

Ramnad Krishnan and his Music

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by Dr. Ritha Rajan

Shri.Ramnad Krishnan was the first Indian musician to be called ‘a musicians’ musician’. He was an exceptional artist who was more concerned about the appreciation of his peers and his intimate learned rasika-s. He used to say ‘that Donald Bradman is a cricketing genius should be certified by Garry Sobers and not by someone else!’ Though he never considered himself to be a big commercial success, his colleagues and even his seniors always admired him and acknowledged that he was a complete musician with special unique talents. More than the general listening public, it was the true experts who appreciated his rare musical gifts and acclaimed him as **their** musician! He was not a formula musician who sang exactly what the audience expected to hear.

With an extraordinary music creativity or manōdharmā not only in rāga but also in laya, a unique stylistic presentation of compositions, and a strict adherence to the Carṇāṭic music tradition with a mutual respect and a keen ear for other music traditions, Krishnan achieved to imbibe music in its entirety as a true conscientious artist. Like Ustad Amir Khan of Hindustānī music, Krishnan could ‘blend talent with imagination, intellect with emotion and technique with temperament’.

Ramnad Krishnan’s musical background

Born to Vaidhyathan and Brihannayaki in Alapuzha in Kerala in 1918, Krishnan had seven siblings. He used to fondly remember his elder sister who could sing very well. His eldest brother Lakshmi Narayanan, father and guru of the famous violin trio, was a violin vidvān and even to this day, he is remembered in Sri Lanka, as a great music teacher. Ramnad Easwaran, as he was known in the music circles, was staff mṛdangam artist in All India Radio, New Delhi and had active participation in the vādyā vṛnda and other prestigious programmes collaborating with Pt. Ravishankar, Emani Sankara Sastry and his nephew M.Y. Kama Sastry. Another elder brother, Ramnad Venkatachalam was staff violin artist in Tirunelveli All India Radio. Ramnad Krishnan was the fourth son. His younger brothers were Mani, who was highly knowledgeable about music and Ramnad Raghavan, who taught mṛdangam at the Wesleyan University, USA and was one of the founders of the Cleveland Tyagaraja Aradhana.

Soon after Krishnan’s birth, the family moved to Ramanathapuram (anglicized as Ramnad) in Tamil Nadu. The brothers learnt music from Vidvān Ramanathapuram C.S.Sankarasivam, elder brother of mṛdangam vidvān C.S. Murugabhupathi. The family’s stay at Ramanathapuram and their tutelage under Ramanathapuram Sankarasivam gave the prefix Ramnad to their names. Before learning from Sankarasivam, Krishnan had initial training from Talaignayiru Subramanya Bhagavatar.

Relocation to Madras (the present Chennai)

Around 1936, Krishnan relocated to Madras and started his music profession. He had made associations with respected vidvāns like NS Krishnaswami Iyengar (known as Mottu Krishnaswami in the musicians' circles), the direct disciple of Kanchipuram Naina Pillai, PN Raghava Rao, disciple of the highly respected West Mambalam Kittamani Iyer, and TR Balu, the disciple of GNB. Initially, like all the aspiring young musicians of those days, he was so captivated by GNB's music. Later, with the association of NS Krishnaswami Iyengar, he acquired Tyāgarāja kīrtana-s of the Walajapet tradition and was also introduced to the music of Vīna Dhanammal. After listening to Brinda and Mukta, granddaughters of Vīna Dhanammal, he had a musical transformation and was firmly convinced that music had to be tranquil to have a long lasting impression in the listeners' minds. After much deliberation and deep reflective thinking, he successfully combined the best elements of the music of Vīna Dhanammal and those of the GNB bāṇi and created a style that was a coherent whole. It had both tradition and modernity and had continued to be apposite over the years.

The Music Academy concert in 1957

The afternoon concert of Ramnad Krishnan at the Music Academy's Annual Music conference in the year 1957 was a turning point in his music career. It was outstanding, featuring a breathtaking ālāpana of the scalar rāga umābharaṇam that was given a very aesthetic musical expression, followed by Tyāgarāja's kīrtana 'nijamarmamulanu' so attractively presented and complimented with sparkling kalpana svara-s. The concert reached its pinnacle in the rāgam tānam pallavi in bēgaḍa rāga. The president of that year's conference, Sangita Kalanidhi Shri T Chowdiah, who attended the concert, was so overwhelmed that he openly declared in everyone's presence that even leading accompanists like him should think twice, be very observant, and attentive while accompanying Ramnad Krishnan. Also he recommended Krishnan's name for the next year conference's 9 pm slot and volunteered to accompany him on the violin. Mṛdangam maestro Palani Shri. Subramanya Pillai, who attended the concert, along with his disciple Shri. Trichy Sankaran, appreciated the whole concert and especially the pallavi and offered to accompany Krishnan in his forthcoming concerts. The warm genuine gestures by these two veteran artists inspired Ramnad Krishnan so much that he never looked back. He was offered the evening concert during the 1959 conference of the Music Academy.

