

Interesting tidbits on Carnatic ragas

Lakshman Ragde

Many years ago, when I was asked to write an article on ragas, I was unsure of what I was going to write about the topic. I did not want to deal with the technical aspects since I am not trained in music. Then I decided to analyse a database of ragas and songs and came up with some interesting information that is not readily available to music lovers. The following is the updated version of the article.

My source is a compilation of 7450 ragas (of which only about 400 are in current usage) gathered from several books. Most rasikas know that there are 72 melakartas (parent scales) in Carnatic music. Each one of these scales has all the notes of the octave and they differ from each other by at least one note of a different pitch. From these are born the janya ragas (derived scales) classified as triswari (three notes), chatuswari (four notes), audava (five notes), shadava (six notes), sampoorana (seven notes) or a combination of these in the aroha (ascending) and avaroha (descending) notes known as vakra ragas.

Composing songs in all of the 72 melakartas is no easy task. Only a handful of people have done it: Belakavadi Krishna Iyer, Muthuswami Dikshitar (asampoorana mela), Kotiswara Iyer, C. Rangiah, Bangalore S. Mukund, Dokka Sriramulu, Padma Viraraghavan, Ashok R. Madhav, D. Pattammal, Nallan Chakravarthi Murthy, Kadalur Subramaniam, M. Balamuralikrishna, Yazhpanam Veeramani Iyer, Vina Shivaramiah, Venuganam Hariharan, R.K. Padmanabha, Shuddhananda Bharati, R.K. Suryanarayana, Lavani

Venkata Rao, Madokaram Prashanth Iyengar, Rukmini Sivakumar, Prof. S. Visweshvaran and Suvarna Nalapat.

Musicologists generally believe that, in order to properly delineate a raga, to bring out its characteristics and at the same time be pleasing to the ear, it must have at least five notes. Surprisingly, there are over 85 of these that have only four notes in arohana and four in avarohana. The well-known musician and composer Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna has come up with two of these called Lavangi and Mahati and he has composed a song in each. There may

not be any compositions available in the others.

I found two ragas with only three notes. These are Omkari and Svayambhuswara.

Now, a look at the janya ragas reveals some interesting results. Mela ragas Harikambhoji, Kharaharapriya, Mayamalavagaula, Sankarabharanam and Natabhairavi lead the list with more than 400 derived ragas each. After this there is a steep drop in numbers. In the list below, the number indicates the number of the janya ragas.

528 (Harikambhoji), 510 (Kharaharapriya), 470 (Mayamalavagaula), 479 (Sankarabharanam),

407 (Natabhairavi), 230 (Vachaspati), 207 (Kalyani), 195 (Todi), 163 (Chakravakam), 140 (Natakapriya),

140 (Sooryakantam), 148 (Sarasangi), 128 (Vakulabharanam), 153 (Kamavardhini), 126 (Latangi),

117 (Keeravani), 115 (Subhapantharali), 107 (Simhendramadhyamam), 105 (Dharmavati), 103 (Dhenuka), 103 (Gamanasrama), 102 (Ramapriya), 99 (Suvarnangi), 97 (Charukesi), 95 (Bhavapriya), 94 (Shanmukhapriya), 94 (Hemavati), 83 (Gaurimanohari), 86 (Shadvidhamargini), 85 (Kokilapriya), 82 (Rishabhapriya), 80 (Namanarayani), 78 (Tanaroopi), 74 (Gayakapriya), 72 (Jhalavarali),

70 (Kanakangi), 68 (Salaga), 65 (Chalanata), 58 (Raghupriya), 57 (Gavambodhi), 57 (Divyamati),

54 (Mararanjani), 52 (Shyamalangi), 52 (Varunapriya), 51 (Senavati), 50 (Pavani), 48 (Jhankaradhwani), 47 (Vagadeeswari), 45 (Ganamooriti), 45 (Soolini), 45 (Viswambari), 44 (Yagapriya), 44 (Ragavardhini),

44 (Dhavalambari), 42 (Naganandini), 43 (Gangeyabhooshani), 43 (Vanapati), 42 (Dhatuvardhani),

40 (Manavati), 40 (Navaneeta), 40 (Hatakambari), 40 (Kantamani), 39 (Jhalavarali), 37 (Ratnangi),

37 (Chitrambari), 36 (Jalarnava), 36 (Nasikabhooshani), 36 (Rasikapriya), 34 (Sucharitra), 34 (Jyotiswaroopini), 27 (Roopavati), 24 (Kosala).

