

Three Nelum Singers from Sri Lanka

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Introduction to the Articles

In 1991 Music and Drama Institute of Oslo University, Norway inaugurated a Music Research and Cultural exchange programme with the Institute of Aesthetic Studies of Kelaniya University. This programme was initiated by Professor K. Jell Skyllstad of Oslo University-Norway and its activities within the institute were carried out by Mr C. de. S. Kulathilake, then music and dance research consultant of the Institute of Aesthetic Studies.

In 1993, at the request of professor skyllstad, professor Ola Kai Ledang of Trondheim University came to the institute with a macintosh computer to conduct a two week workshop (1993) on sound analysing. After completing the workshop, these two articles were compiled by Mr. Kulathilake and Mr. P. D. Ranjith Fernando with sound analysis charts in relation to traditional music of Sri Lanka for the very first time.

Sound Analysis of Three Nelum Singers from Sri Lanka

In the repertoire of Sri Lankan folk Songs there is a style known as *Nelum*, which in its literary context means transplanting or weeding out wild growth in paddy fields. *Nelum* is used as a musical idiom too, i.e. to mean songs sung while transplanting paddy. These songs are sung by groups of women.

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The size of the group varies according to the extent of the field, sometimes 10 or 15.

Nelum songs form a significant area of traditional music in Sri Lanka. As regards their melodies they are supposed to bear strong indigenous character. The melodies try to exhibit the strains of Buddhist Chanting.

The tradition of *Nelum* is popular in the central hill country, the *Kandyian* plateau which is situated between 1000 and 1500 feet above sea level. It is strange that this style of singing is not found in any other region where paddy cultivation forms the major occupation of the people. These songs are *Sivpada* compositions i.e. verses where all the four lines are equal in length, when measured in syllabic instants, and where all four lines end in a common consonantal assonance. Yet the style of singing the four lines is unique in *Nelum*, as it is not found in any other type of singing the *Sivpada* verse. In villages in the *Kandyian* plateau transplanting sessions start early morning and continue until dusk. Women sing all the way while at work. The start with slow melodies called *Ōse*.

Here is an example of a *Nelum* song ...

melovat paalovat säpadeti sudana hata
balavat basak pavasami miture numbata
delovak sanasanta ipaduna me lovata
siduhath kumarunge mavpiyo kiyan mata

(Happiness will come to those virtuous beings in this mundane world and the next beyond; I proclaim a bold statement to you my friends; tell me the names of the parents of prince Siddartha who born to bring solation to both world. Who born to bring solution to both worlds.)

Most verses sung for *Nelum* have been selected from *Yasodaravata*, a folk poem where the virtues of *Yasôdhara*, the wife of Prince *Siddhartha*, have been extolled. The singers inherit this material from their elders. They hardly possess any knowledge of *Yasôdaravata*. This particular verse too is supposed to be from *Yasôdaravata*.

It was mentioned earlier that these songs portray the strains of the Buddhist Chant, and as the normal tradition is for them to be sung by women, it may have been their choice to select verses from this poem. It was Prince *Siddhartha* who attained Buddhahood. Our area of study today is focussed on the singing of *Nelum* songs by three women from three villages in the hill country. The villages are located about 18 miles apart. The singers are all above 25 years of age, and none of them has gone beyond 7th standard in schooling. They are Settivanage Doti, 62 years, from Matalapitiya, Dombagolle Gedara Somawathie (48), from Marathugoda and Patambendi Gedara Kalyani, 28, from Vahakotte. Doti has sung the *Pirit Ôse*, i.e melody of Buddhist chanting as found in Pirit, while Somawathie sings the *Namaskâra Ôse*. This *Ôse* is sung normally at the beginning of a *Nelum* session. Even the text is common in all areas having transplanting tradition.

namo namaskârai iru deviyanta
namo namaskârai sanda deviyanta
namo namaskârai mihikat devita
namo namaskârai me sama devita

Normally in singing *Nelum* the practice is for one lady to start in solo and the rest will have to follow in chorus, sometimes the same line or the next line of the verse. In this analyzing programme only the solo singing has been taken. In the third example of singing, recorded from Vahakotte, Chart 3, the whole song has been sung solo.

Pitch analysis could be extracted from either of the three methods. There is the FFT mode, which stands for Fast Fourier Transform. Then there is the Auto-correlation mode and the Temporal Structure mode. For musical signals, especially the vocal styles of the East, the Auto-correlation method is the best. It is more detailed analysis of the pitches.

