

Emmerson, S. (2017). Is My Performance Research? *Perspectives on Artistic Research in Music*, 27.

Haynes, B. (2007). *The End of Early Music: a period performer's history of music for the twenty-first century*. Oxford University Press.

Jayalakshmi, R. S. (2002). *Gamakas explained in Sangita-sampradaya-pradarsini of Subbarama Diksitar*. Ph.D Diss. University of Madras.

Potter, J., & Sorrell, N. (2012). *A history of singing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Steinheuer, J. (2007). Orfeo. *The Cambridge Companion to Monteverdi*. In Whenham & Wistreich (Eds.). 119-140. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Thornburn, B. E. (2012). *Recomposing Monteverdi: Twentieth-Century Adaptations of Monteverdi's Operas*. Yale University.

Swift, G. N. (1990). South Indian "Gamaka" and the Violin. *Asian Music,* 21(2): 71-89.

Taruskin, R. (1995). Text and act. *Essays on Music and performance*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Whenham, J. (1986). *Claudio Monteverdi: Orfeo*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wistreich, R. (1994). 'La voce è grata assai, ma...': Monteverdi on singing. *Early Music*, 22(1), 7.

Wistreich, R., & Potter, J. (2013). Singing early music: a conversation. *Early Music*, *41*(1), 22-26.