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MEDIATION IN CARNATIC DIASPORAS: RENDERING *SRI GANAPATHINI* IN WESTERN NOTATION SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT
Carnatic music of South India has historically been transmitted through oral tradition, a pedagogical approach sparsely supported by written cues. However, in modern diasporic teaching contexts, many instructors rely on written materials to support students surrounded by Western literacy practices. This paper offers a preliminary examination of how notation functions as a mediating tool in diasporic Carnatic pedagogy through analysis of notation sheets of Tyagaraja's *Sri Ganapathini*, a canonical 18th century *kriti* (song). Drawing on interviews with teachers and students in multiple U.S. settings, I collected notation sheets that use letter-based solfège syllables (sa, ri, ga, etc.), idiosyncratic symbols for ornamentation (*gamaka*), phrase segmentation, and rhythmic organization. Three of these materials form the basis of this analysis, selected for their notational clarity and coherence, and are transcribed into Western staff notation to make legible pedagogical priorities that produce micro-traditions within Carnatic pedagogy. Additionally, this study incorporates IPA transcriptions to examine how pronunciation shapes musical learning as the Telugu text of *Sri Ganapathini* passes through American vernacular speech habits.
Treating Western notation as an interpretive mediation rather than a neutral record, these transcriptions reveal both pedagogical differences and the limits of notation in capturing the fluidity of a *gamaka*-based oral tradition.
KEYWORDS: South India; Carnatic; Transcription; Notation; Mediation; Fieldwork; Oral Tradition; Ethnomusicology.

RESUMEN: *Mediación en las diásporas carnáticas: la representación de Sri Ganapathini en sistemas de notación occidentales*
La música carnática del sur de la India se ha transmitido históricamente a través de la tradición oral, un enfoque pedagógico con escaso apoyo escrito. Sin embargo, en contextos de enseñanza diaspórica modernos, muchos instructores recurren a materiales escritos para facilitar el aprendizaje de estudiantes influenciados por las prácticas de alfabetización occidentales. Este artículo examina cómo la notación funciona como herramienta mediadora en la pedagogía carnática diaspórica, mediante el análisis de las partituras de Sri Ganapathini de Tyagaraja, una kriti (canción) canónica del siglo XVIII. A partir de

entrevistas con profesores y estudiantes en diversos entornos estadounidenses, recopilé partituras que utilizan sílabas de solfeo basadas en letras (sa, ri, ga, etc.), símbolos idiosincrásicos para la ornamentación (gamaka), segmentación de frases y organización rítmica. Tres de estos materiales constituyen la base de este análisis, seleccionados por su claridad y coherencia notacional, y se transcriben a notación musical occidental para hacer legibles las prioridades pedagógicas que generan microtradiciones dentro de la pedagogía carnática. Además, este estudio incorpora transcripciones del Alfabeto Fonético Internacional (IPA) para examinar cómo la pronunciación influye en el aprendizaje musical a medida que el texto en telugu de Sri Ganapathini se adapta a los hábitos del habla vernácula estadounidense. Al tratar la notación occidental como una mediación interpretativa en lugar de un registro neutral, estas transcripciones revelan tanto las diferencias pedagógicas como las limitaciones de la notación para capturar la fluidez de una tradición oral basada en el gamaka.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sur de la India; música carnática; transcripción; notación; mediación; trabajo de campo; tradición oral; etnomusicología.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The methods through which Carnatic music is taught in the South Asian diaspora of the United States reveal a complex interplay between oral tradition, community identity, and the practical demands of teaching in transnational contexts. Although Carnatic music in South India continues to rely primarily on oral transmission supported by skeletal notation, teachers in diaspora communities often supplement oral instruction with locally developed notational systems. Through interviews with teachers and students from around the country, I found that many instructors design their own teaching sheets using Romanized syllables (*sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, da, ni*) along with idiosyncratic marks for *gamakas* (ornamentation), phrase breaks, and *tala* cycles. These systems are practical and pedagogically anchored, but they vary significantly from teacher to teacher, forming what might be described as micro-traditions of notation shaped by the linguistic fluencies, teaching philosophies, and available media shaping diasporic pedagogy.

When a canonical composition such as *Sri Ganapathini*, attributed to the Carnatic composer Tyagaraja, one of the central figures of the Carnatic composition, is taught in diasporic settings, the process of mediation becomes especially visible. Diaspora teachers must translate an orally transmitted, stylistically flexible, and *gamaka*-heavy tradition into a format legible to students who may lack sustained daily exposure to Carnatic sound worlds and the *guru-shishya* tradition of oral apprenticeship. As a result, many teachers create their own notational systems of practical guides that simplify melodic shapes, clarify rhythmic organization, and mark structural divisions of the composition. These sheets are not standardized and often reflect the pedagogical style, musical background, and priorities of each teacher. Rather than functioning as authoritative representations of a composition, they operate as pedagogical scaffolds, designed to help students navigate basic contour, text placement, and phrase structure while learning repertory that is otherwise transmitted through listening, imitation, and embodied practice.

My project examines these processes of mediation by producing Western-notation transcriptions and IPA renderings of *Sri Ganapathini* from three diasporic pedagogical versions of the piece. As a secondary lens, I compare these with a professional South Indian performance to show how diaspora adaptations differ from performance practice in India. Three teaching sheets,

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one publicly available and the other two shared through the teachers, differ not only in the symbols they employ but also in how they parse musical structure: the grouping of *swara* phrases (scalar pitch patterns), the segmentation and spelling of lyrics, the height and direction of pitch contours, the treatment of microtonal slides, and the placement or omission of *gamaka* cues (ornamental pitch movements). In addition to transcribing these materials into Western staff notation, I provide an IPA transcription of the lyrics to analyze how pronunciation varies across pedagogical lineages and instructional contexts, and how these linguistic differences shape musical understanding in diasporic contexts.

These materials reveal how Carnatic music is continually reshaped in diaspora: musically, linguistically, and socially. The notated versions show how instructors adapt *Sri Ganapathini* for students steeped in Western educational habits and trained to rely on visual musical cues, often without daily immersion in South Indian sound worlds. A comparison with a professional South Indian performance further highlights how ornamentation and phrasing, along with text delivery, and melodic nuance shift when an orally transmitted tradition is taught outside its original context.

Considering that part of this project involves transcribing these versions of *Sri Ganapathini* into Western staff notation, I acknowledge that this process inevitably alters the music, since Western notation cannot fully accommodate the fluidity and pitch nuance of a *gamaka*-heavy tradition. A system built around fixed pitch and regular barlines shapes and limits what it can represent, and these constraints become especially visible when applied to Carnatic melodic practice. My preliminary Western-notation edition is therefore not an attempt to recover a singular or original form of the composition, but a means of making the divergent diasporic versions comparable and of drawing attention to the cultural and sonic negotiations required to render the piece legible across musical systems.

To frame these processes, I draw on scholarship that examines musical mediation, the nature of performance, and the interpretive work of notation. Christopher Small's concept of "musicking" situates each rendition of *Sri Ganapathini* as a relational act that constructs its own social world within the diasporic community (Small, 1998: 50–51), echoing Carlos Vega's earlier framing of music as *musicar*, an active practice rather than a fixed object (Vega, 1941: 13).

Similarly, Roland Barthes's distinction between *musica practica* and passive listening highlights how notation structures, but can never fully replace, the embodied practices through which Carnatic music is learned (Barthes, 1985: 150–151). Carolyn Abbate's articulation of "drastic" and "gnostic" modes of engagement clarifies the tension between the orally transmitted, performance-centered South Indian tradition and the diasporic impulse to stabilize it in written form (Abbate, 2004: 506).

Equally important is the editorial perspective offered by James Grier, whose writings emphasize that editing is a historically situated, interpretive act rather than the pursuit of a neutral or authoritative text (Grier, 1996: 6). Following this view, I approach my transcription not as a definitive edition but as a critical mediation that acknowledges its subjectivities. The divergences already present in diasporic notations, particularly in the treatment of *gamakas*, temporal flexibility, and phrase segmentation, are compounded by the constraints of Western notation. Yet the act of producing such an edition remains valuable: it facilitates structured comparison, makes visible the interpretive decisions embedded in each version, and highlights the layers of mediation through which Carnatic music circulates in contemporary diasporic life (Grier, 1996: 6).

