

Dr. N. Ramanathan answers questions
that may be asked by the serious rasika.



Musical forms

Every musical piece is said to belong to a form. Thus the primary aspect of music is the musical form. In south Indian art music, the musical forms are of two kinds — kalpita (composed) and manodharma (improvised or creative).

Kalpita sangitam refers to forms already composed or music whose shape is pre-determined and is learnt and rendered aesthetically. Manodharma, on the other hand, refers to the forms for which the manner or method of shaping is pre-determined but the actual shaping gets done only during the performance. However both manodharma and kalpita require a very high level of training in music requiring deep knowledge of the sancharas or the characteristic phrases in ragas, their proper rendering of laya and tala.

Manodharma is denoted by the term, ‘improvisation’. Some people refer to it as spontaneous or as extempore music. Whether the music is manodharma or kalpita, the presentation must be primarily musical, a pleasing concordance of sound. Whether it is an alapana or a keertana, it must be music first. Thus manodharma need not be considered superior to kalpita. Both require as much training and practice and should be equally beautiful when rendered.

Manodharma

In present day south Indian music, manodharma has four channels or four musical forms under it. They are - alapana, tanam, niraval and kalpanaswaram. For each of these forms, the basic form or structure is defined. However it must be understood that our textbooks still do not prescribe the structures for tanam, niraval and kalpanaswaram.

Alapana

The form generally described for alapana in our textbooks, in terms of such stages as akshiptika, ragavardhani and vidari, does not seem to reflect the contemporary practice in concerts. Further today there appears to be an absence of a formal procedure for the rendering of alapana. Not all alapana is very detailed. Sometimes an alapana is rendered for a duration of just one minute, sometimes for three minutes, sometimes seven and sometimes 15. Thus unless a full-fledged alapana is sung, it will not technically conform to art-music.

But then not all ragas provide the scope for performing a long alapana. It might be normally difficult to sing alapana for a duration longer than three minutes for ragas like Ahiri and Athana. We can perhaps sing an alapana in Bilahari, Begada or Dhanyasi raga for a longer duration. Bhairavi and Kambhoji might allow an elaborate alapana. Todi, Shanmukhapriya, Simhendramadhyamam, Kiravani and Madhyamavati perhaps allow the most extensive alapana. However mela-ragas, especially those like Latangi, Vachaspati, Gaurimanoohari and Charukesi might allow very extensive alapanabut the elaboration can be deceptive. This latter set of ragas does not have a very large number of typical, individual and characteristic ragasañcharas.

Thus art music would also have to take into account what kind of ragas are being used in the system. Although there are many ragas in our system, not all are of the same kind. A raga like Ahiri, Asaveri or Huseni has a number of characteristic phrases and even a single melodic phrase, using just three

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or four swaras, could suggest and reveal the image of the raga. But the raga may not allow the singing of decorative or alankara phrases, which are necessary for developing an alapana. These ragas are thus very restrictive when it comes to manodharma. Thus for manodharma, a ragamust have a large number of typical and characteristic phrases and also a fair amount of freedom to create alankara phrases.

A raga like Bhairavi or Kambhoji has a proper balance of raga-rañjaka prayogas and freedom for creating alañkara phrases. If we take a raga like Latangi or Charukesi we find that there are practically no other sampurna-janya ragas in those melas. In the absence of other ragas in a mela, this single raga could take any possible combination of swaras or phrases as characterising it. In other words, there would be total freedom to coin any phrase and yet not be outside the raga. In case of mela-ragas like Kharaharapriya, Harikambhoji and Malavagaula, there are a number of co-janya ragas in each of the respective parent melas and hence rendering any possible combination of swaras may result in a few phrases infringing into the territory of another co-janya raga. Hence mela-ragas like Latangi, Vachaspati, Gaurimanoohari and Charukesi can rarely be said to manifest their images when using swaras fewer than seven (except perhaps omitting sa/pa). Hence many of the melaragas except perhaps Sankarabharanam and Kalyani, are often regarded as ‘swarasthana-based’ ragas rather than sanchara-based ragas because in these ragas the swaras derive their image or swarupa from their respective swarasthanas and intervals. And in turn the ragas assume their image from all the swaras that constitute them rather

than from sancharas based on a few swaras.

Even ragas like Shanmukhapriya, Kiravani and Simhendramadhyamam were of this kind but in the course of the last one century or more, have developed a fairly rich image for themselves. In the case of Todi, although it is similar to Kalyani and Sankarabharanam it has acquired a greater potency because it has as many large number of phrases that omit panchama as there are phrases that incorporate panchama. In the earlier period Todi raga was devoid of panchama and later came to include it. Thus Todi, because of combining two raga images, one without 'pa' and the other with 'pa', has acquired a very large potency for itself.