Then these signals could be demanded either by dots, or by connected curves or by vertical lines. Here the analysis in charts 2 and 3 from Marathugoda and Vaha kotte have been obtained in vertical lines. The Pitch Analysis diagrams have been timed for 7 seconds each. When you study the pitch analysing charts you will first come across the raw signal as a black image, and the figures along the bottom rule will give the duration in millisecs. For instance, the raw signal of Dom-bagolle Gedara Somawathie gives the duration as 800, 1500, 2200, 2900, 3600, 4300, 5000, and 6400 milli-seconds. The Pitch Analysis charts are marked with three digit figures either below or above the signals. These are the pitch readings in hertz taken at specific points along the signal. In chart 2 from Marathugoda the signal starts at 322, and in chart 1 from Matalapitiya the signal starts at 327. Both singers stood near about Major Third (*Gandhara*). The highest point of Somawathie is at 558, whereas Doti takes it at 585. i.e. about Minor Second of next octave. Kalyani of Vahakotte associates the higher octave than the other two. She goes up to 767, i.e. near the Fifth (*Pancham*).

She takes frequent levels at 419 (Minor Sixth) and at 717 (about Augmented Fourth). Sound chart No. 3 of Kalyani shows that she takes only a few common steps, does not stay much at one point. Two important steps taken by her are 419 and 717, (*Komal D and Tivra M*), i.e. Minor Sixth and Augmented Fourth. The Common steps by the other two singers can be shown as.....

- Omawathie, Marathugoda 473, 355, and near 542, 558
- Doti, Matal apitiya 322 and 419

There is also chart No.4 which gives a Spectrogram of Vahakotte Kalyani's singing. This is a clear and highly sensitive image of the subtle vocal partials of her voice.

The very upper partials can not be heard by the normal human ear. In this Spectrogram chart the upper partials go up to 4800 hertz. It is an important feature of the folk singers of the orient, that beautiful voice flourishes are abundant, especially in the *Nelum* styles of Sri Lanka. On the Computer screen this Spectrogram appears in colours.

Intervals can be discerned from Pitch analysis. In chart 3 you get the largest intervals of nearly 1000, 900 and 700 cents, whereas the smallest steps are visible in the singing of Doti from Matalapitiya... 60 and 400 and also 800 rarely. Her steps are gradual. Chart 3 is from Vahakotte. She has a more powerful voice than the other two.