Background: *Sri Ganapathini* and Diasporic Pedagogy

Sri Ganapathini is a composition attributed to Tyagaraja, one of the most influential composers in the Carnatic tradition. Over the course of the 19thcentury, he came to be venerated as a saint within the Carnatic tradition, and his devotional association with the Tyagaraja temple in Thiruvaiyaru remains central to how his musical and spiritual legacy is understood today. Together with Muttuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri, he belongs to what is commonly referred to as the Carnatic Trinity (Qureshi et al., 2001). These three composers occupy a foundational place in modern pedagogy and performance. Their works continue to be transmitted primarily through oral tradition in India, which results in a wide range of interpretive variants across teachers and lineage-based schools of thought. Tyagaraja's *kritis* (songs) in particular serve dual functions. They operate as devotional vehicles that articulate *bhakti* (devotional worship), and they function as pedagogical material that introduces core structures of Carnatic melody, rhythm, and text setting

(Radhakrishnan, 1957: iii). For these reasons Tyagaraja's works often become early repertory for students in diaspora communities, serving not only as accessible entry points into the tradition but also as anchors of cultural memory for families seeking to nurture South Indian identity in American environments.

An important element of Tyagaraja's corpus is that no autograph manuscripts of his compositions are known to survive; his works are preserved through oral transmission and later manuscripts prepared by disciples and their descendants (Jackson, 1991). In South India, singers learn compositions by listening to their teachers, who themselves learned through oral repetition. Small written reminders do exist, but they are never sufficient to carry the full interpretive weight of a composition. This tension between oral and written transmission is one of the reasons *Sri Ganapathini* is an apt choice for this project. It is a piece that highlights how oral knowledge is adapted when it encounters a context that privileges written supplements.

Sri Ganapathini is a *kriti* in the *raga Sowrashtra* and is commonly taught in *adi tala*, which corresponds to an 8-beat cycle. The piece is an invocation to Ganapati/Ganesha (the elephant-headed god of beginnings), and it is often used to begin lessons, concerts, and community teaching sessions. *Sowrashtra* is associated with auspicious beginnings and with devotional contexts related to *Ganapati*, which makes this composition especially well-suited to introductory teaching. Pedagogically, *Sri Ganapathini* is considered an early intermediate piece.[1] Its melodic scaffolding is clear, the structure is neatly segmented, and it contains characteristic but teachable applications of *gamaka*. For these reasons it appears in the syllabi of many diaspora teachers. Because it is so widely taught, it generates numerous micro variants in phrase length, ornamentation, and pronunciation.[2] It is familiar enough to act as a shared reference point between teachers and students, yet flexible enough to support interpretive variation.

In diaspora contexts throughout the United States, a piece like *Sri Ganapathini* fits well into environments where teachers must balance oral instruction with practical tools that help students who have grown up in Western educational systems. Its structure is straightforward

[1] Personal conversation with Vasanthi Iyer, 13 December 2025.
[2] Ibid.

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enough to lend itself to diaspora notational systems. It is not overly complex, can be ornamented differently depending on a teacher's background, and is therefore a revealing site for examining how Carnatic compositions adapt to new pedagogical conditions.

Sri Ganapathini is also a strong example for studying mediation because its structure allows clear observation of how teachers adapt Carnatic repertory to American contexts. Differences appear in the number and placement of *gamakas*, how phrases are segmented, how lyrics are pronounced, and how quickly a teacher expects a student to move from skeletal melody to more ornamented singing. The composition is conducive to improvisation and light variation, which made it relatively easy for the teachers I consulted to notate. Its moderate complexity means it can be represented in a diasporic notation system without excessive reduction. This balance between simplicity and expressive potential makes the piece an ideal microcosm for examining broader diaspora issues such as linguistic mediation, pedagogical adaptation, hybrid or invented notational systems, and the influence of recordings and digital circulation. The presence of many professional recordings on YouTube also affects how students imagine the piece, creating interpretive influences that coexist with local teaching.

Through conversations with students and teachers in diasporic Carnatic music communities across the United States, including Chicago, Los Angeles, Dallas, and Manhattan, it became evident that multiple written notational systems for the same composition coexist, reflecting the pedagogical priorities and musical lineages of individual teachers rather than a single standardized model. These notations often differ substantially in pitch detail, rhythmic articulation, and the representation of ornamentation, and are typically developed either by the teachers themselves or by a single individual whose system is then adopted within a pedagogical network. For this project, I collected the three distinct notational versions of *Sri Ganapathini*. The first is a printed notation developed by Vasanthi Iyer, a Chicago-based teacher and founder of the *Veena Gana* school, who has taught over 400 students during a teaching career spanning more than 35 years (Iyer, 2025). The second is a handwritten notation created by Smt. (Shrimati) Rajeswari Pariti, a Dallas-based teacher who has taught Carnatic music for over 50 years and employs a personalized handwritten system that she circulates among her students.[3] The third source is an open-access online notation,

[3] Personal conversation with Smt. Rajeswari Pariti, 14 December 2025.

to which I was referred by a student in Los Angeles; this resource includes detailed background information, printed notation, and lyrical translations (Shivkumar, 2025), and is used as a reference by the student's teacher. Taken together, these materials illustrate how notation in diasporic Carnatic practice is plural, teacher-specific, and adaptive, functioning less as a fixed canonical text than as a pedagogical tool shaped by lineage, geography, and individual instructional approaches.

I selected *Sri Ganapathini* for this project because it teaches essential elements of Carnatic musicality while still offering considerable room for interpretive freedom. It appears frequently in diaspora teaching, which makes it valuable for examining how teachers adapt repertory for students who may not speak the languages associated with the composition or who may rely more heavily on written aids. The piece already exists in multiple local forms, which makes it well suited for studying variation, transmission, and notation practices. The three versions I collected demonstrate different pedagogical strategies and different relationships to notation. They also show how a single composition can carry different meanings and functions across communities.

Materials and Transcription Method

In this section, I present the three versions of *Sri Ganapathini* that I transcribed into Western staff notation. The materials were either provided by or recommended to me by the students and teachers I interviewed; the original teaching sheets appear in **Appendices 1 - 3**. My Western notation transcriptions of these versions appear in **Appendices 4 - 6**. I created these transcriptions using an online notation program and notated them in the treble clef for simplicity. The piece is set in *adi tala*, an 8-beat cycle that corresponds loosely to 4/4 in Western meter. In this project, the quarter note functions as the basic pulse, while *aksarams* serve as subdivisions of that pulse; the designation "2-*kalai*" indicates that each beat is stretched to accommodate these subdivisions. Because *raga*-based music does not follow Western tonal centers, I did not assign a key signature; instead, I indicated pitch alterations with accidentals as they occur. This approach allows the transcription to remain flexible while presenting the melodic contour in a format legible to readers accustomed to Western notation.

Before comparing the three versions of *Sri Ganapathini*, it is helpful to clarify the notation system used in the original Carnatic teaching materials. I summarize these symbols in the following table (Table 1. below):

Symbol	Meaning	Notes for This Project
;	Space or rest	Short pause within the phrase; equivalent to a **quarter-note rest**
,	Shorter rest	**Eighth-note rest** (half the value of ;)
Capital letters	Basic pulse speed	Represent the ***tala* beat**; mapped to **quarter notes**
Lowercase letters	Faster speed	Twice the basic pulse; mapped to **eighth notes**
Bold letters	Upper octave	Notes in the higher register (C5)
Italics	Lower octave	Notes below the main register (C4)
-2-	Sing phrase twice	Represented using **repeat signs**
Double line	End of *tala* cycle	End of an **8-beat cycle** (*adi talam*)
New line	*Sangati* (progressive variation)	Each line introduces a new melodic variant that expands or reshapes the previous one
Underline	**Rhythmic variation within *aksarams***	**Subdivision or syncopation** inside a beat- often a **triplet-like feel**
(implicit) ***Aksaram***	Beat subdivision	In **2-*kalai adi talam***: **4 *aksarams* = 1 beat** → like **16th-note subdivisions**

Table 1. Symbols and Notational Conventions in Diasporic Teaching Sheets for Sri Ganapathini

All versions present the raga *Sowrashtram*, whose basic pitch framework is defined by an ascending pattern called the *aro* and a descending pattern called the *ava*. The *aro* (S R1 G3 M1 P M1 D2 N3 S) shows the sequence of notes used when the melody moves upward, while the *ava* (S N3 D2 N2 D2 P M1 G3 R1 S) shows the pathway used in descent (Shivkumar, 2025). The subscripts, such as R1 or G3, indicate specific variants of each scale degree in Carnatic theory; each variant represents a precise pitch position that helps shape the identity of the raga. These patterns provide the melodic vocabulary from which the composition is built.

The first sheet **(Appendix 1)** includes only the *pallavi*, the opening section of the composition, and for this reason my transcriptions focus on that section alone. Although the second and third sheets **(Appendices 2 and 3)** include the *anupallavi* (second section), limiting the study to the *pallavi* keeps the comparison consistent across all sources. In teaching and performance,

the *pallavi* is often developed through a series of *sangatis*, which are sequential variations that increase in melodic or rhythmic complexity. All three versions imply this structure even when they differ in phrasing or ornamentation.

