

Appreciating Carnatic Music
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Lecture – 31
Laya - Temporal Discipline in Music

(Music Starts: 0:20) (Music Ends: 3:27)

“Sruthi Matha Laya Pitha” Sruthi is the mother, Laya is the father of music. This is a popular saying, which we often hear in carnatic music circles, teachers telling their students, parents telling their children, critics telling musicians. The exact origin of the saying is not known. The exact source of the saying is not known. But it is very popularly heard in carnatic music.

Now, what does it mean? Sruthi is the mother here and sruthi here means, singing in tune, singing with pitch fidelity. Fidelity to the pitch, that is (Singing Starts: 04:36) (Singing Ends: 04:45) to sing in the right pitch. (Singing Starts: 04:48) (Singing Ends: 04:57)

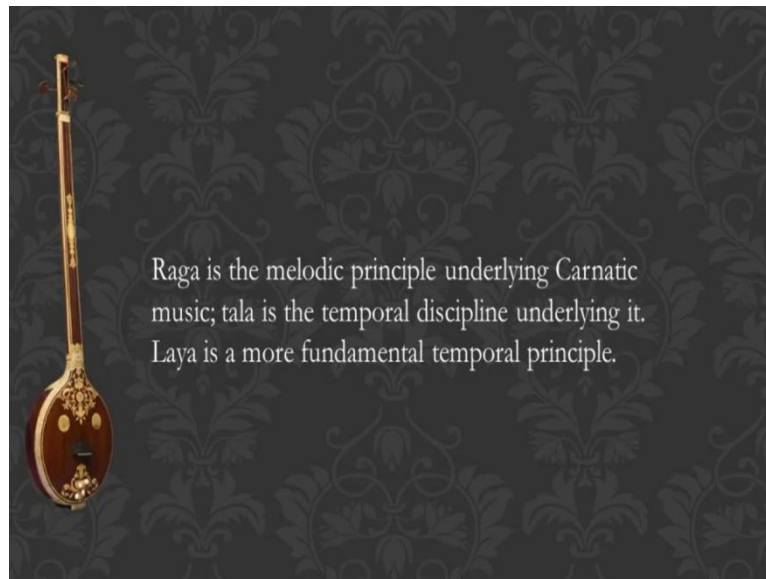
The Tamil expression, they say “Sruthi Searnthu Padrathu” to merge with the sruthi, to merge with the basic adhara sruthi. With the tambura, merge with the tambura and sing, to get the pitches right. (Singing Starts: 05:11) (Singing Ends: 05:13) It is not with little higher or lower, it is easy to go little higher or lower, it is very easy to go little higher or lower. It requires a lot of concentration and practice to get the pitch right each time.

Pitch perfection, is an ideal and in any performance, it is very rare that, every pitch you get it absolutely right, so, but the attempt should be there. But you try to sing with pitch perfection, that meaning of sruthi, “Sruthi Matha. Laya Pitha” here laya means, laya in general means, tempo it is the temporal discipline.

Music is, we have melody on the one hand, but music as an art form, it unfolds in time and so there is also need of a temporal discipline, ordering it in time, giving it an order, an organisation in time. And that is what, laya here means, that on the one hand, you need discipline of melody, melodic discipline on the other hand you need temporal discipline. When these two come together, music is born, that is what, this saying means.

Now the point of talking about the saying is to introduce, you to the concept of laya and eventually very shortly tala. We have in the past couple of weeks or so, we have spoken about raga as the melodic principle underlying carnatic music. Now we have to explore Tala.

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Which is the temporal discipline underlying carnatic music and laya is a more fundamental concept than tala. Now we will spend a few moments trying to understand, what laya is? Laya as I said is transmitted as tempo, the cadences, the way, the speed with which the things happen that is laya. And laya is a part if many aspects of human experience, human activities.

Many human activities are informed by the principle of laya. Speaking for instance, or walking, or running, and singing of course, dance anything, many activities that unfolding time. The principle of laya underlies these activities. So, there is a speed with which I am speaking right now, there is a tempo to my talk, there is a tempo in my speech. When I am speaking, in a course like this, in this lecture there is a certain speed.

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When I am talking to my child, there will be a different tempo. When I am angry, there would be different tempo. When I am sad, my talk will have a different tempo, walking also there are different tempos. And this, tempo itself, laya itself, has a very strong communicative power. If somebody wants to suddenly rattle of few a sentence, it could mean, that speed, the tempo itself will have a communicative content to it.

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A change in tempo also will carry some communicative weight. A person is walking and suddenly if she quickens her pace, if she quickens her pace, and that has mean something. Just the tempo itself, has a strong communicative power. In music, as much as melody is of course all important. Laya is equally important, the aspect of tempo, temporal organisation is as much important, as the actual melodic aspect.

In most performing arts, in all permorning arts, laya is a very subtle. It is a very critical feature, very critical aspect of, that performing art. And laya carriers within, a capacity to make an impact or not make it. A lapse in laya, would not create the kind of impact that one would as par fore. In comedy, for instance the loose of timing that we speak, of all that is about laya. How you maintain the tempo? How you organise the elements of your performance in time?

So, in music as I said this is laya, a tempo, a speed with which the music is organizes the internal speed, that is very critical and it is not necessary that there should be a beat or there should be a certain rhythm. It is not necessary for laya, laya is there in music, even when there is no song. When there are no beats, even something like alapana, which is free flowing there is nothing binding it in terms of temporal dimension, even there, there is a laya.

For instance, (Singing Starts: 12:26) (Singing Ends: 12:36) there is a laya, there is certain tempo, with which the music is being created. (Singing Starts: 12:43) (Singing Ends: 13:23) Now without beats, without anything to actually give stresses. This alapana has an internal laya, there is a certain tempo to this alapana and you will definitely know, there is something wrong, if the laya is not observed. It is an extremely subtle thing; perhaps most subtle aspect of music is laya.