Ramnad Krishnan always acknowledged that it was the Madras Music Academy and the senior vidvāns like Chowdiah and Palani Subramanya Pillai who encouraged him to stay committed to the eternal values of Carṇāṭic Music. Many of his memorable concerts took place at the Academy, where he launched new compositions, ventured into raṅgi rāga-s and sang very innovative rāgam tānam pallavi-s.

The 1957 Music Academy concert of Shri. Ramnad Krishnan was highly lauded by Shri. Neelam (S.Neelamegham), the famous music critic of yester years in the Swadesamithran magazine.

Ramnad Krishnan was visiting teaching faculty at the Wesleyan University US in 1967. He was there hardly for three months and came back to India as he missed his family and his ardent rasika-s in his homeland. From 1970 to 1973, he taught in the Central College of Carnatic Music, Madras (the present Tamil Nadu Music & Fine Arts University)

Music of Ramnad Krishnan, an overview

He had the firm conviction that Indian Music was Rāga Music and that both the Carṇāṭic and Hindustāni systems had their unique rāga styles. The ultimate purpose in both systems was the rāga delineation in all its facets. Major rāga-s should never be deviated from their traditional boundaries. For example, he would never compromise by way of singing tōḍi rāga ālāpana with lighter phrases or with plain svara-s, suggesting shades of sindubhairavi to please the audience. At the same time, while singing tānaṁ in the same tōḍi, he would appropriately introduce plain svara tāna patterns as per the tāna singing dharma. Thus he always kept tradition or saṁpradāya foremost in his mind and successfully balanced that with innovation which was the natural bent of his mind. In niraval singing also, he always adhered to tradition, which was quite testing. In singing kalpana svara-s and in laya vyavahāra, he displayed rare creativity that always surprised and stunned his peers.

Ramnad Krishnan was very particular that both the Carṇāṭic and Hindustāni music styles were inimitable and should not be tampered with. As said earlier, he handled tōḍi rāga as per the Carṇāṭic idiom. Similarly he sang sāvēri rāga with its characteristic flattened gāndhāra niṣāda-s, as specified in the śāstra.

Being very much aware that Carṇāṭic Music had become highly composition oriented, he had acquired a vast repertoire of various types of compositions of various vāggēyakāra-s. Out of this common pool or song collection (or pāṭhāntara, as the Carṇāṭic musicians refer to it), he had formed his concert repertoire, which he had specialized very meticulously. He would not mix his resource repertoire with his concert repertoire.

Summing up, Ramnad Krishnan believed in complete musicianship. As a committed Carṇāṭic musician, he had a vast pāṭhāntara, performed good kīrtana renderings, rāga ālāpana, niraval, kalpana svara, rāgaṁ tānaṁ pallavi and rāgamālika ślōka/virutta. He established his musical identity by presenting rāga ālāpana with novelty, enhancing the rakṭi rāga-s with new dimensions, magically transforming insipid scales as worthy raṇjaka rāga-s and venturing creatively even into the prohibited areas of laya.

He was a highly principled guru and taught his disciples as to how to become a total musician first. He never ever thrust his ‘bāṇi’ or style on any of them. He taught them all the general aspects of music and played the role of a guide when it came to their preferences and choices. He always taught only one disciple at a time and never taught them in groups. He was very particular about giving personal attention to each disciple.

a. Rāga ālāpana was his priority

Ramnad Krishnan's concerts were always cherished mainly for his profound rāga ālāpana. It was his rāga singing that made his concerts so memorable and it is not an overstatement to say that his very name was synonymous with rāga ālāpana. Saṅgīta Kalānidhi Shri D K Jayaraman used to comment that even the most arbitrary and disorganised musical scale (ārōhaṇa/avarōhaṇa) would be magically transformed into a beautiful rāga by Ramnad Krishnan. Rāga-s like bahudāri and umābharaṇam attained the status of rañjaka rāga-s when Krishnan developed them. They would have otherwise continued to be minor scalar rāga-s. Krishnan was always fascinated by the rāga-s, had a kind of emotional bond with them and strived to give them their due melodic entity. He was a **Pygmalion among musicians** and breathed life into any rāga that he sang! His inspiration for rāga singing came mainly from Saṅgīta Kalānidhi Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavathar. Who would delineate so aesthetically even less heard rāga-s like māḷavi and baṅgāḷa. In fact Shri GNB also had been very much attracted and influenced by Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavathar. GNB's innovative ālāpana of rāga-s like māḷavi, kiraṇāvali and chenchu kām̐bhōji bear testimony to this.