For the Western notation, I used an online software program and notated the piece in soprano treble clef to keep the transcription easy to read. The *adi tala* has been translated to a 4/4 with a quarter note base pulse for simplicity. Because *raga*-based music does not operate through major or minor key centers, I did not assign a key signature. Instead, I indicated altered pitches with accidentals and grace notes. Only D-flat is required as a structural accidental in the transcription since it is the only pitch in the *Sowrashtra raga* that does not align closely with a natural pitch of the Western scale. In Carnatic terms, this corresponds to R1 (*shuddha rishabha*), which falls between C-natural and D-natural and is most closely represented as D-flat in Western notation. All other scale degrees align closely with natural pitches (for example, S with C, G3 with E natural, M1 with F, P with G, and D2 with A), and can therefore be written without accidentals. In addition, I have used B-flat in specific descending passages corresponding to the "DND" figure in the Carnatic notation, where the *ni* appears between two occurrences of D2; in Western notation this is rendered as A–B-flat–A to represent the lowered *ni* inflection used in performance practice.

The three versions present *Sri Ganapathini* with multiple *sangatis*, but they differ noticeably in how these variations are organized and developed. The first version emphasizes gradual, stepwise elaboration, with each *sangati* incrementally expanding the melodic material, reflecting a pedagogical approach that prioritizes controlled development and clarity. The second version is more streamlined, concentrating melodic activity into fewer, denser variations that rely more heavily on the student's ability to grasp contour and ornamentation by ear. The third version occupies a middle position, balancing clear structural segmentation with increased internal melodic and rhythmic activity. These differences likely arise from each teacher's priorities: phrasing clarity, breath placement, the level of the students, and how much *gamaka* the teacher expects students to internalize aurally rather than through notation.

The transcription process made these contrasts visible. In the first version, the rests at the end of each *sangati* align neatly with the *tala* cycle, making it relatively straightforward to convert into

Western notation. The beats match cleanly, and the "-2-" markings could be represented directly as repeat signs in the staff notation. It was more difficult to determine exact rhythmic values in the second version. Some phrases extend irregularly across bar lines and tied notes obscure where rests are intended to fall (such as mm. 12 and 20). This results in phrase endings that do not always align with the expected number of beats, requiring interpretive decisions about how to represent these deviations within the fixed grid of Western meter. Although this sheet does not explicitly mark repetition in the same way, I included repeat signs in the transcription based on the structure implied by the original notation, using interpretive judgment to reflect how the phrase is intended to be learned and repeated.

Additional rhythmic challenges arose in the third handwritten version, where hyphen symbols are used to indicate note-value lengthening but do not specify exact durations, nor can these be inferred from surrounding symbols such as letter case or spacing. To translate these elongations, I used a combination of ties, *tenuto* markings, or expanded note values to approximate the intended sustain (for example, the *tenuto* markings in mm. 2 and 3 and grouped rhythmic figures of 16^{th} and 8^{th} notes in mm. 3 and 7). Even so, preserving the sense of elongation while maintaining a consistent 4/4 framework often required interpretive compromise. Underlined sections in the Carnatic notation similarly indicate faster internal motion within a phrase, producing a compressed or syncopated effect. To represent these passages, I used triplets or 16^{th}-note groupings, acknowledging that in Carnatic practice such moments would be performed with greater rhythmic flexibility than fixed subdivision allows.

A further challenge appears at the opening of the composition. All three Carnatic teaching sheets notate the beginning of *Sri Ganapathini* as starting on either the 3^{rd} or 4^{th} beat of the cycle when mapped onto a quarter-note pulse. In performance practice, however, teachers and students consistently explained (and professional recordings confirm) that the melody actually begins off the beat, functioning more like an anacrusis or pickup rather than a metrically aligned entry. In translating these materials into Western notation, I preserved the placement indicated in the Carnatic teaching sheets rather than attempting to correct it according to performance practice. As a result, the sense of off-beat entry that characterizes the sung version is partially lost, illustrating another way in which notational mediation alters the musical experience.

Pitch placement also differed across the three versions. Because the first teaching sheets use italics and boldface only to mark the tonic (C or *sa*) in its lower or upper octave, determining the octave placement of other pitches required reconstructing the implied melodic contour of the *raga*. Here, this contour is more explicitly suggested, with the notation moving into the higher octave earlier in the line. This is evident at the beginning of the second *sangati* (mm. 9–10), where the phrase opens in the upper register. In the second version, the corresponding *sangati* begins on the lower C in the same measure span, shifting the melodic weight downward and producing a different contour. This approach relies more heavily on students learning octave placement and emphasis by ear rather than through detailed written cues, resulting in greater interpretive flexibility but less visual specificity. The third version follows a contour closer to the second, but alters the pitch sequence at the ending, producing a distinct closing gesture. It also is the only one to use a unique wavy symbol (~) above certain notes to indicate extra *gamaka*, which I represented in the transcription with *fermatas* as an approximate marker of expressive emphasis.

Despite these differences, all versions share the same underlying pitch and rhythmic framework, yet the notational choices reveal how diaspora pedagogy mediates this framework in distinct ways. These differences show how the same composition circulates in multiple forms, shaped less by a fixed musical text than by the pedagogical lineage of each teacher. The teachers and students I spoke to all consistently described these sheets as reflections of how a *guru* learned and transmits the piece, with each notation embodying an inherited approach that functions as a lineage or school of thought rather than a neutral record of the composition. As such, these Carnatic teaching sheets do not simply document the music itself but materialize lineage, encoding stylistic values, priorities, and interpretive assumptions passed from guru to student across generations.

Alongside the musical transcription, the text of *Sri Ganapathini* provides another site where mediation becomes visible. For this project, I focus on the *pallavi*, which reads:

Sri ganapathini sevimpa rare
srita manavulara

Translation:
"O devoted people, come and worship Lord Ganapati." (Shivkumar, 2025)

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Although the meaning is relatively straightforward, the way this text is pronounced varies across South Indian regions and across diaspora communities. Teachers noted that most of their students who were raised in the United States can understand some Telugu but do not speak it fluently, and many pronounce it with an American vernacular accent. As a result, students learn the words through imitation rather than linguistic understanding, which produces noticeable differences in vowel length, consonant articulation, and the handling of syllables that carry important musical weight.

In this part of the section, I focus on the text and examine how pronunciation shifts across contexts. This sets the stage for the IPA transcriptions that follow and allows me to consider how linguistic mediation intersects with musical transmission in diaspora teaching. Since the text of *Sri Ganapathini* is in Telugu (a South Indian language spoken primarily in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), I provide several forms of IPA transcription to clarify how pronunciation varies across performance and pedagogical environments. The IPA model I provide for Carnatic singing is one I have created for this project, based on common pronunciation practices used by trained performers, and it serves as a baseline that can be compared with the American English-influenced IPA to show where both forms exceed the representational limits of IPA. Because IPA cannot convey the musical shaping of vowels or the subtleties of *gamaka*, I include a QR code with an audio example to demonstrate the aspects of pronunciation that a written system cannot adequately represent.

It is important to note that this American English influenced IPA does not imply that diaspora Indian students actually sing the piece in this way. In lessons and performances, students make deliberate efforts to imitate their teachers and to approximate Telugu based pronunciation, even if they cannot reproduce every detail. The American IPA reflects how these syllables would typically be pronounced in the students' everyday speech, not in their singing. This distinction matters because it reveals the sound system students bring with them into the lesson and the

specific adjustments they must make to align their spoken habits with the demands of Carnatic musical pronunciation. In other words, the differences shown here highlight the linguistic

modifications that students must undertake before they can even begin to address musical elements such as phrasing, vowel length, and *gamaka*.

Carnatic singing pronunciation (IPA)

Word	Syllable	Carnatic IPA	American IPA
Sri	Sri	/ʃri/	/ʃri/
ganapathini	ga	/gə/	/ga/
	na	/na/	/nə/
	pa	/pə/	/ˈpa/
	thi	/ti/	/θi/
	ni	/ni/	/ni/
sevimpa	se	/se:/	/seɪ/
	vim	/vim/	/vimp/
	pa	/pə/	/pə/
rare	ra	/ra:/	/reɪ/
	re	/re:/	/reɪ/
srita	sri	/ʃri/	/ʃri/
	ta	/ta/	/tɑ/
manavulara	ma	/mə/	/mæ/
	na	/nə/	/næ/
	vu	/vu/	/vu/
	la	/la:/	/lɑ/
	ra	/rə/	/rə/

Sri ganapathini sevimpa rare srita manavulara
/ʃri gəna patini se: vimpə ra:re: ʃrita mənavula rə se: vimpə ra:re: /

American English influenced pronunciation (IPA)

Sri ganapathini sevimpa rare srita manavulara
/ʃri ˌgɑnəˈpɑθini seɪ vimpə reɪ:reɪ: ʃri tɑ mæ næ vulɑ rə seɪ vimpə reɪ:reɪ: /

Table 2. Pronunciation Comparison: *Pallavi* Text Syllable Breakdown in IPA (*Sri Ganapathini*)

The difference in pronunciation occurs in several areas. The first is vowel quality. The short front vowel /e/ in Carnatic singing becomes the diphthong /eɪ/ in the American version, as seen in the first syllable of *sevimpa*, where Carnatic singers use /se:/ while American speakers tend

to produce /seɪ/. The low vowel /a/ in Carnatic pronunciation often becomes /æ/ for many diaspora speakers, which is noticeable in the opening of *ganapathini*, where /gə/ shifts to /ga/. Carnatic practice also uses long, steady vowels that hold musical weight, but these often collapse into shorter or diphthongized vowels in American English shaped pronunciation. This difference can be heard in *rare*, where the Carnatic /ra:/ and /re:/ become /reɪ/ in diaspora speech, altering the contour of the phrase.

