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BIOGRAPHIES OF PROMINENT COMPOSERS

Carnatic music has developed as a great art form over several centuries. The contribution of talented composers to the blossoming of our music is significant. Great composers created lyrics in beautiful language set in suitable tunes and rhythms around which musicians developed concerts. While improvisation varied, the basic song was fixed. This is called kriti or keertana, usually in praise of a deity, building on the form or swarooma of a raga. The composers of these songs are known as vaggeyakaras – (vak-gaya-kara meaning word-music-creator). In this lesson we will study some of these music composers, their lives and work. The composers we will deal with are Purandaradasa, Bhadrachala Ramadas, the Musical Trinity, Swati Tirunal and Papanasam Sivan.



OBJECTIVES

After learning this lesson, the learner will be able to:-

- identify and state the name of the composers;
- recognize the composers of some songs;
- explain the contribution of prominent (enlisted) composer;
- explain background, significance of his song;
- place the music and composer in appropriate context;
- develop the knowledge of composition.

3.1 PURANDARADASA

Purandaradasa (1484-1564) was born as Srinivasa Nayaka in Purandaragherda (Maharashtra) to a wealthy merchant Varadappa. He was well educated, proficient in Kannada, Sanskrit and sacred music. His wife Saraswati bai was very devout.



He became a pawnbroker and was known as “navakoti narayana”. A very miserly man, he was reformed when a Brahmin brought him Saraswati bai’s nosering received by him in charity, but found to be still in her own possession. Giving up his wealth and greed, he became a wandering minstrel singing and preaching religion and charity. Travelling extensively across the Vijayanagara empire, praising God, teaching virtue and good conduct, he died in Hampi at the age of 80. When he was 40, Vyasatirtha initiated him, naming him Purandaradasa,

He is known as Sangita Pitamaha - grandfather of music – and systemized music teaching in Mayamalavagoula raga, which we follow now. He composed sarali, jantai varisai, alankara, geetas, ugabhogha, sooladi and keertanas. Often using colloquial language, comments on daily life and familiar folk tunes, he sang to the beat of a clapper and string drone, orally transmitting his songs which are known as “devarnamas”. Set to easy tunes and tempo, they preach devotion, morality, ethics, compassion etc.

There are many references to religious texts and stories of Gajendra Moksha. Prahlada etc. all in simple tunes with multiple charanams. From his songs we can see him as a normal human enjoying sights, sounds, foods and experiences around him. For example he has mentioned words like Payaram, Seed, Plant, Flower, Fruit etc.



He is said to have composed 4,75,000 songs of which 1000 are available. The language is Kannada, while his signature (mudra) is Purandara Vitala. He had several disciples who spread his music



INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.1

- (1) What was Purandaradasa’s original name?
- (2) What are his compositions known as?
- (3) In which language did he compose songs?
- (4) What was his musical “mudra”?

3.2 BHADRACHALA RAMADASA

Bhadrachala Ramadasa (1620-1688) was Telugu speaking, born to a devout couple Linganna and Kamamba, who lived in Nalakondapalli village He was named Gopanna. A quiet boy, always singing Ramanama, he distributed his entire



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wealth to the needy during famines and drought. According to legend, a Muslim fakir initiated him into Rama Nama, and renamed him Ramadas. The ruler of his area Abu Hasan Kutubshah (Taneesha) was served in capital Golkonda by Gopanna's uncles Akkanna and Madanna as chief ministers. They helped him get the post of tehsildar at Bhadrachalam – a noted holy town - where the Rama temple was in a bad state. Ramadas collected donations and also used sum money from the royal exchequer to renovate the temple. The Nawab imprisoned him for 12 years on embezzlement charges. Taneesha was told by Rama Lakshmana in a dream that Ramadasa was innocent and that renovation was public service. Ramadas was released and given pension and donation of the area around Bhadrachalam as temple endowment. Ramadasa's wife was Kamalamba, and their son was Raghurama.

