

Carnatic Music and its Ragas, with Special Reference to Five Notes Ragas

Balambegai Rajaeshwaran
Director, SVIAS/ EUSL

Abstract

Carnatic Music is part of life in every stream of activity. There is change evolution and advancement in every field. Carnatic music is no exception. This stream of knowledge also has had a long history since it has evolved in a land which has the credit of housing one of the oldest civilizations. The music which is defined by the frame work of grammar is the classical music. The classical music style typical of the southern part of India is carnatic music. The salient features of Carnatic music are Ragas, Thalas and Compositions. A rendering of carnatic music kiritis should be in complete accordance with Thalas and Ragas.

We can define five notes as wonders as all the Ragas have five notes in arohana and avarohana. Mystical Ragas certainly contain R, G, D or both and courses a few other notes. There are Revathi, Karnataka sudhasavery, Bhoopalam, Amirthavarshini Sivaranjani, Hamshadvani, Hindolam, Sudthadhanyasi and Abogi. These Ragas elaborate aalapana, kalpana swaram etc without fear.

Introduction

Carnatic Music through the Ages

Researching, probing, understanding, these are always part of life in every stream of activity. Just as they say that change is the only constant factor; there is change evolution and advancement in every field. Carnatic Music is no exception. This stream of knowledge also has had a long history since it has evolved in a land which has the credit of housing one of the oldest civilizations. Hence, recorded evidence of music is plenty. We can infer many things from these sources.

1. Ancient people of our land knew music.
2. Music had been codified and many specific ways of singing had been defined.
3. Music seems to have been fairly unbroken continuum since historical evidence relating to various points in time give some information or the other about music.

Let us look at Some Example

The Paripadal, a sangam text defines various ragas for singing the verses. This is perhaps one of the earliest textual evidence of the high level of technical advancement that was there so long ago.

The natyasastra, another ancient work is an elaborate text on music, dance theatre contraction and so - on. Here music is treated as a part of theater presentation- i.e. all the three features viz. speech delivery, dance and music were part of one complete whole. This is a point towards music becoming a performing art form.¹

The silapathikaram, the hoary Tamizh epic by Elangoadigal speaks about the talent of Mathavi and Kovalan in singing. Here two various pans have been described. The Thevaarams of the salivate cults were sung in specific puns and this tradition is preserved religiously even today.

The musical pillars at many temples are a fine example of the knowledge sharing that was there between musicians and sculptors. We can go on adding to this list. These few aspects were highted only

to drive home the point that music as a stream had received sufficient importance and focus in South India through the ages. Putting history aside, Let us look at the form as it is today. When we do so form comes across a well developed system.

Understanding Carnatic Music

The vital question is what is [carnatic music] classical music? The simplest way to define is “Music which is defined by the frame work of grammar is classical music”. The classical music style typical the southern part of India is called carnatic music²

The term frames work of grammar, though simple sounding is one of great significance, since it is this one aspect which differentiates classical music from all other forms. Music may entertain with it vibrancies; its may evoke a devotional mood; it can move an audience with sobriety; in short music communicates a message. But if it is classical music this communication has to be done within the frame work of its grammar. If fusion is possible in language, why not in music?

The notes SS RR GG MM of say kalyani to the back ground of western Drums and the folk instrument. Udukkai is a small example of Fusion. This is permissible in applied music.³

The grammar of carnatic music.

The salient features of carnatic music are,

1. Raga
2. Thala
3. compositions

A rendering of carnatic music kirities should be in complete accordance with the Raga and Thala.

Thala is also a technical subject as raga. Some thala like Adi are very easy to follow. Some others like Ada need to be performed with care-else one could go wrong. Some are short and simple like Roopakam. [Just 3 beats]. Jampa is a long thala with 10beats. What ever be the Thala it must be properly, expressed with hands while singing. In many

instrumental programs we can notice a person part of the troupe putting the thalam through out of the concerts since the main artists' hands would be preoccupied.

The emphasis and focus of a carnatic music concert is to explore and express the depth and scope of various Ragas and Thalams through various channels available with an artist- pure raga rendering [Non-thala feature] composition rendering [raga& tala], kalpanaswaram . This is a maths segment calling for extreme precision. Thanam [non-thala] etc.

