

Scope for Manōdharmā Saṅgīta in Minor Rāga-s: A Case Study of Kāpinārāyaṇi

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Abstract: South Indian classical music has two components – kalpitasāṅgīta, which is pre-composed, and the kalpana or manōdharmā saṅgīta, which is creative improvisation adhering to the grammar of the raga and composition. Out of the four branches of manōdharmā saṅgīta, neraval, or the spontaneous melodic improvisation of a line from a composition, is said to be the most difficult. Some ragas provide more scope for exploration of improvisation while there are some other ragas where it is challenging for the artist to explore. This study attempts to explore through the case study method the scope of manōdharmā saṅgīta in rāga-s which have a few determining characteristics and some typical phrases but allow lesser scope for improvisation. In this study, the neraval renditions for the kṛti ‘SarasaSāma Dāna’ in the rāga Kāpinārāyaṇi by eleven artistes across different age groups were analyzed. The handling of the neraval in terms of structure as well as the rāga phrases was analyzed. This study led to the understanding that true creativity in improvisation takes place when the scope of such rāga-s is expanded by artistes who experiment with and push the boundaries of what is considered to be acceptable.

Keywords: Karnāṭaka classical music, Manōdharmā, Improvisation, Neraval, Kāpinārāyaṇi

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the unique aspects of South Indian Classical music is spontaneous improvisation, or manōdharmā saṅgīta. There are four branches – rāga ālāpana, tāna, neraval and svara kalpana. Of these four, neraval is said to be the most complex, as it encompasses rāga, laya and sāhitya. This paper attempts to examine the scope for manōdharmā in minor rāga-s¹. This study adopts a case study method. Analysis has been done by considering the neraval renditions of the rāga Kāpinārāyaṇi by eleven artistes.

Definition of Neraval

Neraval, or Niraval, is the process of choosing a line from a composition and embellishing it, exploring the melodic potential. Sambamurthy says that the term ‘Niraval’ literally means ‘to fill’, that is, to fill up portions of the line with “fresh and appropriate” music [1]. Any line from the composition can be chosen. The general rule is that the chosen line must have a complete linguistic meaning and be self-contained. The singer returns to the original theme at the conclusion of each round of neraval [1].

Neraval can be classified under three distinct categories [2]:

1. The free-flowing ālāpana type
2. The samakāla type
3. The mēlkāla type

In many compositions, the neraval line is standardized due to popular renditions by artistes and is followed by their successors [2]. The kṛti ‘Sarasasāmadāna’ in the rāga Kāpinārāyaṇi is a typical example of the above-mentioned case. Madurai Mani Iyer immortalized the line ‘Hitavumātalentō’ with his scintillating neraval rendition for the kṛti.

Rāga Lakṣana

Kāpinārāyaṇi is the janya of the 28th mēla Harikāmbhōji. Among the Trinity, only Tyāgarāja has composed in this rāga. Post-trinity composers have explored the rāga through their compositions. The following is a list of known compositions in Kāpinārāyaṇi [3]:

1. Are re jayajayaparaśūrāma – Tripuṭa – Gōvindācārya

¹Here, minor rāga-s are considered to be those rāga-s which, according to N. Ramanathan, have a few determining characteristics and some typical phrases but allowing lesser scope for manōdharmā. This view was put forth by him in an email to the author’s guide Arati N. Rao dated 6th July 2020.

2. Cintalanniyu–Sriramachandra Murti Sistla
3. Dayasaramahasradainyam hara – Ādi–C. S. ShivaramakrishnaBhagavatar
4. Dhīm tana dhīm – Ādi – Veena SheshaIyer
5. JagadīśaBrōva – Ādi – TiruvotriyurThyagayya
6. Kalakalabala – MiśraĒka – ChitravinaRavikiran
7. KāpiNārāyaṇa – Bangalore S Mukund
8. Parabrahmamū – Ādi – PatnamSubramaniaIyer
9. Sarasasāma dāna – Ādi – Tyāgarāja
10. Satya pramāṇamuga – Sriramachandra Murti Sistla
11. Satyam Jnānam – Sriramachandra Murti Sistla
12. TillaiCidambaram – Ādi – Mārimutta Pillai

Among these 12 compositions, ‘Sarasasāma dāna’ is the most popular kṛti rendered on the concert stage.