References

S.L.B.C. Recording from Matalapitiya (28.6.1970), Marathugoda

S.L.B.C. Recording from 17.10.1977

Music Research Unit Project 1. Sigiriya, Dambulla, Vahakotte

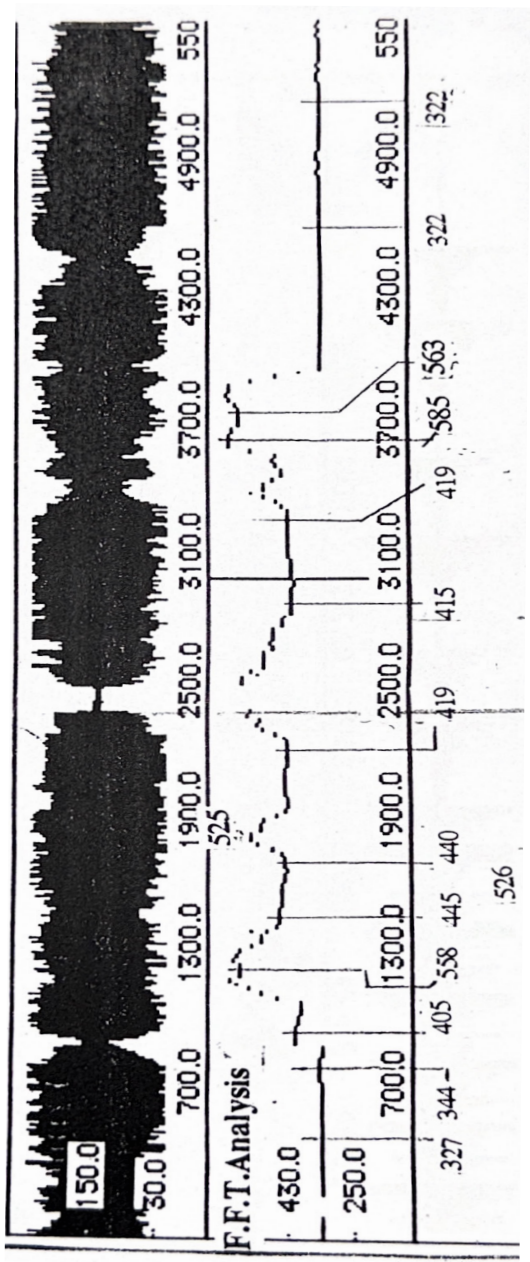


Chart 01 - Settivanige Doti, 49 years, Matalapitiya

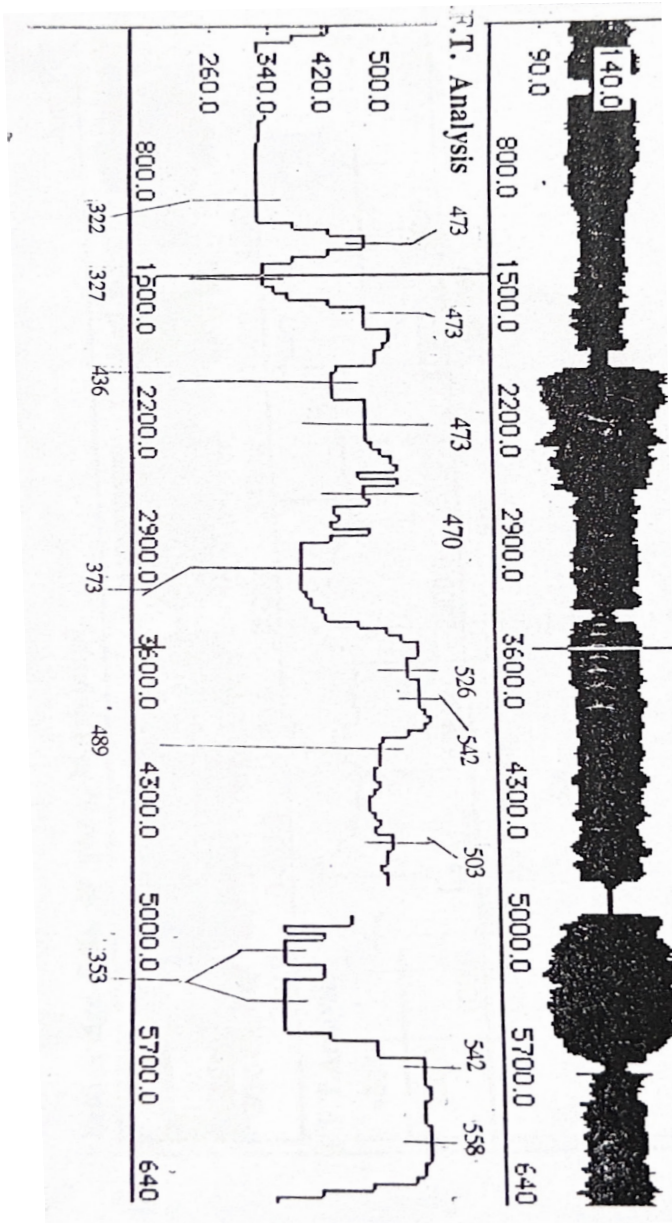


