

Appreciating Carnatic Music
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Lecture -58
MANODHARMA- Improvisation in Carnatic Music ALAPANA

(Music Starts: 00:24) (Music Ends: 04:04)

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Manodharma or Kalpana Sangeetham is one of the most exciting aspects of carnatic music. This is the improvisational aspects of carnatic music. There are five ways in which improvisation happens in carnatic music.

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Alapana, Neraval, Swarprastara, Tanam and Viruttam singing and Viruttam through this course, you have heard most of these aspects of Manodharma and in this session. We will talk, some in detail about this various aspects of Manodharma.

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First Alapana, the word Alapana is a Sanskrit word and it means conversation. Now Alapana is arguably the most central aspects of Manodharma sangeetham. It is the king of so to say and this is borne out by the usage in ordinary discourse. When we say that, he sang the raga, it means he sang the Alapana. So the raga is best brought out the raga is best brought out most impactfully or exhaustively to a extent raga is best brought in it by an Alapana.

Now Alapana and other aspects of Manodharma actually found in ancient text. We find mention of Rupakaalaphi and raga alapathi in medieval text. No doubt referring to Manodharma music Rupaka refers to a kind of compositions. So Rupakaalaphi most probably meant improvisation, that happens within the compositions and Ragaalaphi refer to what we today called Alapana in carnatic music.

Now broadly we can say that improvisation, there are two kinds of improvisation one is that which is its stand alone in the sense it does not need the compositions. There is a improvisation that happens outside of the compositions and there are improvisation aspects that happen within the compositions using a compositions an anker these improvisations happen.

Now Alapana is something happens before a compositions, that is though we have these four or five aspects of Manodharma sangeetham and its really the musicians creativity that comes to fore here, yet there is a place for these Manodharma aspects. They cannot spring up anywhere in the concert. Anyhow if we are speaking of a concert then there are certain points, where we expect Manodharma in certain forms.

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Of course there is much more of to carnatic music, than just what we here in concerts like any other art form. Possibly finest music is created outside concert halls and during private music sessions, during practice sessions during informal surveys and so on.

But point is though we have four or five Manodharma aspects, they have a place and a proportion in a concert. So Alapana always precedes the compositions, Alapana is always in the raga. Raga is brought out edifice so to say created using by the Alapana and this Alapana in the particular raga almost always is a preface to the kriti itself in the compositions that follows the Alapana in the same raga.

Now if the composition is small composition it is minor composition, then quite often there is no Alapana and if there is Alapana it will be a very short one. If you have a big raga like Sankarabharanam or Kalyani and the composition also great, most likely the Alapana will be elaborated to be extensive.

It would be inappropriate for instance, sing a very elaborate Alapana in a minor raga before a minor compositions. So Alapana affords great scope for musicians creativity, imaginations. But it is not free rain obviously. There are clear constraints within which musicians must work, first is obviously there are ragas grammar. If you are singing a raga in Sankarabharanam, you are going to stay within the grammar of Sankarabharanam

And the other constraints is what is imposed by the musicians equipment, vocal equipment. If the singer, what he or she can do with her voice that is obviously plays limitations on what can be done. And the third very important constraints, if we may call it aconstraints, is an esthetic considerations each musicians, every musicians will have esthetic preferences.

So even though I may be able to bring out certain movement from my voice, I may restrain myself doing that out of esthetic considerations. This is very important in the making of a musicians just because you can able to do something do not do it music in any art form is about judicious use of resources, the control about everything.

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So how does one go about singing an Alapana. First Alapana is rarely taught. A guru very rarely teaches an Alapana. It is not even quite possible what the guru does, what the musician is expected to is learn compositions, learn varnams and kritis and padams in the raga. And after you have internalized about dozen such compositions. And equally importantly after you heard a lot of music and hear lot music performances.

You hear you own teacher singing the raga Alapana, you attend concerts and absorb the raga in various such context. Then the student attempt to sing Alapana and what the guru does is more by way of saying that this is not quite right, why don't you try something else because ragas are very subtly creatures. The great subtlety to ragas and though we may be singing the notes that are permissible in the raga.

It is very, very possible to bring on shades on another raga, just by subtle movement here are wrong, shake here or wrong glide there or you touch an another note and come down it will suggest another raga. So these possibilities are very rare. So the gurus role is to correct the student has he or she tries her hand at Alapana. The guru may also suggests ways of developing certain idea in the Alapana or improving delivery that is about.

What a guru's role can be especially, when you come to singing Alapana. Now in an Alapana what is expected is there would be very good introduction. When you introduce a raga first

couple or three phrases of Alapana are very important because it is expected that the ragas identity very clearly established. There should be no vishi washings about those phrases, that if you are sing Kalyani first few phrases of you Alapana must immediately establish the raga.

There should be no doubt in the listeners mind t it is kalyani, that you are going to perform. Suppose you should not sing phrases of some Kalyani or some of Sankarabharanam. And these are the nervosas very understandable mistakes. But an Alapana introductions is expected to firmly established the identity of the raga is going to be performed.

Some master musicians can playfully keep you guessing, but that is one thing. It is an another thing to fill the listeners mind to in perplexity by going back and forth between various phrases without quite getting hold on the raga. So once the introduction of the Alapana is done. I mean this is as I said this is how do you perform Alapana. There is no one blue print, no one schema, the same person singing the same raga today and tomorrow will be completely different.

But I am just giving some idea of some broad expectations, something that are mostly adhere to all the time. But there is nothing hard and fast here except the requirement that ragas grammar would be maintained and there will be a esthetic coherence. But beyond that you cannot say the Alapana is should be this way or that way.

But broadly we can except that these various aspects to the Alapana, you introduce the raga, you introduce the raga through few very clear phrases and then the rest of development of the raga. Very often the musician may zone in one swara and important swara in the raga and weave many phrases around it and always there is a variation in the tempo. You won't find a Alapana sung in the same tempo throughout that is for instance.

(Singing Starts: 17:33) (Singing Ends: 17:49) So varying tempo is there including phrases in various tempos that is one of bring them together judiciously. That is one way of creating interest in the Alapana dynamics. Now how a raga is developed depends very much on the raga by itself. Now if you have heavily nuanced gamaka filled raga some of the rakthi ragas like sahana, ethukula kambhoji, hagiri, and devagandhari.

These are all ragas that are major, that are very nuanced raga and their life is in subtle gamakas and very definitive phrases. So a raga like this cannot be developed to a great extent. You will only beat it to death, that is few raga like sahana it is possible to of course sing for ten minutes or twenty minutes of Alapana.

But how far it will be effective that is a question. Then how this raga is treated, so you pay attention to ragas nature. Let us watch Professor V.V. Subramaniam as he plays Alapana in the raga sahana and he also has small bit to say about, how it is possible to otherwise play this raga? And how it is possibly not so appropriate to play it that way?

(Music Starts: 20:15) (Music Ends: 22:48)

So this raga has a slow tempo expressing very soft moods. And all that there is some frill like fast phrases also there but it should not be played like this. (Music Starts: 23:15) (Music Ends: 23:34) If you play this the total image of the raga is gone because I have strength, I have voice strength, more conscious about the fast tempos and all that I have the skill that does not appear. (Music Starts: 23:59) (Music Ends: 24:07)

Of course you have major like Sankarabharanam or kambhoji or kalyani these raga can bear extensive treatment, in all three registers in varying speeds so many swaras that can be highlighted these are all great big ragas. Now how these ragas are developed is also dependent on the musicians, voice bhava and she has work at it how she has strained her voice and also her esthetic references.