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Voice Culture through the lens of Compositions in South Indian Music – A Perspective

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Abstract

South Indian classical music is a Raga-centric art form. Any form of exploration, be it rendition of a composition or Manodharma aspects like Alapana, Kalpanaswara, Neraval or Pallavi singing, the Raga always takes precedence. Compositions are the primary sources of information regarding these Ragas. Though practice exercises like Sarali, Janta and Datu swaras and Alankaras are the most important lessons for a person to establish identification of notes and make his/her voice agile and flexible to sing, practice of compositional forms like Gitas, Svarajatis, Varnas, Kritis etc is the backbone for understanding ragas, unique gamakas and phrases used in those ragas and to train the voice to reproduce the same. This paper aims at highlighting aspects of voice culture pertaining to certain ragas, (rakti ragas in specific) by exploring the various compositional forms starting from Gitas to Kritis. Various illustrations are presented to second the ideas discussed. Analytical and Qualitative methods have been used for the research methodology. The study unveils the utility of learning and practicing compositions of various forms and styles as the only way to train a voice to sing nuanced gamakas pertaining to rakti ragas like Varali, Thodi, Sahana, Begada, Anandabhairavi etc.

Keywords: Voice Culture, Carnatic Music, Compositional forms, Raga, Gamaka

Research Paper

Introduction

"According to Somesvara, the singing voice, Śārirā, is so called because it is coeval with Śārirā,body. Its excellence lies in snigddhata (glossiness, unctuousness) and is inherent to it as is fragrance in flower, luster in pearl and sweetness in sugarcane. Vocal excellence accrues only by virtue acquired in previous births, through jyana yoga, or by worshipping god, but never by mere practice." (R Sathyanarayana)

Carnatic music is one of the most challenging and demanding forms of music. It takes years of diligent training and focused practice to master the intricacies and nuances in this form. For example, while rendering a single composition, the musician must keep in mind the melodic aspect i.e. Raga, rhythmic aspect i.e. Tala, Lyrical aspect i.e. Sahitya, various variations as taught by Guru i.e. Sangati-s (Preset Melodic variations of a line in a composition) etc.

In addition to all these contents, one must also be able to render various Manodharma (Also known as kalpana sangita. Refers to the creative aspects of Carnatic Music) aspects i.e. Neraval (Melodic exploration of a line in a composition), Svarakalpana (Melodic exploration of a raga using solfege usually prefixed to a line in a composition) etc in correlation with the composition chosen with ease and conviction. A typical carnatic concert lasts for about 2-2.5hrs. If not for unwavering commitment to the art form, one cannot execute a concert, till the final item, to perfection.

Learning and practicing compositions has been the traditional method of culturing a carnatic voice. A structured and systematic pedagogy has been laid down by masters of the past. Saint composers like Purandaradasa and lakshanakara-s (Musicologists) like Sarngadeva (Author of Sangita Ratnakara – an important text for musicology) have contributed immensely in defining and codifying the essential practice exercises and methods to cultivate a singable voice.

Composers through the years have composed various forms of compositions starting from Gita-s (Introductory

compositions in CM. A student is introduced to sahitya using these compositions) to Kriti-s (Advanced and complex compositions comprising of 3 parts- Pallavi, Anupallavi and Charanam) etc. All these compositions have purpose in-terms of voice culture. For example, Gita-s are first and foremost compositions where lyrics are introduced. This is the stage where a student learns how to integrate Dhatu (Music/svara/musical notes) and Matu (Lyrics/syllables). Similar purposes can be drawn for every composition that one learns in a lifetime.

Dichotomy of ideas like whether one needs a good voice to sing compositions or one can achieve a good voice by practicing compositions is an ever going debate. The objective of this paper is not to come to any conclusion in this regard. It simply aims at highlighting the various aspects of voice culture that can be improved and perfected by repetitive practice of compositions.

Research Methodology

The methodology of this research paper is on analytical lines. Ideas have been assimilated from teachings of various Guru-s and personal experiences as a student of music.

Voice culture through the lens of compositions

A.Traditional pedagogy

Voice culture can vaguely be defined as 'training that a voice undergoes in order to be ready to sing'. This training can be looked at from 2 perspectives:

1. Generic voice training
2. Genre-specific voice training

Generic training usually involves acquiring basic skills like identification of notes, achieving perfect pitch, an agile and flexible voice, good breath control etc. All these skills can be achieved by employing practice methods like sustaining on notes, practicing notes in different octaves, breath exercises like Pranayama (Yogic Breathing Exercises) etc.

