

A Comparative Study of Harmonic and Structural Influences of Western Classical Music on Sri Lankan Film and Popular Music

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Abstract

This study investigates the parallels and intersections between Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music, focusing on their shared musical characteristics and cross-cultural influences. The purpose of this research is to identify and analyze the parallels in harmonic language, instrumentation, melodic and rhythmic structures, song forms, recording techniques, and recent trends in musical fusion. Employing a qualitative comparative methodology based on an extensive review of existing literature and analytical examination of representative musical compositions from both traditions, this study seeks to fill a gap in current musicological scholarship concerning the reciprocal influences between these distinct yet interconnected musical cultures. The research problem centers on the limited understanding of how these traditions converge and diverge in their compositional and performative practices within the context of globalization. The findings demonstrate significant similarities, including the use of comparable harmonic progressions, diverse instrumental palettes, elaborated melodic motifs with ornamentation, complex rhythmic patterns, and analogous song structures such as verse-chorus frameworks. Furthermore, both traditions utilize advanced recording and production technologies to achieve high-quality sound, while recent collaborative projects exemplify a dynamic fusion of stylistic elements. In conclusion, despite preserving their unique cultural identities,

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Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music share foundational musical frameworks and engage in ongoing mutual exchanges that contribute to the enrichment and diversification of contemporary global musicology.

Key words: Sri Lankan modern music, Western Classical music, Instrumentation, Melodic structures, Song structure.

Introduction

Music is a universal language that transcends cultural boundaries, yet each tradition retains unique characteristics that define its identity (Cook, 1998). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in understanding how different musical traditions intersect and influence one another (Nettl, 2015; Clayton, Herbert, & Middleton, 2003). This paper delves into the correlations between Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music, examining how these distinct musical traditions share common elements and mutually influence each other.

Sri Lankan modern music, a vibrant and evolving genre, has roots in traditional Sri Lankan music while incorporating contemporary elements and global influences (Samarasinghe, 2019; Senaratne, 2020). Western classical music, with its rich history and well-established theoretical foundations, has significantly shaped many global music forms (Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 1983; Samson, 2001). Despite their different origins and cultural contexts, both Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music exhibit remarkable similarities in their harmonic language, instrumentation, melodic structures, rhythmic elements, song structures, and recording techniques (Perera, 2017; Cooper & Meyer, 1960; Brown, 2018).

Research Problem

While Sri Lankan modern music continues to evolve, there is limited scholarly exploration of how deeply it has been influenced by Western classical music in terms of musical structure, theory, and production (De Silva, 2021; Chandrasekara, 2016). The lack of in-depth comparative studies has created a gap in understanding the extent and nature of this cross-cultural influence. Therefore, this study addresses the problem: **“To what extent has Western classical music influenced the theoretical, structural, and production aspects of Sri Lankan modern music?”**

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify and analyze the musical elements shared by Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music, including harmony, melody, rhythm, and form (Cooper & Meyer, 1960; Tagg, 2013).
2. To examine the influence of Western classical music on the instrumentation and arrangement practices in Sri Lankan modern compositions (Perera, 2017; Senaratne, 2020).
3. To explore the role of Western music theory in shaping the harmonic and tonal structures of Sri Lankan modern music (Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 1983; Nettl, 2015).
4. To assess how recording techniques and technological advancements influenced by Western music production have been adopted in the Sri Lankan context (Brown, 2018; De Silva, 2021).

5. To contribute to the broader discourse of global musicology by highlighting cross-cultural influences and fusion between Eastern and Western music traditions (Clayton et al., 2003; Tagg, 2013).

Literature Review

The relationship between music traditions across cultures has long been a subject of musicological and ethnomusicological studies. Cook (1998) emphasizes the universality of music while acknowledging its cultural particularities. Similarly, Nettl (2015) highlights the significance of cross-cultural influences in the evolution of music traditions, which is highly relevant in the context of Sri Lankan modern music's development alongside Western classical paradigms.

Studies specific to Sri Lankan music reveal a strong foundation in traditional rhythmic and melodic systems, with gradual shifts influenced by global exposure. Samarasinghe (2019) and Senaratne (2020) document the transformation of Sri Lankan music as it incorporates Western harmonies, orchestration, and digital recording techniques. Chandrasekara (2016) further explores how Western classical music, particularly its structural and theoretical frameworks, has influenced contemporary Sri Lankan compositions.