Thus in art-music, alapana and the other manodharma forms have to be elaborately developed and the extent of elaboration would depend on the kind of raga chosen. In addition the alapana has to be rendered in all three layas, vilambita, madhya and druta. In modern times, rendering of alapana in vilambita laya is rather rare. But the requirement of art music is that phrases in all three layas should be present in the development of an alapana.

Tanam

Tanam primarily signifies 'madhyama-kalam' and thus it should be rendered in this tempo. It requires singing or playing of melodic phrases using syllables like 'ta' and 'nam'. The phrases should reflect different rhythmic formations as contrasted with alapana, which has no pronounced rhythm. Further the tanam should have profusion of consonants with very little vowel extensions as contrasted with alapana, which should be dominated by vowels with sparse use of consonants.

Niraval and kalpanaswaram

Niraval and kalpanaswaram, in the early 20th century and earlier, appear to have only formed a part of pallavi singing. Performing niraval and kalpanaswaram

for keertanas or kritis appears to have been a development of the 20th century. Singing niraval to oru-kalai (eka-kala) talas would not provide sufficient scope for melodic variation and elaboration. This is so because in oru-kalai talas, the syllables of the text are placed at very close proximity. There would be very little space available for introducing melodic variations or swara changes. In rendu-kalai keertanas or in rendu-kalai pallavis the number of syllables would be same as in a keertana in oru-kalai but the tala-avarta in rendu-kalai would take double the duration or have a longer time span. This would provide a long time duration between two syllables and thus allow for introducing variety in the melodic material. Thus rendu-kalai talas would allow heavier melodic material and variation in them and would thus provide a good base for niraval and kalpanaswaram of a level that would rise up to art music. In fact, a pallavi of nalu-kalai would provide the ideal platform for rendering niraval and kalpanaswaram of the level of real art music. This is because a Pallavi in a tala in vilambita laya will have the same number of syllables (aksaras) as the one set in oru-kalai or rendu-kalai. And hence the same number of syllables when set in a nalu-kalai would be well spread out to provide scope for melodic variations. In a vilambita tala there would be facility for singing in all three kalams, first, second and third, but in a madhya or druta kala musical piece, this possibility is not there. In other words in a madhyama-kalam musical piece one can render Niraval and Kalpanaswaram only in madhyama and druta kalams and not in vilambita-kalams.

Niraval singing too has to be spread over three sthayis. Quite often niraval is seen to focus more in the upper tetrachord of the madhyasthayi and in the tarasthayi. But as mentioned earlier, in art music, performance of all forms should cover all the three sthayis as long it is permissible by the ragaon which it is based. For instance, ragas like Anandabhairavi, Saranga, Pantuvarali, Khamas and Harikambhoji do not allow melodic movements in the

mandrasthayi or below nishada in the mandrasthayi.

Niraval and kalpanaswaram are rendered within the framework of tala and hence they have to exhibit the basic rhythm, namely, two swaras per beat in the first kalam and four swaras per beat in the second kalam, or else, four swaras per beat in the first kalam and eight swaras per beat in the second kalam. However in the first kalam the melodic flow is more fluid and sometimes the melody assumes the flow akin to that of an alapana. For this, towards the end of the first-kalam Niraval, a 'sama-kalam' rendering is performed in some music styles. This is done to exhibit the rhythmic format of first kalam that would project two swaras per beat/ four swaras per beat.

Sometimes while doing kalpanaswaram in an alapana-tanam-pallavi, there is the practice of rendering swaram in other ragas referred to as ragamalika swaram. This might help to provide relief or a change from the musical intensity that the pallavi singing has created. But as pallavi singing is primarily directed towards a musical exposition based on a single raga, singing of ragamalika swaram does lighten the seriousness that art music is associated with.

As mentioned earlier, art music requires that manodharma be performed with discipline and in a formal manner without slackness and casual approach. Thus the raga for which manodharma is rendered should be respected and the various forms, alapanashould be elaborately rendered, spread over all three sthayis and using all three kalams.

To sum up this note on manodharma forms, we see that while tanam and kalpanaswaram provide dense organization of syllables or consonants, alapana and niraval have both large vowel extensions as well as stressed akara syllables resembling dense syllabic organisation (as in fast akara phrases seen in the 'sthayi' of alapana and second kalam niraval).