

Importance of Compositions in Pedagogy of Improvisation in Karnatic Classical Music

K. Kanaka Durga
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Dept. of Music, School of Fine Arts
Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University
Hyderabad, Telangana
Email: kanakadk49@gmail.com

Abstract

Manodharma (improvisational) sangitam (music) is an essential part of concert performance of Karnatic classical music. It has five aspects - namely, ragalapana, kalpanasvara, neravu, tanam and pallavi. Although improvisation is considered to be a creation of one's own, a student requires some initial training in all the aspects. In the process of creating something new, the most important issue is to understand the characteristics of a raga (ragalakshanam). The form of svara, its gamaka, anusvara, the raga phrases and their kalapramana may be imbibed by learning various compositions in which the basic structures of raga and tala are embedded. Different compositions may be used in different ways to guide students in their initial stages of learning the various aspects of manodharma sangita namely ragalapana, svarakalpana, neraval and tanam. The present paper titled "Importance of Compositions in Pedagogy of Improvisation in Karnatic Classical Music" explores how a student may be guided to sing alapana, svarakalpana, tanam and neraval using compositions.

Key Words: Manodharma Sangitam, Pedagogy of Improvisation, Use of compositions in Improvisation, Karnatic Classical Music

Introduction

Manodharma sangitam (MS) or improvisation is an essential part of Karnatic classical music (KCM) concert performance. It has five aspects to it namely - ragalapana, kalpanasvara, neraval, tanam and pallavi of **Ragam-Tanam-Pallavi (RTP)**. The artist using his own knowledge, imagination and intelligence creates MS (Sambamoorthy). Pedagogy is the art and science of teaching where in the teacher guides a student to learn how to learn. (Pedagogy)

The most important issue in singing MS is to understand ragalakshanam. The raga svarupa and tala structures are embedded in various compositions in KCM. The method of singing a gamaka, appropriate use of anusvara and singing various raga phrases in correct kalapramana may be learnt from a guru and by listening to stalwarts in concerts.

In this paper, I will discuss how the svara structures found in compositions may be used in pedagogy of ragalapana, kalpanasvara, neraval and tanam.

Four MS aspects

➤ Ragalapana

Ragalapana is the exposition of a raga without any tala framework or accompaniment. In vocal, it is sung using *ta-da-ri-na* syllables. It precedes compositions such as varnam, kruti/kirtana and pallavi of RTP.

➤ Svarakalpana

Svarakalpana or kalpana svaras or svaraprastara is sung for a theme of compositions such as varnam, kruti/kirtana and pallavi to the accompaniment of violin and percussion instruments. These are sol-fa syllables set to the particular raga and tala of the composition being sung.

➤ Niraval

Niraval is the creative rendition of a meaningful line of a kruti or RTP pallavi sung to the accompaniment of violin and percussion instruments. In this form, the words of the theme, the raga and tala are all equally important.

➤ Tanam

Rendering of a raga in madhyamakala (medium speed) with the use of the syllables *ta* and *na* is known as tanam. Tana is not bound by any tala but there is rhythm in it. Tanam may be sung as combination of three layas - vilamba, madhya and druta depending on the artists' preferences, vocal capability, raga or guru's tradition. It is sung after rendering alapana and prior to singing RTP pallavi or kruti theme. Some artists sing tanam to the accompaniment of percussion instrument mrudanga.

Use of Compositions in Pedagogy of MS

➤ Pedagogy of Ragalapana

We may take a simple phrase from Kalyani raga, Adi tala varnam composed by Ramnathpuram Srinivasa Iyyengar to understand the method of improvising for alapana. The starting phrase of anupallavi (refer to notation in *page 108*) (Chinna Satyanarayana) is

P , M G N D , / G D P , M G R S N This is a good phrase for developing raga. Using the concept of srotovaha yati, gopucha yati etc. we may elaborate the phrase as an alapa. First take the part - G D P , M G R S N - and elaborate as follows:

G D P , M G R , / D, P M G R, / P, M G R, / M G R, / G R, /R,R/S, (gopucha)

#S, / S, S/ N RS, / N R G, G / GR, GR G,G / G R S N - N R G , G / G R S N - N R G R G,G - G, G, G/ (srotovaha).... After this, the phrase - P , M G N D , - may be worked upon as a continuation of the above alapana

GR, G, M, P, / P , M GMP, / P, M P, PM / PMG, - PM R, / G,P, M PM / G D, P, M / G NND P, M/ G, M , P,... After improvising around P, one may explore D and N, and

then Ś. Then one may take some other phrases from compositions in higher octave for elaboration, then move down and end with fast paced phrases.

➤ Pedagogy of Svarakalpana

Svarakalpana may be taught in the initial stage of learning by using expressions from compositions. Different kinds of alankarik prayogas are found in varnams, svarapallavis and svarajatis.

For e.g. in the caranams of svarapallavi in raga Kalyani, set to caturasra Rupaka tala, one finds expressions such as mentioned below:

In caranam 1, 1st and 2nd avartams (page. 32) (Chinna Satyanarayana):

Ś, ĠR | Ś N - RŚ N D P M | P , - Ś N | D P - N D P M G R | G , -

In this, we find a pattern as shown below:

Ġ R Ś N - RŚ N D P M P , / Ś N D P - N D P M G R G , Taking this phrase, a student may be guided to make similar patterns in ascending and descending order such as

N D P M - D P M G R S R, / D P M G - P M G R S N S, and so on. In ascending order, one may take only the latter part of the phrase as shown below:

P M G R S N S, / D P M G R S R, / N D P M G R G , and so on.