The word of kiriti therefore only heightens the mood, listening experience and complement. The concert when the song is followed by cutting and crisp creative swarms-passages, the mood changes to one of challenge and desirous work and the listener flows along with the mental maths calculations of the singer, as the song ends, the listener is elated, having been through a range of emotions.

Hence, a good carnatic music concert can be an immensely satisfying experience. Not only that, the main artist must be tactful enough to plan the concert properly. Too many complicated swarms can alienate a listener, almost making him feel puny before the expertise of the singer. Yet, when this is done in proper proportion, it will enthrall the listener making him feel that swarms are pouring like a water fall. Too many rare Ragas will make most part of the 2 hour experience, new and unheard again creating a distance. Instead, one or two Ragas will make the audience sit up and feel that they have been educated in certain away. It is all in the artist's hands.⁵

What is Carnatic Music?

Through home work and practice – Spot dissonance and spot creativity.
Science, maths and logic – Aesthetic and emotion crisp culting precision
– Sustenance for long duration.

Do we hear music or see music? Or rather these days, are we seeing more of music than hearing it? Messy as this question sounds; it is quite a plain query. Are we seeing a lot of visuals with music being ancillary to it or are we just hearing music with out viewing any visuals? In today's

Television channels music video boom alluring our appreciation of music at a very basic level.⁶

Some Popular Ragas. Five Notes wonders

Every human being has an inherent desire to sing, you sing well” are really 3 golden words, that can flatter even a die hard non – singer. People don’t recite poems in bath rooms: they don’t dance on an impulse, but people unconsciously hum when either they are relaxed or too happy. Any person, who listens to a song, repeats it without actually planning to do so. Every individual is not a professional singer. But it is that basic desire to hear one’s own voice spell out a couple of notes. Truly it is a unique pleasure to every individual.⁷

Five Notes Wonders

Five notes wonders- you guessed it right. This is no technical term. It is a catchy phrase coined to arouse the reader’s interest in the topic. What does this term “Five Note Wonder” stands for? To understand this “Raga” is a huge topic and we will be hearing many in-depth titles on its varying aspect. But, it is not possible to start a discussion on any aspect of it without brushing up some basic right?

1. A raga is a predetermined sequence of musical notes that raga move both up wards and downwards. It is both these put together that defined the shape, scope and structure of a raga.
2. The up-ward movement of notes is called Arogana and the down word movement of the notes is called Avarogana.
3. Carnatic music defines seven basic notes. “S” and “P” are non variable. The other notes have two variations, each , high & low

S	R	R	G	G	M	M	P	D	D	N	N
	lower	high	lower	high	lower	High	-	Lower	High	lower	high
	R1	R2	G1	G2	M1	M2	-	D1	D2	N1	N2

Ragas fall in to two categories. Melakartha and janya. Melakarthas contain all the seven notes in both Arogana and Avarogana. Thus,

S	R1	G1	M1	P	D1	N1	S
S	N1	D1	P	M1	G1	R1	S

In a melakartha Todi. If some boxes in this are empty, then it is called a janya.

S	R1	G2	M1	P	D1	N2	S
S	N2	D1	P	M1	G2	R1	S

In a janya Lalitha, it is not necessary that an omission of note has to take place both ways. It is fine if it is so only in one direction hence, five notes in the forward direction & seven notes backwards is janya.

S	R1		M1	P	D1		S
S	N2	D1	P	M1	G2	R1	S

One such example,

Now let's look at this structure

S	R1		M1	P	D1		S
S		D	P	M		R	S

You guessed it right. This is five notes wonder; but not very popular though, this is Karnataka Sudtha savery. Thus we can define five notes wonders as all the Ragas having ⁵ notes in Arogana & Avarogana Now see the following Structure.

S	R1	G1		P	D1		S
S		D1	P		G1	R1	S

Here the G1 added and M1 taken off gives the structure of the very popular raga Boopalam. This raga is generally, associated with dawn day break etc. In fact, Boopalam is a household term, so much so that a couple of films songs of Tamil and Malayalam contain, the words 'Boopala Ragam' in the lyrics. See the amount of difference created by just one notes! But that is nothing surprising. Let's use just logic and arrive at the categories of janya ragas possible.

