

Appreciating Carnatic Music
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Lecture 1
Body of Music

(Music Starts: 00:20) (Music Ends: 03:14)

Namaste. I am happy to welcome you to this course on Appreciating Carnatic Music. We are here in the beautiful campus of IIT Madras, in the Durga Peeliaamman Temple which is, which has its unique ambience situated on a small hillock as it were. The song you just heard “Nadha thanum anisham shankaram namami manasa sirasa”. This is a well known composition in Carnatic Music. Many things can be said about this composition.

First of all that it is a kriti. Kriti is a kind of composition in Carnatic Music. We can also say that this krithi was composed by Tyagaraja an eighteenth century poet composer, “Vaggeyakara” as we called him. We can say that this composition was in the rAga Chittaranjani. Chittaranjani, as a rAga, has certain unique features to it. We can also say that the composition is in Adi tAla and the graha or the eduppu is half mAttrA into the tAla cycle.

We can say all this in much more about compositions such as this. We talk about all these concepts during this course and hopefully at the end of this course you will be comfortable with such descriptions.

At the level of the text of the composition, it should be obvious to most Indians at least that it is in the language Sanskrit. And it is in praise - it is addressed to Lord Shiva as Shankara - nAda tanum anisham shankaram namAmi”.

It is interesting that Tyagaraja refers to Shiva Shankara as “NAda tanu”, “tanu” means body. “NAda” while it is a very difficult word to translate because it is laden with metaphysical, mystical connotations; it is an esoteric concept almost. For our purposes, “nAda” can be translated as musical sound. So, to call Shiva as “nAda tanu” means calling him the embodied musical sound.

I chose to begin our course with this composition partly in keeping with an ancient tradition of beginning any new venture with a prayer. And this song, this kriti, is particularly apt because it is in praise of Shiva as the embodiment of nAda or musical sound.

It is also significant and interesting that the composition, these concepts in the composition echo similar ideas, similar concepts found across centuries, across the country. From Kalidasa to Abhinava Gupta, the tenth century Kashmiri philosopher, aesthetician, to Saranga Deva the twelfth century, musicologist. In fact, Saranga Deva, who also was Kashmiri origin, but lived in the Deccan, Deccan region. Saranga Deva, in his very very famous work “Sangeetha Ratnakara”, he begins this work with a Mangalacharan with a prayer in which he uses almost the same terms. The last line of the Mangalacharan of Saranga Deva in Sangeetha Ratnakara is “vande nAda tanum tamudhurajagadgItam mude shankaram.”

And it is interesting that six centuries later in Tanjavur Tyagaraja uses almost the same, identical expressions, “nAda tanum anisham shankaram namAmi”. Such ideas and such concepts were transmitted through a process of osmosis. Because there is no evidence to suggest that Tyagaraja actually had read the Sangeetha Ratnakara or any of Abhinav Gupta’s works.

The other reason that I thought this composition is a good starting point for us is that there is an explicit reference to the saptaswaras, the seven notes. (Singing Starts: 8:23) (Singing Ends: 8:32). And it is with these saptaswaras the seven notes that our journey begins.

What is the basic working material for a musician? For a painter, for instance, it is colors, lines; for a poet, it is words, sentences; for a sculptor, it is, it could be stones or wood; for an architect, it could be bricks; for a musician, yes, it is notes or swaras. It has been observed by many and rightly so that as far as musical material goes, these swaras, these notes, these find use only in the activity of music, unlike the material of other art forms.

For instance, a poet uses words; but a non-poet like, for instance I, I am also using words; but this is not a poetic activity. We use stones for other purposes than sculpting; but swaras, notes are

used only for music making. So as far as material goes, musical material is unique to music. This is an interesting aspect of the art of music.

And it is these seven swaras that form the basis for the bewildering variety of music that form the music that we hear today; whether it is the music of M.S. Subbulakshmi or Bhimsen Joshi or Pavarotti. Whether it is Rahman's Jai Ho or Adele's Sky fall; all this variety of music that we hear today - all of it stems from just these seven swaras. And this variety is due to the difference in how these notes are treated, how they are handled. Sure, there are other factors that make for the difference between different genres of music. Rhythm, for instance, plays a very important part in the identity of a musical genre. But, certainly, in stylized musical forms like Carnatic or Hindustani music or Opera music, it is the handling of the notes that is fundamentally responsible for the identity of that musical form.

More about this musical material, the swaras, in our next.