Genre-specific voice training for carnatic music is a very interesting and intriguing topic of study. Traditionally, voice culture pertaining to carnatic music (will be referred as CM from here) has never been viewed as a separate exercise. Training of voice is intertwined with training of the mind, right from the first few lessons in this form of music. CM has a very organized and regimental pedagogy that integrates both the technical aspects of music and that of voice training together from the beginning stages itself.

Varisai-s (Basic svara exercises)

↓

Alankara-s (Advanced Svara exercises employing different Tala structures and patterns)

↓

Gamaka-s

↓

Compositions

Fig 1

Fig 1 broadly represents the traditional flow of pedagogy in CM. At no point in time are these levels linear. They are all intertwined and may run parallel. For instance, Introduction of gamaka-s is done by encouraging students to sing varisai-s and alankara-s with appropriate gamaka-s. Similarly, as students are taught new raga-s through Gita-s and Varna-s, practicing the basic exercises like varisai-s and alankara-s in those raga-s is advised to get a grip over the gait of the raga-s.

For the lack of a better representation, the flow of pedagogy has been represented in a linear fashion, but that might not be the case all the time. At an intermediate level, the pupil may move from one level to another in any direction. In fact, guru-s insist on practicing the basic exercises and basic compositions like varna-s (These compositions act as bridge between practice compositions and compositions performed on stage; Slightly more complex, these help understand the basic gait of a raga.) every day, even at an advanced level, to maintain voice agility and ensure a perfect pitch. This may be compared to one going to the gym everyday to maintain physical fitness. The vocal apparatus is, in the end, made of tissues and muscles.

B.Voice Range

CM is one genre of music in which anyone with any kind of voice timber can be trained and encouraged to sing.

"The sound of each individual's singing voice is entirely unique not only because of the actual shape and size of an individual's vocal cords but also due to the size and shape of the rest of that person's body. Humans have vocal folds which can loosen, tighten, or change their thickness, and over which breath can be transferred at varying pressures." (Sharma)

Unlike in film music, where a voice with specific range and quality depending on the demand is preferred, CM can be rendered in any pitch that the musician is

comfortable with. There is no perfect pitch for men/ women. The fact that every voice is different is widely accepted in CM. However, whatever pitch one chooses to sing in, he/she must have a range of 2.5 - 3 octaves. Compositions in CM typically range from mandhra-sthayi [Refers to lower octave (Below the basic pitch)] panchamam to taara-sthayi [Refers to the higher pitch (above the first overtone of the basic pitch)] panchamam. There are compositions which go down till the mandhra sthayi rishabham [One of the Sapta Svara-s] as well. However, a musician can explore a raga in any octave while rendering manodharmic aspects based on the voice facility (barring a few ragas for which the range is restricted).

Compositions give a lot of scope for improvement of range. This has been illustrated through some examples.

- Gita like 'Janakasuta' in Saveri dwell in the madhra sthayi and touch the mandhra sthayi panchamam. Gitas like 'Analekara' in Suddha Saveri and 'Mandara Dharare' in Kambhoji are predominantly in the tara sthayi where the later one ranges till the tara sthayi panchamam. 'Analekara' begins starkly from the tara sthayi rishabham and madhyamam.
- The swarajatis (A form of composition slightly more complex that Gita-s) of Syama Sastri re-establish the importance of mandhra sthayi in CM. All the three, namely, Kamakshi amba (Bhairavi) Kamakshi ni padayugamu (Yadukulakambhoji) and Rave Himagiri Kumari (Thodi) have grand madhra sthayi beginnings.
- Pancharatna-s of Tyagaraja are good practice exercises to improve range. The first Swara–Sahitya of a of Jagadanandakaraka (Naata) begins in the mandhra sthayi reaching till the mandhra sthayi panchama. Similarly the first Swara–Sahitya of Dudukugala (Gowla) ranges till the mandhra sthayi rishabham.
- Few short and faster paced compositions like Abhimanamennadu, a composition in Begada of Patnam Subramaniam Iyer, have mandhra sthayi beginnings.
- Compositions of Tyagaraja like 'Ksheerasagara' in Devagandhari (charanam) and 'Ksheenamai' in Mukhari (anupallavi) have portions ranging upto the tara sthayi panchamam. The samashti charanam of 'Marakatavallim' , a composition of Muttusvami Dikshitar in Kambhoji has been set completely in tara sthayi region and one needs to have good level endurance to execute it to perfection.

