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**The Melakartha Scale of Carnatic Music**

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Carnatic music, an ancient treasure among South India’s forms of fine arts, retains its spot in the hearts of music lovers even today. Its tradition and authenticity are preserved through the continued use of the melakartha scale, the thalam patterns, and the sahithyam of composers from various centuries. Yet, manodharmam, the improvisational aspect of Carnatic music, allows the art form to enrich and reach new levels of innovation.

The ragas are the foundation of Carnatic music and are categorized according to the swarams that they are made of. The melakartha scale is used to organize ragas in this particular manner. Ragas’ structures can generally be categorized into two types: a melakartha or a janya. The melakartha ragas have all seven swarams, both in the ascending and descending orders. Additionally, the swarams are always in the order of Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, and Ni. The janya ragas are descendants of the melakartha ragas. Janyams don’t necessarily have all seven swarams in their scales, or in the standard order. However, they are descendants of their respective melakarthas because they take some of their “parent’s” swarams and become a new raga.

The scale has 72 melakarthas, most of which have several janyams. Although some like Thodi, Kalyani, Shankarabharanam, Mayamalava Gowlai, and Harikambhoji have many janyas. For example, Hindolam is a janyam of Thodi. It takes all of Thodi’s swarams, except Ri and Pa. Thus, Hindolam’s scale is as follows: Sa Ga Ma Dha Ni Sa. This concept of borrowing swarams from the melakarthas has given us hundreds of ragas apart from the 72 melas.

Some janyams may have all seven swarams, but their structure may not qualify them as a melakartha. For example, Bhairavi is a janyam of Natabhairavi. It has all seven swarams, but it does not follow the standard order. Its arohanam is often sung as Sa Ga Ri Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni Sa. So, this slight change in its order makes it a janyam. Vidushi S. Sowmya once mentioned that the Sa Ga Ri is what gives Bhairavi its depth and that it should be sung in this way. Thus, the janya ragas’ structural variety allows Carnatic music to go beyond the parent ragas.

Generally, melakartha ragas are sung as main items in concerts. Because they have all seven swarams, artists have the freedom of exploring a plethora of options while performing manodharmam. But, some janyams like Bhairavi, Saveri, Kambhoji, and Arabhi are also favorites for manodharmam because their signature phrases allow artists to elaborate them into main items. Singers like the stalwart Sri G.N. Balasubramaniam sometimes have enough imagination to perform long aalapanais for rare janyams like Andolika. So, depending on the performer’s knowledge of a raga, janyams are elaborated. Such different ragas and the ways of carrying of them out make Carnatic music wide open and fascinating centuries later than when it was originated.