The earliest mention of Kāpinārāyaṇi is seen in *SaṅgrahaCūḍāmaṇi* of Gōvindācārya[4]. The rāga is described as the janya of Harikāmbhōji. The scale provided is:

s r M p d N - Ś N d p M g r S r S

Ṣaḍja is described as the nyāsa, amśa and graha svāra.

Another work that mentions the rāga is Rāgalakṣaṇa, which was written around the 18th-19th century[4]. The scale provided is:

s r m p n ś - ś n d p m g r s

No other detail is mentioned in the work.

Rāga pravāham of D Pattammal lists three variations of the scale for Kāpinārāyaṇi [5]:

1. s r m p d n ś - ś n d p m g r s
2. s r m p n ś - ś n d p m g m r s
3. s r m p n ś - ś n ś d p m g r s

The scale currently identified with the rāga is s r m p d n ś - ś n d p m g r g r s.

The lakṣaṇa for the rāga is derived from the composition itself. Some of the prominent phrases seen in the composition are:

m g r g , r , - r m p d n , - m g g r r , - ś n n d d p m ,

The range of the rāga as seen in the composition is from Mandra Ni (ṇ) to TāraRi (ṛ). The entire composition is in a brisk medium tempo (madhyamakāla) and a lot of jāntiprayōga-s can be observed.

II. ANALYSIS

Overview

The kṛti ‘Sarasasāma dāna’, a composition of Tyāgarāja, is chosen for the case study.

The following criteria have been chosen for the analysis:

1. Range
2. Duration
3. Stages
4. Tempo
5. Phrases
6. Syllable placement
7. Neraval form

The renditions of the following artistes have been considered for this study:

1. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer [6]
2. G N Balasubramaniam [7]
3. Madurai Mani Iyer [8]
4. M L Vasantakumari [9]
5. Suryaprakash [10]
6. Sanjay Subrahmanyam [11]
7. Nithyashree Mahadevan [12]
8. Sandeep Narayan [13]
9. Amritha Murali [14]
10. Ramakrishnan Murthy [15]
11. Bharat Sundar [16]

The eleven artistes mentioned above can be classified into three categories on the basis of seniority; the first four belong to the first category, artistes five to seven belong to the second category and the last four belong to the third category.

1. Range

a. Commencement

Most of the artistes have begun the neraval around the niṣāda region . Some of them have chosen to begin the neraval around the dhaivata region , while one artiste has begun from the madhyama . In general, the trend appears to be dhaivata-niṣāda as a starting point for the neraval. The notations are given below:

1. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer

	;	;	;	n d	, n	, d	;	D				
	-	-	-	hita	-vu	-mā	-	ṭa				
	D	, n	d ś	n n	d d	p p	m m	;		r g	, r	;
	len	-tō	-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	-
	;	;	;	d n	, d	n	;	N				
	-	-	-	hita	-vu	mā	-	ṭa				
	N	, n	;	D	n ṛ	, n	;	N		D	, d	;
	len	-tō	-	bā	ga	-bal	-	ki		ti	-vi	-

2. Sanjay Subrahmanyam

	;	;	;	m m	, m	, m	;	M				
	-	-	-	hita	-vu	-mā	-	ṭa				
	;	;	;	;	;	r m	r m	S				
	-	-	-	-	-	len	-	-				
	r m	;	;	m m	, m	;	;	M				
	tō	-	-	hita	-vu	-	-	mā				
	;	;	;	P	m p	, m	;	, r		M	, S	;
	-	-	-	ṭa	len	-	-	- tō		-	-	-

b. Focal Points

The neraval for this kṛti is generally done in the middle -upper regions , that is, the pañcama to ṣaḍja region. Two artistes have adopted a step -by-step approach, beginning from riṣabha and madhyama , resting on each note and building the neraval. An excerpt from one of the renditions is provided below as an example:

Sandeep Narayan

	;	;	;	r p	, m	, m	;	m g				
	-	-	-	hi ta	-vu	-mā	-	ṭa				
	r s	r p	M	m g	r g	;	r s	R				
	len	-	tō	-	-	-	-	-				
	;	;	;	s r	, m	, m	;	m g				
	-	-	-	hi ta	-vu	-mā	-	ṭa				
	r s	, r	M	P	, d	, m	;	P		D	, D	;
	len	-tō	-	bā	- ga	-bal	-	ki		ti	- vi	-

c. Nyāsa

The nyāsa svāra-s are generally dhaivata , niṣāda and ṣaḍja . The lowest nyāsa svāra is madhyariṣabha while the highest is tāramadhyama. As mentioned earlier, some artistes, by adopting the step-by-step approach, have dwelt on each of the svāra-s in the rāga.

d. Lowest note

In general, the neraval renditions do not go below mandraniṣāda. Most of the artistes have restricted their neraval expositions to the region above madhyaṣaḍja and riṣabha.

e. Highest note

The highest note observed in the neraval renditions is the tārapañcama. Most of the artistes have touched the tāramadhyama as the highest note.

