

Melakarta System of Carnatic Music

Ms. Josna

Page | 29

In 1550 Ramamatya of the Vijayanagar Empire wrote a work called Svara Mela Kalanithi in which he mentions 19 Melakarthas and one more composed by himself. The musicologists, who created a revolution in Carnatic Music, was Venkatamakhi, also known as Venkateswara Dikshita, who was the second son of Govinda Dikshita. Although Venkatamakhi deals with the vina and other subjects in his book, the most important part of it is the one relating to the scheme of 72 Melakarthas. Venkatamakhi was indebted to Somanatha for the idea of evolving a scheme of Melakarthas.

The Venkatamakhi scheme is based on the universally recognized 12 notes of the gamut and he gives us for the first time a systematic classification of Melakarthas based on the swaras. He, however, added four (dual names) notes namely Shatshruti Rishabha, shuddha Gandhara, Shatshruti Dhaivata, and Shuddha Nishada for (Sadharana Gandhara, Chatushruthi Rishabha, Kaisika Nishadam, Chatushruthi Daivatham) respectively thus making the total number of swaras 16. By permutation and combination of these 16 notes in a systematic manner, Venkatamakhi presented to the music world a unique scheme of 72 Melakarthas, which is perhaps the limit to which a musical system can reach. He however,

classified them as those existing in his time, immediate possibilities and remote possibilities.

For nearly 150 years, the Venkatamakhi scheme did not see the light of the day, although Tulaja in his Sangeetha Saaramrutha (18th century) has made a reference to it. During the 18th century a musicologist called Govinda improved upon the Venkatamakhi system and wrote a treatise called "Sangeetha Choodamani". This work caught the attention of Tyagaraja, who followed it while composing his krithis (sampoorna mela paddhathi). Dikshitar, however, followed the Venkatamakhi system which he inherited from his father (Asampoorna mela paddhathi).

Venkatamakhi set standards to 72 Melakartha scheme with ka, ta, pa ya, di formula and by 1660AD he gave a format to Lakshya of Carnatic music. Slokas and also lakshana geethams were written taking the 72 Melakartha scheme scale into consideration. Saint Tyagaraja composed following the guide lines of Govinda Melakartha system one of the pioneers of the present Carnatic music performing style which is in vogue. Except Dikshitar all the other composers followed the Govinda system and which became most popular system in Carnatic music till date. This system only is followed by the present generation.

The first single and full length composition covering all the 72 Melakarthis was composed by one Lavani Venkata Rao, a poet of the Tanjavur court. This was called “Bahattar Melakartha”.

The great Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer was commissioned to set the ragamalika to music. Later Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer, who didn't relish the narastuti in Lavani Venkata Rao's Marathi composition, wrote a suitable sahithya in praise of his tutelary deity. This unique composition is still being sung.

Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer's mela raga malika, composed around the year 1883 who is a pioneer of 72 raga malika which is a very scholarly composition and also very difficult to memorize and present for any ordinary musician , became so popular so that many scholars and musicians were inspired in composing kritis individually in the 72 Melakartas. Subbarama Dikshitar was one such composer and he was followed by Koteswara Iyer, who composed Tamil krithis in all 72 Melakarthis.

In the year 1946, BMK composed kritis in all the Melakarthis. Composing music in the 72 Melakarthis is no easy task because the notes in each chakra of six Melakarthis are so close to each other that they demand great skill on the part of the singer to avoid what is known as ‘Vivadi Dosha’. The scheme of 72 Melakarthis is a system of south Indian classical music in which the maximum

number of Melakarthas are evolved by permutation and combination of the 12 swara sthanas. These 12 swara sthanas are further expanded with dual names forming 16 in number.

The 16 swara sthanas are

Shadjam

Shuddha Rishabham

Chathushruthi Rishabham

Saadharana Gandharam

Antara Gandharam

Shuddha Madhyamam

Prathi Madhyamam

Shuddha Daivatham

Chatushruthi Daivatham

Kaisiki Nishadam

Kaakali Nishadam

And four Vivadi swaras as follows

Shatshruthi Rishabham

Shuddha Gandharam

Shatshruthi Daivatham

Shuddha Nishadham

The 72 Melakarta ragas are given in 12 groups called chakras, each containing 6 Melakarthas in each group.

Page | 33

- Indu stands for the moon, and only one moon exists – hence it is the first chakra.
- Netra stands for eyes, of which we have two – hence it is the second chakra.
- Agni denotes the three divya agnis (fire, lightening and Sun), they are three – hence it is the third chakra.
- Veda denotes the four (Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Adharvana) Vedas –It is the name of the fourth Chakra.
- Baana stands for the five arrows of Manmatha (Lily, Lotus, Jasmine, Asoka, Mango flowers) – hence it's named after fifth chakra.
- Ruthu denotes the 6 seasons (Vasantha, Greeshma, Varsha, Sharad, Hemanth, and Shishir) of Hindu calendar – It is the name of the sixth chakra.
- Rishi meaning sage represents the seven sages called Saptha Rishi (Vashishta, Bharadwaja, Jamadagni, Gautama, Athri, Viswamitra, and Agasthya)- It is the seventh chakra.

- Vasu stands for the eight Vasus of Hinduism called ashta Vasu (they are attendant deities of Gods Indra, Agni, Prithvi, Vayu, Anthariksha, Aditya, Dyaus, Chandrama, Nakshatrani) –It is the eighth chakra.
- Brahma comes next of which there are 9 called Nava Brahma (Virinchi, Padmabhu, Swayambhu, Parameshti, Surajyeshta, Hemagarbha, Shatanand, Chaturmukha, and Hanuman) – It denotes the ninth chakra.
- Disi denotes the 10 directions (North, East, West, South, North –East, North- West, and South – West, South- East, sky and Paathal – represents the tenth chakra.
- Rudra denotes eleven forms of Rudra (Mahadeva, Shiv, Maharudra, shankara, Neelalohitha, Eeshana, Vijaya, Bheema, Deva deva, bhavodbhava, Adityatmaka Sri Rudra) - It denotes the eleventh chakra.
- Aditya denotes the twelve names of sun (Indra, Dhata, Parjanya, Twashta, Pusha, Aryama, Bhag, Vivshmana, Vishnu, Amshumaan, Varuna, and Mita) – It denotes the twelfth chakra.

Thus, in a gist the scheme of 72 Melakarthis consisting of 72 homogeneous scales with krama sampoorana arohana and avarohana, marks the final stage of evolution of the concept of mela. It forms the basis for the present raga system of South Indian music. Melakartha scheme is a collection of fundamental 72 scales in

Carnatic music (South Indian classical music) Melakarthis are parent ragas also known as Janaka ragas, Mela ragas etc. Melakarthis are sampurna ragas containing all the seven swaras of the octave in both ascending and descending scale. They are full octave scales. These are perfect seven note scales. They use one variety of each of the seven notes and follow the same straight line sequence in both Ascent and Descent. The descent is minor image of Ascent. The sequence of swaras is strictly ascending and descending, in pitch without any vakratvam or varjatvam. The ascending and descending notes takes the same variety of swaras.