A second difference lies in the treatment of consonants. Telugu uses forward placed consonants, produced with the tongue close to the upper teeth, and these create a softer sound in words like *srita* or *ganapathini*. American English speakers replace these with more common English *t* and *d* sounds, which are produced slightly further back in the mouth. This can be heard in *srita*, where /ta/ in Carnatic pronunciation becomes /tɑ/ in the diaspora version. Carnatic *thi* is pronounced as /ti/, and although teachers in the diaspora usually correct this, some students may approximate it as the English "th," /θi/, which produces a noticeable shift in the sound of the word *ganapathini*. While not the most frequent substitution, it clearly illustrates how the two sound systems diverge.

Vowel length is another significant point of variation. Carnatic singing employs deliberate elongation, shown here with a colon, and this length functions as a musical cue. For example, *se:* in *sevimpa* is sustained in performance, which shapes both melodic weight and *gamaka* placement. In the American version this elongated vowel becomes /seɪ/, a shorter, diphthongized sound that reduces the musical emphasis. Similar changes occur in *rare*, where elongated vowels are replaced with shorter ones, shifting how the phrase sits within the line.

Syllable stress also changes. Carnatic singing distributes syllables evenly because the rhythm follows the *tala*, keeping stress consistent across the line. By contrast, American English pronunciation introduces stress patterns that follow English speech habits, often emphasizing the first or second syllable of a word. This difference is particularly clear in *ganapathini*, which remains evenly articulated in Carnatic style but becomes /ˌgɑnəˈpɑθini/ in American speech, placing stress on *pa* and disrupting the even flow of the text.

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While the IPA system is useful for demonstrating broad differences in pronunciation, it has several shortcomings when applied to Carnatic music. These limitations appear most clearly in the pronunciation of sounds that are specific to South Indian languages. Because IPA is a Western linguistic framework designed primarily to represent spoken language, it cannot always accommodate the sounds that emerge in sung Telugu. The *pallavi* of *Sri Ganapathini* contains several examples where the system falls short.

In Telugu, the "ra" in *rare* and *manavulara* is not the English r or the Spanish r. Telugu distinguishes between two types of r-sounds: a light tap, made by briefly touching the tongue to the ridge just behind the upper teeth, and a more curled, slightly retroflex version that singers often use to create fullness and emphasis. In performance, the first *ra* in *rare* may be produced with a more open, slightly retroflexed quality, while the second *re* sits farther forward. IPA can represent /r/ or the tap /ɾ/, but it cannot show the subtle shifts singers make between these positions or how they vary the r-sound within a single word for musical phrasing.

A similar issue appears in the syllable *Sri*. While I have written it as /ʃri/ for both *Sri* and *srita*, the first *Sri* in the line is longer and more open, closer to "shree," while the second is shorter and more compressed like "shrih". In actual performance, *Sri* is rarely a clean consonant cluster; singers often approach it with a slight glide or a soft vowel onset, something like a barely audible schwa or y-like sound before the cluster. This might be approximated as [əʃri] or [ɪʃri], but even these variants do not capture the way the onset changes depending on raga, breath, and teacher. IPA can symbolically show these choices, but it cannot express their fluidity or their dependence on musical context.

The syllable *vu* in *manavulara* also illustrates a limitation of IPA. Although I have written it as /vu/, many singers produce it with a softer onset that lies between [v] and [w], something like [ʊu] or [wu]. This occurs because several South Indian languages (and many greater Indian languages, including Hindi) do not maintain a strict distinction between v and w. IPA offers symbols for each, but it cannot show the blended, gliding quality that occurs in singing, especially when the syllable moves quickly into *la*. There is also a conflict between linguistic length and musical length in the vowel of *se* in *sevimpa*. The vowel [e] is musically long, held across a

sustained pitch, yet its shape shifts slightly over the duration of the note. IPA's length mark can show duration, but not the way the vowel evolves as the singer moves through the phrase or applies *gamaka*. The written transcription therefore shows only a static sound, not the dynamic musical gesture that defines the syllable in performance.

Because IPA cannot represent these nuances, the written transcription in this section is necessarily incomplete. To address these limitations, I include a QR code (see Fig. 1) linking to an audio recording of the *pallavi*. Hearing the pronunciation reveals the vocal subtleties that no written system, including IPA, can fully capture.

Fig. 1. QR Code Linking to Audio Example of the *pallavi* (voice: Nagarajan Srinivasan)

Discussion and Conclusions

After considering the musical and linguistic aspects of the piece, I turn to the structural differences between the three versions of *Sri Ganapathini*. These differences matter because diaspora teachers must negotiate how much of an orally transmitted tradition to preserve and how much to adapt for students whose musical learning is shaped by Western literacy and classroom instruction. In these contexts, notation functions less as an authoritative representation of a composition than as a

pedagogical aid that reflects individual teaching priorities. Teaching sheets encode decisions about clarity, structure, and ornamentation, giving written form to distinct pedagogical voices and producing micro-traditions rather than a single standardized practice.

The effects of these pedagogical choices become audible in performance. Students often reproduce the notational habits and instructional strategies of their teachers, resulting in renditions that are more metrically regular, more text-stable, and less densely ornamented in early stages of learning. Ornamentation (*gamaka*) is frequently simplified or deferred, in contrast to South Indian teaching contexts where ornamentation is introduced from the outset. Differences in pronunciation and phrase shaping further accumulate, contributing to distinct sonic profiles shaped by mediation, notation, and pedagogical practice rather than by geography.

When these versions are placed alongside professional South Indian performances of *Sri Ganapathini*, such as those by renowned Carnatic performers like T.M. Krishna or the Malgudi Brothers, the contrast is immediate. It is not a fully analogous comparison, since the diaspora renditions are produced by young or amateur students while the South Indian recordings represent highly trained professional musicians. Even so, the differences are instructive. Professional renditions make far heavier use of *gamaka* in nearly every phrase, and the melodic line is shaped by continuous pitch movement rather than by discrete notes (Krishna, 2019). Tempo and breath placement are flexible, responding to the expressive needs of the raga rather than to a set rhythmic grid. The phrasing is guided by the aesthetics of *Sowrashtram* itself, producing arcs of sound that are less metrically regular than the diaspora teaching versions (Music Today, 2016). Professional musicians also employ a wider range of microtonal inflections and sustained vowel-based ornamentation, which create a fluidity that cannot be captured within Western notation. Even the delivery of the text differs: retroflex consonants, subtle vowel shading, and shifting ‘r’ sounds emerge naturally in performance, and these nuances resist representation through IPA or basic Roman spelling.

These differences emerge from the training environments and musical expectations that shape each version. Professional musicians in South India spend years studying within a *guru-shishya* model, where immersion, imitation, and intensive listening form the core of learning

(Qureshi et al., 2001). Their style reflects deep lineage, improvisatory practice, and an internalized understanding of *raga* grammar. They perform for audiences already familiar with the expressive possibilities of Carnatic music, so ornamentation and nuance are expected features rather than embellishments (Qureshi et al., 2001). In contrast, diaspora students are often beginners or young children who meet Carnatic music primarily through weekly lessons. Their musical goals are oriented toward learning and retention rather than toward fully developed performance. As a result, these renditions necessarily prioritize clarity, repeatability, and accessible pedagogy rather than the expressive complexity found in professional settings.

Despite these differences in experience and intention, comparing diaspora and South Indian renditions remains meaningful. The contrast shows what is simplified, transformed, or reshaped when an oral tradition moves into new cultural and educational settings. It highlights the gap between a teaching version and a performance version of the same composition, revealing how multiple interpretations can coexist within the tradition. The diaspora versions are not less authentic or incorrect; instead, they are mediated forms that reflect the needs of their communities and the pedagogical frameworks in which they circulate.

This comparison also underscores the layers of mediation present throughout this project. Transcribing the notation sheets into Western notation necessarily flattens the raga's characteristic nuance, especially its microtonal motion and its *gamaka*. These versions already simplify the musical surface for pedagogical reasons, and the act of notating them simplifies it further. Professional recordings make these losses especially clear by revealing the dimensions of the music that lie outside written representation: the fluid ornamentation, the shifting vowels, the breath shaping, and the subtle rhythmic elasticity. Together, these observations emphasize that Carnatic music lives most fully in sound and that each attempt to write it down is only one possible mediation among many.

