

Meaningful Adjustments: Musical Performance and Ritual Action in a South Indian Temple

William Tallotte

ETHNOMUSICOLOGY has been defined as “the study of music in its cultural context,” “the study of music in culture,” and “the study of music as culture.” Whether or not these definitions correspond to significant turns in the history of the discipline (Nettl 2005, 217–18), they all suggest, at least, that ethnomusicologists should study music both as a sonic structure and a social activity. From an analytical point of view, this implies that music and its contextual or cultural background have to be studied conjointly, i.e., “as dialectically interrelated parts of a total system” (Blacking 1971, 93). Such a perspective leaves room for a vast array of approaches. A context-sensitive analysis, indeed, can establish links between music and symbolic representations and/or social patterns anchored in a specific culture (Feld 1982; Seeger 1987; Lortat-Jacob 1998; Wolf 2006; Alter 2008). It can also connect music and context through the analysis of performance, that is, the analysis of music and sound in relation to modes of production and acts of communication embedded in a specific situation (Qureshi 1995; Desroches 1996; Clayton 2007; Tallotte 2012; Clayton, Dueck, and Leante 2013; Widdess 2013). These approaches, in which interconnectedness is clearly addressed in the analytical process, not only match the motivations encapsulated in the definitions mentioned above, but also represent original and innovative attempts to understand music as a meaningful manifestation of human experience.

The present study follows on from this paradigm, with a focus on musical performance and ritual action in a South Indian (Tamil) temple context. It explores the temporal and structural relationship between the music of an outdoor ensemble of shawm and drum players, the *periyā mēlam*, and the actions carried out by priests during the last of the seven daily worship rituals performed in the Śaiva temple of Chidambaram, Tamilnadu.¹ It provides an analysis of several performances and discusses, with references to cognitive anthropology, the significance of music in relation to cultural knowledge. Part I introduces the basic argument of the article while giving minimal information about the ethnographic setting, i.e., the life and music of South Indian temples. Part II provides a syntactic overview of the bedchamber ritual in the temple of Chidambaram. It maps and briefly describes ritual actions and musical interventions. Part III isolates a ritual sequence and analyzes the piece played by *periyā mēlam* musicians at the beginning of the procession. The analysis, based on interviews, observations, and audio recordings, focuses on structural aspects of the piece.² Part IV discusses the performance process and the

1. The *periyā mēlam* (“large orchestra”) is an ensemble usually composed of two shawms (*nāgasvaram*), two barrel-drums (*tavil*), a pair of cymbals (*tālam*), and a drone (*śruti peṭṭi*). It is the only instrumental ensemble performing on a regular basis during high-caste Hindu temple worship in South India, particularly Tamilnadu.

2. Video has not been used as a research tool for the simple reason that filming is restricted in the temple compound and strictly proscribed during rituals.

nature of musicians' action and knowledge. Part V goes a step further and investigates the issue of music and meaning in the context of Hindu temple worship.

I. ARGUMENT AND SETTING

Calendar festivals (*utsava*) and daily rituals (*pūjā*) constitute the main activity in high-caste Tamil Śaiva temple complexes. Calendar festivals are generally huge celebrations in which the images of the deities are taken in procession around the temple on monumental chariots. Thousands of devotees gather, milling about the courtyards and corridors of the temple in order to witness rituals and processions. Daily rituals, on the other hand, are short ceremonies with well-defined patterns that bring together regular devotees at fixed hours, from dawn (when gods are awakened) to dusk or night (when gods are put to bed). In this context, priests, musicians, and other temple employees often emphasize the regularity and precision of their task so as to point out the cyclic character of the ritual as well as the highly specialized nature of its practices. For them, each ritual has to be the exact replica of the ritual performed on the previous day. However, observations made *in situ* challenge their ideal, showing that a given ritual sequence can last up to twice as long on one day as on another and may vary, therefore, in terms of content. Several factors, overlapping or not, tend to explain this flexibility, for example: ritual additions inscribed in a wider calendrical agenda (L'Hernault and Reiniche 1999, 46–48), ritual mistakes occasionally made by officiating priests (Fuller 1993, 181–87), or sudden slowdowns caused by the unusual density of the crowd, notably when a daily procession brings together regular devotees and those who have taken part in a calendar festival on the same day.

The impact of these time fluctuations on musical performances is rather heterogeneous and depends mainly on the relationship that each group of specialists (officiating priests, hymn singers, and *periyā mēḷam* musicians) maintains with the core of the ritual.³ The situation can be summarized as follows:

1. The officiating priests (Gurukkaḷs) chant *mantras* in the central shrine, near the deity, in synchrony with the ritual gestures they perform. Since *mantras* and ritual acts are apprehended as complementary units (Staal 1990, 191–97), they necessarily vary together in length and starting time.

2. The hymn singers (Ōduvārs) sing Śaiva Tamil hymns (from the *Tirumuṟai* and other anthologies) in front of the shrine during short interludes from which instrumental music is excluded. They perform one or two hymns, rarely more, accompanying themselves with small cymbals (*kuḷi tāḷam*). They usually restructure the verses of the hymns, drawing them out, splitting or mixing different lines in order to reduce or extend their length (Tallotte 2009, 24–25). This procedure is often necessary since the duration of their performance essentially depends on priests' actions and indications.

3. The musicians of the *periyā mēḷam* stand outside the central shrine, away from the

3. For a concise presentation of vocal and instrumental specialists employed in Tamil Śaiva temples, see Reiniche (1989, 76–96, 104–109), Davis and Orr (2007, 78–85), and Tallotte (2010, 181).

deity—a distance marking the ritual space both socially and acoustically (Tallotte 2012, 213–14). They accompany the ritual from a certain distance and follow orally transmitted prescriptions in which correspondences between their repertoire and ritual actions are generally well defined. In other words, they have to play every day the same piece or set of pieces for the same ritual sequence, but within a temporal framework whose constitutive parts are relatively flexible, and in a position from which it is not always easy to see what is going on around the deity. As a result, one of their tasks is synchronizing the prescribed piece, be it fixed or improvised, with a ritual sequence of variable duration. As stated by P. Kandasvami (personal communication, 2008), who has been playing *nāgasvaram* in the Chidambaram temple for over thirty years: “I must play the appropriate piece at the right time [during a specific sequence], and whatever happens. I cannot stop playing or move to another piece [before the next sequence starts]. It would be an offence for the faithful, the priests and the gods.”

Two questions emerge from this situation: how do *periyā mēḷam* musicians adjust their music with ritual actions in the course of performance? And why are such musical and temporal adjustments de rigueur and so crucial for the ritual and its participants? In order to answer, we have to go into the details of the analysis.