Like Purandaradasa, Ramadas used simple folk tunes and easy language to describe his deity and devotion. He did not make the songs too difficult, so that ordinary people could understand and sing them in group bhajans. Frequent repetition of Ramanama, and the signature "Bhadrachala" are seen in his songs, which are mainly in Telugu, but with many Sanskrit words. Both Purandaradasa and Ramadasa inspired many later composers, especially Tyagaraja who refers to Ramadasa's bhakti in his own compositions.

Ramadasa's keertana have the setting of a pallavi and multiple charanams, and set in familiar ragas and tunes like Kambodhi. The emphasis is more on words than on tunes. All bhajan sessions in South India include his songs which are well suited to group singing



INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.2

1. What was Ramadasa's native language?
2. Whose name is frequently repeated in his songs?
3. Where was the famous Rama temple which he renovated?

3.3 MUSICAL TRINITY

It is a wonderful coincidence that the three greatest composers of Carnatic music were born in the same town of Tamil Nadu around the same period of time. The famous town they were born in, Tiruvarur, is in the Tanjavur district, and is a place of pilgrimage for all music lovers.



3.3.1 Syama Sastri – the seniormost – was born on 26th April, 1762 to Viswanatha Iyer, descended from Telugu priests who migrated from Kanchipuram. The father was employed in Tulaja's court. He was named as Venkatasubramaniam, trained as a priest. A sangita sanyasi initiated him into music and perhaps tantric upasana (devi worship). Later he was associated with Pacchimiryam Adiyappa (of Viriboni fame).

His songs have simple lyrics but complex beautiful rhythmical balance. About 300 kritis of his are known, mostly in Telugu, using the signature Syamakrishna. He lived as a simple, comfortably placed householder. His eldest son Panju Sastry inherited his scripts and writings, the younger, Subbaraya Sastri was a good composer. Syama Sastri does not seem to have traveled much, being absorbed in his music and devotion. Grieving over his wife's death, he died a few days after her on February 6, 1827.



3.3.2 Tyagaraja was born on 4th May 1767 to Rama Brahmam, a Telugu speaking Brahmin, who was said to be very talented giving discourses on Ramayana and initiated in the Rama taraka mantra. The third son's arrival, according to legend, was predicted to the parents by the presiding deity of Tiruvarur, after whom the child was named Tyagaraja. The family later shifted to a house gifted by the Tanjavur ruler in Tiruvayyaru, on the bank of holy Kaveri. The village is full of scenic beauty, and Thyagaraja refers to this in his kritis "Sari vedalina" (Asaveri) and "Muripemu" (Mukhari). Tyagaraja had difficult relationships with his siblings because of his total concentration on devotion and music. He first married Parvati, and on her death, Kanakamba. Their only daughter Sitalakshmi married Kuppuswami, whose son Tyagaraja died childless. The saint died in Jan, 1847 after taking sanyasa.

Tyagaraja trained in Sanskrit, Telugu, astrology was a great yogi. He learnt vocal music and veena from famous singer Sonti Venkataramanayya. Tyagaraja's songs have literary beauty, yogic vision, bhakti and musical excellence. Like Purandaradasa, he criticizes mere outward observance of rituals without sincere devotion. He admired Ramadasa and Potana. In Tyagaraja kritis we find very wide variety. Easy melody, delicate rhythms, Pancharatnas, emotional outpouring of devotion, elaborate descriptions, simple appeals for mercy, we find it all in his works. Complicated ragas with elaborate sangatis, folk music and bhajana songs





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as in Utsava Sampradaya and Divyanama songs, three operas Prahlada bhakti Vijayam Sitarama Vijayam and Nowka Charitram bear testimony to his genius. Though most songs are in Telugu, there are several in Sanskrit too. His ishta devta was Rama but he sings of Ganesa, Siva, Devi, etc. with equal ease and his songs on Sangita, Nada, express his ideas on theory and practice of his art. Of the three composers in this group, his songs have greatest variety and since he had many disciples, his music is most popularized and preserved for posterity. To this day we have excellent musicians from his sishya parampara.

