

Appreciating Carnatic Music
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Lecture - 08

Lecture title: Understanding RAga - 1 (RAga & Swara)

So, we have been talking about rAga, what then is a RAga?

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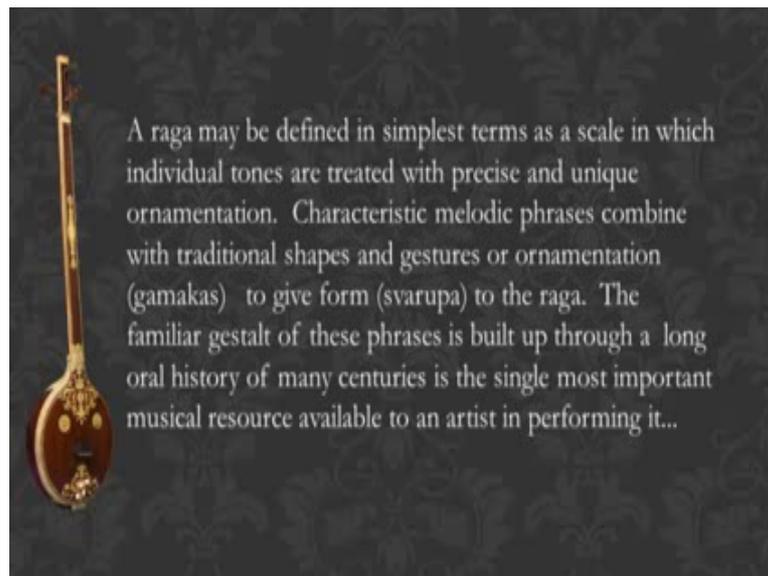


RAga, very briefly stated is an abstract entity, it is an abstract entity, it can be seen as providing a frame work that sets the bounds for melody making. It both enables melody making, it also restrains it. So given a certain rAga, say [Ananda Bhairavi](#), some melodies are possible within it – it offers a scope for certain melodies, some other kinds of melodies are not possible within it. There are many rAGas in Carnatic music today, hundreds of them in actual practice and many more exist as possibilities.

Let us look at a fundamental question, how does one create a melody? How does one create a tune? Not everybody can, obviously. Anybody can hum a little tune. But to create a melody which makes an impact on a whole population, that is not trivial. I recently learnt that, the melody of Beethoven famous work “Ode To Joy”, that melody, that melodic line was something - it is a very famous piece - and that melodic line apparently took him twenty years to perfect. He had been working on it for twenty years and it took that long for him to perfect.

Ragas are a source of melody, but melody of a very special kind. Let us try to understand raga. A good point to start this exercise of trying to understand, what a raga would be with what eminent musician T. Viswanathan has to say about it. T. Viswanathan belonged to a very respected family of musicians and a family of traditional musicians. He taught at Wesleyan University in Connecticut for many years. T. Viswanathan has this to say about raga.

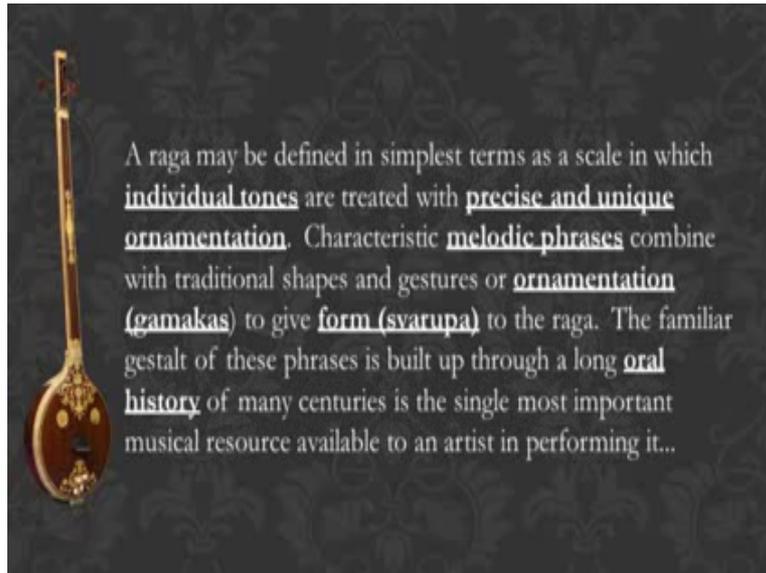
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A raga may be defined in simplest terms as a scale, in which individual tones are treated with precise and unique ornamentation. Characteristic melodic phrases combine with traditional shapes and gestures or ornamentation, which is called gamaka, to give form to the raga - the svarupa to the raga. The familiar gestalt of these phrases is built up through a long history of many centuries and is the single most important musical resource available to an artist in grasping the raga and performing it.

That was T. Viswanathan on raga. There are few key words here.