II. THE BEDCHAMBER RITUAL: A SYNTACTIC OVERVIEW⁴

In South Indian temples, daily rituals (*pūjā*) refer to the public rituals performed every day in honor of the presiding deity. In high caste Tamil Śaiva temples, this presiding deity is a specific and unique form of the god Śiva. As a result, the organization of daily worship throughout Tamil Nadu shows both consistency in its outlines and discrepancy in its details: temples follow roughly the same program but differentiate themselves regarding the number, timing, duration, and exact content of rituals (Tallotte 2007, 46–48). In the temple of Chidambaram, seven public *pūjās* are performed every day in honor of Naṭarāja, the Hindu god Śiva in his form of the cosmic dancer. He is depicted in the central shrine by several images or forms (*mūrti*).⁵ Although specific in terms of scenario, spatial dispersion and structure, all these rituals rely on the same fundamental series of rites, which consists of bathing (*abhiṣeka*), decoration (*alaṅkāra*), food offering (*naivedya*), and light offering (*dīpārādhana*, i.e., the waving of lamps with camphor flames/lights before the deity). The officiating priests of the temple, the Dikṣitars, perform the ritual in the main shrine, and around this shrine when the god is taken in procession. As stated by Paul Younger (1995, 33), “the ritual takes priority over all else and is carefully carried out whether there is no crowd at all or overflowing crowds surging from wall to wall.” In any case, *periyā mēḷam* musicians accompany at the most four out of the seven daily rituals. As shown in Table 1, their presence roughly corresponds to processional activities and, to some extent, transitory phases of the day, such as sunrise, zenith, and sunset. In this daily worship context, the ensemble generally appears in a reduced form, with only one shawm (*nāgasvaram*), two distinct barrel-drums (*tavil*, *maddaḷam*), and occasionally cymbals

4. Some data presented in this part are adapted from Tallotte (2010, 177–78, 180).

5. An unmovable anthropomorphic statue of stone, but also a small anthropomorphic ruby statue, a small crystal *liṅga*, and a pair of silver sandals (*pādukā*), used for the processions of daily rituals.

Rituals (<i>pūjā</i>) Names	Hours	Main actions	<i>Periya mēlam</i> participation
<i>Pāl naivēttiyam</i> (Sanskrit <i>Uṣaḥ kāla</i>)	6:45–7:10	Getting up and offerings in the bedchamber, and procession until the main shrine	x
<i>Upasaṁdhi kāla</i>	8:30–9:30	Offerings and procession around the second enclosure (<i>prākāra</i>)	x
<i>Samdhi kāla</i>	10:00–11:00	Offerings (mainly ablutions)	–
<i>Ucca kāla</i>	11:30–12:00	Offerings	–
<i>Sāyarakṣā</i>	18:00–18:50	Offerings (full protocol)	x
<i>Ireṇṭa kāla</i>	20:00–20:30	Offerings	–
<i>Paḷḷiyaṛai cēvai</i> (Sanskrit <i>Ardhayāma</i>)	22:00–22:30	Offerings and procession from the main shrine to the bedchamber via the flagstaff	x

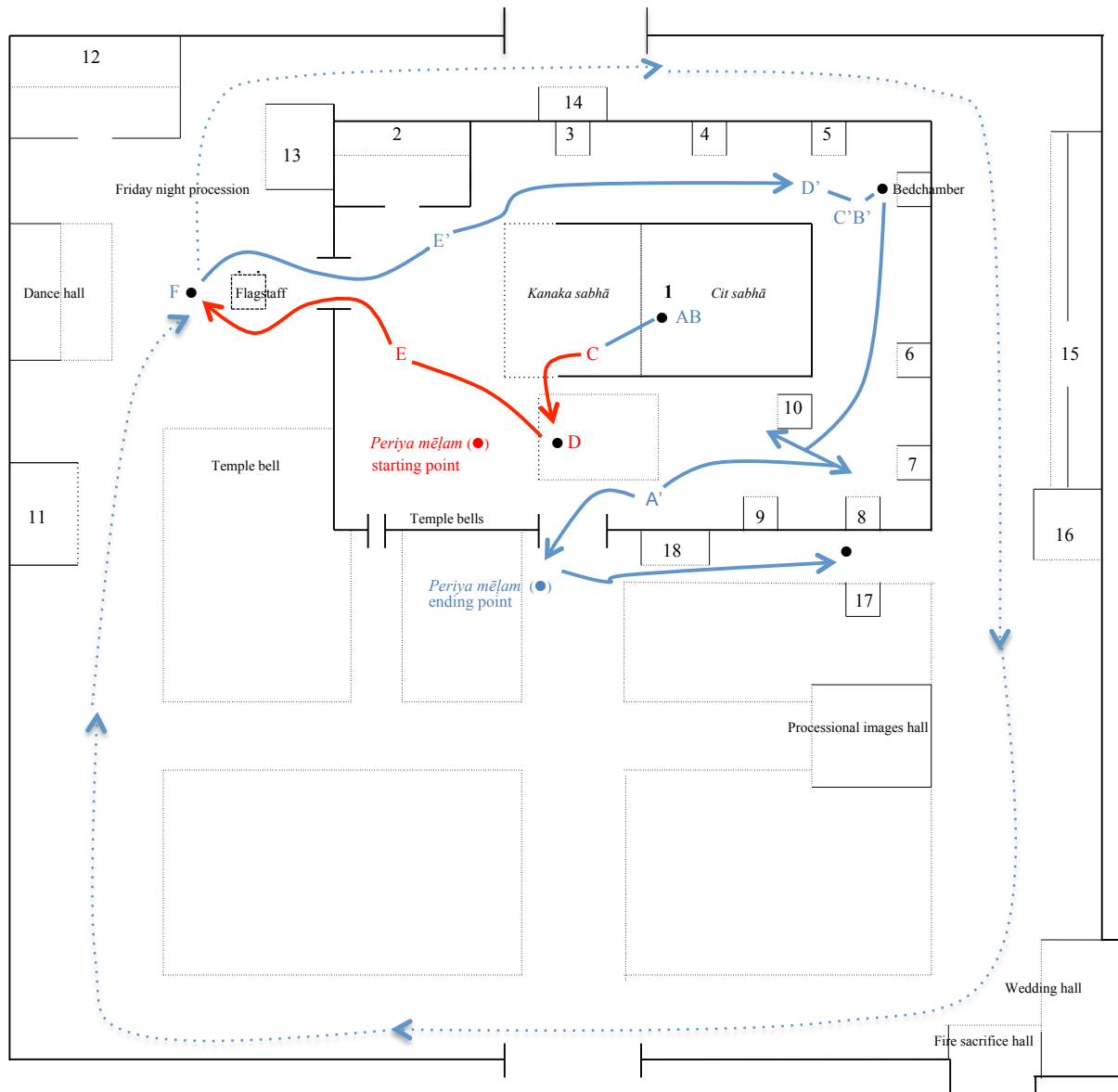
Table 1. Daily worship and *periya mēlam* participation in Chidambaram Naṭarāja temple.