Perera (2017) notes that Sri Lankan modern composers often borrow Western compositional techniques, such as chord progressions and counterpoint, while maintaining native rhythmic patterns. Lerdahl and Jackendoff's (1983) generative theory of tonal music provides a basis for analyzing these harmonic and melodic elements in both traditions.

Furthermore, Brown (2018) and De Silva (2021) provide insights into how Western recording and production technologies have been integrated into local studios and music practices, marking a fusion not just in sound but in process.

Tagg (2013) advocates for a modern, inclusive approach to musicology that appreciates non-Western traditions through accessible analytical tools, which aligns with this study's aim of bridging Western and Sri Lankan musical methodologies.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a **qualitative comparative analysis** method to examine the correlations between Western classical music and Sri Lankan modern music. The research is exploratory in nature, seeking to uncover patterns, influences, and shared elements across both traditions.

Data Collection

- 1. Textual and Theoretical Sources:** Musical scores, academic literature, and existing analyses of Western classical and Sri Lankan modern music were examined.
- 2. Audio Recordings:** Selected compositions from both traditions were analyzed aurally and visually using digital audio workstations (DAWs) and notation software.
- 3. Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Sri Lankan music composers, producers, and ethnomusicologists to gather insights on their perspectives of cross-influence.

4. **Case Studies:** Specific Sri Lankan modern songs known to be influenced by Western classical techniques were selected for detailed analysis.

Sample Selection

- Western classical pieces included works from the Classical and Romantic periods (e.g., Mozart, Beethoven).
- Sri Lankan modern songs were selected from artists and composers documented in sources such as Perera (2017) and De Silva (2021).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the following procedures:

1. **Thematic Analysis:** Transcripts of interviews and literature were coded to identify recurring themes related to harmonic structure, melodic development, rhythmic complexity, and instrumentation.
2. **Musical Score Analysis:** Using notation software (such as MuseScore or Sibelius), pieces were transcribed and analyzed for their use of tonality, form, chord progressions, and rhythmic patterns. Western and Sri Lankan pieces were compared side-by-side.
3. **Audio Analysis:** DAWs like Logic Pro and Audacity were used to examine production techniques such as mixing, panning, reverb use, and stereo imaging.

4. Comparative Matrix: A matrix was constructed to systematically compare elements like:

- **Harmony** (use of major/minor scales, modulation)
- **Melody** (motif development, phrasing)
- **Rhythm** (syncopation, polyrhythms)
- **Instrumentation** (traditional vs. Western instruments)
- **Production Techniques** (multi-tracking, EQ, dynamic range)

Findings from the analysis revealed significant overlaps in harmonic structure and instrumentation, while rhythmic complexity and melodic motifs often retained their Sri Lankan character. Western theory was found to influence chord usage and song forms, especially in fusion genres.

Discussion & Results

1. Harmonic Language

Both Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music utilize harmonic progressions and chords as foundational elements of their compositions (Perera, 2017). They share common principles of tonality, modulation, and chordal structures, which are essential for creating harmonic tension and resolution (Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 1983).

- Chord Progressions: Both traditions rely on functional harmony, using tonic, dominant, and subdominant chords to create structured progressions (Perera, 2017).
- Tonality: Much like Western classical music, Sri Lankan modern music often adheres to a tonal framework, utilizing diatonic scales to define a tonal center (Samarasinghe, 2019).
- Modulation: The use of modulation to shift key centers is common in both systems, introducing contrast and emotional variation (Chandrasekara, 2016).
- Chordal Structures: Both traditions use triads and extended chords as the basis for harmonic movement. These structures are built on specific scale degrees and mirror classical harmonic functions (Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 1983).
- Tension and Resolution: Harmonic tension is established through dissonant intervals and resolved through consonant chords in both traditions, creating expressive emotional arcs (Cook, 1998).

While stylistic preferences may differ, the underlying harmonic principles—such as tonality and resolution—remain a shared foundation between the two traditions (Senaratne, 2020).

2. Instrumentation

Both Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music exhibit diverse instrumentation, ranging from orchestral instruments to modern electronic devices, to construct complex and expressive soundscapes (Brown, 2018; De Silva, 2021).