3.3.3 Muthuswami Dikshitar (1775-1835) was the son of Subbamma and Ramaswami Dikshitar of Tiruvarur, who was himself an accomplished musician trained by Venkata Vaidyanathan, who in turn came from the school of 17th century musicologist Venkatamakhi, whose tradition was followed by this family. Ramaswami moved with family to Manali (near Madras) where he was court musician. A saint Chidambaranatha Yogi took Muthuswami as disciple on pilgrimage to Varanasi, they visited several places in North India, and he studied Philosophy, Tantra and Sanskrit for about six years. Though married twice, he was not interested in worldly life. He composed songs on various deities starting with Tiruttani temple, using “Guruguha” as his signature. His whole life was spent in pilgrimage ending at Ettayapuram in 1835 on Deepavali Day.

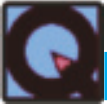
His beautiful songs are strings of the names of Gods and invocations almost like a mantra, and the music reflects the delicate gamakas – in slow and grand tempo – of his veena playing. We can see his knowledge of music and language reflected in the special use of madhyamakala sahitya contrasted with slow tempo kritis, with literary flourishes of rhyme and alliteration, use of a phrase or word with several meanings, the alankaras (ornamentation) using progressive increase/decrease of a phrase srotovaha and gopuccha yati, skillfully weaving raga name and his own mudra, into compositions that are more literary than lyrical. Apart from the musical felicity, we see his moulding of Sanskrit phrases, grammatical variations as in Vibhakti kritis, temple and deity depiction of his pilgrimage, systematic organization of kritis into Sthala or Deity groups, even a sub-group of ragas with similar ending names, all these reveal a person who was thorough and organized in putting his theory into practice.

He was attached to his brothers ChinnaSwami and Baluswami, and in a group of devoted disciples, later famous as the Tanjavur Quartet. They popularized his kritis as well as the use of the violin. Dikshitar used some Hindustani ragas, and even a group of Western melodies for some simple “Nottuswaras”. While traditional in his practice of music, Dikshitar and family interacted with other kinds of music and culture. His brother’s grandson Subbarama Dikshitar compiled and published “Sangita Sampradaya Pradarsini” in 1904, linking the music and ragas from early times to the start of 20th century. The family and sishya parampara popularized the songs, which are alive and vibrant now even in 21st century.

The Trinity connection starting from birth in the holy town of Tiruvarur to devout parents, the strong background of knowledge of religion, music and Sanskrit, perceived as born after special divine blessings, accepted as disciples of saintly gurus, initiated into special religious vidya or nama worship, totally dedicated to music as a path to the divine, honoured by disciples and contemporaries is indeed an amazing story. Each had a premonition of his end, and completed life's pilgrimage with serenity. Their houses have been renovated and, preserved for posterity and their memory is celebrated with music festivals every year. While Syama Sastri's songs are on Devi, Tyagaraja and Dikshitar's songs from Ganesa to Hanuman enrich our knowledge of religion and mythology.



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INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.3

- 1 Give the names of the Music Trinity.
2. What is Syama Sastri's original name?
3. Which of the Trinity composers had more variety of compositions?
4. What is the name given to group of songs on one temple of holy place?

3.4 SWATI TIRUNAL

Swati Tirunal (1813-1847) the second child of queen of Travancore Rani Lakshmi bai and Rajaraja Varma Koyithampuran. The "Swati" refers to the star under which he was born on April 16, 1813. He had an elder sister Rukmini Bai and younger brother Marthanda Varma after whose birth his mother died. His mother's younger sister Gowri Parvati Bai took charge of the state and the children as Regent Queen till he took over as ruler in 1829. His aunt and his father educated him well. He specialized in languages and learnt Tamil, Sanskrit, English by the age of seven, and later Kannada, Telugu, Hindi, Marathi and several other languages.