Rāga-s like aṭhāṇa, sahāna, janarañjani, kīravāṇi, bēgaḍa and kām̐bhōji were given an altogether different new approach by Ramnad Krishnan. He gave a new portrayal of the rāga aṭhāṇa by exploring all its musical potentialities in the madhya sthāyi. Till then, the rāga aṭhāṇa had been labelled as an uttarāṅga rāga !The rāga sahāna which was always sung with very limited phrases that were bound by a typical sahāna varṇa mettu or tune, was elevated as a prime rakṭi rāga by Ramnad Krishnan .To enhance the rāga status, he floated new kīrtana-s in sahāna like 'sari evare' composed by Tirupati Narayanaswami, the Tamil pada 'ini enna pechirukkudu' of Vaidiswarankoil Subbarama Iyer and brought back Tyāgarāja's 'raghupathē rāmā' which had been exiled for some time. He sang all the three kīrtana-s of Tyāgarāja in janarañjani rāga with elaborate ālāpana, presenting appropriate combinations of slow and fast phrases which gave a novelty to the rāga. He had a special liking for the harmonic minor scale of Western music which corresponds to the Carṇāṭic rāga kīravāṇi. Having listened to the Western interpretation, he brilliantly introduced highly appealing consonant musical phrases in the typical Carṇāṭic style. He was so proud that viduṣi-s Smts.T. Brinda and MLV were all admiration for his kīravāṇi rāga ālāpana! He was one of those very few musicians who sang a very impressive harikām̐bhōji, without any traces of kām̐bhōji and he was the first musician to have commenced the rāga ālāpana for kām̐bhōji in the pūrvāṅga, with the typical grand kām̐bhōji gāndhāra and broke the convention that kām̐bhōji ālāpana should always start only as n d P dṁg p d or as ds N d In kām̐bhōji, though many compositions develop from the madhya sthāyi, with extensions in the maṇḍra sthāyi, when it comes to rāga ālāpana, it has been customary to commence only as n d P dṁg p d or as ds N d. It was Ramnad Krishnan who broke this convention!

b. Phrase oriented rāga ālāpana

The sañchāra-s or phrases in the rāga-s meant so much for him and he always viewed rāga-s on the basis of the phrases they contained and not by their mere svara-s. He was always conscious of the importance given to the ārōhaṇa/avarōhaṇa of the rāga-s in Carnāṭic Music. At the same time he could also shrewdly keep at arm's length, the regimented ārōhaṇa/avarōhaṇa, if they came in the way of the free and aesthetic expression of the rāga. Highlighting all the core phrases in a rāga, he also brought in other phrases in the same rāga-s that were identified by him and presented all the phrases so artistically that it was a gratifying musical experience for him and his listeners.

He had the rare gift to unfold any rāga with profound artistry and to roll it back with the same dexterity. Even the winding up phase of his rāga ālāpana sustained the interest, thrill and excitement!

He enjoyed a kind of fondness for appropriately bringing in certain well – known phrases from the respective compositions while singing a rāga and also certain stylistic phrases that were typical of other stalwart musicians. While singing bhairavi ālāpana, he would suitably incorporate certain ranjaka phrases from the well known Kshetrappa padam 'rāma rāma prāṇa sakshi' which were very much in conformity with the rāga flow. Similarly, he embellished the rāga-s bēgaḍa and surati with a few highly impressive musical phrases found in the Kshetrappa padam-s sung in the oral tradition.

c. His unique niraval and kalpana svara-s

Ramnad Krishnan always adhered to the traditional practice of presenting niraval in madhyamakāla even at the very outset. As the niraval progressed, the complexity also increased in due proportion and the whole process was highly challenging. His niraval for the line 'valaci padamula nammite' in the sāvēri rāga kīrtana 'daridāpūlēka', and the phrase 'tāmarasa ḍaḷa nētri tyāgarājuni mitri' in 'ammarāvamma' in kalyāṇi rāga (to cite a few) were always cherished by all. He had been inspired by his seniors like Mazhavarayanendal Subbarama Bhagavathar and sang a tight madhyamakāla niraval with 'kāydaa' (a word used very commonly by the yesteryear musicians to denote the adventurous way of singing niraval and kalpanasvara-s. For the listeners it was a herculean task to keep the tāḷa!)

His kalpanasvara-s for the rāga-s, aṭhāṇa (mummūrtulugumi), jayamanōhari (yagñadulu), śrīraṅjani (bhuviniḍasudane) and pūrṇacāndrika (nējēsina) were very creative and innovative. He was perhaps the only musician of our times to have sung kalpanasvara-s for pūrṇacāndrika in great detail as if it was a major rāga like śaṅkarābharaṇam or bhairavi!