- **Orchestral Instruments:** Instruments such as strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion are widely used in both traditions. In Sri Lankan film and concert music, orchestral arrangements frequently mirror Western scoring techniques (Chandrasekara, 2016).
- **Keyboards:** Both traditions utilize keyboards, including piano, organ, and synthesizers. Sri Lankan music also incorporates harmonium, merging traditional and Western textures (Samarasinghe, 2019).
- **Guitars:** Acoustic and electric guitars appear in both traditions, used for harmonic support and melodic ornamentation (Perera, 2017).
- **Percussion:** Both use diverse percussion instruments, from drum kits to congas and tambourines. Sri Lankan music often blends these with local drums like the rabana and getaberaya (Senaratne, 2020).
- **Traditional and Folk Instruments:** Indigenous Sri Lankan instruments such as the tabla or serpina are blended with modern orchestration, much like how Western music may integrate folk instruments like the accordion or tin whistle (Tagg, 2013).

- Electronic Instruments: Modern production has introduced synthesizers, samplers, and digital effects into both genres. This shift is largely due to Western technological influence (Brown, 2018; De Silva, 2021).

Thus, while cultural uniqueness remains in specific instrument use, both traditions demonstrate a shared evolution toward hybrid instrumentation (Tagg, 2013).

3. Melodic Structure

Melody is a core component in both Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music. Both traditions use scales, intervals, motifs, and melodic development techniques to shape expressive themes (Cook, 1998; Samarasinghe, 2019).

- Scales and Intervals: Western music typically employs major/minor scales and modes such as Dorian or Mixolydian, while Sri Lankan music incorporates traditional heptatonic ragas such as Suddha Raga (Senaratne, 2020; Perera, 2017).
- Melodic Contours: Both traditions explore ascending, descending, and undulating contours, which shape the emotional direction of a piece (Nettl, 2015).
- Motifs and Phrases: Repetition, variation, and transformation of short melodic ideas are central in both traditions. Western fugues and Sri Lankan *virindu* traditions show similar structural techniques (Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 1983; Chandrasekara, 2016).

- **Ornamentation:** Melodic lines are enhanced using grace notes, vibrato, glides, and trills. Ornamentation plays a key role in expressivity across both cultures (Cook, 1998; Tagg, 2013).
- **Melodic Development:** Techniques such as sequencing, fragmentation, and variation appear in both traditions to elaborate initial themes (Perera, 2017).
- **Emotional Expressivity:** Dynamic phrasing and nuanced articulation are employed to evoke mood and narrative, underscoring the universal emotional aim of both traditions (Samarasinghe, 2019).

Although the melodic vocabulary may differ, the conceptual and structural functions of melody are strikingly similar across both musical systems (Tagg, 2013; Nettl, 2015).

4. Rhythmic Elements

Both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music pay attention to rhythmic patterns and grooves. They utilize various time signatures, syncopation, and rhythmic variations to create rhythmic interest and drive in their compositions (Manuel, 2015; Perera, 2020). Rhythmic elements are vital in both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music. Both traditions employ various rhythmic patterns, time signatures, syncopation, and rhythmic variations to create rhythmic interest, drive, and energy in their compositions (Jayawardene, 2019). Here are some key points regarding rhythmic elements in Sri Lankan modern music and Western music:

- **Rhythmic Patterns:** Both traditions use rhythmic patterns as the foundation of their compositions. These patterns consist of sequences of long and short durations, creating a rhythmic groove. The specific patterns employed may vary between the two traditions, reflecting their respective cultural influences and styles (Manuel, 2015).
- **Time Signatures:** Both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music utilize a range of time signatures to organize the rhythmic structure of a composition. Common time signatures in Western music include 4/4, 3/4, 6/8, and more complex meters, while Sri Lankan modern music may use time signatures such as 2/4, 6/8, or 9/8, among others (Jayawardene, 2019; Perera, 2020).
- **Syncopation:** Syncopation, the emphasis on offbeat or unexpected rhythmic accents, is a characteristic shared by both traditions. Syncopated rhythms add a sense of groove and rhythmic complexity, creating interest and energy in the music (Clayton, 2000).
- **Rhythmic Variations:** Both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music incorporate rhythmic variations to enhance the overall rhythmic texture. This can include the use of rhythmic improvisation, rhythmic motifs, rhythmic ostinatos, and other techniques that add rhythmic complexity and diversity (Perera, 2020).

- **Percussion Instruments:** Percussion instruments play a significant role in both traditions. In Sri Lankan modern music, traditional percussion instruments like the *rabana*, *bera*, and *thammattama* are used to create intricate rhythmic patterns and provide a strong rhythmic foundation. Similarly, Western music employs various percussion instruments such as drums, cymbals, and tambourines to enhance the rhythmic drive and groove (Samarasinghe, 2018).
- **Dance and Movement:** Both traditions often accompany music with dance and movement. Rhythmic elements are crucial in facilitating the dance movements and creating a symbiotic relationship between music and physical expression (Jayawardene, 2019; Clayton, 2000).