2. Duration

Table no 1: Shows the duration of the neraval and total rendition of the kṛti, and if the renditions include rāga ālāpanā and kalpana svara-s.

ARTISTE	TOTAL DURATION	NERAVAL	RAGA	SVARA
Semmagudi Srinivasa Iyer	9.5	4.5	N	Y
G N Balasubramaniam	17	2.5	Y	Y
Madurai Mani Iyer	23	5	N	Y
M L Vasanthakumari	16	2	Y	Y
R Suryaprakash	14	7	N	Y
SanjaySubrahmanyam	24.5	5	Y	Y
Nithyashree Mahadevan	15	5	N	Y
Sandeep Narayan	18.5	7	N	Y
Amritha Murali	12	3.5	N	Y
Ramakrishnan Murthy	11	6	N	N
Bharat Sundar	23	8	N	Y

As can be seen in the table above, the duration of neraval rendition for the kṛti is usually around 5 to 6 minutes. The neraval exposition takes up around 30% of the total rendition on average.

3. Stages

In general, most of the renditions are in a single stage. As the kṛti is in the madhyamakāla, the expositions are brisk, and in a consistent tempo, with no demarcation between the first and the second speed. Three of the artistes have chosen to adopt the step-by-step approach, which lends itself to two stages of neraval: the freestyle, or the ālāpana type, and the mēlkāla, or the fast type. One artist has adopted a multi-stage approach described below:

First stage – Lower range, freestyle (N-P region)

Second stage – Middle range – ālāpana type

Third stage – Mēlkāla

Fourth stage – Back to ālāpana type neraval

Fifth stage – Build up to mēlkāla, higher rang

4. Tempo

Most of the neraval renditions are in the madhyamakāla as mentioned in the above criteria. The tempo of the kṛti is reflected in the neraval expositions. Minor fluctuations in the tempo can be seen.

5. Phrases

5.1 Rāga ālāpana

A preliminary analysis of rāga ālāpana was done to examine unique phrases, if any, that would contribute to the understanding of how a rāga develops through manōdharmā saṅgīta. A detailed analysis of rāga ālāpana is beyond the scope of this study.

In rāga ālāpana renditions, the general observation is that the nyāsa svara-s commonly adopted are D and N. Interestingly, one of the artistes from the third category has chosen to explore the possibility of P as a nyāsa svara. This has given rise to unique phrases such as ‘MGRGRS RMP,’ and ‘P, MG RG, S R, M, P,’ which appear to be similar to phrases of the rāga Kēdāragauḷa.²

Parallels are observed such as ‘MGRG,R, NDPD,P,’. Unique phrases such as ‘NŚRMĀRŚN,’ ‘Ś;PDNŚRN,’ ‘MĠR,ŚRN,’ and so on can be observed.

5.2 Neraval

²While the phrase ‘MGRGRS RMP,’ is also a typical phrase of the rāga Nārāyaṇagauḷa, its rendition in this particular instance is closer to Kēdāragauḷa.

In the neraval renditions, the general observation is that the neraval phrases are interspersed with ascending and descending akāra-s. Slow phrases are not observed. Most of the artistes have chosen to utilize shorter repetitive phrases, such as ‘ND-NDN-NDN-ND-NDN-NDN-DP-DPD-DPD-PM-PMP-MPD...’.

Most of the artistes have used the phrase ‘MGRGR’, in madhya and tārasthāyi -s. This phrase is seen sparsely in the kṛti and is not reflected in the scale. Yet it has been famously associated with the rāga and is one of the defining phrases. Some of the more unique phrases observed include: R̄M, ĠR̄, - R̄M, ĠS̄, - M̄ĠR̄S̄N,

6. Syllable placement

In general, the neraval renditions adhere to a fixed placement, as that lends to the flow of the rāga. In cases where the neraval exposition is done in stages, the later stages do not adhere to the fixed placement of the syllables. It is discarded in favor of the flow of the melody. The rule here seems to be that as long as it supports the flow of the rāga and the neraval, a fixed placement is adhered to.