S.No.	Number of notes in Arogana	Number of notes in Avarogana
01	07	06
02	06	07
03	06	06
04	07	05
05	05	07
06	06	05
07	05	06
08	05	05

Out of these eight variety ie 5- 5 combinations in the chapter that follow:

Also the table speaks only of ragas where notes move in and out of fashion; ie upwards in Arogana and downwards in Avarogana. In some ragas the notes move zigzag.

Categorizing the Ragas;

If a variation in the pitch and frequency of usual sounds around us can do so much to our moods then, just imagine. Music is nothing but structure, orderly sound and how many varying moods it can create! We have touched upon this point in Kalyani.

Just think of our films. If the hero is fighting with villains and is on a loosing wicked, the background music in most cases would be a chorus of ten violins playing a sad raga like Subha panthavarali. At some point, the hero gets new found energy. Fine now, with the new vigor, he takes on the villains. The music also changes. It might change to brisk and rich rhythms mike orchestrates suddenly, the camera shifts is supported by pure percussion – it could be mirudangam or Tabla played in a peppy style. Let us first categories the five notes wonder.

01. The mystical Ragas
02. The Bright Ragas

03. The Sober Ragas. Let us list out the Ragas in each category.

01. **Mystical Ragas**

Revathy

Boopalam

Karnataka sudha savery

Amirthavarshini

Sivaranjani

02. **Bright Ragas**

Moganam

Hamsadvani

Brindavana saranga

Madhyamavathi

03. **Sober Ragas**

Abogi

Sudha dhanyasi

Hindolam

What causes this categorization? Obviously, it is the notes that each raga contains, some notes have a very characteristic feel. Some notes are flexible, how shall we put this? Garlic and Onion are two major ingredients for cooking. Garlic wherever added will identify itself with its smell. R1 and D1 if either one or both are present, the raga has to have a mystical ethical feel. Similarly these very same notes acquire a very prominent place in certain ragas. In such cases, the entire elaboration and creativity would revolve in and around this particular note.

Mystical Ragas

Mystical ragas certainly contain R1 or D1 or both and off course, a few other notes. Let us look at the structure of the five mystical Ragas.

Revathy

S	R1		M1	P		N1	S
S	N1		P	M1		R1	S

Since we have already touched upon Karnataka Sudha savery and Boopalam.

Karnataka Sudha Savery

S	R1		M1	P	D1		S
S		D1	P	M1		R1	S

Boopalam

S	R1	G1		P1	D1		S
S		D1		P	G1	R1	S

But then we correlate based on the overall feel created by the ragas. Hence, these usages [prayogas as they are called] are pretty ancient. It is just the new avatar of Revathy as a musical melody for classical and light music, is relating new. Amirthavarshini and Sivaranjani though categorized as mystical Ragas should perhaps not be there! They actually Sober Ragas. Amirthavarshini has been put there just because of the special powers attributed to it. Let us first look at the structure of,

Amirthavarshini

S		G2	M2	P		N2	S
S	N2		P	M2	G2		S

There is a myth about how Muthuswamy Diskshitar sang the kirit. { Aanandam Amirthakarshini} and it started pouring when he sang the lines' varshaya! Which means, Let it rain, Let it rain! The myth further says' that on another occasion Dirksithar sang Sthambaya; which means, please? Stop! Please stop!' and the down pour stopped.

Hence even to day there is this belief attached to Amirthavarshini. Hence, though the Raga sounds Sober, there is always a mystical and suppositious element attached to it. Hence, it can be regarded as a mystical Raga.

Sivaranjani

Structure:

S	R2	G1	_	P	D2	_	S
S		D2	P	_	G1	R2	S

Siva Ranjani contains the bright variants R2 and D2. Yet. It makes you cry! Why? It could be due to the dominating effect of G1.

Revathi is a very beautiful Raga. It is supposed to have been popularized only in the last two to two and a half decades. It is therefore difficult to find a Thaygarajas kirit or Dikshithar kirit or Syamaasstrical in Revathi. Many recent songs are in these ragas. One popular number is Bhosambo' composed by Dayananthha Sarasvathi and sung by the late Sangeetha Vidwan Magarajapuram Santhanam. Some catchy Thillanas have also been composed in Revathi.