Situating these findings within broader questions of musical mediation allows for a more critical understanding of what it means to transcribe an orally grounded tradition like Carnatic music into Western systems of representation. Christopher Small's idea of "musicking" frames each version of *Sri Ganapathini* not as a derivative approximation of a South Indian original, but

as a relational act that constructs meaning within its own community (Small, 1998: 50–51). Read alongside Carlos Vega's notion of *musicar*, these renditions appear less as reproductions of a fixed work than as enactments shaped by local pedagogical and social worlds (Vega, 1941: 13). In this view, the renditions are not attempts to reproduce a fixed entity, but enactments of musical relationships shaped by the pedagogical environments, linguistic habits, and social worlds in which they circulate. The composition becomes a site through which diaspora musicians articulate identity, belonging, and memory, and transcription becomes one more relational practice within this field (Small, 1998: 50–51).

Roland Barthes's distinction between *musica practica* and passive listening further illuminates the tension at the core of this project. Carnatic music, especially in its South Indian pedagogical setting, is a *musica practica* tradition: knowledge is produced through doing, repeating, feeling, and listening within a lineage (Small, 1998: 50–51). Written notation, whether Romanized or Western, attempts to stabilize something that is fundamentally enacted rather than encoded. The versions examined here demonstrate how notation can guide learning without replicating the embodied knowledge that performance demands. The gap between the professional South Indian recordings and the diaspora teaching versions is therefore not merely a matter of skill but an expression of this deeper structural divide. Transcription makes the music legible, but its legibility comes at the cost of the tactile, embodied aspects that define the tradition.

Carolyn Abbate's concepts of the "drastic" and the "gnostic" place further pressure on the act of transcription (Abbate, 2004: 506). Professional performances of *Sri Ganapathini* operate in the drastic mode, grounded in the immediacy of sound, voice, gesture, and breath. The diasporic materials belong to the gnostic mode: they translate the piece into a system intended for preservation, comparison, and study (Abbate, 2004: 506). My Western-notation transcription intensifies this gnostic tendency, converting the fluidity of *gamaka*, the elasticity of time, and the nuance of Telugu pronunciation into a visually stable, repeatable object. This transformation is not neutral. It changes the ontology of the piece, making it appear more fixed than it is and obscuring the performative contingencies on which Carnatic music depends. Yet this very distortion reveals the limits of notation and the degree to which diaspora pedagogy is shaped by materials designed for seeing rather than hearing.

James Grier's editorial theory is especially useful for naming what is at stake here. If every edition is an interpretation, shaped by the editor's position and historical context, then transcription is not a simple act of transfer but a form of authorship (Grier, 1996: 6). My edition of *Sri Ganapathini* does not recover a singular or authoritative version of the piece. Instead, it mediates between already mediated diaspora renderings, each shaped by the teacher's musical biography, community, and pedagogical aims. The divergences in *sangati* structure, octave placement, and phrase contour become visible not because the Western staff captures them perfectly, but because its rigidity highlights where the oral tradition resists assimilation into written form (Grier, 1996: 6). The Western notation is therefore a critical tool rather than a definitive text, one that exposes the interpretive decisions embedded in each stage of musical transmission. Taken together, these findings offer a preliminary editorial framework for analyzing how Carnatic compositions are reshaped through diasporic notation practices, and they invite further research across additional repertoires, teachers, and regional communities.

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ANISHA SRINIVASAN is a PhD student in Musicology at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music. She holds degrees from Indiana University, Bloomington and New England Conservatory of Music. Her research spans both historical and contemporary contexts: she examines how South Indian classical music moved across imperial, colonial, and diasporic networks between South India and Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and how these movements continue to shape pedagogy, notation, and transmission practices in present-day Indian diasporic communities in the United States. She has presented her work at national and international conferences, including the International Musicological Society and the Society for Ethnomusicology. In addition to her scholarly work, she is an active mezzo-soprano.

Appendix 1

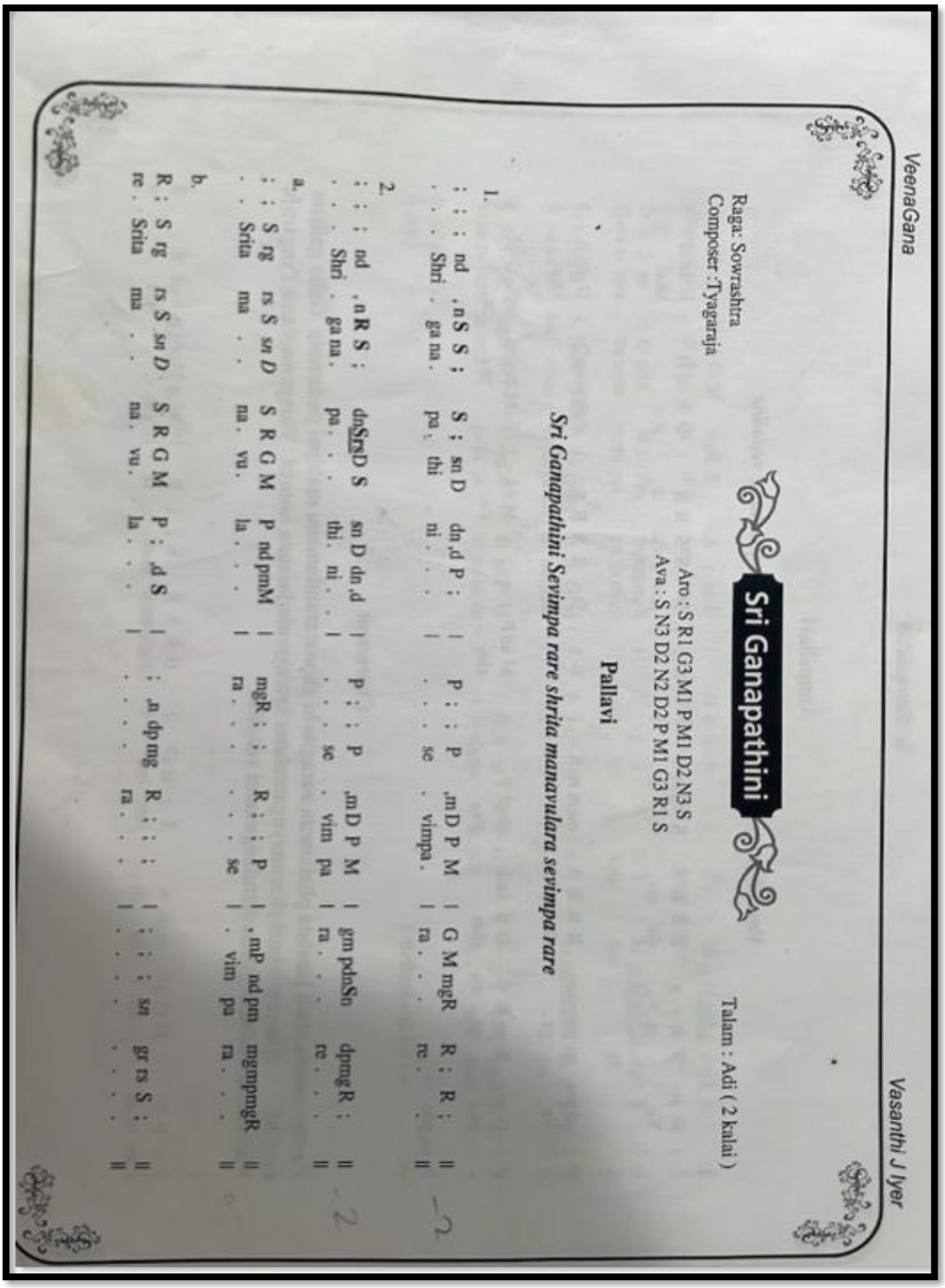
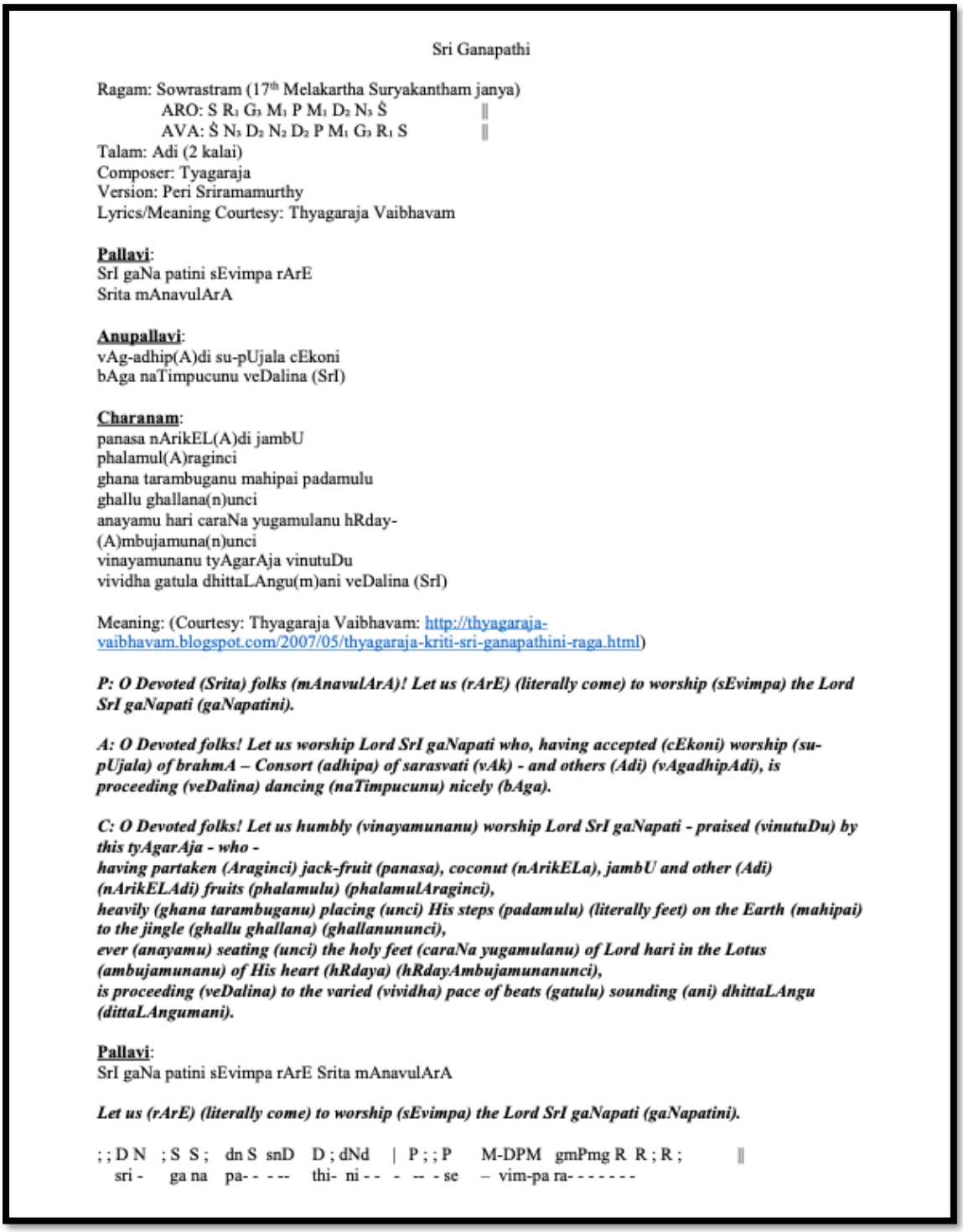


