

Saptaratna-Pancharatna

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Of the several factors that have contributed to the greatness and exceptionality of Carnatic Music, the variety and richness of compositions stand foremost. It's a recognised fact that Carnatic Music is predominantly composition based and all the improvisations like rāga ālapana, neraval and swara kalpana are made to the chosen composition that is presented. The main emphasis is on vocal music; most compositions are written to be sung, and even when played on instruments, they are meant to be performed in a singing style (known as gāyaki). And one of the added specialities of the wealth of Carnatic compositions is the Samudāya Kritis or Group Compositions. Many vāggeyakāras have composed samudāya kritis or a series of songs based on particular themes. The greatest masters in this arena are Sri Thyāgarāja, Sri Muttuswāmi Dikshitar, Sri Shyāma Shāstri and Mahārāja Swāti Tirunāl. It is noteworthy that Sri Oothukkādu Venkatakavi (1700-65), whose period was before that of the above mentioned composers, has composed the Kāmākshi Navāvaranams, Ānjaneya Pancharatnams and Saptaratna Kritis. Since one does not find any prior instances of such group kritis by any composer, we can say that Oothukkādu was probably the pioneer in composing Samudāya kritis and thereby set an example for later vāggeyakāras.

The Saptaratna Kritis of Oothukkādu are one of the most precious gems in the crown of Carnatic Compositions. Equally scholarly, profound and elegant, but more popular are the evergreen Ghana Rāga Panchartna Kritis of Thyāgarāja.

Ragas

While Thyāgarāja has employed ghana rāgas like Nāttai(Jagadānandakāraka), Gowlai(Dudukugala), Ārabhi(Sādhinchene), Varāli(Kanakanaruchira) and Sri(Endaro mahānubhāvulu), Oothukkādu has used ragas rare and popular; weighty and light. His choice of ragas seems more instinctive and based on

natural inclination rather than compliance to any theme. Oothukkādu's seven ratnas are made up of the following ragas.

1. Nāttai – “Bhajanāmrta Paramānanda”
2. Gowlai – “Aganitamahimā”
3. Kalyāni – “Mādhava Hrdi Khelini”
4. Keeravāni – “Bālasarasa murali”
5. Thodi – “Jatādhara Shankara”
6. Paras – “Ālāvadennālo”
7. Madhyamāvathi - “Sundaranandakumāra”

Talas and Structure

All the songs of the Saptaratna and Pancharatna are set to Ādi tala and more or less have the same format consisting of a pallavi, anupallavi and several charanams to be sung with swara and sāhityam alternately. The charanams generally comprise of madhyamakāla sāhityam. A few of the kritis have an anchor charanam (a charanam from which each swara and sahitya of the secondary charanams would take off and land, rather than from the pallavi). The 3rd of the Pancharatnas and the 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th and 7th of the Saptaratnas have anchor charanams.

The Language

One of the Pancharatnas is composed in Samskritam (i.e., “Jagadānandakāraka”) and the rest are in Telugu. Whereas, Oothukkādu has chosen Tamil for the Paras Kriti “Ālāvadennālo” and Samskritam for the other six.

The Theme

While all his kritis are soulful, Sri Thyāgarāja has outclassed himself in his Pancharatnas where he is at his greatest and perhaps touched the pinnacle of Carnatic music. Jagadānandakāraka is a kriti with various descriptions and attributes of Lord Rama. In Dudukugala, Thyagaraja puts himself in the place of a sinner and finally takes refuge in Lord Rama. Sādhinchene has been carved out in

a language full of liberty, teasing tone, metaphor and simile and brings out the greatness of the Lord in a lucid manner most enthusiastically. In Kanakanaruchira, the composer brings out the story of Dhruva, Hanuman and several other bhaktas and describes the sweetness of the Lord's grace on them. And lastly he describes the greatness of the devotees through the ages and pays his salutations in "Endaro mahānubhāvulu". While the theme of Thyagaraja's Pancharatnas mostly revolves around Lord Rāma (with an exception of "Endaro mahānubhāvulu"), Oothukkādu has offered incredible variety and colour in his Saptaratnas. He has composed no two songs with the same theme. The first pays tribute to great devotees, mythological and historical personalities such as Ānjaneya, Prahlāda, Nandi, Sanaka, Sanandana, Sugreeva, Mārkaṇḍeya, Vishṇavaite Azhwārs, Shaivaite Nayanmārs, Arunagirināthar, Purandaradāsa and Tulasidāsa. (The theme of this kriti is similar to that of "Endaro" of Thyagaraja.) The second ratna is an outstanding piece on Lord Vishnu. The third is a unique and special composition on Rādhā, the beloved of Lord Krishna. The beauty and charm of Krishna and his music is the theme of the fourth ratna. The fifth kriti has Lord Shiva as its theme and describes the five faces of Shiva, his instruments and his several epical episodes. While the sixth brings to light the heroes of "Periya Purānam" i.e., the 63 nayanmārs (this being the only composition in Indian Music that salutes each of the 63 saints by name), in the seventh, Oothukkādu describes Lord Krishna and gives him the eight offerings such as arghyam, pādyam, deepam, dhoopam, etc, in each of the charanams.

These Saptaratnas and Pancharatnas put together are classic masterpieces which the world of Carnatic Music will cherish for the generations to come. With their unmatched grandeur, they bring in a mood of meditative devotion of sublime nature which transcends words and feelings. Thus, it is appropriate to call them "Dwādasha Ratnas" of Carnatic Music.