P.NSR.S

Usage in flat style gives the effect of holy chant.

SR SR SN SR-----1

NSN-----NS----NS R SSS—2- is actually the notation for the usual style in which the Bhagavat Gita is recited. These usages fall within the scope of Revathi. Of course, 3 notes cannot define raga .Effect of G1 there is some film professions mentioned that, at one stage there was a very strong belief in film circles that if at least one song of the film is tuned in Sivaranjani it will prove lucky for the movie, but lucky raga was quite an interesting twisted! Hence, it is under this category.

In 'Aval oru menakai' the Tamil movie, Sivaranjani are all nice songs in this raga. In fact the signature turn of all India Radio played when the Transmission is started early in the morning, it in Sivaranjani. Both these film songs, though love songs, do sound melancholic, that in the feel of Sivaranjani. There is a blush of G2 used in Sivaranjani which contributes to changing its mood. This addition if used makes Sivaranjani brighter.

Bright Ragas and Sober Ragas, sunshine, bright day, sparking ideas, Julianne, joy success, bondless well all things bright and beautiful are brought out through the bright Ragas.

Hamsadvani

This is truly the brightest of the bright Ragas! It will make you sit and run from your bed .And if this is heard in high speed; well you might end up becoming P.T Usha. Its structure is

S	R2	G2	-	P	-	N2	S
S	N2	-	P	-	G2	R2	S

With all suffixes being (2) ie R2 G2 N2 students would have guessed that it denote the, brighter of the two variants of any notes. The PNS and SNP usage if this raga gives it obvious. Marching effect. It is off course not a raga used for extensive elaboration. Yet, it gives a crisp start to a programmer. Generally it is an opening Raga. The varnam Jalajakshi taught to students. The Dikshitar “Kirifi Vaathabi Ganapathim” ECT is popular song in these Ragas.

Moganam

Moganam is perhaps the nearest neighbor structurally but farthest when it comes to the overall feel scope and usage of the raga, the start point is of course. The structure.

S	R2	G2	-	P	D2 -	S
S		D2	P	G2	R2	S

As in the previous ragas this Raga also contains all the bright variants as seen from the suffix.2 only that it contains D2 instead of N2 at the cost of being repetitive. It is relevant to mention once again that moganam is verey heavy Raga. It leaves a lasting impression in the mind unlike the fast food and racy feel of Hamsadvani. It lends itself to detailed elaboration. It most often occupies the prestigious place of the main place of a concert or at least the place of the prominent piece handed a couple of songs before the main pieces. It is a Raga brimming with gamagas. The fine touches in-fact make this Raga fairly difficult to handle unlike the relatively straight Hamsadvani.

If Hamsadvani can be composed to the effect created by many bright sparks, Moganam can be compared to the lasting brightness created by day light. Moganam is so well suited for slow- placed songs that it also brings out the mood of love; to be precise, different shades of love; joy of union, pangs of separation while joyfully recollecting past moments of togetherness ect.

The popular 'varnam' 'ninnukori' generally taught to students as the first varnam is in Moganam. This varnam has inspired a catchy film number beginning with the words 'Ninnukori Varanum' in the film Agni Nakshathram. This peppy song brings out the fast paced and speedy side of Moganam truly a great Raga.

Brindavanasaranga and Mathyamavathy

Both these Ragas are another set of structural neighbors though not as pots a part in feel and usage as the earlier pann. They are closer to each other when comp aired to Moganam and Hamsadvani.

Brindavanasaranga

S	R2		M1	P		N2	S
S	N1		P	M1		R2	S

Mathyamavathi; - Structure

S	R2		M1	P		N1	S
S	N1		P	M1		R2	S

Except R2 which is an obvious bright note are prominently bright. Yet, when they combine in this particular structure, they bring out a very bright mood. It is generally used to conclude a programmed that is the final though not a raga used for defatted elaboration; it is a prominent Raga no doubt, in the Musical circle. It also holds a special place due to its utility as a final.

If you have jumped in to the conclusion that N2 in place of N1 would make this Raga significantly brighter than Madhyamavathi; then sorry, you are wrong; In fact both Ragas are bright. Then only they can create an over-all effect.