Fig. 2. Appendix 1: Diasporic Teaching Sheet for *Sri Ganapathini* (Vasanthi Iyer)

Note: Printed teaching sheet for the *pallavi* of *Sri Ganapathini*, created by Vasanthi Iyer (Chicago) and shared with the author for this project.

Appendix 2



Sri Ganapathi

Ragam: Sowrastram (17th Melakartha Suryakantham janya)
ARO: S R_1 G_3 M_1 P M_1 D_2 N_3 Ṡ ‖
AVA: Ṡ N_3 D_2 N_2 D_2 P M_1 G_3 R_1 S ‖
Talam: Adi (2 kalai)
Composer: Tyagaraja
Version: Peri Sriramamurthy
Lyrics/Meaning Courtesy: Thyagaraja Vaibhavam

Pallavi:
SrI gaNa patini sEvimpa rArE
Srita mAnavulArA

Anupallavi:
vAg-adhip(A)di su-pUjala cEkoni
bAga naTimpucunu veDalina (SrI)

Charanam:
panasa nArikEL(A)di jambU
phalamul(A)raginci
ghana tarambuganu mahipai padamulu
ghallu ghallana(n)unci
anayamu hari caraNa yugamulanu hRday-
(A)mbujamuna(n)unci
vinayamunanu tyAgarAja vinutuDu
vividha gatula dhittaLAngu(m)ani veDalina (SrI)

Meaning: (Courtesy: Thyagaraja Vaibhavam: http://thyagaraja-vaibhavam.blogspot.com/2007/05/thyagaraja-kriti-sri-ganapathini-raga.html)

P: O Devoted (Srita) folks (mAnavulArA)! Let us (rArE) (literally come) to worship (sEvimpa) the Lord SrI gaNapati (gaNapatini).

A: O Devoted folks! Let us worship Lord SrI gaNapati who, having accepted (cEkoni) worship (su-pUjala) of brahmA – Consort (adhipa) of sarasvati (vAk) - and others (Adi) (vAgadhipAdi), is proceeding (veDalina) dancing (naTimpucunu) nicely (bAga).

C: O Devoted folks! Let us humbly (vinayamunanu) worship Lord SrI gaNapati - praised (vinutuDu) by this tyAgarAja - who -
having partaken (Araginci) jack-fruit (panasa), coconut (nArikELa), jambU and other (Adi) (nArikELAdi) fruits (phalamulu) (phalamulAraginci),
heavily (ghana tarambuganu) placing (unci) His steps (padamulu) (literally feet) on the Earth (mahipai) to the jingle (ghallu ghallana) (ghallanununci),
ever (anayamu) seating (unci) the holy feet (caraNa yugamulanu) of Lord hari in the Lotus (ambujamunanu) of His heart (hRdaya) (hRdayAmbujamunanunci),
is proceeding (veDalina) to the varied (vividha) pace of beats (gatulu) sounding (ani) dhittaLAngu (dittaLAngumani).

Pallavi:
SrI gaNa patini sEvimpa rArE Srita mAnavulArA

Let us (rArE) (literally come) to worship (sEvimpa) the Lord SrI gaNapati (gaNapatini).

; ; D N ; S S ; dn S snD D ; dNd | P ; ; P M-DPM gmPmg R R ; R ; ‖
sri - ga na pa- - - -- thi- ni - - - -- - se – vim-pa ra- - - - - - -

Fig. 3. Appendix 2: Diasporic Teaching Sheet for *Sri Ganapathini* (shivkumar.org)

Note: Open-access online teaching sheet for the *pallavi* of *Sri Ganapathini*, recommended to the author by a student as a reference used in their instructional setting.

rs S D N ; S S ; dn Srs nsnd D ; dNd | P ; ; P M-DPM gmpd nsrs sndp mgrs ‖
re – sri - ga na pa--- - - - thi ni - - - - - se- vim-pa ra- - - - - - - - - - - - - -

O Devoted (Srita) folks (mAnavulArA)!

R ; -S R S ; R ; GMPM P, n d N d | P ; ; P M- D P M gmpd nsrs sndp mgrs ‖ R ;
re Sri tha ma- -- na –vu- la- - ra - - - - - se- - vim-pa ra- - - - - - - - - - - - -

Anupallavi:
vAg-adhip(A)di su-pUjala cEkoni bAga naTimpucunu veDalina (SrI)

O Devoted folks! Let us worship Lord SrI gaNapati who, having accepted (cEkoni) worship (su-pUjala) of brahmA – Consort (adhipa) of sarasvati (vAk) - and others (Adi) (vAgadhipAdi), …

; ; P ; M D ; N S ; S ; SR rs S | ; ; ; S ; rg rsS ; dnS snD D ; dNd ‖
Va - - ga thi pa thi - - su-- - - -bhu ja la-- che- - - - ko ni - -

P ; ndpm gr –srgm pd nsrs n s rs S R rsS | ; ; ; S ; rg r s S ; dn Srs nsnd D; dNd ‖
- - va- - - -ga----- -- di--- pa--- thi –su-- bhu - ja lu— che- - - - - - - ko ni- -

… is proceeding (veDalina) dancing (naTimpucunu) nicely (bAga).

