

How the study of Carnatic Raga influenced my contemporary Western compositions

Since 2017, the study of Carnatic music theory -especially the Ragas- has enlarged the perspectives and the ways I look at Arabic Maqam theory (especially that I transfigure many Arabic elements into my contemporary Western compositions). Hereby are some of these perspectives:

- 1- My attraction to the Raga theory is tied primarily (yet not only) to the Ragas which have common elements with Arabic music Maqam system (for example: identical modalities, similar pentachords or tetrachords -such as (C, D, Eb, F#, G) or (C, Db, E, F)- in addition to the occurrence of the interval of augmented 2nd). Example 1.
- 2- In some Ragas¹, the number of pitches may differ when ascending from when descending. For example, in Raga Abheri the ascending pitches are 5 while when descending the pitches are 7. In Raga Poorvikalyani, the ascending pitches are 6 pitches, while when descending the 7 pitches are performed. This fact has affected my use of some Arabic Maqamat in my Western compositions. For example, the beginning of my piece 'Melancholie' (for chromatic harmonica & orchestra) as well as 'Nuages funèbres' (for piano) use solely and intentionally the first 6 pitches from Maqam Hijaz-Kar (this time transposed on E) thus omit the Maqam's 7th pitch (D#) for a good while. Example 2.
- 3- When reading Raga Lalitha theoretically (Example 3), I perceive it as Raga Mayamalavagowlai (Ex. 1 A) yet with an omitted G. This theoretical reading has influenced omitting pitches in some Arabic Maqamat when used in some recent compositions. This time, however, the omissions are not extracted from the very end of the Maqam (as was mentioned in point 2), but from the middle of the Maqam. This can be traced, for instance, in the opening measures of my piano piece 'Tombeau' (the first piece of my new work 'Critiques & Ironies') inspired by the ascending pitches of Raga Gowlai (C, Db, F, G, B).
- 4- In Example 4 A&B, the Ragas begin with a pentachord named 'Nikriz' according to Arabic music theory (C, D, Eb, F#, G). However, the Ragas combine the Nikriz pentachord with two tetrachords, namely, (G, Ab, Bb, C) – named in Arabic music 'Kurd'- as well as (G, A, B, C) -named in Arabic music 'Ajam'. Though the three tetrachords do exist in Arabic music theory, they are not combined in such a way in Arabic music; I am not yet familiar with a combination of Nikriz+Kurd neither of Nikriz+Ajam². So, the Ragas here offer new ways to combine Arabic tetrachords.

¹ The Ragas are quoted from the following website:
<http://www.ragasurabhi.com/carnatic-music/ragas.html>

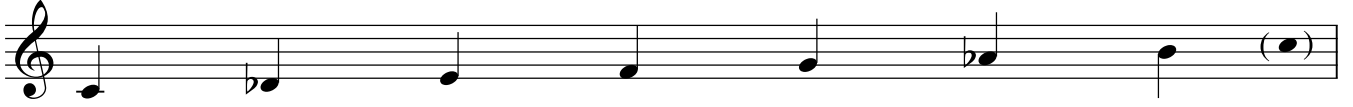
² In Arabic music theory, the following combinations exist with Nikriz being the 1st pentachord: Maqam Nikriz: C, D, Eb, F#, G, A, Bb, C; Maqam Nawa Athar: C, D, Eb, F#, G, Ab, B, C; Maqam Zawil: C, D, Eb, F#, G, A, B $\frac{3}{4}$, C

- 5- No Arabic Maqam begins with a 3-note chromatic cell. Neither do any Arabic Maqam use adjacent intervals larger than $1+1/2$. Here, however, Raga Varali (Example 5) combines these two taboos, thus offers a new horizon by combining the tetrachord (C, C#, D, F#) with a more familiar 2nd tetrachord, namely, (G, Ab, B, C) – called ‘Hijaz’ in Arabic music. I used Raga Varali in my new work ‘BELOVED’ (choreographic cantata for tenor, chamber choir and chamber orchestra).
- 6- In Example 6 A&B, the Ragas break up again with another taboo, namely, beginning an Arabic modality with the interval of an augmented 2nd (C, D#, E, F#) & (C, D#, E, F). The Ragas here combine these unfamiliar 1st tetrachords/genus/jins with more common 2nd tetrachords, named in Arabic music as Nahawand (G, A, Bb, C) & Ajam (G, A, B, C).
- 7- In Example 7, the Raga uses again a tetrachord which I have not yet encountered in Arabic music theory (C, Db, E, F#). Actually, this is a well-known tetrachord in Western music theory, namely, an all-interval tetrachord. Isn’t it wonderful, however, to see a Carnatic Raga combining the Western and the Arabic music theories: an all-interval tetrachord combined with a Hijaz tetrachord?