C. Language and Diction

Integration of Dhatu and Matu is the crux of any composition. Rendering the sahitya syllables along with the tune with utmost integrity and clarity is every musician's responsibility.

"Vowels are the vehicles of musical sound and consonants are the vehicles for meaning of the word content. Consonants are voiced if the vocal cords participate in phonation and are unvoiced if they do not. Consonantal sounds are impulsive and proceed in terms of spurts" (Sathyanarayana)

- Practice of compositions helps students to improve upon pronunciation. The practice of vowel sounds–Akara, Ikara, Ukara etc is emphasized upon. The first line of the pallavi in 'Darini telusukonti', a composition of Tyagaraja can be used as an exercise to practice these vowel sounds.

Da…….	(akara)
Ri……..	(ikara)
Ni……....	(ikara)
Te……	(ekara)
Lu……	(ukara)
Su……	(ukara)
Kon……..	(anunasika)
Ti……..	(ikara)

- In the composition 'Ksheenamai' of Tyagaraja, the pallavi uses syllables like 'Kshee' (samyukta-akshara) and 'Jan' (anunasika).

Pallavi: *Kshee**n**amai tirugā Jan**m**inche siddhi Mānurā*

- The charanam of the composition of Mysore Vasudevachar in Abheri 'Bhajare re manasa' is a masterclass to perfect m-kara (singing with a closed mouth)

Charanam: *Rāvana mada**nam** rakshita bhuva**nam** Ravi Sasi naya**nam** Ravi jāri marda**nam***

- Languages play a huge role in voice culture. Languages tend to have syllables and sounds unique to them. Few aspects with regard to telugu and Sanskrit language have been illustrated in the previous examples. Examples in tamil and Malayalam are given below.
- In Tamil, the sound 'u' (as in 'ir**u**kk**u**d**u**') is unique to itself. In the composition 'Vazhimaraittirukkudu' of Goapalakrishna Bharati, every word in the pallavi ends with this syllable.

Pallavi: *Vazhi maraittirukk**u**d**u** malai pole or**u** mād**u** pad**u**t**u**r**u**kk**u**d**u***

- In Malayalam, the syllable 'nya' is used often. This can be seen in the padam composed by Swati Tirunal (A prolific carnatic composer from Kerala) 'Taruni nyan'.

Pallavi: *Taruṇi **nyā**n endu cheyvu anta māmaka daita ninē mara**nnu***

D. Breath control and stamina

Breath control and stamina are central to any form of vocal music.

"Therefore, breath is the cause and air the medium of vocal sound, controlled and balanced utilization of breath forms the first and most important step in voice training". (Rueggeberg)

One needs good control over breath for a seamless flow of concert. So is the case with CM as well. Repetition of compositions helps develop this breath control and endurance. There can be 2 kinds of phrases that help us gain endurance – slow phrases and fast phrases.

- **Slow phrases:** The anupallavi of Balagopala, a composition of Muttusvami Dikshitar in Bhairavi is an exercise for sustenance of notes. In the word 'Shareera', the Panchamam is elongated for about half an avartam. Similarly the anupallavi of 'Entarani', a composition of Tyagaraja in Harikambhoji, comprises of slow phrases in the tara sthayi.
- **Fast phrases:** The last sangati in pallavi of 'O Rangasayee', a composition of Tyagaraja in Kambhoji is a long fast phrase extending through the word 'O Rangasayee' and is supposed to be sung in one single breath. A rare swarajati of Mayuram Viswanatha Sastri 'Sarasadala nayanane muruga guha' in Todi begins with a fast avarohana phrase –

  Ṡ, , ,, , Ṙ Ṡ ND P M G R S R G ,, , , , M , P , , , , , ,

  sā….rasadala.nayananemurugā…..... gu..hā……

E. Microtones

Concept of microtones is most applicable to CM. Though, theoretically, there are only 12 notes, each of these notes take different forms in different ragas owing to gamaka-s (Melodic oscillation of notes). Though most of these notes are often moving, and direct application of concepts like 22 sruti-s/microtones (which are static/constant frequencies) doesn't seem logical, these microtones can view as closest approximations/ averages. Slight changes in these microtones bring major differences between raga-s. Hence, a nuanced understanding of these notes and gamaka-s is crucial.

Though raga-s are viewed as independent entities and are known to have existed much before any of the popular compositions known today came into existence, in today's day and age, compositions by various vaggeyakara-s is our primary source to understand raga-s.

