

Carnatic Music- Classification of Ragas

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, beginning this month, I will be spending a few segments on the various ways that *ragas* may be classified in Carnatic music. Before we delve further into the classification criterion, a brief recap of *ragas*, in general, follows.

Readers may remember from initial columns that a basic musical note is called a *swara* . Similar to other classical music systems, Carnatic music also has seven musical notes or *swaras*; however the position of these *swaras* is on a relative scale rather an absolute scale. The *saptaswaras* (seven notes) of Carnatic music are *sa ri ga ma pa da ni*. For a given *sruthi* (pitch), the *sa* and *pa* notes are a constant. The other *swaras* (*ri ga ma da ni*) all have variations, which results in the expansion of seven notes into twelve on the musical scale. A combination of *swaras* strung together in a pattern capable of pleasing the ear constitutes a *raga* (melody). Depending on the pattern and the *swara* combinations in the pattern, the resulting *raga* is different and has a different name.

Perhaps, the most commonly heard classification of *ragas* is that of *melakartha* or *janaka* (parent) ragas and *janya* (child) ragas. A *raga* is considered to be a *melakartha raga* only when it has all the seven notes in its scale and in order, in both the *arohanam* (ascending scale) and *avarohanam* (descending scale) and with the same frequency. The combination of the various *swarams* thus arranged gives rise to a total of 72 *melakartha ragas*. Examples of *melakartha ragas* include Mayamalavagowla, Kalyani, Shankarabharana and Kharaharapriya among others. The *raga* Bhairavi is not considered as a *mela raga*, even though it has all seven notes, since it takes one kind of *dhaivata (da) swaram* in the *arohanam* and another kind of *dhaivatha (da) swaram* in the *avarohanam*.

Any *raga* which does not conform to the *melakartha* structure is considered as a *janya raga*. While the number of *melakartha ragas* is fixed at 72, given the rules that it has to adhere to, numerous *janya ragas* are born by varying the ascending and descending scales and by adding or subtracting one or more notes in the ascending or descending scale. Examples of *janya ragas* include Hamsadhwani, Bilahari, Mohana and Arabhi among others. Each *janya raga* is ascribed to a *melakartha raga*- the process of associating a *janya raga* with a specific *melakartha raga* merits a separate discussion, which I shall address at a later date.

Till we meet next time, do try and listen to some of the *mela ragas* and *janya ragas* that I have mentioned- audio samples for these can easily be found on the Internet.

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