P ; S ; N - G R S dn Srs nsnd D; d N d | P ; ; , n dNd P ; mg P mgR GMPM ‖ ndpm
- - bha – ga –na tim - - - - - - pu chu - - - - - - - nu---- ve - - da-- li- na - - - - -

Charanam:
panasa nArikEL(A)di jambU phalamul(A)raginci
ghana tarambuganu mahipai padamulu ghallu ghallana(n)unci
anayamu hari caraNa yugamulanu hRday- (A)mbujamuna(n)unci
vinayamunanu tyAgarAja vinutuDu vividha gatula dhittaLAngu(m)ani veDalina (SrI)

… having partaken (Araginci) jack-fruit (panasa), coconut (nArikELa), jambU and other (Adi) (nArikELAdi) fruits (phalamulu) (phalamulAraginci),

P P P P ; M mg mp mgR R ; R ; R ; | s n D R S R ; R ; G M mgmp m g R srgm ‖
Panasa Na - ri ke - - la - - thi jam-bhu- pha-la mula na ra gim - - - - - chi - - - - - -

P d n P P ; M gmpd nd pm gr R , R , R ; | s n D R S R ; R ; G M mgmp m g R srgm ‖
Pana- sa Na ri ke - - la - - - - - thi – jam bhu pha-la mula Na ra gim - - - - - chi - - - - - -

.. heavily (ghana tarambuganu) placing (unci) His steps (padamulu) (literally feet) on the Earth (mahipai) to the jingle (ghallu ghallana) (ghallanununci),

D N S sn D d n P M M P dndp mpmg R S | S ; N R ; R R ; M ; mgmp mgR R ; ‖
Ghanatha ram- bu- ganu ma hi pai— pa-da- mula ghal lu ghal la na nun - - - - chi - - - -

ever (anayamu) seating (unci) the holy feet (caraNa yugamulanu) of Lord hari in the Lotus (ambujamunanu) of His heart (hRdaya) (hRdayAmbujamunanunci),

R G M m g R -S R -S D P p p m g R S S R | P , m gmpm G M P D NS nsrs R ; R ; ‖
Ana ya mu na Hari cha rana yu ga – mula hruda yam------ -- bu ja mu la nun ---- chi ---

Appendix 3

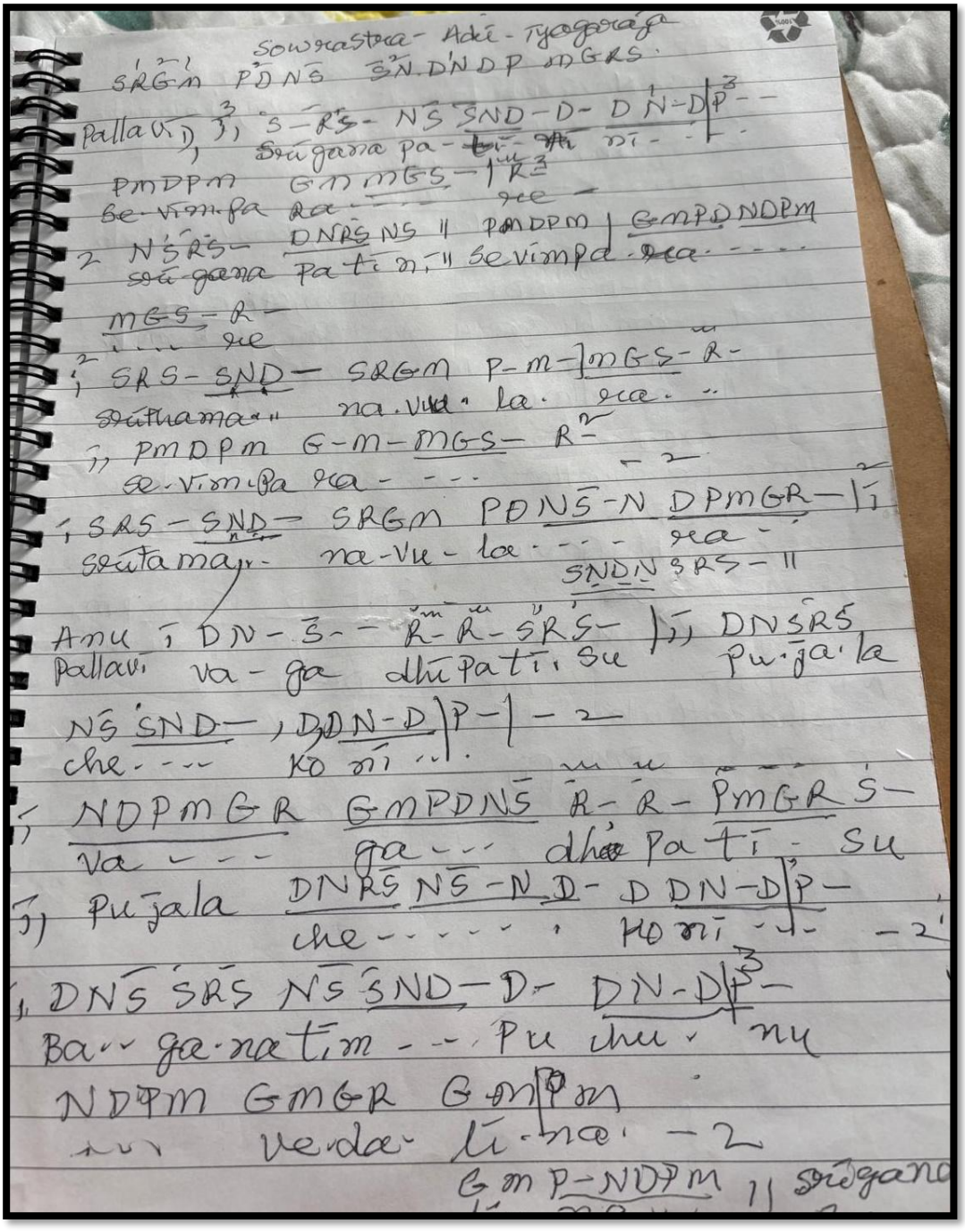


Fig. 4. Appendix 3: Diasporic Teaching Sheet for *Sri Ganapathini* (Smt. Rajeswari Pariti)

Note: Handwritten teaching sheet for *Sri Ganapathini*, created by Smt. Rajeswari Pariti (Dallas) and shared with the author for this project.

Appendix 4

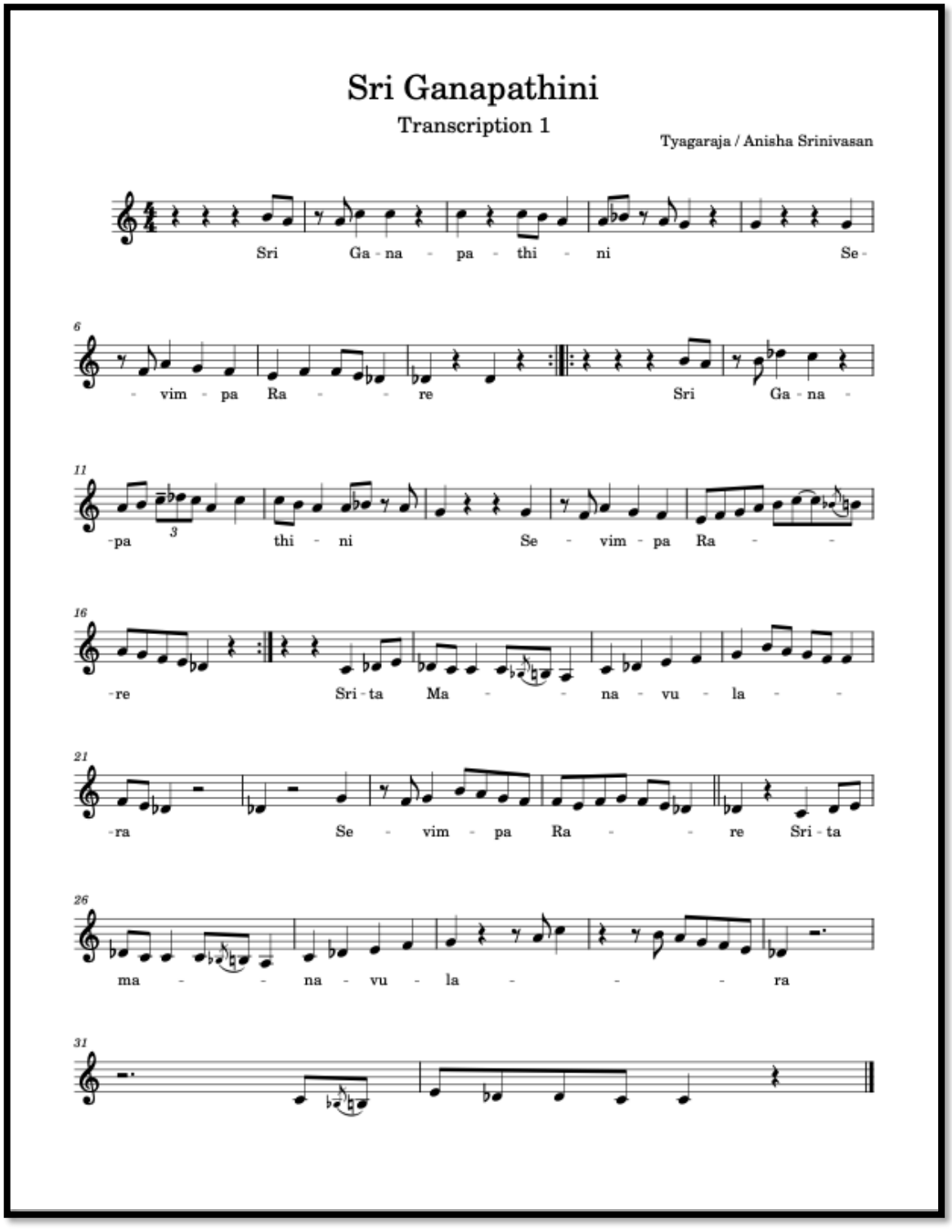


Fig. 5. Appendix 4: Western Staff-Notation Transcription of *Sri Ganapathini* (Version 1)

Note: Western staff-notation transcription of the *pallavi* of *Sri Ganapathini* by the author, based on the teaching sheet in Appendix 1.

