

Topic: The evolution of the flute in Carnatic music - lecture to be held as a centenary tribute to Vidvān TR Mahalingam

Speaker: Prof Dr CA Sreedhara

Date & Time: 31.12.2025; 8.20AM

Venue: Kasthuri Srinivasan Hall, The Music Academy

Abstract:

Among the group of wind instruments, the flute is one of the most ancient musical instruments. In almost all ancient civilizations, the flute was a common instrument. Since time immemorial, the flute has evolved in terms of need, form, and usage. Ancient flutes had fewer finger holes and limited ranges, and they were used in folk music, theatre, kutapas, and dance as accompaniment. In Indian culture, the flute is associated with Lord Sri Krishna and spiritual experience. Excavations, Vedic literature, Silappatikāram, Nāṭyaśāstra, and other musicological treatises, along with literature in Sanskrit and regional languages, sculptures, and paintings, shed light on the evolution of the flute. Over time, the flute gradually evolved into a refined instrument capable of rendering the intricacies of rāga-s and gamaka-s in Carnatic music. Kumbakonam Śrī Sharabha Shastry played an important role in the evolution of the flute, marking a significant milestone in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this transition period, the legendary flutist Palladam Sanjeeva Rao elevated the flute into a successful Carnatic classical concert instrument. Śrī T. R. Mahalingam (Mali) was instrumental in revolutionizing flute playing techniques, developing a unique style, and emphasizing shruti shuddhata. His innovations played a significant role in establishing the flute as a unique solo Carnatic concert instrument. Subsequent legendary flutists such as Tirupampuram N. Swaminatha Pillai, T. Viswanathan, N. Ramani, K. S. Gopalakrishnan, Sikkil Sisters, and others further expanded its repertoire. Today, young flutists continue to explore new dimensions through experimentation and innovative playing techniques. This lecture demonstration highlights the origin and evolution of the flute in Carnatic classical music from multiple perspectives.