Both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music share a focus on rhythmic elements to drive the music forward, create groove, and engage the listener with rhythmic variations, syncopation, and rhythmic patterns. While the specific rhythmic idioms may differ, the significance of rhythm as a foundational element is evident in both traditions (Manuel, 2015).

5. Song Structure

Sri Lankan modern music and Western music often share similar song structures, such as verse-chorus, bridge, and pre-chorus sections. They both use these structures to organize the progression of the song and create a sense of familiarity and balance (Middleton, 1990; Samarasinghe, 2018).

Song structure is an important element in both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music. While there may be variations and unique cultural influences, both traditions often utilize similar song structures to organize the progression of a song and create a sense of familiarity and balance for the listener (Jayawardene, 2019). Here are some key points regarding song structure in Sri Lankan modern music and Western music:

- **Verse-Chorus Structure:** The verse-chorus structure is a common song form used in both traditions. It consists of alternating sections: verses, which present the narrative or story, and choruses, which provide a memorable and often repeated section that serves as a musical and lyrical anchor (Middleton, 1990).
- **Bridge:** Both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music incorporate bridge sections. The bridge serves as a contrasting section that provides a departure from the verse-chorus pattern, often introducing new melodic, harmonic, or lyrical material. It adds variety and interest to the song by breaking away from the established structure before returning to the familiar verse-chorus sections (Samarasinghe, 2018).
- **Pre-Chorus:** Pre-chorus sections are also commonly used in both traditions. A pre-chorus acts as a transitional section between a verse and a chorus, building anticipation and tension before the release of the chorus. It often features different lyrics and melodic content to create a sense of progression and prepare the listener for the climactic chorus (Tagg, 2000).

- **Intro and Outro:** Both traditions typically include intro and outro sections in their songs. The intro sets the mood and prepares the listener for the main body of the song, while the outro serves as a conclusion, providing closure and often repeating or summarizing musical and lyrical elements from earlier in the song (Middleton, 1990).
- **Instrumental Breaks and Solos:** Both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music may incorporate instrumental breaks and solos within their song structures. These sections allow for instrumental improvisation or showcase the technical and artistic abilities of the musicians (Jayawardene, 2019).

While there may be cultural and stylistic variations in song structures between Sri Lankan modern music and Western music, the use of verse-chorus structures, bridges, pre-choruses, intros, outros, and instrumental breaks provide a common framework for organizing the progression of a song and creating a cohesive musical experience (Samarasinghe, 2018).

6. Recording Techniques

With advancements in technology, both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music benefit from similar recording and production techniques. They utilize studio equipment, digital editing, and mixing techniques to achieve high-quality recordings and polished productions (Thompson, 2009; Samarasinghe, 2018).

Here are some key points regarding recording techniques in both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music:

- **Studio Equipment:** Both traditions utilize professional studio equipment to capture and record musical performances. This includes microphones, audio interfaces, preamps, and recording consoles. These tools ensure accurate and high-fidelity reproduction of sound (Thompson, 2009).
- **Digital Recording:** Both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music benefit from digital recording technology. Digital audio workstations (DAWs) allow for multitrack recording, editing, and mixing of individual instrument and vocal tracks. This enables precise control over the recording process and facilitates the creation of layered arrangements (Hodgson, 2010).
- **Editing and Post-Production:** Both traditions employ digital editing techniques to refine recorded performances. This can involve tasks such as aligning and comping multiple takes, pitch correction, timing adjustments, and other enhancements to optimize the quality of the recorded tracks (Hodgson, 2010; Samarasinghe, 2018).
- **Mixing:** Mixing is a crucial stage in the production process of both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music. Mixing involves balancing the levels of individual tracks, panning instruments across the stereo field, applying equalization and other audio effects, and creating a cohesive and balanced sonic image (Thompson, 2009).
- **Mastering:** Mastering is the final step in the production process and is common to both traditions. Mastering involves fine-tuning the overall

sound of the recording, applying dynamic processing, equalization, and other enhancements to achieve a consistent and professional sound across different playback systems (Hodgson, 2010).

- **Virtual Instruments and Samples:** Both traditions make use of virtual instruments and samples to enhance the sonic palette of their recordings. These tools allow for the incorporation of realistic or synthesized sounds, expanding the creative possibilities in the production process (Jayawardene, 2019).
- **Mixing and Mastering Engineers:** Both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music often rely on the expertise of mixing and mastering engineers. These professionals bring their skills and knowledge to ensure that the recordings sound polished and meet industry standards (Samarasinghe, 2018).