The syllable placement in the kṛti:

	;	;	;	n d	, p	, d	;	d p					
				hita	- vu	- mā	-	ṭa					
	n d	p m	;	R		, m	p d	N	d p		D	, d	;
	len	- tō	-	bā		- ga	bal	-	ki		ti	- vi	-

An excerpt from a neraval rendition by Sandeep Narayan:

	;	;	;	n d	, n	, d	;	D					
				hita	- vu	- mā	-	ṭa					
	p m	, p	D	R		, m	P	, p	;		d m	pd	;
	len	- tō	-	bā		- ga	bal	-ki	-		ti	vi	-

7. Neraval Form

With respect to the form, there are two approaches as mentioned earlier: the stage-by-stage development and the single stage approach. In this particular kṛti (and the rāga), the focal point is the D-N region. It is observed that even in the multi-stage development, the renditions tend to gravitate frequently to the focal point. The multi-stage approach can be considered to be a ‘template’ that can be applied to other minor rāga-s. However, the neraval content will still vary from rāga to rāga according to the focal point. This natural gravitation towards the focal point helps in preserving the aesthetic beauty of the kṛti and the rāga.

III. FINDINGS

- The artistes have typically begun the neraval renditions from D – N, and embellished in the P-Ś region, that is, the uttarāṅga. No drastic variation is seen between the three categories.
- The second and the third categories of artistes have experimented with a multi-stage approach to neraval, but most of the artistes have rendered the neraval in a single stage.
- It is observed that the artistes who have taken the multi-stage approach have treated each of the svāra-s as nyāsa, but in general, typically D, N and Ś are the points for nyāsa.
- The kṛti's range is from Ḍ to R̄, but it is observed that in general, the neraval renditions do not go below Ḍ. Conversely, most of the artistes have touched M̄ and P̄ as the highest notes.
- The length of neraval rendition is typically between five to six minutes. It is observed that while it is common to sing the kṛti and take up neraval without singing an ālāpana, very rarely is the neraval not followed by svāra prasthāra.
- In the single stage approach, the neraval exposition is brisk and in a consistent tempo, with no clear demarcation between the first and second speed, or the free-flowing stage and the mēlkāla stage. In the multi-stage approach, typically it is done in two stages: the semi-rhythmic stage and the mēlkāla stage.
- The gait of the kṛti is reflected in the neraval renditions, with minor fluctuations in tempo.
- Short repetitive patterns are observed in the renditions.
- While the phrase 'MGRGR,' is observed in the kṛti in only three instances, it has been identified as one of the defining phrases of the rāga. Variations of this phrase are also observed in the renditions.
- The syllables are rendered in their respective positions since the line and the placement of the syllables lend to the flow of the rāga. In the case of multi-stage neraval exposition, the later stages, or mēlkāla neraval, do not adhere to the fixed placement.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is observed that the kṛti is the foundational material on which the manōdharmā rendition is based. Since there is only one well-known composition in Kāpinārāyaṇi, the scope of manōdharmā is limited to the phrases and the picture of the rāga provided by the composition. This can be observed in the various renditions, where common themes are adhered to. The kṛti itself is based around the uttarāṅga portion of the scale, and that is again reflected in the manōdharmā renditions. While each artiste has incorporated their style viz. long kārve-s, brika-s and so on in their exposition, the general structure and approach is very similar.

The second and the third categories of artistes have attempted to experiment with the boundaries of the rāga, which is reflected in the multi-stage approach adopted by some of the artistes and the unique phrases observed in the rāga ālāpana and neraval renditions. A surprising phenomenon is that even though the rāga offers limited scope and information for manōdharmā, it has become widely popular and is rarely rendered without at least a brief rendition of neraval.

Analysis throws light on the fact that while musicians adhere to the commonly established boundaries of the rāga, true creativity occurs on the stage when each artiste contributes by experimenting with and pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable. This could be perhaps how rāga-s previously considered to be minor are increasingly being chosen for pallavi renditions and detailed exploration in manōdharmā. A rāga grows in scope by being handled by generations of artistes who each contribute their unique stamp in the rāga, adding more information to the existing structure in terms of phrases.

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