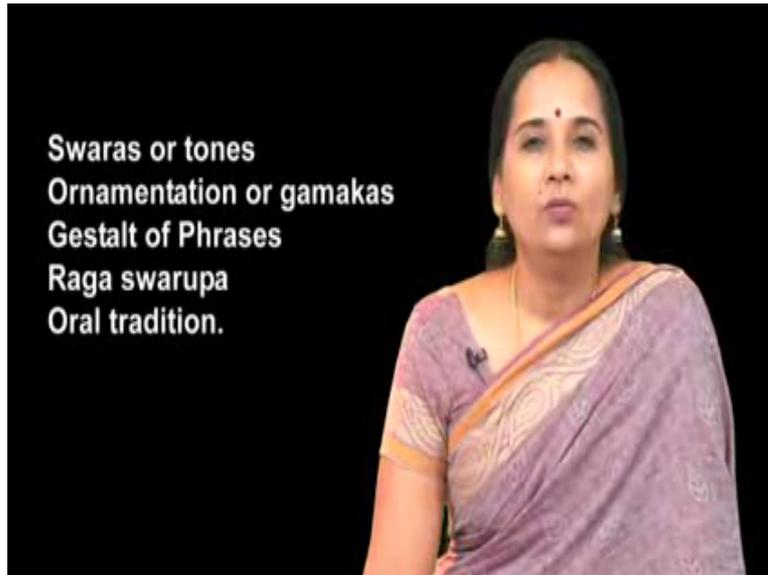
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The key words then are, tones or swaras, ornamentation or gamakas, melodic phrases, rAga svarupa, gestalt of phrases and oral tradition. We will take up one by one each of these key words and try to explore this. Before going on to the first keyword it is important also to note, what words are not used here. Now rAga is a word that is bandied about it, its very... everybody has almost has heard of it and there are many things that it is translated into. RAga is sometimes called a tune, rAga is called a scale.

It is important to notice that in this definition it is not equated with a scale. There is a scale that is associated with every rAga - that is true. But a rAga is not identical with the scale- there is much more to it. It is not a tune, it is not a single line of melody and it is not a song. RAga exists as a possibility for creating many tunes, many melodies or many songs and it is associated with the scale but it is much more than a scale. Now let us take up first of these keywords.

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It is swara-s or tones, T. Viswanathan has said it is defined in simplest terms as a scale in which individual tones are treated with precise and unique ornamentation. So, it is a scale with specific tones, specific swara-s in it. Now swaras form the skeleton of a rAga as it were. The bare skeleton of the rAga is provided by the swaras. An important and very fundamental feature of a rAga is that, it permits certain swaras, certain notes and does not permit some other swaras.

So equally, it includes a set of swaras and excludes the others. And those swaras which are excluded are completely excluded. You cannot use any of the excluded swara just for effect here and there, that is not permitted in classical music. Now let us take a simple and very familiar rAga, the rAga Mohanam. Mohanam has a scale that finds presence in other musical traditions of the world to Chinese music notably has a great use for this scale. Mohanam is heavily used in other genres of Indian music such as film music and religious music.

The corresponding rAga to Mohanam in Hindustani musical tradition is called Bhoopali or Deshkar there are two rAGas that correspond to Mohanam. Mohanam sounds something like this, let me take my adhara shadja and I will show you (Singing Starts: 07:39) (Singing Ends: 07:52). The swaras are what I just sang (Singing Starts: 07:58) (Singing Ends: 08:03). In this you have the scale laid out in front of you, the scale of Mohanam is (Singing Starts: 08:12) (Singing Ends: 08:19).

This is the bare skeleton of Mohanam and how do you flesh it out? (Singing Starts: 08:26) (Singing Ends: 09:03). Thought I'm mentioning the swaras here, we never sing with the

swaras, except in the case of a particular kind of improvisation called swara prastara. When we sing a rAga AlApanA creating melodies (Singing Starts: 09:20) (Singing Ends: 09:23).

We are talking about how we are creating melodies with say five swaras of Mohanam. (Singing Starts: 09:31) (Singing Ends: 12:35). So with just, with a set of five notes, so many melodies are possible in the stylized way of Carnatic music. As I said (Singing Starts: 12:48) (Singing Ends: 12:55) these are the swaras.

When you sing Mohanam you cannot sing, (Singing Starts: 12:59) (Singing Ends: 13:01) Ma is a swara which does not occur in Mohanam, it cannot be used ever (Singing Starts: 13:06) (Singing Ends: 13:11) You cannot say (Singing Starts: 13:12) (Singing Ends: 13:14). You cannot sing that. Then you have destroyed the rAga.

These are very, what may be called obvious swaras that cannot be included. But there are subtle movements that not be included. Now just to demonstrate, how a single note can make a lot of difference (Singing Starts: 13:39) (Singing Ends: 13:48). This is a song all of you must have heard, A. R. Rahman's take presentation of vande mataram (Singing Starts: 14:00) (Singing Ends: 13:05).

Suppose I would sing like this, (Singing Starts: 14:07) (Singing Ends: 14:18). all I have done is both times, I have sung (Singing Starts: 14:24) (Singing Ends: 14:26) the same thing but the second time what I did was (Singing Starts: 14:29) (Singing Ends: 14:31) the ga, I have used the other variant of ga, and it will create a completely different mood (Singing Starts: 14:41) (Singing Ends: 14:43). This has a brightness to it, whereas (Singing Starts: 14:46) (Singing Ends: 14:48), it has a slight moroseness and a slight touch of pathos in it.

So, just one single note can make this difference. And RAgas as we will see, rAgas are essentially associated with moods. They are supposed to evoke moods and this happens to large extent because of the swaras that are used.

Now let us listen to Mohanam, rendered by Dr R.S. Jayalakshmi in concert for our course with L. Subramanian providing percussive support on the Mridangam. Sit back and enjoy this. In our next session, we will take a detailed look at ornamentation or gamakas which is a very crucial aspect of Carnatic music

(Music Starts: 15:58) (Music Ends: 27:45)