Chart 02 - Dombagolle Gedara Somawathie, 43 years,
Marathugoda, Pujapitiya

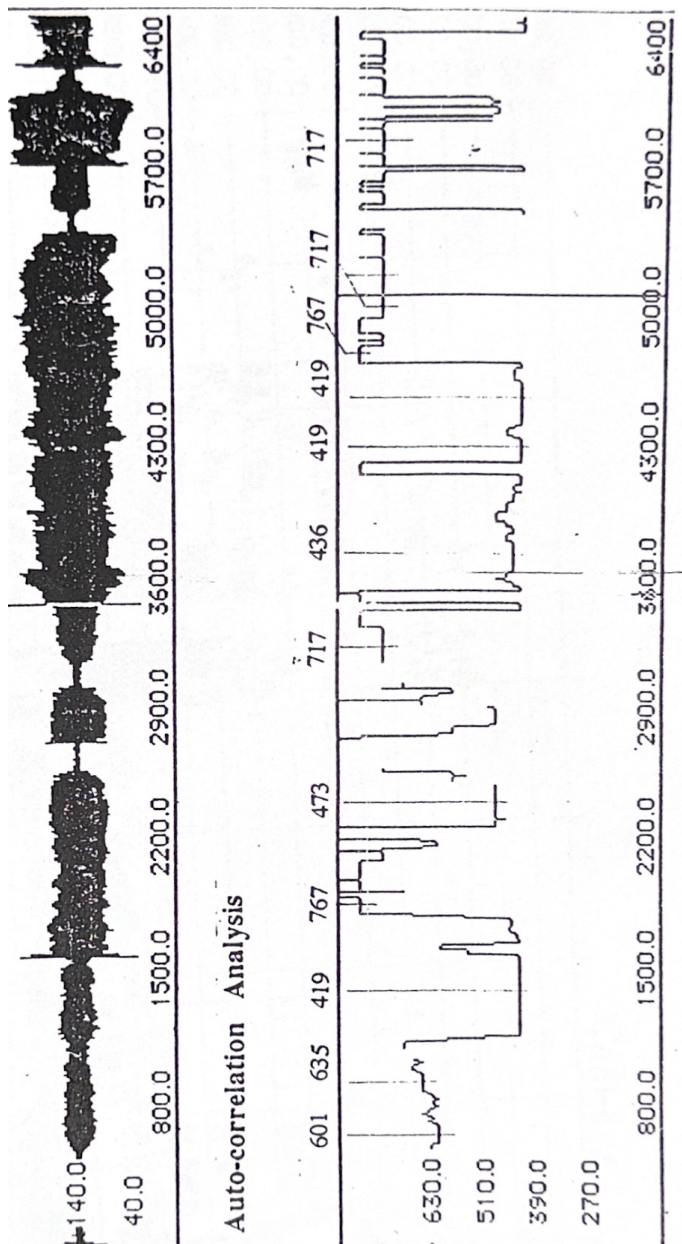


Chart 03 - Patambendi Gedara Kalyani, 28 years, Vahakotte

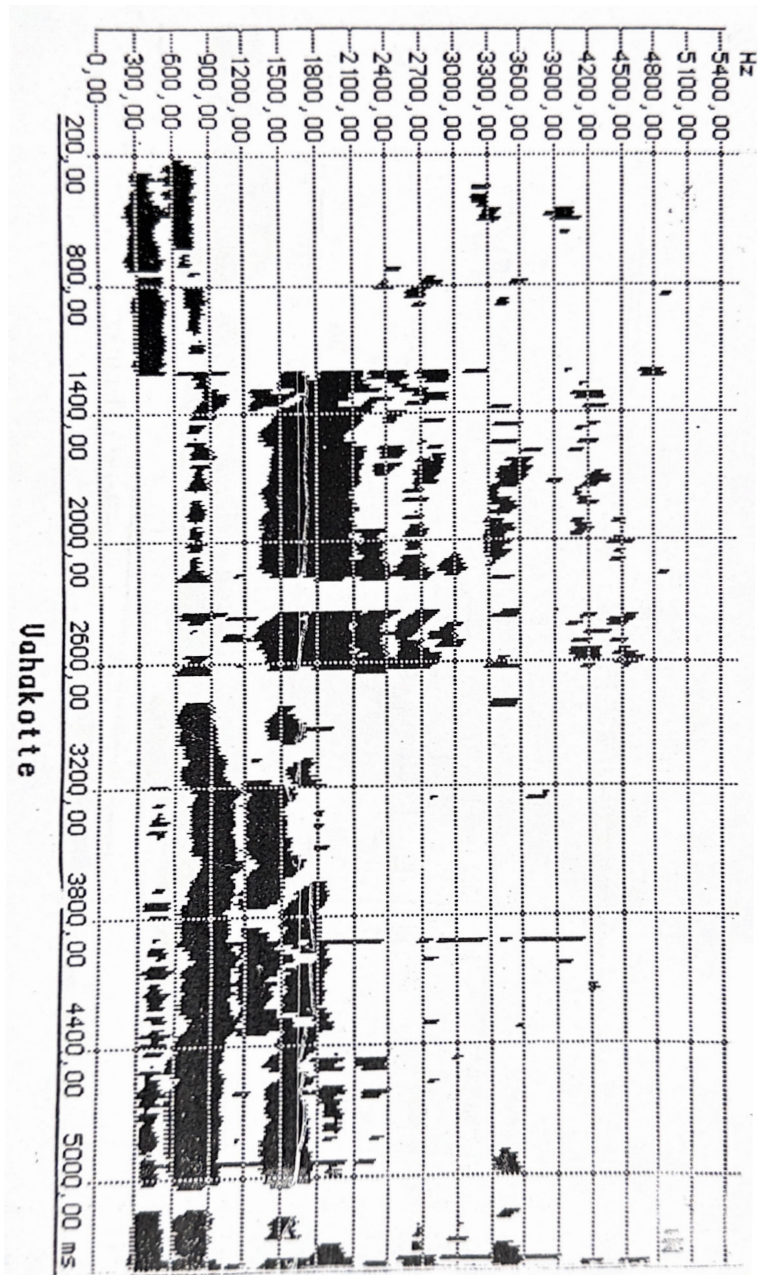


Chart 04 - Patambendi Gedara Kalyani, 28 years, Vahakotte