Karnatak music

I would like to point out that certain statements made in the article are not correct ("The structure of Raga music" by R. Ramanna, Curr. Sci., 1995, 68, 897-916). Ramanna states that a change of tonic (Shrut) in a piece of Carnatic music is strictly forbidden. This certainly is not true and there are musicians, especially the most skilled and imaginative, who use tonic shifts (Shrut Bhedam) routinely in their concerts. Examples can be quoted from numerous concerts of Balasubramania Krishna and late Maharajapuram Santhanam and many others. This is done even in Carnatic instrumental music concerts. What is done is not a shift of the tuning of the Tanpura, but stressing the new Sa, which is actually any of the notes of the main raga, sufficiently to shift the mental tonic of the listener. It is also important to include the specific ornamentation of the derived raga as correct gamakas (which are in general different from the gamakas in the original raga) to get the desired effect. Simple examples are singing ragas like Hindola and Madhyamavati from Mohanam...

A mere shift of the tonic without including the correct gamakas to change ragas in Carnatic music is not practical except for those ragas in which the gamakas are simple, essentially those that could be played on a harmonium or any keyboard instrument, and even there the effect is momentary, in those passages where even the gamakas have some similarity. This aspect cannot be seen in the written notations where any consistent mapping which preserves intervals more or less accurately looks viable. However, there are rare situations where the listener may hear a raga which is different from what the singer sings! This happens because the actual tuning of the tanpura is on notes Sa, Pa and Sa, whereas what the listener hears is in the key of Ga. To have the desired effect, the tanpuraist would shift from Sa to Pa in the drone itself. Then what he will perceive would be the inverted raga (in the sense of raga generated with the first inverted shruti chord). This happens in those situations where the listener is familiar with the inverted raga and not the actual raga being sung. (I have heard it only in Hindustani music.)

Another important and controversial aspect which is touched upon (but elaborated only in the book) is the question of harmony in Indian music. R. Srinivasan in his review in the same issue has mentioned some of the practical difficulties in incorporating harmony while rendering Carnatic ragas. I merely want to stress the fact that harmony based on triads would be possible only in the obvious cases in which the raga has straightforward rendering without too many dynamical gamakas (roughly defined as modulations which blur the note in frequency all the way to the neighbouring notes, while stressing the main note itself. For example, many of the notes in Todi, combinations of Ma, Pa and Dha in Kalyani, Panthuvaram and derivatives, etc.) Todi would actually be very difficult in this respect with so many dynamical gamakas with the notes defined in a very impressionist way. But there are also many examples in which Indian musicians have tried out harmony with good success in raga which do not depend strongly on dynamic gamakas (e.g. parts of Mohanam and many pentatonic ragas). There is a popular LP record by Ramani and his students on flute where many harmonized passages are played very skilfully, for different ragas. Harmony has been tried out in many times in fusion music with a good Indian music component, and two-string harmony (may not really classify as harmony) has been tried by L. Shankar on some occasions (by recording twice over, playing his double violin) with pleasing effects. There are statements in the beginning of the article which seem to suggest that only very recently Carnatic music has come out of couts into concert halls and that transformation to hi-fi era has not taken place in India. This obviously cannot be right. In fact, everything in hi-fi including Dolby technology, CDs, good acoustics, etc., are all incorporated already in many prominent recording studios as well as concert halls dealing with Indian music. So the justification that the article aims to educate technologists and scientists on aspects which might help in this technology revolution is misplaced, and after reading the article I also felt that it really does not contribute in this aspect even if there was a need.

The listing of the historical events of importance to Carnatic music (Appendix I) includes the name of Swati Tirunal, mentioned as a Veena expert and not as a composer! Is it a slip or taking sides in the well-known controversy?

While introducing Ramanna's article, the editor had commented that 'probably, many scientists may feel that it is not an appropriate subject for Current Science'. Many scientists would not really have any objection to publishing an article on music when it pertains to a scientific analysis or study of scientific aspects of music. In fact, some of the greatest of physicists have spent considerable time on musical acoustics and related theory. What was disappointing in the article was the way irrelevant information was included as transcripts of all the Melakarta ragas in western notation. This straightforward mapping, once the notation is established, should have been left as 'exercise' if anybody was interested in generating the full list.

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Raja Ramanna's article fails to communicate and is thoroughly misleading.

In Part I of the article, an unsuccessful attempt is made to explain the notation used in Western music. As I could not follow it and as I have no knowledge of it myself, I refrain from commenting on what is presented in terms of that notation. As regards the rest of Part I, I say, without reservation, that it does not convey anything to the reader. In Part II of the article, there is a description of what the author considers to be the salient features of a typical Karnatak music concert. When one reads through it, one is amazed by its divergence from reality. For instance, mention is made of flutists playing accompaniment to vocal musicians in Karnatak music concerts. I regularly go to music concerts and, on the average, I have attended fifteen to
twenty concerts per year during the last fifty years and more. Not once have I found a flutist accompanying a vocalist.