"Carnatic music of today is mainly surviving because of the great compositions of great vaggeyakaras or composers. This area of music, called the kalpita sangeetam has become the backbone of south Indian music. If the unending number of sabhas and a galaxy of musicians of Carnatic music are surviving, it is largely because of the creations of the great composers". (Rama)

Thus, learning and practicing compositions in various raga-s is probably the only way to be able to perceive the raga-devata.

Guru-s always insist on learning as many compositions as possible in a raga to be able to truly express the flavour of a raga. Few notes in a raga have been attributed to the raga itself, Begada Madhyamam, Varali Madhyamam, to name a few. These distinct microtones and their presence in the compositions have been illustrated using a few examples.

- The Madhyamam of Begada has got many shades. It's often referred to as a 'Hanging note' given its exact position is undetermined. In the composition 'Tyagarajaya Namaste' of Muttusvami Dikshitar in the same raga, the line 'Mukura bimba pratibimbita' in the charanam beautifully exhibits many shades of Madhyamam.
- The Gandharam of Sahana is one such note. Theoretically, this raga is said to have Antara Gandhara. However, the microtonal value is slightly lesser than that of Antara Gandhara. - Sowmya S.

  The sahana varnam 'Karunimpa' is one of the first compositions in Sahana that a student learns. The opening phrase introduces the Gandhara beautifully. In the phrase 'Karunimpa', the syllable 'nim' corresponds to the Gandharam. This Gandharam makes use of 'Urdhva-Svara-Kampita' gamaka.
- The Varali Madhyamam is a mystical note. In fact, Subbarama Dikshitar in his Sangita Sampradaya Pradarshini, while categorising and naming notes, classifies a Madhyamam exclusive to Varali and names it as 'Varali Madhyamam'. The first svara-

sahitya of the Varali Pancharatnam of Tyagaraja, 'Palugaru Momu', brings out the Madhyamam in all its glory. (The placement of 'Svarakshara'[A technical embellishment where the Svaram (Note) and Aksharam (Syllable in the lyrics) are the same] has been highlighted.)

- Todi Gandharam has many shades. The chitta swaram of magnum opus composition 'Gajavadana sammodita' by Kumara Ettendra is a masterclass for perfecting the various gamaka-s that the Gandharam bears.
- As stated previously, microtones can bring about the differences in allied ragas. The Kedaragowla Varnam (Sami Dayajuda) and Surati Varnam (Ento Prema) have similar beginnings in terms of notation. But the microtonal differences in the way the Nishadam and Gandharam are treated in both the ragas bring about the clear distinction between them.

F. A note on Padam-s and Javali-s

Just like the Gharana-s in Hindustani tradition, CM also has various schools of music. This is called 'Bāṇi' in vernacular.

"However, the remarkable thing about the traditional Gharana system of music instruction and teaching in India through the Guru-Sishya-Parampara, is that it was akin, in some respects, to the characteristic ethos of most pre-modern forms of craft-specialization" (Banerjee)

Every bani is known for its special features. The Dhanammal bani (still carried on by disciples and family of Veena Dhanammal) is a torch bearer of Padam-s and Javali-s. They also have many compositions of the Trinity and other composers as a part of their vast repertoire. The distinct feature of this bani is the nuanced gamaka-s. The members of this bani are very regimental in terms of pathantara[The collection of nuances and methodologies that a Guru passes on to their student] and choose their disciples carefully.

"The pathantara of Padam-s and Javali-s sung in this school are probably one of the toughest to reproduce. Many padam-s like 'Mora Topu' (Sahana), 'Ososi Na madi' (Mukhari), 'Payyada' (Nadanamakriya), 'Poosa daramu' (Todi) and Javali-s like 'Entati Kuluke' (Kalyani), 'Yela Radayane' (Bhairavi) require a different set of voice training that can be achieved only by learning these compositions"– (Sowmya)

Conclusion

There is no denial of the fact that one must prepare his/her voice to be able to sing compositions. However, practicing compositions is very much a part of voice culture in CM. The intention of this paper is not to equate the size of repertoire to good voice. It simply highlights the various aspects of voice culture that can be achieved by repeating compositions multiple times.

All the compositions given as examples are in popular practice and renditions of the same can be found easily on platforms like Youtube.

"Drill is often misunderstood as mechanical repetition to fix into a reflex habit. On the other hand, it is a serious work activity which aims at perfecting a skill or strengthening associations to make them permanent". (R Sathyanarayana,9)

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