(*tālam*).⁶ In addition to *periya mēlam* music, one may note that a few devotees play cymbals (*jālrā*) and non-officiating priests or appointed members of the community ring temple bells (*ghaṇṭā*) and blow conchs (*śaṅkha*) and trumpets (*kombu, tirucciṇṇam*).

The bedchamber ritual (*paḷḷiyaṛai cēvai*) is the most musical of the seven rituals. It displays the largest number of *periya mēlam* pieces and closes the day in a festive atmosphere, especially on Friday nights when the crowd is denser and the procession is extended to the second enclosure (*prākāra*) of the temple.⁷ In all cases, Naṭarāja is brought to bed on a palanquin from the main shrine to the bedchamber, where he spends the night with his lover and spouse, the goddess Śivakāmasundarī. Table 2, to be read together with Figure 1, shows the pieces played by the *periya mēlam* musicians during the bedchamber ritual in parallel with ritual sequences performed by the priests. Delimitations displayed in Table 2 are consistent from both musicians' and priests' perspectives. The hours indicated in the first column refer to an average time established from observations and recordings I made from 2000 to 2010.

6. Footnote 1 gives the usual instrumentation of the ensemble.

7. The temple layout is composed of four concentric rectangular walls that enclose the central shrine of Naṭarāja. The first and second enclosures (*prākāra*), where daily worship activities take place, consist of open-air and enclosed spaces where shrines of various sizes are organized along corridors and halls (as shown in Figure 1). The third enclosure is a vast outdoor space surrounded by four monumental towers (*gōpura*). It comprises important shrines and a big tank. The fourth enclosure is essentially reserved for orchards and plantations.



- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 Śiva-Naṭarāja | 10 Caṇḍeśa (one of the 63 Śaiva Tamil saints) |
| 2 Viṣṇu-Govindarāja | 11 Somāskanda (Śiva, his consort, and his younger son) |
| 3 Gaṇapati, or Gaṇeśa (Śiva's elder son) | 12 Puṇḍarikavallī (Viṣṇu spouse) |
| 4 Liṅga (aniconic form of Śiva) | 13 Taṇḍāyudapāṇi (a form of Subrahmaṇya) |
| 5 Subrahmaṇya (Śiva's younger son) | 14 Ākāśa Gaṇapati (Gaṇapati of ether) |
| 6 The sage Jaimini | 15 Nāyaṇmār (the 63 Śaiva Tamil saints) |
| 7 Bhikṣātana (ascetic form of Śiva) | 16 Mūla-Liṅga (original liṅga) |
| 8 Kāla-Bhairava (frightful form of Śiva) | 17 Ardhayāma Sundara (night guard of the temple) |
| 9 Sūrya and Candra (Sun and Moon) | 18 Navagraha (nine planets) |

Blue lines: daily procession
 Dashed blue lines: Friday night procession
 Red lines: sequence with the *Tēr mallāri*



Figure I. Plan of the central area of Chidambaram Naṭarāja temple, showing the processional route of the bedchamber ritual.

Ritual		<i>Periya mēlam</i> music and repertory	
Hours	Ritual sequences	Mode (<i>rāga</i>)	Form (piece), metric cycle, composer
22:00	A 1 Rites of preparation in the main shrine (1)	–	–
	B 2 First offerings in the main shrine (1)	–	–
	C 3 Śiva (1) is carried from the main shrine to the palanquin, situated at D (see Figure 1)	<i>Gambhīra nāṭa</i> ↓ ↓	<i>Mallāri</i> (<i>Tēr mallāri</i>), <i>khaṇḍa cāpu tāla</i> , anonymous
	D 4 Second offerings (at D)	↓	↓
	E 5 Procession from D to the flagstaff	↓ ↓	↓ ↓
	F 6 Halfway offerings, beside the flagstaff	–	–
	E' 7 Procession from the flagstaff to the bedchamber	<i>Kharaharapriya</i> ↓ ↓ ↓	<i>Kīrttaṇai</i> (<i>Māyavittai</i>), <i>adi tāla</i> , <i>Muttuttāṇḍavar</i> . Or another <i>kīrttaṇai</i> in <i>kīravāṇi</i> , <i>kalyāṇi</i> or <i>rēvati</i>
	D' 8 Fourth offerings, before the bedchamber	↓ ↓	↓ ↓
	C' 9 Installation of Śiva in the bedchamber	–	–
	B' 10 Final offerings in the bedchamber, closing of the bedchamber	<i>Nilāmbari</i> ↓ ↓	Traditional (<i>Paḷḷiyarai pāṭṭu</i>), non-measured (shawm solo), anonymous
22:30	A' 11 Conclusion: procession to the east and closing of shrines 10 and 8	<i>Madhyamāvati</i> ↓ ↓ E Mode ↓ ↓	<i>Utsava sampradāya kīrtana</i> (<i>Nagumomu</i>), <i>adi tāla</i> , Tyāgarāja Traditional, simple pulsation, anonymous
	Offerings to the night guard of the temple (17), closing of its shrine	C Mode ↓ ↓	<i>Svaram</i> (<i>Svaram</i> or <i>English note</i>), simple pulsation, anonymous

Table 2. The bedchamber ritual in Chidambaram Naṭarāja temple: structure, ritual actions and *periya mēlam* repertoire.

A preliminary examination suggests that *periya mēlam* music acoustically underlines a spatiotemporal structure in which fixity (F) and mobility (M) alternate on a systematic basis. This simple but concrete segmentation allows one to generate the following structure, with F referring to the rites realized at a specific point in the space, and M to a movement of (1) the deity alone (M), (2) the deity and the whole cortege (M₁), or (3) the cortege without the deity (M₂). The indications in brackets refer to the positions indicated on the plan (see Figure 1).

F	Preparation of the god (Naṭarāja) and first offerings in the main shrine [1]
M	The god is taken from the main shrine to the palanquin
F	Installation of the god on the palanquin and offerings
M ₁	Procession from the starting point [D] to the flagstaff
F	Offerings to the god, beside the flagstaff
M ₁	Procession from the flagstaff to the bedchamber
F	Offering to the god, in front of the bedchamber
M	The god is taken from the palanquin to the bedchamber
F	Offerings to the god and his spouse, closing of the bedchamber
M ₂	Procession to the east, closing of Caṇḍeśa [10] and Kāla-Bhairava [8] shrines
F	Offerings to the night guard of the temple [17], closing of its shrine

Figure 2 presents this structure (F M F M₁ F M₁ F M F M₂ F) as a symmetrical sequence of ritual actions (A B C D E F E' D' C' B' A'), with a central point F opening onto the Friday night procession. Figure 2 should be read together with Table 2 in order to localize ritual actions and musical events on the map of Figure 1.