Coming to percussion instruments played in Karnataka music concerts, mention is first made of Tabla which is seldom used in Karnataka music, and of morching which is rarely used. But the more commonly used Ghata and Kanjira do not find a mention anywhere.

While dealing with alapana it is stated that 'more often than not, the percussion instruments are silent during alapana as it does not always have a tala structure'. It means that alapana has sometimes a 'tala structure', and on such occasions, percussion instruments are played. This is ludicrous, to say the least. An incorrect statement is also made about tani avarthanam: 'it may or may not be supported by other instrumentalists'. What sort of tani avarthanam is it if it 'is supported' by a non-percussion instrumentalist?

'After completing the “statement” of pallavi and anupallavi,' according to the author, 'the main musician takes on elaboration of the two themes in which new forces are brought in, such as Kalpana swaras'. Kalpana swaras being 'new forces' used to 'elaborate' pallavi is just absurd. Further, 'once pallavi and anupallavi is elaborated, there is a great degree of freedom for the performer for further elaboration swara-wise and talatwise'. Statements of this sort which challenge our capacity for comprehension are abundant in the article.

'Two ragas with identical Arohana and Avarohana and derived from the same Janya Mela may yet differ from each other', says the author. Pray, what is Janya Mela? It is common knowledge that the 72 Melakartha of Indian music are described as 'Sampurna raga' because each of them have all the seven swaras in the order of their frequencies both in Arohana and Avarohana. They can also be called Janaka raga because all the other ragas are derived from them. The derived ragas are Janya ragas. From this it is evident that Janya Mela is a contradiction in terms and so is meaningless. The context, however, suggests that Melakartha is meant and not Janya Mela.

As an instance of the above statement Arabbhi and Samsa are mentioned as two ragas with identical Arohana and Avarohana and derived from the same Melakartha. It is just not true. Arabbhi is a derivative of Dherashankarabharana and Samsa of Harikambhoji. Their Arohana and Avarohana are also different.

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Raja Ramanna replies

I do not know the status of Lakshmana Rao as a musician and therefore if he is disappointed and thinks that there is nothing in my article, it cannot be quite correct because many of the things I have mentioned are based on well-known books on Karnataka music.

It is a pity, as Rao himself says that he does not know staff notations and therefore is unable to understand the comments made using these notations, and yet says that there is nothing in them. The article is written to make it comprehensible to the practitioners and scholars of western music as well as Indian counterparts. It has been necessary to do it through staff notation. Perhaps, the best thing for him to do, I feel, is to learn staff notation and then make his comments. A. M. Chinnasamy Mudaliar (1895), P. Sambamurthy and H. P. Krishna Rao of Mysore, etc. knew western notation and used it.

About the other points, The term Karnataka music concert has been used in a broad sense. In the music team of a Bharata Natyam performance, for instance, one can see the flute functioning as a support to the vocalist. According to some old timers, before the advent of the Violin, Veena and or the Flute were the supporting instruments in any vocal recital. Many old timers in Mysore city are familiar with the flutist M. Venkatasesh Iyengar (father of Doreswamy Iyengar) supporting Venkatagirirajappa in the Veena recitals. In recent times M. Balamurali- krishna has given many concerts with Flute support.

Regarding the use of Tabla in Kannatic music, any old timer in Mysore city will vouchsafe the fact that it was the Tabla (not Mrudangam) which was the accompanying talavyada in the music concerts before the Mrudangam appeared on the scene in the 1920s. It was similar in Bangalore city. About the absence of mention of Ghhatam, Kanjira the relevant sentence in my article reads 'on his right side are placed percussion instruments like the Tabla, Mrudangam, Morching (Jews Harp), etc., covering other instruments instead of their detailed enumeration.'

About the alapana, Rao has laid emphasis on words 'more often than not' and draws his own sarcastic conclusion 'as if the alapana has some times a tala structure'. Here again, the use of the words alapana and tala are in a broader sense. Otherwise, how can one classify the alapana performed by ragaswaram where a person maintains a beat on the cymbals while the tavil also joins. I have had discussions with no less a person than Bangalore K. Venkataram, Director of the Percussive Arts Centre, Bangalore, about the tala structure in alapana. In fact, it was he who has suggested to me to include this particular aspect in my article. Janya instead of Janaka Mela is a typographical error.

Concerning other comments, answers can be found in Sambamurthy's volumes.

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