About a month ago, I lost my father. While this column is not about him, I’d like to pay homage to him through these words. My father was instrumental in cultivating in me a deep reverence for the Carnatic form. He was equally adamant about my listening to, and performing Western Classical music. Indeed, his constant playing of music in the car on the way to school has shaped the way I internalise and process various musical forms.

Over the month, I have been searching for music that celebrates the life of people – the type of music one associates with the passing of great individuals. It brought me in touch with a number of traditions from across the world, and I genuinely encourage you to listen to some of these musical forms. As a starting point, I will direct you to the ethereal beauty of Ayub Ogada’s music (from Africa). In ‘Kothbiro’ (The Rain Is Coming), the musical expression of his soul achieves its zenith. While the song is not directly about death, it celebrates a return to the earth, and the lifting of the spirit in the pouring rain. Visit the link: Kothbiro: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=kothbiro+ayub+ogada

**Tunes for occasions**

The Oppari traditions that we have been exposed to in South India are unfortunately dying out. As a wholly improvised format that is part performance-poetry and part song, this form celebrates both the public and personal anecdotes from a person’s life. While the migration of people across continents across millennia has dispersed human beings to settle in other parts of the planet, the quintessence of their spiritual core and its expression through music has somehow developed on parallel lines in other world traditions.

In Ghana, for instance, the idea of singing a litany accompanied by various other rituals including a ceremonial dance is common at funerals. In New Orleans, the idea of a ‘jazz funeral’ takes root. The influence of brass instruments on the jazz tradition finds a fabulous platform in funeral processions, often becoming a musical tribute to the dead. Sadly, this tradition is also dying out. It finds a parallel in the Zapotec funeral traditions of Mexico, where a band plays happy music to accompany the procession.

In New Orleans Jazz funeral: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krJW2qMVv4M

Zapotec Funeral: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FvkxFA44N4M

In death as much as in life, music unites humankind. Music marks every milestone of the human condition. The similarity in musical structure and colour of funeral songs across such varied groups is remarkable and perhaps a reminder of where we all came from. Mostly, the joy and the beauty of music at such occasions allow us to pause and reflect on a life lived well. A celebration and a continuity of life itself.

1 month later. Happily, he lives on through every piece of music I encounter.

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The writer is a Chennai-based pianist and music educator

The Piano Man

A requiem for the soul

On musical forms, which make funeral an occasion to celebrate the dead

ANIL SRINIVASAN

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The Maori members of New Zealand performing Haka

Dance ritual The Maori members of New Zealand performing Haka

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