Figures 1 and 2, along with Table 2, provide a general but comprehensive spatiotemporal framework for the present analysis. They allow us to localize with precision the sequence of actions on which we are going to focus, namely the C-D-E sequence. This sequence is accompanied by the *Tēr mallāri* and corresponds to the installation of the deity on the palanquin and the first half of the procession. It illustrates particularly well the tension between repertoire fixity and time elasticity; on the one hand, the piece cannot be replaced by another; on the other hand, it is played during a movement, when time variations are more likely to happen. For the sake of clarity, this sequence appears with a greyed background in Table 2 and with red lines in Figure 1.

↓	A	1 Preparation	↔	11 Conclusion	A'
	B	2 First offerings	↔	10 Final offerings	B'
	C	3 Uninstallation	↔	9 Installation	C'
	D	4 Second offerings	↔	8 Fourth offerings	D'
	E	5 Procession towards south	↔	7 Procession towards north	E' ↑
		6 Halfway offering			
		F			
		Friday night procession			
		↓			

Figure 2. Structure of the bedchamber ritual, Chidambaram Naṭarāja temple.

III. THE *TĒR MALLĀRI*: FORM AND CONTEXTS

Mallāris are instrumental pieces unique to the *periya mēlam* repertoire, i.e., they are not shared with other ensembles of Karnatic music.⁸ They are played in only one mode, the *rāga gambhīra-nāṭa*, based on the pentatonic scale C-E-F-G-B. By contrast, they are rendered in a large variety of metric cycles (*tāla*), including rare ones (Tallotte 2007, 120–22, 132). Musicians distinguish two types of *mallāris*: those named according to the *tāla* in which they are played—for instance, *Miśra jāti tripuṭa tāla mallāri* or simply *Miśra tripuṭa mallāri*—and those performed during either a festival or a daily ritual but named according to the action they accompany—for instance, the *Talikai mallāri*, which accompanies the offering of food (*talikai*) brought by a priest from the temple kitchen to the shrine. The *Tēr mallāri*, literally the *mallāri* of the chariot (*tēr*),⁹ falls into this second category. *Mallāris* of the first category are performed during temple festivals, before the procession of the deities gets under way; those of the second category are performed during either a festival or a daily ritual, in conjunction with the ritual action for which they are named.

When I first asked the temple musicians to define the *Tēr mallāri* in technical terms, I mainly obtained loose descriptions. Only the foremost shawm player of the temple, Achalpuram S. Chinnatambi Pillai, gave me precise and detailed information. His understanding of the *Tēr mallāri* refers to festival performances (where he frequently plays) and not to daily worship performances (where less qualified musicians take his place). His explanation, however, has the advantage of offering a clear, explicit and authoritative picture of the piece and its structure. As often occurs in South India, his presentation mixed speech, singing, and writing. He first solmized the melodic theme or melody of the *Tēr mallāri*, transcribed in Example 1, and gave the musical mode (*gambhīra-nāṭa*) as well as the metric cycle (*khaṇḍa jāti eka tāla*, comprising five isochronous beats) of the piece;¹⁰ he then solmized the melody in three levels of speed (*trikāla*), a technique of rhythmic augmentation and diminution; finally, he wrote down the structure of the whole piece, showing that this one is not only built on pre-composition and rhythmic variation, but also improvisation through the *alāriṭṭu*¹¹ and the *rāgam*,¹² outlined in Figure 3.

Chinnatambi and his musicians play the *Tēr mallāri* on the tenth day of the *brahmotsava* festival, when Naṭarāja is brought back from the royal hall (to the northeast of the area depicted in Figure 1) to the main shrine ([I] in Figure 1). The performance I

8. Today, three ensembles represent the Karnatic tradition, or South Indian art-music tradition: the concert ensemble, which constitutes the main stream; the dance ensemble, which accompanies *bharata nāṭyam* performances; and the temple instrumental ensemble, or *periya mēlam*. They all share a similar vocabulary and grammar, but still keep alive their own specificities in terms of style and repertoire.

9. In temple practice, the chariot can be a monumental chariot, a palanquin, or a small chariot on a trailer, either motorized or pulled by tractor.

10. The rendition of the *Tēr mallāri* in the metric cycle *khaṇḍa eka* (5 beats: 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1) is a speciality of the Chidambaram temple tradition. In most other temples, this composition is rendered with the same melodic contour but in *ādi tāla* (8 beats: 4 + 2 + 2).

11. In this study, the term *alāriṭṭu* (opening) refers to the short rhythmic improvisation performed at the commencement of a *mallāri*.

12. A *rāgam* (or *rāga ālāpana*) is a melodic improvisation in free rhythm, which usually precedes a measured melody in the same mode (*rāga*). In *periya mēlam* music, this melodic improvisation has the particularity of being accompanied, or punctuated, by the drum.

a



pa pa ni pa pa ga sa ga pa ga sa ga sa ni pa pa ni pa pa ni sa

b



ga ma pa pa sa pa ma ga sa ga sa sa ga sa

c



ga ma pa pa sa pa sa pa ma ga sa ga sa sa ga sa

d



ga ma pa pa sa pa sa pa ma ga sa ga sa sa pa

e



ma ga sa ga sa sa pa ma ga sa ga sa pa ma ga sa ni

Example 1. *Tēr mallāri* melody (including phrases a, b, c, d, and e) in medium speed, as solmized by Achalpuram S. Chinnatambi Pillai, Achalpuram, March 2001.

