

# The nuance of Kathakali music

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(Courtesy to THE HINDU : by LEELA VENKATARAMAN)



One of the most evolved art forms, music for Kathakali, is often inadequately understood by Carnatic music aficionados who normally compare it with grammar and rules that apply to their own music and find it lacking. Music as a vachika element in Kathakali is designed entirely to enable and enhance characterisation, and not primarily for expressing classical virtuosity. Though Kathakali music ragas are largely from the Carnatic genre, there are ragas special to it and not known to Carnatic singing and even those common to Carnatic music in usage and 'prayog' for this dance drama form follow an individualistic mode.

In the 19th Century, Travancore had only the Sopanam style of singing as a continuation of what was used in the earlier tradition of Ramanattom. In central Kerala, the Tiruvilwamala and Mottedattu schools of music were basically Sopanam. It was only around 1910 that musician Kavusseri Masnu Bhagavatar brought in the Carnatic elements and this trend was popularised for Kathakali by Nemmara Madhava Menon and with the later Venkatakrishna Bhagavatar, the Carnatic music element increased to include raga alapana.

But while the raga is often Carnatic, the very slow tempo in which it is sung is certainly a regional element. In fact the "Chembada tala chauka kalai" singing which requires phenomenal voice and breath control to hold each moment of a note that much longer, without in any way lessening the flow and continuity of melody, is not easy for any singer to master. One understands the need for two singers, one main and the other who takes up the refrain from where it is left off. Along with this almost boneless suppleness of voice full of emotion, a mastery over rhythm, both inherent

and acquired is a must, for the singer keeps time with his beat on the Gong (if the main singer) and with cymbals (for the second singer).

### Sense of timing

Also the singer has to keep his eyes riveted on the actor for every little body movement has to synchronise with the gong beat. So adept are experienced singers that every nuance of a moving facial muscle is anticipated and synchronised with the gong rhythm. The training of a singer for Kathakali is in conjunction with a performing actor, after the 'janteswara', etc., training like it is for the Carnatic singer. After varnam, the next step of learning singing of padams from various Attakalaris or plays, are in conjunction with a Kathakali performer. The singer has to control the performance, its tempo and also the percussionists by his acute sense of timing. The raga used is entirely governed by the mood and character and unlike Carnatic music where a Kambodhi would not be followed almost immediately by a Yadukula Kambodhi, or a Husseni or Mukhari or even Anandabhairavi would not follow a Bhairavi rendition, Kathakali music has no such qualms, for if the mood demands a certain raga, its following soon after another raga very close to it, is no restricting factor. Unlike other dance forms which for abhinaya delight in using lyrics interpreting love in separation (viniyoga), Kathakali revels in sambhoga sringar situations where the hero and his beloved are lost in contemplation of each other's beauty. Nalacharitam's "Kupalaya volochane, bale, bhaimi, kusalayaadhare, charuseele" where Nala addresses his wife joyfully describing every detail of her physical attributes, rendered in mandara sthaya in two avartans (rhythmic cycles) of adanta tala – the first tempo in 56 matras, moves so slowly that the really accomplished singer can add a nectarine quality with his melody and words inspiring the best out of the hero. As the eyes of the actor move to each aspect of Damayanthi being described, the singer has to keep in pace – which is why Kathakali experts very often prize the singer more for his conducting ability than for his melodious rendition – though a wailing high-pitched singing in Bhairavi or Todi can create goose pimples in the listener.

### No pause!

Apart from the slow singing which is very difficult to master, the fluidity takes years to acquire. Unlike classical musicians, a Kathakali musician goes from raga to raga with no pause. The singer rendering in Natakuranji "Devi sukhamo" as Hanuman falls at the feet of Sita when he is led to the ashram by Lava and Kusa in "Lavanasuravadham" is heart rending for audiences. Ragas like Padi (not from Mayamalavagowla as janya but from Harikambhoji), Puraneer, Indalam, Begada ragam sung using madhyama sruti, Navaroz are special to Kathakali Natyasangeet. So also ragas are used for moods they are normally not associated with in Carnatic music as Neelambari used for raudra and veera rasa as against a lullaby or similar mood in Carnatic music. Similarly, Ahiri is used for Veera mood rather than Karuna. In a scene showing Krishna reasoning with Duryodhana to hand over some part of the kingdom to the Pandavas after completing the period of exile, Duryodhana's belligerence in Begada and Krishna's pleading tone in Senjurutti make a wonderful contrast heightening the dramatic tension.

The drums like the Chenda, a most versatile instrument which can bring out any tonal quality in the world and the maddalam as percussion (particularly important in the cholliattam improvised segments) add the final dimension to the drama in Kathakali.

Sadanam Harikumar in a most informative lecture at Chennai's Kalakshetra showed how the gait, rhythm and metres in which Tanam is sung in Carnatic music, has been imitated in recitative parts of sahitya rendered at a speed in high points of climax in Kathakali.

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