PREFACE

During the course of my music training in Karnataka classical music, I have often heard many senior musicians and my Gurus referring to the term “Nagaswaram Bani”. Their fond reminiscences of musicians of yesteryears such as Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and GN Balasubramaniam would often be punctuated with references to the influence, Nagaswaram music had on these vocalists. For a city bred young student of Karnataka classical music, whose only exposure to Nagaswaram music was during marriage ceremonies, the above references to the Nagaswaram influence often sounded incredulous. Needless to say by my generation, the exposure to Nagaswaram music for young students of Karnataka classical music has diminished considerably. A chance reading of N Pattabhi Raman’s article in Sruti Magazine about the “Nagaswaram Bani” set the ball in motion. Curiosity led me to look into many musicological treatises in order to understand the Nagaswaram music and its influence. However I realised that even though there are many works that deal with the grammar of Karnataka classical music there only a few treatises which spoke about the performers, the performance and content. Listening to several recordings of Nagaswaram music, especially of the past masters served as a game changer and opened my mind to a whole new perspective in Karnataka classical music. Nagaswaram music is classicism mixed with a heady tone of earthy shades. Thus the comprehension of this investigation has to be aided by extensive listening, especially to the music of Nagaswaram players such as TN Rajarathinam Pillai, Namagiripettai Krishnan, Karaikurichi P Arunachalam, Vedaranyam Vedamurthy and others that have been mentioned through the chapetrs of this research.

History defines our present. We are the result of the actions of our fore-fathers. We have taken off from a historical point, especially in Karnataka classical music. What we define as tradition in Karnatak classical music is the sum result of its historical journey. Music and musicians played an important role in the ancient cultural societies of India. The Royal patronage of classical music was considered a prestige yet very few accounts of the artistic communities that received such patronage is available. There are certainly very few works which have documented the life, times and music of Nagaswaram players and the interrelationship they shared with vocalists. This research attempts at bridging the gap between the Nagaswaram music, its community and Karnataka classical vocal music. It is an attempt at documenting the deep connection between both streams of Karnataka classical music and the infallible mark they have left on each other, along with the rise and fall of the various artistic communities that existed side by side. What this research does not intend to
do is pit vocal music against instrumental styles or vice versa. Karnataka classical music has become an organic whole with both instrumental and vocal music sharing very similar content and modes of presentation. What is played on an instrument when vocalised becomes singing. This research does not comment on the superiority of any one style, Bani or musician over the other. There has been no attempt to comment on the musicianship of any musician. This research does not attempt to compartmentalise or categorise the style of any musician. It is an observation and study into the influence of Nagaswaram within the artists own intrinsic style. Among all the instruments of Karnataka classical music it is my opinion that the Nagaswaram has been relatively un-documented and distanced as a far off cousin. This research has been an attempt at the reconstruction of the history of Karnataka classical music so as to include the Nagaswaram as a member who shared an active dialogue in the development of South Indian classical music. My focus during the course if this research has been on the historical significance of the Nagaswaram-Vocal relationship and the actual music content that was set in motion through performance and transmission in both streams. How a style (with special reference to Nagaswaram) was incorporated into performance and passed down through teaching, its success and the musicians who adopted it has been the emphasis of my research. No attempt has been made to dwell into the grammar of Karnataka classical music since this has been dealt by many senior musicologists in various treatises.

I used multiple sources in my attempt to form a continuous narrative about the Nagaswaram’s historical journey and the key role it played in shaping todays Karnataka classical music. The most important source was the senior vocalists, the actual practitioners of the art who came forward to share their experiences with me. The analysis of oral traditions has been linked with the references to construct a tangible history of the Nagaswaram. The perspective has been to analyse the Nagaswaram’s influence on Vocal. It is the inter-relationship that has been the prime focus of this research. There are many coincidental references to this bond in the alternative sources such as reputed Journals of music and periodicals. Musicological treatises in regional languages also throw some light on the Nagaswaram. The challenge was to connect all the dots and form one consolidated chronicle. Along with this method I rely on the scholar to recognise the historical significance of the Nagaswaram through intelligent interpretation of the matter I have presented. This area has been covered by the first four chapters.

The fifth and sixth chapters have an analysis of style or Bani. I have tried to present the opinion of highly reputed musicians and musicologists. The study is based on the
evaluation of vocalists who have been influenced by the Nagaswaram, either in style or content. I have included music recordings to affirm and assist with the descriptive writing based on the performance of such vocalists. While most of the recordings have come from my private collection, other sources of audio recordings have been mentioned and enlisted in the appendix. The chapter on the influence of Nagaswaram on other instruments sheds further light on the extent of the Nagaswaram impact in Karnataka classical music. While there are a few works which deal with the Nagaswaram tradition, I have tried to look at it not as a separate tradition but as one that was deeply entwined with the Karnataka classical music idiom (which includes vocal and other instruments). The Nagaswaram had many interesting modes of presenting Karnataka classical music which are now being adopted by vocalists, dancers and other instruments such as the violin. I believe that looking at the Nagaswaram as a separate tradition serves the purpose of further alienating it from what we call mainstream Karnataka classical music today. I have tried to avoid such a division by highlighting the common grounds of interaction between the various streams of Karnataka classical music.