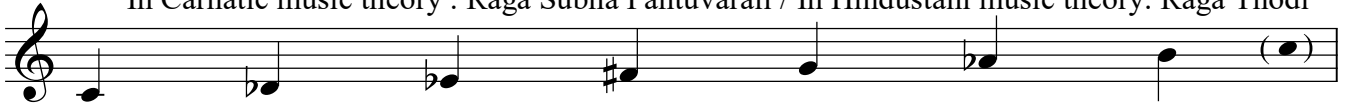
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Example 1:

A) In Arabic music theory : Maqam Hijaz-Kar
In Carnatic music theory : Raga Mayamalavagowlai



B) In Arabic music theory : Maqam Nawa Athar Kurd
In Carnatic music theory : Raga Subha Pantuvarali / In Hindustani music theory: Raga Thodi



C) In Arabic music theory : Maqam Nawa Athar
In Carnatic music theory : Raga Simhendramadhyamam



D) In Arabic music theory : Maqam Nahawand
In Carnatic music theory : Raga Keeravani



Example 2:

Maqam Hijaz-Kar (on E) while omitting its 7th pitch, namely, D#



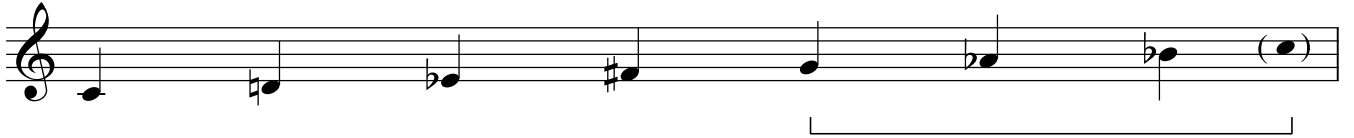
Example 3:

In Carnatic music theory : Raga Lalitha

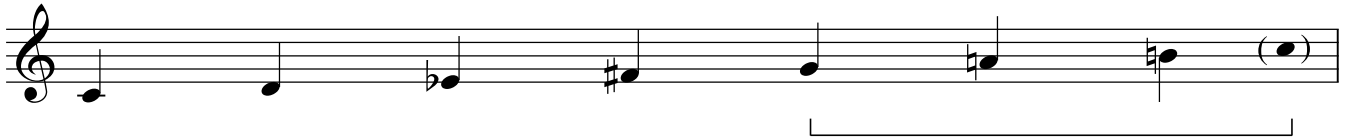


Example 4:

A) In Carnatic music theory : Raga Shanmukhapriya

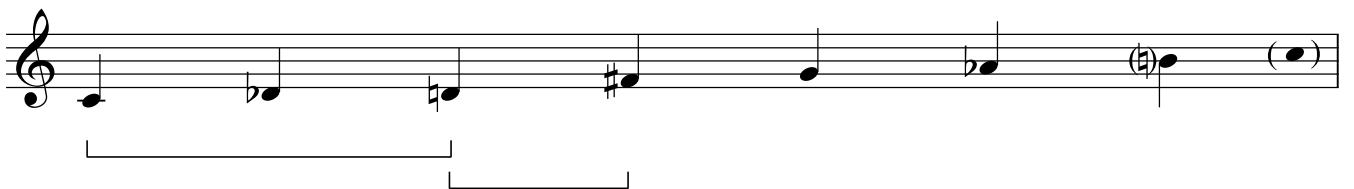


B) In Carnatic music theory : Raga Neethimathi



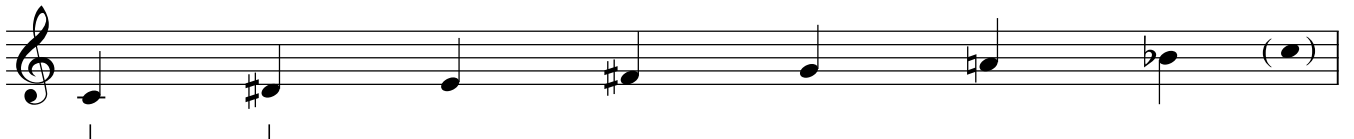
Example 5:

In Carnatic music theory: Raga Varali

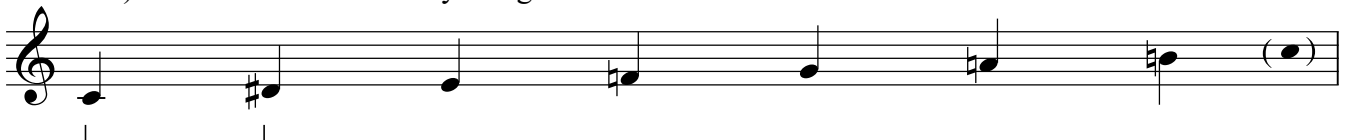


Example 6:

A) In Carnatic music theory : Raga Nasikabhooshani



B) In Carnatic music theory : Raga Nattai



Example 7:

In Carnatic music theory : Raga Pantuvarali