Rhythmic introduction and non-measured melodic improvisation	→	<i>alārippu/rāgam</i>	[Section 1]
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Melody in speed 1	→	aaaa bbbb ccc d e	[Section 2]
Melody in speed 2	→	aaaa bbbb ccc d e	
Melody in speed 3	→	aaaa bbbb ccc d e	

Rhythmic cadenza	→	<i>kōrvai</i>	
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Figure 3. *Tēr mallāri* structure, as given by Achalpuram S. Chinnatambi Pillai, Achalpuram, March 2001.

recorded in June 2001 during the summer festival¹³ shows that the structure played (see Figure 4) roughly corresponded to the structure delineated by Chinnatambi (see Figure 3), except for the addition of a new section, the *kalpana svāra*.¹⁴

For their part, daily worship musicians perform a shortened version of the *Tēr mallāri*, outlined in Figure 5, but with some significant differences. The rhythmic and melodic introduction (section 1) is always present but brief; the melody (section 2) is not necessarily played in *trikāla*, and, when it is played, the procedure is variable; the *kalpana svāra* (section 3) is never played; finally, two climaxes (*keṭṭi mēlam*)¹⁵ are systematically performed during section 2. Generally, the complexity of the performance structure can be

Rhythmic introduction & non-measured melodic improvisation	→	<i>alāriṭṭu/rāgam</i>	[Section 1]
Melody in speed 1	→	[a] aaaa bbb cc d e	[Section 2]
Melody in speed 2	→	aaaa bbbbbb d e	
Melody in speed 3	→	aaaaaa bbbbbb d e	
Melody in speed 1	→	aaaa bbb cc d e	
Melody in speed 2	→	aaaa <u>xx</u> yyyy a bbb cc d e	
Melody in speed 3	→	aaaaa <u>xxx</u> yyyy aaa bbb ccc d e	
Melody in speed 4	→	aaaaaaaaaa	
Melody in speed 1	→	[a]	
Rhythmic cadenza	→	<i>kōrvai</i>	
Measured melodic improvisation	→	<i>kalpana svāra</i>	[Section 3]

Figure 4. *Tēr mallāri* structure, as performed by Achalpuram S. Chinnatambi Pillai and his troupe during the *brahmotsava* festival, Chidambaram, 28 June 2001.

[Audio example 1 \[First part of section 2, melody in speed 1, 2 and 3 and return to speed 1\]](#)

13. Two *brahmotsava* festivals take place every year in Chidambaram Naṭarāja temple. The first one, Mārkaḷi Tiruvātirai, is held in the month of Mārkaḷi (December–January) and corresponds with the winter solstice. The second one, Āṇi Tirumaṅgaṇam, is held in the month of Āṇi (June–July) and corresponds with the summer solstice.

14. The *kalpana svāra*, a melodic improvisation based on a metric cycle (*tāla*), can be performed after any composition. It explores the intricacies of the mode (*rāga*) through the elaboration and the invention (*kalpana*, “forming in the imagination,” “inventing”) of combinations of notes (*svāra*).

15. The *keṭṭi mēlam* is a short instrumental tumult that underlines light offerings (*dīpārādhana*). It emphasizes a crucial moment of the cult in which all the worshippers have chances to receive the vision (*darśana*) of the iconic god, i.e., to see the god and to be seen in return. On the *keṭṭi mēlam*, see Tallotte (2010, 186–87).

1 P. Kandasvami, Saturday 20 January 2001 [4'05] [Audio example 2](#)

[0'28] *Alāriṣṣu/rāgam*

[3'37] 2 aa bb c ⊙ c dd e a ⊙ b cc d ⊙ aa Λ b cc dd e ∇ a ⊙ b ⊙ c ∇
(2'49)

2 P. Kandasvami, Monday 22 January 2001 [5'03] [Audio example 3](#)

[0'35] *Alāriṣṣu/rāgam*

[0'48] 2 aa bb cc dd e ⊙
[1'24] 3 aa bb cc dd e Λ
[2'16] 2 aa b c ⊙ d e a bb c ∇ ⊙ b c ⊙ c ⊙ c d ∇
(3'45)

3 P. Kandasvami, Friday 26 January 2001 [6'31] [Audio example 4](#)

[0'36] *Alāriṣṣu/rāgam*

[1'53] 2 aa bb cc dd e a Λ b c dd ⊙
[0'15] 3 aa bb cc d
[3'08] 2 a ⊙ b cc dd ⊙ xx yy c ⊙ dd e ∇ ⊙ y b cc d ⊙
[0'19] 3 aa bb cc dd e (4'20)
[0'20] 2 a ∇

4 T. Krishnamurthy, Friday 10 August 2001 [7'01] [Audio example 5](#)

[0'35] *Alāriṣṣu/rāgam*

[1'47] 1 a ⊙ aaaa bb ccc d e
[0'42] 2 aaaaaa bb c ∇ (2'55)
[2'48] 3 aaaaaa ⊙ aaaaaa ⊙ bb ccc d e aaa Λ ⊙
[1'09] 1 aaaaaa Λ ∇

⊙ = rhythmic transition on drums
 Λ = melodic and improvised transition on the shawm
 ∇ = *keṭṭi mēlam*

Figure 5. *Tēr mallāri* structures, as performed during the bedchamber ritual, Chidambaram, 2001.

correlated with the length of the performance.¹⁶

IV. MUSICIANS' KNOWLEDGE AND PERFORMANCE PROCESS

Are *Tēr mallāri* daily worship performances underlain by a coherent model of development, i.e., a set of rules allowing *periyā mēlam* musicians to play the piece within the flexible spatiotemporal framework of the ritual and in accordance with participants' expectations? At first sight, the performances recorded during the bedchamber ritual (summarized in Figure 5) display a collection of musical structures derived from the framework (see Figure 3) delineated by Achalpuram S. Chinnatambi Pillai during interviews and performed by his troupe during main festivals (see Figure 4). Daily worship musicians, indeed, seem to conform to the original order of the melody of Example 1 insofar as their performances, despite repetitions and transitions, essentially display linear successions of consecutive phrases (abc, abcd, abcde), as shown in Figure 6.

The flow diagram in Figure 6 illustrates the general pattern of the performance but does not explain the overall rationale guiding the performance. Although musicians do not have much to say about this issue, a few examples of their comments are nonetheless eloquent: "I must play the *rāgam*," "I'm free to elaborate the *rāgam* as I want," "I must play the melody in the first speed," "I may choose to play or not the melody in *trikāla*," and so on. They actually stress two contrasting aspects of their performance practice—obligation on one hand, freedom on the other. Obligation may refer to tacit rules governing the formal structure of a particular piece. The *Tēr mallāri*, in fact, must include no fewer than two sections. First, the introduction (*alārīppu/rāgam*) with drummers playing quintuplets and shawm player(s) exposing the mode *gambhīra-nāṭa*; second, the melody in full, with phrases a, b, c, d and e in at least one level of speed.¹⁷ Freedom, in contrast, may refer to the possibilities of expanding or contracting a section or a subsection through the following

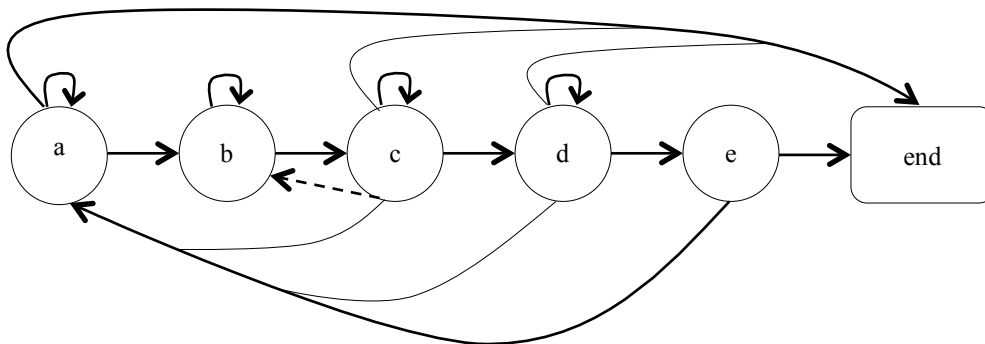


Figure 6. The order of phrases in the *Tēr mallāri*, elaborated from Figure 5.

