

PREFACE

This thesis records my efforts to come to terms with the musical tradition I have inherited both as a member of a family that has for nine generations been now intimately connected with Karnatak Music and as a South Indian. My training in music started at home, and later I had the opportunity of doing the graduate and post - graduate courses in Music in a Music College. My home atmosphere was one in which the musical personality of the family was zealously guarded. It may be said that my exposure to a formal college course in Music was my first serious acquaintance--it might even be called confrontation--with other styles of Karnatak Music. By my training in the family, I belong to the Karaikudi School of Vina playing. I majored in Vina in College, and there were Vina teachers in the College who did not belong to this school. The teacher who becomes most influential in my development was a vocalist.

The differences I encountered at College were significant problems to me at time. Since my leaving College, I have been trying to connect the theory of music as expounded in the ancient treatises and the practice of this music as handled in my family and outside as a tradition. I found it a difficult task because there is a

big gap between the theory and practice in the modern days. The current -- day understanding of some of the basic concepts that govern Karnatak Music was questionable and in this thesis I make the attempt to see the concepts in perspective. Seeing the concepts in their practical application in the music of contemporary musicians of the authentic traditional stamp, I have come to conclusions which are perhaps not orthodox. This perface is the attempt to state the circumstances that led me to do my own thinking on the significance of the concept of the raga which is vital to both the Karnatak and the Hindustani modes of Indian music.

As I have already said, my early music training was under my grandmother Smt. Lakshmi Ammal. She was one of the five daughters of Karaikudi Subbarama Iyer, the elder of the Karaikudi vina brothers who made a name for themselves in the music tradition of south India. She was trained at home. It must be remembered that in the days of my grandmother's girlhood, girls were not seriously taught or trained. She picked up most of her music from what she heard in the household. Under such circumstances, there was not the possibility of any exposure to theory. But my grandmother had a native, unerring svara-gnana and laya-gnana. She enjoyed singing. The Karaikudi School is known

for its closeness to vocal rendition. I have very great admiration for her because with the severely limited opportunities she had, she garnered up so much of music. My admiration for the tradition which she inherited is also unbounded. She did not have much formal training, but what she did have had been the most rigorous Karaikudi tradition-
-endless practice of every stage of the traditional lessons. She was married in her early 'teens (as the custom then was) and she settled in Madurai.

My earliest recollections are of a house full of music and music-learning young people. There were students who came to our house and learnt music, and there were always one or two who lived with us, learning music under the gurukula system. Before I officially started learning music, I picked up a lot of it from this atmosphere. My grandmother, a teacher of Vina, was a very good singer also. As already said, our family's way of learning to play on the vina is an arduous one, following the traditional pattern of lessons with the students repeating each stage, hundreds of times literally. The repetition is meant to give the students absolute fluency in fingering and a refined sensitivity to svara-s and an instinctive grasp of laya. It is a style which emphasises clarity of phrases, and closeness to sahitya. The vainika often sings while playing

on the vina. This was the methodology followed in teaching me. In time, I gathered confidence enough to say that I could capture any combination of svara-s that I heard sung or played and could reproduce it.

But this competence meant only that I could reproduce what I heard or what I was taught. I did not gain the confidence that I could improvise on my own. I felt that this was a serious defect. While I had the technique to reproduce any music I heard, almost near perfection, I had no urge to create, or to cross the boundaries of imitation. I was fortunate enough at this stage to come under the influence of two great teachers. One was my paternal uncle Karaikudi Dr.K.S. Subramanian. The other was my revered teacher the late Dr. Sharada Gopalam who was a vocalist par excellence. My uncle used to give me sessions that stretched to hours on end on svarakalpana alone. These sessions were meant to lead me to experiencing the purity of tone through the raga alone --- tala supplying only the 'time' and not leading one to conceive of combinations of fours or threes. Gradually, he led me to discover combinations of threes and fours well within the boundaries of 'raga' and not just as mathematically conceived combinations. The endless hours of discussions I had with Dr. Sharada Gopalam contributed a lot to my growth both as

a person and as a musician. It was then that I learnt to distinguish a raga, sieving out the technique coming under the guise of more and more creativity. I learnt to improvise, the ragatva leading my intuition every moment, and my inhibitions about not being able to create began to disappear slowly. I stopped imitating, and even if I did, I did it with feeling. Exploring on these lines, I learnt to experience my music, which I had never done before. The very feeling of oneness with the music I was performing led me to create with greater ease till I could gain enough confidence to give concerts.

Later, my uncle developed a series of exercises for vocal music, integrating the technique of right voice production through Yoga. I began cultivating my inborn flair for vocal music, and practised according to his method rigorously. My development at this point, I would say, was tremendous. The knowledge of vocal music, and the right use of the vocal chords enhanced my sensitivity to vina music, and my experience with the vina helped me to sing with precision. I was taught some very good principles of music by my uncle in Brhaddhavani. Brhaddhavani is a research institution founded by my uncle, after years of toil.

I should also mention the role of another great teacher under whom I learnt for three years. This was the late

Sri. C.S. Sankarasivam, a great vocalist, and disciple of Harikesanallur Sri Muthaiah Bhagavatar. My first insight into the aspects of creative music, especially niraval, was through him. My lessons under him also enriched my repertoire considerably.

Having experienced some very important elements of music, I began wondering why there were not many works related to laksya. This was mainly because the laksana granthas that I was taught in my theory classes did not seem to speak of the contemporary reality. I began to feel that many of our maestros did not owe much to theory as expounded in the ancient (or modern, for that matter!) treatises on music. Most of the works I read had information extracted from many ancient treatises, and even borrowed the terminology used in those treatises to describe their contemporary music. A knowledge of such writings did not contribute to the understanding of laksya nor did they have any relevance to contemporary music. So I felt the urgent need to do something to understand practice theoretically, and then to evolve a way to communicate my understanding to any serious student. My natural choice was the most vital component of our music, the raga.

When a raga is described in terms of its constituent elements--its svvara combinations--not much is conveyed. The

raga attains its personality only when its melodic form is completely presented. A raga may begin merely as a scale but in course of time it can develop a far greater personality and assume a complex of significances.

In the development of raga alapana, there are observable formalities. The arohana and avarohana svara-s provide only the basic framework. There are characteristic opening phrases, middle movements and end-phrases. These make it clear that a raga alapana is a well-developed tradition. This tradition is in practice. But it can be picked up even by one who does not know the theory part of music. When one tries to relate the practice part of theory, one finds that the laksya aspect does not find a place in many of our written works. How does one understand this gap between the grammar and the actual expression? The basic question here can be reduced to this: Did the grammar evolve from the practice or did the practice take its inspiration and definition from grammar? The concepts of raga available in original texts of grammar do not seem to help one substantially in finding the answer to this question of precedence.

The desire to find the element of originality or creativity in presenting a comprehensive picture of a raga

was one of the motives behind the thesis here attempted. Twenty-nine raga-s are here studied in detail. The representation of a raga rendering in terms of notation is a complicated and difficult job. The popular way of doing this does not satisfy the demands made on the available tools of notation framework. So an effort has also been made to record music through descriptive notation to represent the movements of musical phrases accurately. This system of notation has been extensively used by Dr.T.Viswanathan, and my uncle Dr. K.S. Subramanian, has followed it to the degree of near perfection.

I have devoted a major part this work to the study of the chosen raga-s through an analysis of some phrases in each of the raga-s. The phrases analysed have been sung by me and recorded, and this cassette is submitted along with this thesis for practical reference to the phrases analysed.