

Basic Principles of Carnatic Music – Part II

By Smitha K. Prasad

Last month, we took a brief look at some of the basic tenets of Carnatic music viz. *sruthi*, *swara* and *raga*. This month we will continue our learning of the remaining tenet of Carnatic music (*tala*) and take a more detailed look at the concept of *swaras* (notes) and how different *ragas* (melodies) arise as a result of *swara* combinations.

Tala

Tala refers to the rhythm component in Carnatic music. A *tala* is made up of a specific number of beats, which constitutes one cycle of the *tala*. Some of the popular *talas* in Carnatic music include *Adi Tala* (8 beat cycle), *Rupaka Tala* (6 beat cycle), *Atta Tala* (14 beat cycle). A Carnatic music composition is set to a particular *tala* and this typically does not change during the composition.

In any *kutcheri* (concert), the vocalist or instrumentalist is supported by a percussionist who provides the *tala* (rhythm). The main percussion instrument used in Carnatic music is the *mridangam* (a double-sided drum). Other percussion instruments seen in *kutcheris* include *ghatam* (an earthenware pot made specifically to be played as an instrument), *khanjira* (frame drum) and *morsing* (a metallic instrument). Most of the percussion instruments have to be tuned to the *sruthi* of the vocalist or instrumentalist.

Swara and Raga

After an introduction in the last issue, we continue our discussion on *swaras* and *ragas* in more detail. The seven *swaras* in Carnatic music - *sa ri ga ma pa dha ni*- can be likened to the Western scale- do re mi fa so la ti. *Sa* and *pa* are called the drone notes and are constant for a particular *sruthi*. From an introductory perspective, it is sufficient to understand that the remaining notes *ri ga ma dha ni* have 2 basic variations each. Think of this in terms of a keyboard (piano) where you have black keys that represent semi-tones in between the white notes. As a result of these variations, there are a total of 12 *swaras* that originate from the initial 7 *swaras*.

With the different variations in *swaras* available, a number of *ragas* (melodies) come about when the various *swaras* are strung together. A *raga* can have all 7 *swaras* in which case it is called a *melakartha* (main) *raga*. From these are derived the *janya* (child) *ragas* which may have a combination of fewer than the 7 *swaras*. Carnatic music has 72 *melakartha ragas* and innumerable *janya* (child) *ragas*.

With the sheer number of *ragas* that are used for Carnatic music compositions, it begets the question- how does one identify the *raga* of the composition being presented? *Raga* identification takes a lot of practice- mainly listening! Typically, one begins by associating the *raga* of a composition with one that has been previously heard. The *raga* repertoire gets built over time and soon *raga* identification becomes second nature. The artiste often announces some of the rare *ragas* that are presented in a *kutcheri* since it is not practical to expect the general audience to be familiar with the numerous *ragas* in existence.

Till we meet next time, do continue to listen to compositions in various *ragas*- this is the best way to build and enhance your *raga* knowledge. Being able to identify various *ragas* brings another layer of enjoyment to any Carnatic music *kutcheri*.

Smitha Prasad is a Carnatic vocalist based in Cary, NC and can be reached at smitha_prasad@hotmail.com