16. This assertion is mainly based on the *Tēr mallāri* performances I recorded. I unfortunately did not time the structure of the performances I merely observed during the bedchamber ritual. At best, I noted down an approximate duration for each section.

17. Observations, musicians' interviews, and recordings (see Figure 5) confirm this assertion. One may note, however, that priests and devotees may or may not include the *alārīppu* as part of the *Tēr mallāri*, depending on their familiarity with this music.

techniques:¹⁸

1. Repetition of (1) similar phrases (aa, aaa etc.) and (2) similar subsections (for instance in Figure 5, second example, from aabbccdde to aabbccdde).

2. Variation of (1) a subsection consisting of phrases a, b, c, d, and e by rendering it in one, two, or three levels of speed, and (2) a phrase by progressively enriching it with new melodic-rhythmic elements, as in the variations (*saṅgati*) developed in most Karnatic compositions.¹⁹

3. Recombination of subsections consisting of phrases a, b, c, d, and e through the addition or omission of one or several phrases, but without changing the order (for instance, the third example in Figure 5, from aabbccdde to abcd, aabbcc, abcd, aabbccdde, and abcd).

4. Melodic improvisation on the mode *gambhīra-nāṭa* in the *alāriṭṭu/rāgam* section and sometimes in the main section as transitions (Λ) between phrases and/or subsections, and rhythmic improvisation on the drums (⊙) in the *alāriṭṭu/rāgam* section and the main section.

At this stage of the analysis, it seems reasonable to conclude that these techniques (repetition, variation, recombination, and improvisation) can be used in a variety of ways during the performance as long as the main section consists of successions of consecutive phrases (as in Figure 6) and follows a musical prelude (*alāriṭṭu/rāgam*) that combines both rhythmic and melodic improvisation. Figure 7 takes the analysis a step further and specifies how musicians exploit these techniques when performing through the systematic combination of obligatory, variable and optional factors. It illustrates the situation from a practical and operational point of view, showing how the musicians modify in real time

P. Kandasvami, Monday 22 January 2001 [5'02] [Audio example 3](#)

Alāriṭṭu/rāgam (D)

2 a(x) b(x) c(x) d(x) e ⊙(D)

3 a(x) b(x) c(x) d(x) e Λ (D)

2 a(x) b(x) c(x) ⊙(D) d(x) e a(x) b(x) c(x) V (D) ⊙(D) b(x) c(x) ⊙(D) c(x) ⊙(D) c(x) d(x) V

Obligatory Variable Optional

(x) = The previous element can be repeated one or several times

(D) = The duration of the previous element is variable

Figure 7. Performance process of the *Tēr mallāri* during the bedchamber ritual, adapted from Figure 5, second example.

18. A subsection refers here to a consecutive succession of phrases starting with phrase a.

19. This technique is widespread in both concert music (Morris 2001) and temple music (Tallotte 2007, 233–35) of South India.

and with great flexibility the initial structure of the *Tēr mallāri*.

In this section of the present study, we have gradually shifted from musical elements that explicitly define the *Tēr mallāri* and enable people to identify it as a piece of the *periyā mēlam* repertoire (see Example 1 and Figure 3), to implicit performative principles that direct musicians' action during the C-D-E sequence (Figures 4–7). The focus has thus been moved from a description of the knowledge needed by musicians to perform to an analysis of this knowledge in the course of performance. Although this approach permits us to better understand how musicians deal with ritual time discrepancies, we still have to determine on what basis they choose to start, end, extend or contract a section or a subsection.

A pragmatic and ecological approach, in which perception, action, and environment are encompassed within a single framework, should help us to formulate an answer. In this respect, Table 3 shows how musicians' perception of the environment—that is to say musicians' perception of ritual actions—guides their actions in relation to the progress of the piece they are playing. It points out the visual and aural signs that provide them with opportunities to adjust the duration of their performance at significant moments of the ritual by manipulating the variable and optional factors mentioned above.

Signs for action	<i>Periyā mēlam</i> musicians action
The temple bells in the central enclosure stop ringing	The musicians start to play the <i>alārippu/rāgam</i> section
The first light offering is performed around the palanquin	The musicians perform the first <i>keṭṭi mēlam</i>
The palanquin is lifted	The shawm player terminates as soon as possible his phrase or sub-sequence and walks in the direction of the flagstaff, close to the drummers, who keep playing
The palanquin is close to reaching the flagstaff	The shawm player has reached the flagstaff and can start to play
The second light offering is performed around the palanquin, near the flag staff	The musicians perform the second <i>keṭṭi mēlam</i>
The officiating priests start to recite <i>mantras</i>	The musicians stop playing

Table 3. Signs for action and musicians' action during the *Tēr mallāri* performance.

Musicians' action seems to belong to two distinct categories. The first category concerns physical relocations, as well as starting and ending. It entails, essentially, one straightforward action—starting to play, for instance, when the temple bells stop ringing, or moving towards the flagstaff when the priests lift the palanquin. The second category consists of musicians' decisions regarding performative and musical procedures (see Figure 8). In this case, we cannot access directly the mental process by which musicians select from a vast array of possibilities (for example, all musical routes a shawm player may potentially picture at a key point of the ritual). In any case, these actions are either taken for granted, and thus rarely verbalized (first category), or entirely implicit (second category).

The patterns of actions in these two categories are what psychologists call schemas and cognitive anthropologists term cultural models (Bloch 2012, 172–75), meaning the mental or memory frameworks that allow shortcuts for action and “operate unconsciously to contextualise current experience” (Snyder 2000, 95). In the present context, they can be understood as either a complex schema comprising both ritual and musical elements or, more likely, two independent schemas that are combined in the process of performance. Indeed, the musicians can very well perform the *Tēr mallāri* in other temple contexts, where spatiotemporal configurations might be different. P. Kandasvami, for instance, also plays this piece for the first ritual of the day, when Naṭarāja is brought back from the bedchamber to the main shrine, and for minor festival processions, when replacing the main troupe (the troupe including Achalpuram S. Chinnatambi Pillai). Occasionally, he may perform the *Tēr mallāri* for similar occasions in other Śaiva temples of the region.

