

Carnatic Music- Thyagaraja Aradhana

By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, I'd like to wish you a happy, peaceful, prosperous and musical New Year 2014! The ringing in of the New Year brings with it one of the most famous annual Carnatic music festivals viz. the "Thyagaraja Aradhana" held in Thiruvaiyaru, Tamil Nadu. The "Thyagaraja Aradhana" festival occurs sometime during the months of January or February, depending on when the "Pushya Bahula Panchami" day occurs each year, as this is the day that the great composer saint Sri. Thyagaraja attained *Samadhi* (passed on).

Thyagaraja (1767-1847) was one of the greatest composers in Carnatic music. Along with Sri. Muthuswami Dikshitar and Sri. Shyama Shastri, they formed the Trinity of Carnatic music. Sri. Thyagaraja was an extremely prolific composer- of the 24,000 compositions attributed to him, only about 700-800 are available to us today. Among the many great compositions by Thyagaraja, perhaps none is more famous than the set of *Pancharatna krithis*, which literally translates to five (*pancha*) gems (*ratna*). These *krithis* are composed in the *Ghana ragas* - Nata, Gowlai, Arabhi, Varali and Sri. Each of these compositions has both *swara* passages and corresponding *sahithya* and beautifully brings out the essence of the *raga* in which it has been composed.

The *aradhana* at Thiruvaiyaru was initially started by Thyagraja's disciples to commemorate the day that he attained *Samadhi*. Over the course of time, disagreements set in and two rival factions emerged to organize the *aradhana* with musicians aligning themselves with either of the competing groups. Unfortunately, women were not allowed to perform at the *aradhana*.

Bangalore Nagarathnamma (1878-1952), the daughter of a very successful lawyer could trace her musical lineage to the composer saint Thyagaraja. She not only performed concerts but also gave discourses in Kannada, Tamil and Sanskrit. Nagarathnamma had a dream in which she was charged with the responsibility of building a memorial to saint Thyagaraja in Thiruvaiyaru. In line with this vision, she set aside proceeds from her concerts and built a temple around the *samadhi* of saint Thyagaraja. She was also responsible for the unified celebration of Thyagaraja *aradhana* in Thiruvaiyaru. Despite Nagarathnamma's efforts that led to the development of the shrine for Sri Thyagaraja, she was not allowed to perform during the *aradhana* since she was a woman! Nagarathnamma then started a women's faction that performed its festivities separately. This continued till 1940 when women were also allowed to perform on stage at the *aradhana*.

Today, the who's who of Carnatic music gathers together at Thiruvaiyaru to pay homage to the great saint Thyagaraja on the *aradhana* day. The *Pancharatna krithis* are sung in unison and it is a treat to listen to hundreds of vocalists, instrumentalists and percussionists performing in unison, paying their tribute to Sri. Thyagaraja. This event is routinely broadcast on the television, radio and the Internet.

Till we meet next time, do listen to the broadcast of the "Thyagaraja Aradhana" online on January 21st, 2014 - you should be able to easily find a website that carries a live broadcast.

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