Sober Ragas

Sober ragas are not sad ragas. Sivaranjani was just one such example and need not be generalized. Sober Ragas, we may define as all those Ragas which bring out a soft feel. They don't energize like bright Ragas; they don't horripilate like mystical Ragas. They relax the troubled mind. They calm a tensed heart. They are therefore suited for relaxed hearing.

Sober Ragas

1. Hindolam
2. Sudha dhanyasi
3. Abogi

Hindolam

This is truly an enhancing and incomparable raga. A Raga with innumerable compositions. Hindolam is truly a singer's and listener's delight. It is relatively very easy to handle. When compared with many other ragas, it has such a distinctive feel. While singing it is very difficult to go off tune. Once the singer gets a basic grasp of it, it is easy to build on and elaborate.

Structure;

S		G1	M1		D1	N1	S
S	N1	D1		M1	G1		S

Though the D1 does add its flavor, the overall effect of the Raga is not really dominated by its mystical quality. This is a very melodious Raga.

The popular kiriti" Samajavaragamana', of Thyagarajas kiriti is in this Raga. The beauty of Hindolam is that it doesn't look that simplistic to a listener, instead of the ease of handling. It is just that its gamagas and other usages, are fairly easy to assimilate and it reproduced. It is certainly a popular stage Raga used at prominent points of a concert.

Suddha Dhanjasi

It is Hindustani version" Dhana" is supposed to have originated from folk melodies. Yet, in the carnatic system, no such origin is mentioned. It

is a neat and pleasant Raga, closely related to madyamavathi in structure but sounds radically different. Structure;

S		G1	M1	P		N1	S
S	N1		P	M1	G1		S

Students are required to turn back a structure of Madyamavathi which contains R2 instead of G1. The reason for the radical variance is now obvious. R2 is a bright variant which lends a bright feel to the Raga. G1 is the Sober variant of G we may notice that Suddha Dhanjasi consists of all '1' suffixes. Naturally it is a sober Raga. Muthaiya Bhagavathar's varnam."Sree Rajamathangi "is a very fine composition to understand the scope of this Raga.

Abogi

There was an add of a herbal powder, which went" Mangai eval koonthal thanil veesudum ragam"

Structure.

S	R2	G1		M1		D2	S
S		D2		M1	G1	R2	S

Abogi is a unique Raga. It is a very sober. Yet, very letting catchy and Romantic. The fact that it has been used in its pure classical version for brief and jingles that has to attract the viewer, listener, in just a couple of minutes, Hence, the students get exposed to the Raga at the beginning stage itself.

Conclusion

If we draw a circle and if melakartha occupies the right extreme, then five notes wonders will occupy the left extreme. Since among all janyas, they are the farthest from the melakarthas. The reason is that they are short of 2 notes in the forward direction and 2 notes in the backward direction when compared with the melakarthas. Hence, they sound very different from those ragas which use all the seven notes. Yet, of all janyas these Ragas are the easiest to handle. Their technical name is Audava. Audava stands for 5. It is because the Raga which has 6 notes

in one direction and 5 in another and in reverse can confuse a learner in the usage. This is because, in such cases, a particular note can be touched only while descending and not while ascending or vice versa.

Such confusion is not there in the 5-5 Ragas. Since it is the same notes both ways learners can confidently venture in these Ragas for elaborate Alapana, Kalpana swaram etc. without fear.

Foot Notes

01. Vidyabhavani What is Carnatic Music
02. I.B.I.D Understanding Carnatic Music
03. Vidyasanger Grammar of Caranatic Music
04. Vidyabavani Some popular Ragaa
05. Vidyasanger Grammar of Caranatic Music
06. Vidyabavani What ia Carnatic Music
07. I.B.D. Some Popular Ragas

Bibliography

- Demystifying Fine Arts, Vol. 1-10.
- Musings of a Musician by R. Rangamanuja Ayyangar B.A.L.T.
- Perfecting Carnatic Music level-7 by Chitra Vina N-Ravikiran.
- Raga its science and maths by Vidya Vhavani.
- The Art and science of Carnatic Music by Vidya Shanger.
- What is Carnatic Music? By Vidya Bhavani.