While the specific techniques and equipment used may vary depending on the budget, resources, and artistic vision, both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music benefit from advancements in recording and production technology. These tools allow for high-quality recordings, precise editing, and professional-level mixing and mastering (Thompson, 2009; Hodgson, 2010).

7. Fusion and Cross-Influences

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend of fusion and cross-influences between Sri Lankan modern music and Western music. Artists from both traditions have been exploring collaborations,

incorporating elements from each other's styles, and creating a unique blend of musical expressions.

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of fusion and cross-influences between Sri Lankan modern music and Western music. Artists from both traditions have been embracing collaboration and incorporating elements from each other's styles, resulting in a unique blend of musical expressions. Here are some key points regarding fusion and cross-influences between Sri Lankan modern music and Western music:

- **Collaborations:** Artists from Sri Lanka and the Western world have been coming together to collaborate on musical projects. These collaborations involve musicians, composers, and producers from both traditions working together to create music that combines elements of Sri Lankan modern music and Western music. This can result in innovative and culturally rich musical experiences.
- **Genre-blending:** There has been an exploration of genre-blending, where artists combine elements of Sri Lankan modern music genres with Western genres such as pop, rock, jazz, electronic, and hip-hop. This fusion of genres allows for the integration of different musical elements and influences, resulting in a fresh and dynamic sound.
- **Instrumentation and Arrangements:** Artists have been incorporating instruments and arrangements from both traditions into their compositions. This can involve using traditional Sri Lankan instruments alongside

Western instruments or incorporating Western-style arrangements into Sri Lankan compositions. The combination of diverse instruments and arrangements adds depth and richness to the music.

- **Harmonic and Melodic Influences:** Sri Lankan modern music and Western music have been influencing each other harmonically and melodically. This can include the use of Western harmonic progressions and chord structures in Sri Lankan compositions or incorporating Sri Lankan melodic motifs and scales into Western compositions. These influences create a fusion of harmonic and melodic elements from both traditions.
- **Cultural Exchanges:** Through cultural exchanges and global connectivity, musicians and artists from Sri Lanka and the Western world have been exposed to each other's music and have developed an appreciation for the diverse musical traditions. This exposure has facilitated the exchange of ideas and the integration of elements from both Sri Lankan modern music and Western music.

Fusion and cross-influences between Sri Lankan modern music and Western music offer exciting opportunities for artists to explore new musical territories, bridge cultural gaps, and create unique and diverse musical expressions. This trend allows for the celebration of cultural diversity and the creation of music that transcends traditional boundaries.

It's important to note that while there are similarities, Sri Lankan modern music also retains its own unique cultural identity and incorporates elements of traditional Sri Lankan music, language, and culture.

Conclusion

This study has explored the intricate connections between Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music, revealing a rich tapestry of shared elements and mutual influences. Despite their distinct cultural backgrounds, both musical traditions exhibit significant similarities in harmonic language, instrumentation, melodic structures, rhythmic elements, song structures, and recording techniques.

Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music both utilize harmonic progressions, tonality, and modulation to create musical tension and resolution. They share a diverse range of instrumentation, incorporating orchestral, keyboard, guitar, and percussion instruments, as well as traditional and contemporary instruments unique to their respective cultures. Melodic structures in both traditions are grounded in scales, intervals, and motifs, employing ornamentation and development techniques to enhance emotional expressivity. Rhythmic elements such as patterns, time signatures, syncopation, and variations are vital in driving compositions and engaging listeners.

The similarities in song structures, including the use of verse-chorus forms, bridges, pre-choruses, intros, and outros, demonstrate a shared approach to organizing musical progression. Advances in recording and production technology have further bridged the gap between these traditions, enabling high-quality and polished productions.

Recent trends in fusion and cross-influences highlight the dynamic and evolving relationship between Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music. Collaborations between artists from both traditions have led to innovative and culturally rich musical expressions, blending genres and incorporating diverse elements.

Understanding these correlations enriches our appreciation of both musical traditions and underscores the importance of cross-cultural exchanges in music. This exploration emphasizes that while Sri Lankan modern music and Western classical music retain their unique cultural identities, their shared foundations and mutual influences reflect the interconnected nature of global music today. Such insights contribute to the broader discourse on global musicology, highlighting the potential for creative innovation through cultural fusion.

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