Appendix 5

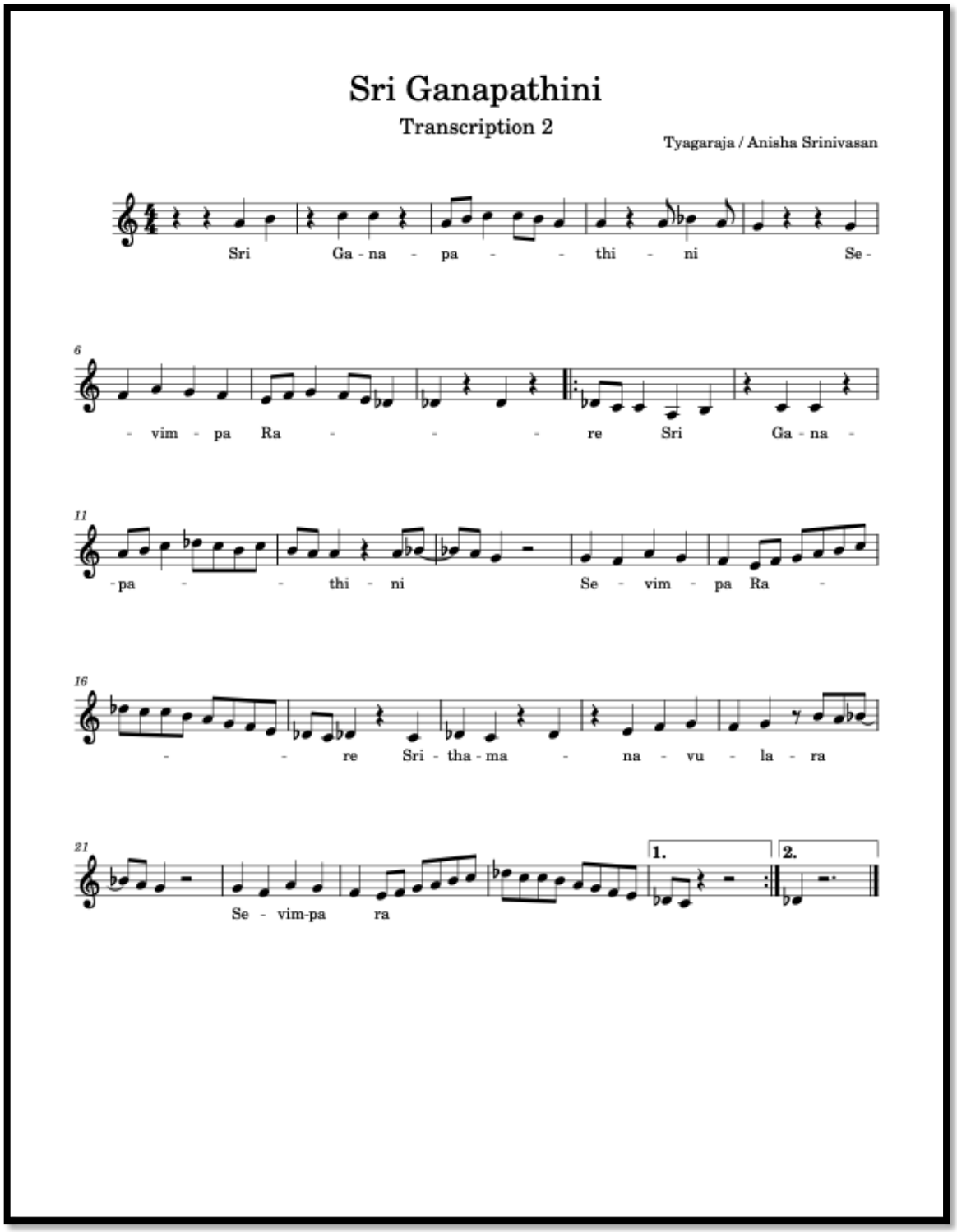


Fig. 6. Appendix 5: Western Staff-Notation Transcription of *Sri Ganapathini* (Version 2)

Note: Western staff-notation transcription of the *pallavi* of *Sri Ganapathini* by the author, based on the teaching sheet in Appendix 2.

Appendix 6

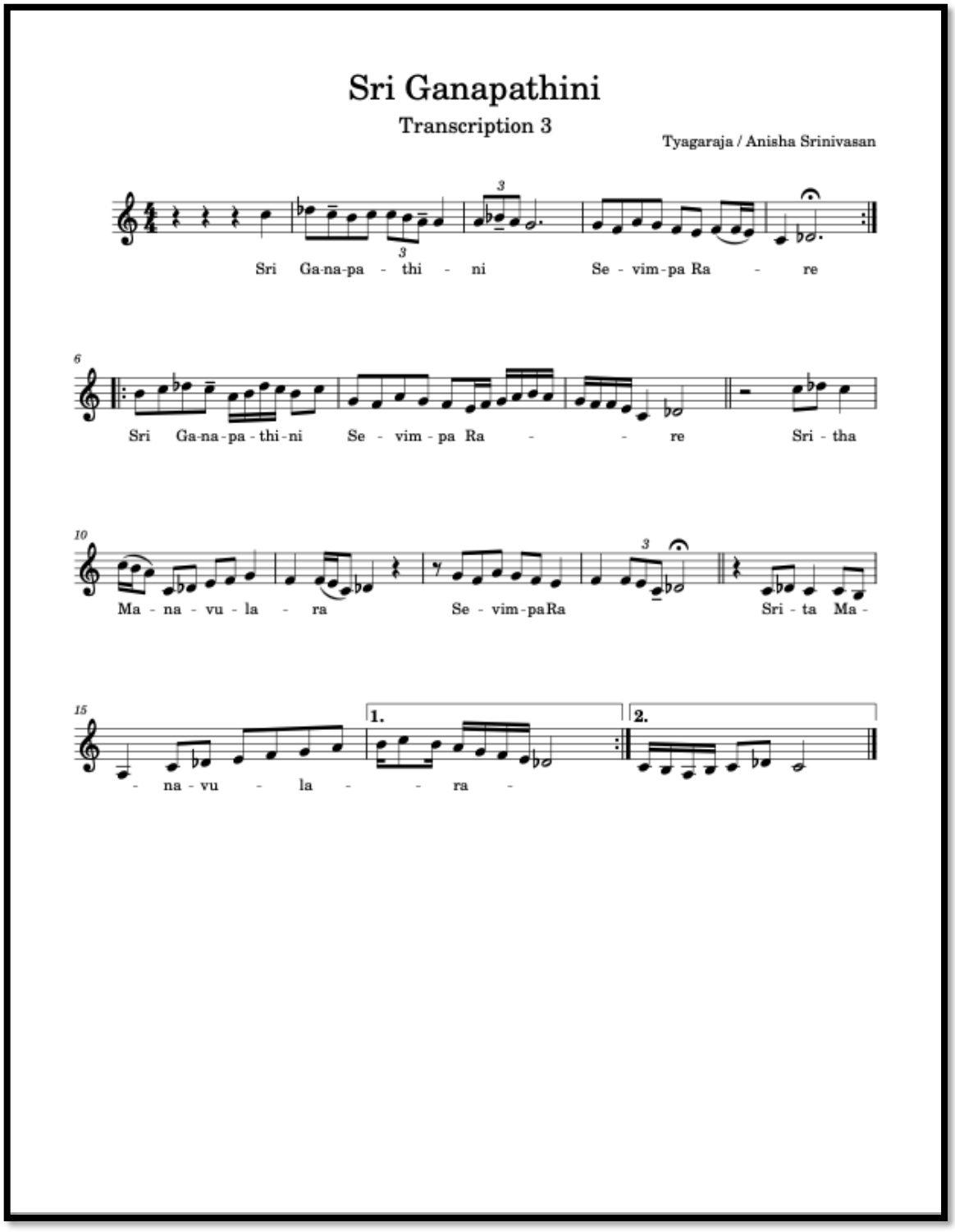


Fig. 7. Appendix 6: Western Staff-Notation Transcription of *Sri Ganapathini* (Version 3)

Note: Western staff-notation transcription of the *pallavi* of *Sri Ganapathini* by the author, based on the teaching sheet in Appendix 3.