

Appreciating Carnatic Music
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Lecture -59
ALAPANA: Style and Aesthetics

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G.N. Balasubramanian was a great musician, very, very popular performer of the last century. He was easily the reigning star in the 40's, 50's and 60's of the last century. And he had introduced this what is called "Brika" style, and that was somewhat new in the vocal music in those days. He had actually adopted it from "Nathswaram bhani". It is called nathswaram, it is a kind of phrases that it produced the way it produced it, that he adopted into the vocal music and it was a region hit in those days.

So the Brika is like this (Singing Starts: 01:12) this is one way of singing it. This kind of trills. This kind of quick clustering of swaras delivered with the sharpness. (Singing Ends: 02:43). That is the style that G.N. Balasubramanian pioneered in vocal music. And even we have musicians who follow the style. So the raga alapana is possible, it is possible to develop a raga alapana studded with such Brikas.

There are others who prefer a style that is more sedate and not so filled with fireworks, Brika style is fireworks. (Singing Starts: 03:13) (Singing Ends: 03:35)

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Semmankudi Srinivasa Iyer another musician of last century, he brought in a style that was very, very dignified, full of grace and solid gamakas but not very little place for Brikas.

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And then we had another great musicians M.D. Ramanathan. M.D. Ramanathan was almost a maverick, brilliant musicians. And he had his own style to himself. We will listen to raga alapana of kalyani by G.N. Balasubramaniam and by followed by M.D. Ramanathan .so you can have a idea of how different the style can be.

(Music Starts: 04:34) (Music Ends: 24:21)

Alapana is perhaps most abstract on the aspect of manodharama. And it is perhaps also one of the most challenge aspects because you really have nothing to anchor your music on as it were painting on a canvass and this was also real test of the musicianship of a performer. The question would be we speak of improvisation, we speak of creativity, we speak of mano dharma and yet we have all this rules expectations, raga rules and presentation rules.

So how much of creativity we really expect. For instances our new phrases created we have pidis. We have the established phrases of raga. We have these phrases established in compositions in the alapana of past masters. Can we get beyond that I believe so in fact in the hands of good genuine musicians. Even singing well established phrase can glisten with musicianship.

The same phrase sung by good musicians and by a mediocre one, there will be a difference that stems from the depth of that persons musicianship. The larger task of building an alapana structure edifice so to say weaving phrases, varying their speed, varying their volume, introducing dynamics of various kinds that is an artistic effort which is what alapana is all about.

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Now let us listen to genius of the last century Mahalingam. T.R. Mahalingam who is a flute player, a genius, a maestro he has played an alapana in raga Kapi. And you can notice, how he creates a tapestry of alapana. Let listen to mali.

(Music Starts: 27:19) (Music Ends: 32:31)