Starting music lessons from Subrahmanya Bhagavatar and Padmanabha Bhagavatar, he learnt, listened and was influenced by many great musicians like the Tanjavur Quartet, Maharashtra Singers, Shadkala Govinda Marar, several disciples of Tyagaraja and Dikshitar who performed in his court. His interaction with East India Company officials stirred him to modernize his state. He started



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an observatory, museum, zoo, press, public library and an English school (now university college). He brought legal reforms, started courts land survey, conducted first state census in 1836, set up hospitals with Alopathic doctors, started engineering department, brought about social reforms for women. His aunt and foster mother encouraged him to improve his knowledge in various spheres. Of his immediate family brother Marthanda Varma succeeded him and ruled from 1846-1860.

After his wife's death, Swati Tirunal married a singer and veena player, called Lakshmi. The second wife had a son, and her sister married the ruler's brother. But relations with the third wife were not cordial with the family disputes being settled in Madras High Court.

Belonging to the Kulasekhara dynasty of Travancore state, Kerala, with several palaces and pomp and show, Swati Tirunal remained essentially a humble devotee. Dedicated to the Lord Padmanabha, he considered himself only a servant administering the Lord's domain. Thus in his kritis he takes the mudra of Padmanabha (or its synonyms) and describes the glory of Lord Vishnu. In a short life span of 32 years he has written several hundred songs, not only in Sanskrit and Manipravala in several other languages also. His compositions include two musical opera varnams, kritis, swarajatis, padams, javalis, Hindustani dhrupads khyal, tappas, thumris, bhajans. His court was filled with music and musicians, and from his Navaratri kirtanas to his vibrant Hindi tillana, his compositions are an important part of Carnatic repertoire.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 3.4

1. How was Ramavarma popularly known as Swati Tirunal?
2. What is the mudra he uses as signature in his kritis?
3. What is his mudra?

WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

In this lesson we have learnt about some important Carnatic composers. Purandaradasa, a rich miser, converts and becomes a great bhakta. Swati Tirunal is born as royal prince, but is known for his simplicity and devotion to bhakti and music, using his wealth for public welfare. Ramadasa the great bhakta uses the wealth he is entrusted with, for improvement of religious buildings. Tyagaraja

seeks alms as a religious wandering minstrel, like Purandara did after conversion. Syama Sastri and Dikshitar had no money worries, and devoted all their energy to divine service. They have all used their knowledge, wealth and musical gifts to glorify God. Their compositions are examples of gana rasa and bhakti rasa, showing us that music and devotion are the greatest treasures we can have on earth.



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TERMINAL EXERCISES

1. Write a brief essay on the qualities needed in a good Carnatic music composer.
2. Briefly describe the background knowledge Carnatic composers find useful about epics, myths and other reference material to enrich, their Sahitya
3. Even if he is not a great singer, what are the talents the composer requires to match music and lyric and find appropriate raga settings?
4. Name some examples of literary beauty and ornamentation in Dikshitar's kritis.

TERMINOLOGY

1. Vaggeyakara – Creator of words and music
2. Matu – lyric or text
3. Dhatu – the music
4. Mudra – word signifying composer's name or that of the shrine, or raga, the indication skillfully woven into the text.



ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

3.1

- (1) Srinivasa Nayaka
- (2) Devarnama
- (3) Kannada
- (4) Purandara Villala



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3.2

- (1) Telugu
- (2) Rama
- (3) Bhadrachalam

3.3

- (1) Syama Sastri, Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar
- (2) Venkatasubramaniam
- (3) Syama Sastri
- (4) Kshetra Kritis

3.4

- (1) Because of his birth star SWATI
- (2) Padmanabha (or synonyms)
- (3) Padmanabha

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

1. Learn more compositions of Trinity while listening from audio CD's or cassetts or public concerts.
2. Make a comparative study on the employment of music by the classical trinity.