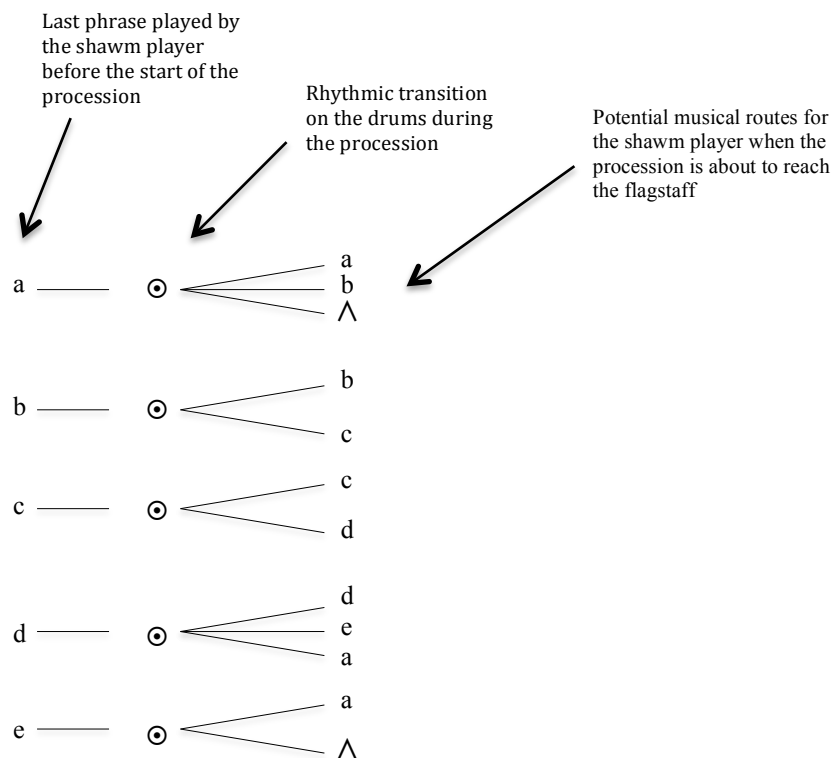


Figure 8. Potential musical routes when the palanquin is about to reach the flagstaff

V. MUSIC, RITUAL AND MEANING

Performing music in synchrony with the ritual involves explicit rules as well as an important amount of implicit knowledge. Such a situation, especially in a context permeated by the notions of devotion and sanctity, raises questions about the meaning of music in ritual or, more precisely, the significance of music's relationship to ritual in Hindu temples. In order to maintain the discussion within a reasonable limit and avoid oversimplification, we will not address this issue in general but rather in relation to the bedchamber ritual, as performed in the temple of Chidambaram. We will also keep, as a point of reference the second of our two initial questions: why are musical and temporal adjustments *de rigueur* and so crucial for the ritual and its participants?

To answer this question, priests, musicians and most participants may refer to repertoire codifications and prescriptions. By convention, a specific mode (*rāga*) and/or a specific piece have to be played for a specific ritual sequence, whether this sequence is part of a daily ritual or part of a festival.²⁰ Such a rule, nevertheless, varies from one sequence to another; while a sequence may correspond to one piece exclusively, such as the C-D-E sequence and the *Tēr mallāri*, another sequence may involve several pieces in the same or different modes. In any case, *periya mēlam* musicians have to sustain the flow of the piece from start to end by maintaining the impression of its original form, regardless of time fluctuation, processional moves, or sudden interruptions imposed by light offerings. As shown earlier, this can be realized through the succession and intertwining of flexible phases: an improvised melodic-rhythmic prelude; repetition, variation, and recombination of pre-composed phrases; short improvised transitions in which the shawm player may show off his skill; and drum interludes. Be that as it may, the piece must start when the loud and resonating sound of the temple bells stops, and must continue until the end of the second light offering, led by priests near the flagstaff. This specific configuration raises the question as to why it is like this and not some other way. Why, for instance, could the *kīrttaṇai* that follows the *Tēr mallāri* (see Table 2) not start earlier (at E) or later (between E' and D') if the previous ritual sequence (from C to E) is shorter or longer than it usually is?

It appears, in the first place, that a strict correspondence between a piece of the repertoire and a ritual sequence serves as a powerful marker; in the bedchamber ritual, each distinctive piece accompanies a specific ritual sequence and characterizes it musically. In other words, the music heard echoes the sequence seen, and vice versa. Aural and visual aspects of the ritual thus come to reflect the same religious and emotional experience.²¹ As a result, regular devotees strongly expect the reenactment of this association when attending the ritual.²² In fact, during interviews and informal discussions,

20. For general correspondences between modes and daily rituals, see Sambamurthy (1963, 229) and Terada (1992, 96–97; 2008, 121–22). For a systematic study of the *periya mēlam* repertoire and its correspondences with daily worship and festival agendas, see Tallotte (2007, 105–28).

21. Olfactory and gustative aspects of the ritual probably reinforce this experience through the stimulation of memory and senses. One may think, for example, of the smell of the offerings (sandalwood incense, jasmine flowers, clarified butter, cooked foods, etc.) or the taste of the sanctified food (*prasāda*) distributed to the devotees at the end of the worship.

22. Regular devotees are those who live in Chidambaram and often take part in daily rituals of the Naṭarāja temple. They must be differentiated from the devotees who occasionally attend these rituals, passing through during a pilgrimage or a temple tour. The first, indeed, can recognize the melodies played by *periya*

most of them stressed that their familiarity with the melodies was a source of pleasure and enjoyment. They suggested, in consequence, that the substitution of one piece for another one during the ritual would most likely be felt as a disturbance, not to say a frustration. This seems to be particularly true of the *Tēr mallāri* insofar as it underlines crucial moments of the ceremonial transport of Śiva (Naṭarāja) from the main shrine to the palanquin, his installation on the palanquin, the lifting of the palanquin, and the starting of the procession.