These svara strings may be used as such in svarakalpana of various Kalyani raga krutis/RTP pallavi. Such practice helps the students to understand how phrases are constructed.

➤ Pedagogy of Niraval

We will take up the Shankarabharana raga kruti, in Adi tala, *Svara raga sudha* ... of Saint Tyagaraja. (page 119) (Sarma, Sangita Vidya Bodhini) . Neravu may be done for the charanam line -

muladharaja nada merungute / mudamagu mokshamura

The neraval line *muladharaja* ... may be written as follows to understand its structure.

; mu , - , la ,, - ,, dha, - , ra ja, | ; , na - , da me , | run...-, gu te , ||
2+mu (3) + la(5)+ dha(3)+ra(1)+ja(5)+na(2)+da(1)+me(2)+ run(5)+ gu (1)+te (2) ||

; mu ,, da ,, ma ,, gu ,, - mo ,, , ksha mu , | ra ,, ,, ,, | ,, ,, ,, ||
2+ mu(1½)+ da(1½)+ma(1½)+gu(1½)+mo(5)+ksha(1)+mu(2)+ ra (8) + (8)||

One avarta of this chouka kala kruti consists of 32 hrasva svara aksharas. Each of the sahitya akshara is of different duration as shown above. The letter *mu* is of 3 hrasva akshara kala, *la* is of five aksharas and so on. A student should try and stick to this format as much as possible. In kruti, however, one may shift by one or two aksharas depending on the melody. In pallavi of RTP, the structure should be strictly adhered to.

After singing the neraval line fluently in the tala structure without any melody, students should make an attempt to create svara structures of their own for neraval line.

This may be done in different ways using svara structures available in compositions as discussed below.

A. Sing the line to the already existing melody lines and svara structures. This particular line of sahitya may be sung to the lines of pallavi *svara raga sudha*....and also anupallavi line *paramananda mane* It may be necessary to change the melody line of pallavi/anupallavi slightly to suit the sahitya of nerval line. This exercise may also be done for any other krutis/varnams learnt in the same raga.

B. Take up various phrases that occur in the kruti (refer to notation in *page 119*) (Sarma, Sangita Vidya Bodhini), (*page 236*) (Pinakapani) and use them. For e.g.,

The first sangati of pallavi line is as follows:

; S R - G, G, - G, G, - M G M, | ; M P -, M G, | R, G, M P - G R G R ||

SN-svara-ra, ga.....| | ||

Different raga phrases may be taken from the notation and improvised.

i) First they may take S R G G, G, G sing the line with the phrase SRG and end it as GR GRS S R GM

ii) Then next they may take up M G M.... and sing with this phrase as the base and end with MGR S, R GM

iii) Then the phrase M P -, M G, may be taken for improvisation

iv) Next the phrase G, M P - G R may be improvised upon.

After exploring all the phrases in pallavi, they may move to the anupallavi line and look for phrases that help in moving around and above P, and also in the higher octave.

➤ **Pedagogy of Tanam¹** (Kanaka Durga, Use of Tyagaraja Ghana Raga Pancaratna Krutis in Pedagogy of Tanam)

The madhya laya of tanam may be practiced by singing *tanamta* syllables for tana varnams. The syllables may also be practiced for Ghana raga pancaratna krutis of Saint Tyagaraja as shown below.

The tanam syllables for first caranam of Sri raga pancaratna kruti of Saint Tyagaraja may be practiced as follows:

S, ; - ; - ; S, - S N N S | N N S N - P ; | ; P - M P N S ||
ta, ; - ; - a nam- ta a a / a / a a / a a - nam | ; ta/ - ta a a a ||

R, ; - ; - ; - G R R G | R R G R - R G R R | S ; ; G R ||
nam - ; ; - ; - ta a a / a / a a / nam, -, ta a a / nam ; ; ta a ||

¹ Original work presented at a seminar (not yet published) - for full paper see <https://kanakadk.blogspot.com/2018/04/my-seminar-paper-presented-in-sri.html>

, R S N- * Endaro mahanu....
, *n a m*,-* ...

Students may do this exercise for all pancaratna krutis of Saint Tyagaraja to learn to sing *tanamta* syllables with ease. They may observe the svara structures to understand tanam form. In tanam, phrases of different patterns like trisra, caturasra, khanda and misra and sankirna and combinations of 3+5, 5+3, 4+4, 3+3 etc.. are repeated. (*page*. 161) (Vedavalli). In the above example, one may observe the svara patterns as shown below:

S N N / S N N / S N

G R R / G R R / G R R / G R R

Observation of these svara combinations in various compositions will help in understanding the method of constructing svara patterns for tanam form (*page* 117) (Rama).

Conclusion

Students may first sing various phrases from compositions many times until they understand the nuances of each svara, its gamaka, anusvara, raga phrase and kalapramana properly. It is important to understand which phrase in the composition is good for which aspect of MS. Initially, they may use the exact phrase to sing but at a later stage, they may change it slightly to make it more aesthetic and melodious. Various phrases may be sung in different octaves and used in improvisation. One needs to understand which svaras can be elongated and which have to be sung short. For instance in raga Shankarabharana, the svara N is usually not used as a very long, extended note. By observing the compositions, one may learn these intricacies. It is very helpful to work on different phrases by writing them down in the initial stages. Continuous and rigorous practice will aid in using the phrases from memory rather than from written notes and help in getting spontaneity.

For understanding the actual method of rendition of various aspects, students have to listen to good musicians and imbibe. They have to work on each aspect, listen, understand, observe, analyze, notate and sing. They have to understand what suits their own voice and fits into their own concept of aesthetics. Over a period of time, they will develop a style of their own, and sing with ease and spontaneity.

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