



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Rare Ragas Handled By The Contemporary Composers

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Abstract: Carnatic Music is a holistic form of music because of the presence of innumerable compositions in different ragas, talas and languages by Composers from different time periods. While there have been many compositions composed in popular ragas, the contemporary composers have explored the rare ragas through their compositions. This study aims at a short analysis of the rare ragas handled by six contemporary composers.

Index Terms - Carnatic Music, Composers, Contemporary Composers, Ragas, Rare Ragas, G.N.Balasubramanian, Lalgudi.G.Jayaraman, M.Balamuralikrishna, K.Ramaraj, Kalyani Varadarajan, Ashok Madhav

I. Introduction

The South Indian Carnatic Music system is very intricate, complex and is replete with aesthetics and traditions. The whole structure of this music is built around the ragas. Prof.P.Sambamurthy¹ describes a Raga as “a combination of notes that have a definitive relationship with the aadhaara shadja and are sequenced in a particular order”. But what adds to the aesthetics are the gamakas or movement musical setting. Ragas can be presented via Kalpitha or Kalpana Sangeetham. Kalpitha Sangeetham refers to the pre- The defined music in the various musical forms and compositions. The Kalpana Sangeetham refers to the creative music and is mostly on the spot.

The creation of a composition can also be seen as a Kalpana Sangeetham. Some composers compose on the spot while others take time to compose and may even incorporate more ideas and corrections later. The raga and the lyrics have to be spliced together to make meaningful sense of both language and music. A composition stands the test of time only if it is replete with Raga bhava and has an exemplary musical setting.

1.1 Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is limited to 6 contemporary composers of whom some are popular performers turned composers and the others who are only composers.

¹What is a raga – Sambamurthy,P. (2001), South Indian Music Book II

II. Ragas in Carnatic Music

There are infinite ragas in Carnatic Music. They are mainly classified as Melakarta and Janya ragas. From the point of view of listeners, performers and composers, the ragas are either popular or rare².

A popularity of a raga depends on its scope for manodharma and the number of compositions that are available in the raga. A raga becomes popular when it undergoes improvisation through various compositions, repeated exploration by the artists because of its scope and the willingness of the listeners to hear them over and over again.

On the contrary, a rare raga is not often heard in performances. It may be due to limited availability of compositions in that raga or limited scope for manodharma. The scope for manodharma in a raga is generally depends on the ability of composers and singers to use the gamakas, janta, dattu prayogas appropriately, in a logical and artistic manner. Ragas like Kalyani, Thodi, Bhairavi, Kamboji, Karaharapriya etc have greater scope for gamakas, because of which the scope for composing is far higher compared to ragas like Ragavardhini, Suvarnangi, Shyamalangi, Jhalavarali, Kantamani etc. This idea of exploring rare ragas has been echoed by many Composers in Carnatic Music.

III. Ragas handled by various Composers in Carnatic Music

A composition is a repertoire not only for the present but also the future. The Ragas and Talas live through generations via these compositions. The popular ragas of today have gained their stature because of numerous compositions being composed in these ragas. These popular ragas have remained so because of constant repetition of the compositions and knowledge of raga prayogas that these compositions provide.

In the light of this knowledge, we see many rare ragas being handled by many composers as well. There could have been many compositions in rare ragas in the earlier period, but due to lack of proper documentation and exclusive oral traditions being prevalent, many such compositions could have been lost or modified. Oothukadu Venkata Kavi³, a Pre-Trinity composer, has composed in rare ragas like Deeparam, Hamsageervani, Lalithagandharvam.

The Trinity (Thyagarajar, Dikshithar and Shyama Sastri) have composed in many rare ragas during their period. Rare ragas like Bahudari, Chenjukamboji, Dilipakam, Devamruthavarshini, Gambiravani, Garudadwani, Vijayasri, Kumudakriya, Nagadhvani, Natanarayani, Kuntalam, Kalgada, Chintamani etc have been featured in their compositions for the first time. Taking inspiration from the great trinity, the subsequent composers have also composed in many rare ragas.

IV. Rare Ragas handled by the Contemporary Composers

Contemporary Composers are modern age composers of the 20th and the 21st century⁴. The contribution of these brilliant composers has enriched the repertoire of Carnatic Music⁵. Many refined aesthetic versions of popular ragas can be found in these compositions. But what has stood out is the use of rare ragas in their compositions.

²What are popular ragas – Sambamurthy,P. (2004), Great Composers Book I

³Compositions of Oothukadu Venkata Kavi - <https://www.karnatik.com/co1036.shtml>

⁴Who are the contemporary composers - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Carnatic_composers

⁵Contemporary Composers – Sambamurthy, P. (1998), South Indian Music Book IV

The following are some of the contemporary composers who have handled the rare ragas.

4.1 G.N.Balasubramanian (1910-1965)

A very popular vocalist of his time, G.N.B as he was fondly called, has composed over 250 compositions⁶. He has composed in some rare ragas like Samakadambari, Gavathi, Kadanakuthuhalam, Chenchukamboji, Chaayaranjani, Veenadhari, Margahindolam, Bahudari. Sarangatharangini, Amrutha behag and Sivasakti are his own creations.