This strong association between music and ritual action leads us to a related phenomenon, in which the musical elements of the *Tēr mallāri* may evoke non-musical realities present in the ritual. The most striking example concerns rhythm and can be supported by emic views and/or performative evidence. The quintuple subdivision of the beat (2 + 3, solmized *ta ka ta ki ta*), played by drummers on *tavil* and *maddaḷam* and worshippers on cymbals (*jālṛā*), happens to be systematically associated with the five syllables of Śiva's fundamental *mantra*: *Namaḥ Śivāya* (Salutation to Śiva). During the performance, the leading devotees recite mentally this *mantra* while playing the cymbals (*Namaḥ Śivāya*) in order to maintain the two accented strikes (1 2 1 2 3) that typify this quintuple (*khaṇḍa*, “broken”) rhythmic division. One may conclude, therefore, that this rhythm stresses the presence of Śiva during the worship and might call him to mind in other circumstances, inside or outside the temple. Priests and musicians go even further by emphasizing the systematic occurrence of the number five in the *Tēr mallāri* and the relation of this occurrence to Śiva via the pentatonic scale (C-E-F-G-B) of the mode *gambhīra-nāṭa*, the quintuple subdivision of the beat (2 + 3), the metric cycle (*khaṇḍa eka tāla*, 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1), and the five phrases (a b c d e) that form the pre-composed material of the piece (see Example 1). Moreover, they often claim that the *Tēr mallāri* induces sentiments, moods, and emotions through the mode (*rāga*) in which it is played. In this regard, they often relate *gambhīra-nāṭa* with strength, courage, and determination, arguing that its melodic contours have the power to give the bearers sufficient energy to lift and move the palanquin.²³

Obviously, referential and affective/emotional associations are likely to justify formal strategies developed by musicians to adjust the duration of the *Tēr mallāri* to match that of the C-D-E sequence. Nevertheless, analysis of the performance process seems to indicate that strictly formal aspects of the ritual might also be relevant to understanding the relation between music and ritual in terms of structure, time, and meaning. As shown previously, the bedchamber ritual has a palindrome-like structure (A B C D E F E' D' C' B' A'). Because palindromic or recursion-based structures are common or at least well-recognized in Vedic ritual and *mantra* recitation (Staal 1990a, 85–89, 180–82; and 1990b, 20–21, 67–78; Yelle 2003, 16), we may consider the structure of the bedchamber ritual as an

mēlam musicians and relate them to specific ritual sequences. The second, in contrast, can at best (if they are familiar with high-caste Tamil temple rituals) relate one or two melodies to a type of action. Let us note that the repertoire of Śaiva temple complexes, despite local traditions (Sankaran 1975 and 1990, 34–38; Terada 1992, 117–21; 2008, 135–38), often share similarities in terms of content and organization (Tallotte 2007, 107–17).
23. This view echoes Indian theories about relationships between musical mode and sentiment (Powers and Widdess 2001) as well as the common association in South Indian musicological circles of *gambhīra-nāṭa* with the eighth aesthetical sentiment (*rasa*) of Indian classical dramaturgy, i.e., heroism (*vīra*) (Sambamurthy 1959, 174).

enlarged version of palindromic and recursive structures of certain *mantras* performed by the priests of the Chidambaram temple during regular worship and fire sacrifices (*homa*).²⁴ Such structures are embedded in ritual practices and, most probably, other spheres of activity such as musical structures, temple architecture and temple artifacts. They could be regarded as a de facto recurrent and significant cultural feature, not to say a foundational schema, that is, “a cultural or cognitive pattern that appears in a number of apparently unrelated domains” (Widdess 2013, 283).²⁵ In any event, it is somehow remarkable that the music of the *periyā mēḷam*, along with other instruments, highlights with precision the whole ritual structure by way of clear-cut and meaningful contrasts. One may think, for example, of the striking contrast between sequences C-D-E (up to the flagstaff) and E'-D'-C' (down to the bedchamber, [Audio example 6](#)) in terms of melody, meter and rhythm: the pentatonic scale of *gambhīra-nāṭa rāga* (C-E-F-G-B) versus the heptatonic scale of *kharaharapriya rāga* (C-D-E \flat -F-G-A-B \flat); the five beats of *khaṇḍa eka tāla* (1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1) versus the eight beats of *ādī tāla* (4 + 2 + 2); and a quintuple rhythmic division (*tā ka tā ki ta*) versus a binary division (*tā ka dī mi*). For other meaningful contrasts, one may think, as well, of sounds that precede or follow most *periyā mēḷam* interventions: those led by temple bells that ring and strongly resonate inside the main enclosure (for instance at B) as opposed to those without instruments where officiating priests recite *mantras* (for instance at F) or Ōduvārs sing Tamil hymns (for instance at C'). These examples demonstrate in a concrete way how music and ritual are structurally interconnected. Musical events highlight ritual actions and underline with precision the entire structure of the ritual. In this respect, one may reasonably conclude that musical and temporal adjustments within one sequence and sharp musical contrasts from one sequence to another contribute to the success of the ritual and help the worshippers in their spiritual quests.

CONCLUSION

S.R.D. Vaidyanathan, a foremost *nāgasvaram* exponent with whom I learned the basics of the instrument, told me once that the *Tēr mallāri* was just “a small tune.” This is very much the case if we think of the form in which it is taught. But this is far from the reality if we think of how this piece is performed in the context of Śaiva temple daily worship. The “small tune” is, in fact, reenacted every night and transformed into a complex and flexible form based on procedures using pre-composition, repetition, variation, recombination, and modal improvisation. As demonstrated in this study, most of the performance process relies on tacit rules, implicit knowledge, and the combination of cultural schemas. Linguistic mediation is of small help since it is through experience, embodied routines and practices related to *habitus*²⁶ that shawm and drum players acquire the ability to adapt what they have learned from their guru to the spatial, temporal, and socio-religious configuration of the ritual. They notably use the ritual as a

24. One example is this *mantra*: *hrīṃ gaṃ glaṃ gaṇapataye glaṃ gaṃ hrīṃ* (personal communication from S. Aiyappa Dikshitar, priest at the Chidambaram temple, February 2015).

25. On foundational schemas, see Shore 1996, 53–54. For a discussion of this concept in relation to music, see Widdess 2012, 91–94; Lewis 2012; and Widdess 2013, 24–26, 304–305.

26. *Habitus* is understood here as a principle that allows someone to generate strategies in order to deal with inconstant or unforeseen situations (Bourdieu 2000, 257).

resource for potential ways of action in an attempt to regulate the duration of their performance and align repertoire prescriptions with ritual actions and sequences. In doing so, they not only delimit spatiotemporal sequences encompassing referential and effective meanings, but also highlight musically the entire structure of the ritual.

These remarks validate pragmatic/syntactic rather than semantic interpretations of the ritual, while emphasising that the cult (the ritual, strictly speaking, along with all surrounding activities) may induce symbolic meanings for musicians and participants.²⁷ They also suggest that studies of religious music in which the musical structure and the event are conjointly analyzed (e.g., Widdess 2006) might help us to understand music and ritual as two fundamental and interrelated human activities. More generally, such approaches propose concrete alternatives to overcome the dualism between structure and action that still challenge ethnomusicology and many other disciplines within the human sciences.

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27. On ritual interpretation and cultural meaning, see Staal 1990a, 115–40; and Bell 1997, 61–90.

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