Now let us look at the ragas in terms of the popularity with the composers. I used a database of 65,600 songs (by over 400 composers) to compile the list. There are no real surprises here. Even Varali, a raga that some believe should not be formally taught to a student by a teacher (and risk bad feelings), looks like it is quite popular. Here is the list.

Sankarabharanam 1997, Kambhoji 1633, Mukhari 1435, Bhairavi 1349, Kalyani 1322, Todi 1201, Ragamalika 1113, Mohanam 1096, Sree 988, Nadanamakriya 938, Anandabhairavi 919, Madhyamavati 896, Varali 793, Dhanyasi 766, Kamavardhini 760, Kedaragaula 748, Saveri 720, Saurashtra 678, Khamas 658, Surayi 648, Kharaharapriya 605, Bilahari 500, Nata 611, Athana 556, Arabhi 551, Poorvikalyani 530, Begada 523, Kanada 521, Yadukulakambhoji 486, Sahana 475, Hamsadhvani 409.

There are many, many ragas where only a single composition is available in each (so far). The total is around 700.

There are hundreds and hundreds of ragas for which compositions are just waiting to be written.

There are 4175 songs that have no raga specified, there are 4202 songs that have no composer's name listed!

There are a number of ragas that have been adapted by Carnatic music from Hindustani music. Some of the well known ones are: Behag, Hameerkalyani, Brindavanasaranga, Dwijavanti, Ahirbhairav, Madhuvanti, Desh, Chandrakauns, Mand, Gavati, Peelu, Bagesree, Yamunakalyani, Basantbahar and a few more.

Hindustani music also has borrowed from the south. Ragas like Hamsadhvani, Arabhi, Charukesi, Simhendramadhyamam, Malayamarutam, Vachaspati, Saraswati and Keeravani have become quite popular. New ragas are being formulated, Ayodhya

by Chitravina Ravikiran being an example. Many of these have Tamil names.

Thus Carnatic music is a vibrant and

exciting art form, gaining more and more followers all over the world, especially in the north American continent. ■

Lakshman Ragde

Lakshman Ragde is an ardent Carnatic music rasika who has compiled encyclopedic information on Carnatic music compositions. He has been generous in sharing lyrics for various compositions with Carnatic music lovers, musicians and students of music for almost fifty years. When a music aficionado is looking for lyrics to a specific composition on the internet, Lakshman's name is bound to come up often. If more information is needed on a composition, Lakshman is often able to provide it in the shortest possible time. He has been working tirelessly to help people without seeking any monetary gains.

Lakshman started collecting information on compositions, ragas and composers from different sources over time. As we know, Carnatic music songs have been composed in various languages such as Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam. Lakshman has transliterated them into English script as per ITRANS standards and has been sharing them with anyone in need free of cost and with no expectations. He has been adding more and more entries to his database over the years. By 1986 he had collected enough material to compile the printed book *Alphabetical Index of Karnatak songs* with about 18,000 entries. Since then, his collection has grown to over 35,000 entries, covering close to 1100 composers. Music lovers the world over regularly send him requests for additional details of the compositions in his collection, especially lyrics, ragas, composer names, and even notations.

Lakshman has received a grant in aid (2 lakhs rupees) from the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi. He has published a few compendiums, including

◆ The ultimate index of 34,000 songs,



◆ Alphabetical index of Carnatic songs,

◆ Pancharatna kritis of Tyagaraja with meanings and notations,

◆ Second edition with updated information of alphabetical index of Carnatic songs with more than 55,000 entries

◆ Kritis of Tyagaraja with English text and diacritical marks

Lakshman has also put together two CDs containing details on more than 35,000 songs. He has helped the music community at large by his selfless work. He is associated with several music websites, such as: www.rasikas.org, www.sangeethapriya.org, carnaticcorner.com

For his hard work, Lakshman has been recognised by several organisations. He received the Rasikapriya Award in 2007 from Sangeethapriya organisation, the Kala Seva Mani award from Cleveland Tyagaraja Aradhana in 2015, Community Service Award in 2016 from the India-Canada Association.

Born in Chennai, he worked as a teacher for several years before retiring, and lives at Kitchener, Ontario in Canada; he is 86 years young.

ASHOK MADHAV
(Composer and connoisseur of music)