4.2 M. Balamuralikrishna (1930 – 2016)

He was one of the finest vocalists and composer⁷ with over 400 compositions to his credit. He has created many new ragas like Lavangi, Trisakti, Mahati, Ganapathi, Jaya Jayalaitha, Mohana Gandhi, Sushama, Pushkara Godavari. He has also composed in many rare ragas like Rohini, Chandrika, Gurupriya, Janjuthi, Vallabhi, Chandrajyothi, Ahir Bhairav, Sumukhi and compositions in all the 72 melas.

4.3 Lalgudi. G. Jayaraman (1930- 2013)

He was a legendary violinist and a composer⁸ of varnams, kritis and thillanas. He has used many rare ragas like Rageshree, Madhuvanathi, Mishrasivaranjani, Bindumalini, Karnaranjani, Kadanakuthuhalam, Durga, Bagehsree, Hamsaroppi, Thilang, Hamsavinodhini.

4.4 K. Ramaraj (1936 – 2009)

A composer of par excellence⁹, who specialized in composing in rare and vivaadi ragas. Some of the rare ragas used are Kathyayani, Ghambeeravani, Bhaarathi, Kanakaangi, Raagavardhini, Vaasanthi, Kantamani, Lavangi, Gurunathapriya, Rathipathipriya, Vishnupriya, Neelamani, Shadvidamargini, Gurupriya, Sumanesaranjani, Chandrajyothi, Kapilam, Jalavarali, Patdeep, Surya, Priyadarshini, Kaikavasi, Karnaranjani, Jayantasena, Sunadavinodini, Hamsakalyani, Manasijapriya.

4.5 Kalyani Varadarajan (1923 – 2003)

She has composed¹⁰ in all the 72 mela ragas. Bhavani, Madhukauns, Sunadavinodhini, Chayasindu, Bhogi, Gurupriya are some of the rare ragas that she has used in her compositions.

4.6 Ashok Madhav (Living Composer)

He resides in the USA and has composed¹¹ in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit and Kannada. He created the ragas Hamsakalyani and Hamsangi. He has composed in many rare ragas like Koshalam, Vakulabaranam, Sinduramakriya, Kantamani, Saranga Malhar, Vijayanagari, Sumanesaranjani, Pasupathipriya, Vandadarini, Ratipathipriya, Chandrakauns, Saktirupini, Surya, Hamsavinodini, Sivasakti, Niroshtha.

⁶Compositions of G.N. Balasubramanian - <https://www.karnatik.com/co1022.shtml>

⁷Compositions of M. Balamuralikrishna - <https://www.karnatik.com/co1030.shtml>

⁸Compositions of Lalgudi.G.Jayaraman - <https://www.karnatik.com/co1071.shtml>

⁹Compositions of K.Ramaraj - <https://www.karnatik.com/co1141.shtml>

¹⁰Compositions of Kalyani Varadarajan - <https://www.karnatik.com/co1222.shtml>

¹¹Compositions of Ashok Madhav - http://www.carnaticcorner.com/articles/ashokmadhav_compositions.htm

V. Findings of the Study

The following points have been observed while analyzing the rare ragas used by the contemporary composers.

- The composers have handled rare ragas like Margahindolam, Chenjukamboji, Chandrajyothi, Jayantasena, Ghambeeravani, Kaikavasi, Niroshtha, which were first handled by Thyagarajar.
- The rare ragas Gurupriya, Karnaranjani, Veenadhari, Pasupathipriya, Vijayanagari, used by these composers, are ragas created by Muthiah Bhagavathar.
- Many of these composers have composed in all the 72 Mela Ragas.
- A general liking for Vivaadi Melas and Janyas are seen in their compositions.
- The contemporary composers seem to have supported each other by composing in the ragas created by them. For eg. K.Ramaraj has composed in Hamsakalyani, a raga created by Ashok Madhav.
- These Composers have adapted many Hindustani ragas like Chandrakauns, Sumanesaranjani (Madhukauns), Patdeep, Bageshree, Madhuvanathi, Rageshree, Ahir, Bhairav, Mishrasivaranjani, Gavathi in their compositions.
- The composers have also created new ragas like Hamsakalyani, Sivasakti, Sarangatharangini, Lavangi, Mahati, Ganapathi.

VI. Conclusion

The contemporary composers have trodden the not so common path to unearth the treasure, by bringing out the beauty and aesthetics of these rare ragas. These compositions have inspired many modern-day performers and teachers to explore and teach these ragas. The availability of notations and recordings of these rare raga compositions, have made it easier for the performers, listeners and students to access and be enlightened about these ragas.

Some of the rare ragas require exemplary control of mind and voice to execute and bring out their beauty. The Performers find it thrilling and challenging to explore the unexplored. Today, the rare ragas are being appreciated by the Listeners. Though the popular ragas are eternal and make a compelling inclusion in concerts, the inclusions of rare ragas are a welcome change from the usual routine. The above study is just a small step towards an in-depth research about Rare Ragas handled by the Contemporary Composers.

References

1. Pattammal, D. (2007), Raga Pravaham - Index of Carnatic ragas
2. <https://www.karnatik.com/composers.shtml>
3. Other Internet searches and books provided in footnotes throughout the article.