It was Ramnad Krishnan who introduced for the first time madhyamakāla kārvaī while singing kōrvaī-s in kalpanasvara-s.

g r s n **Ṭ**, r s n d **Ṭ**, s n d p m

(The bold letters mark the svara-s sung with madhyamakāla kārvaī)

d. The memorable Rāgam Tānam Pallavi –s (RTP)

The pallavi themes set by Ramnad Krishnan were always unique and challenging. His three beats pallavi-s like 'kāṇaṅkidaikkumo sabeśan' in varāḷi rāga, 'cēta śrīrāman' in tōḍi and four kaḷai pallavi-s like 'mā madura mīnāṅṣi' in bhairavi and 'kaṇcadaḷāyatakṣi' in kīravāṇi had the unusual fractional grahaṁ or eḍuppu after 3 ½ beats and were very innovative. It was he who popularized such pallavi-s with fractional eḍuppu.

His pallavi-s in khaṇḍa ṇaḍai and miśra ṇaḍai were also very much sought after. Like the Alathur brothers, Shri. Krishnan relished singing the ṇaḍai pallavi-s in 1¼ and 1¾ kaḷai with an amazing facility and thus providing a fitting finale to the whole RTP .

His tānam singing was traditional in uniform madhyama kāla. It was short, crisp and in accordance with the rules laid down for tāna singing.

e. Ślōka or viruttam singing

Krishnan always enjoyed singing ślōka/viruttam as rāgamālika towards the close of the concert. He chose rāga-s like sāvēri, dēvagāṇḍhāri, kāpi, hamīrkalyāṇi and behāg and ended with suraṭi. His voice was at its best and the presentation was relaxed with free manōdharmā. He always used to remember Saṅgīta Kalānidhi Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer while singing ślōka-s and the very thought inspired him so much.

He was one of the very few musicians who had consciously groomed his voice and achieved a unique timbre which could bring in the best sound production and modulation. It is interesting that the great German physician and physicist Helmholtz had made an in depth study of such well cultivated voices which are capable of producing harmonics or upper partials as in the musical instruments.

f. An extensive and exhaustive repertoire of compositions

Ramnad Krishnan had accessed a vast collection of compositions from various authentic sources. Tyāgarāja kīrtana-s of the Walajapet tradition were acquired from Saṅgīta Kalānidhi T Brinda and NS Krishnaswami Iyengar and many Tyāgarāja kīrtana-s were obtained from the Umayalpuram paper manuscripts, some of them being very rare like the two kīrtana-s 'ānyāyamu sēyakara' and 'ēdinibāhubala' in the earlier kāpi rāga of a compound structure, being a blend of darbār and kānaḍa and 'callaganāto' in the rāga vēgavāhini as per Tyāgarāja's school. He launched the kīrtana 'ānyāyamusēyakara' with rāga and svara in one of his Music Academy concerts. His concert repertoire consisted of mainly Tyāgarāja kīrtana-s, Patṇam Subrahmaṇya Iyer kīrtana-s and select kīrtana-s of ŚyāmaŚastri. He usually chose to sing Dīkṣitar kīrtana-s that were Vīna Dhanammal's parampara versions such as 'aṅṣayaliṅgavibho', 'aṅgarakam', 'mināṅṣi mēmudam', 'śrī subrahmaṇyāya namaste' and the vāra kīrtana-s.

At the same time he was equally at home while rendering kīrtana-s like ‘ēkāṁranātham’ which came from *outside*!

He had learnt many Telugu padaṁ-s and jāvaḷi-s from Smts. Brinda and Mukta. While singing padaṁ or jāvaḷi he did not blindly imitate their style. He believed in individual interpretation which was never a hindrance to the great tradition that they belonged to.

Credit goes to Shri. Krishnan for having immortalized many kīrtana-s and certain jāvaḷi-s. ‘Śrī mānini’ and ‘lāvaṇya rāma’ in pūrṇaṣaḍjaṁ, ‘tuḷasammā’ in dēvagāndhāri, ‘nējēsina’ in pūrṇacāndrika, ‘ninnāḍanēla’ in kannāḍa, ‘mummūrtulu’ in aṭhāṇa, the jāvaḷi-s ‘nyāyamugāḍura’ and ‘parulanamāṭa’, to name a few. Krishnan learnt the jāvaḷi ‘parulanamāṭa’ in kāpirāga from Rupavatiāmmal, the younger sister of Vina Dhanammal who lived in Hyderabad. It was he who brought to limelight, this lovely jāvaḷi, which was sung in upāṅga kāpi without aṇyasvara-s.

Ramnāḍ Krishnan was a great musician of our times, who had a judicious consciousness of the past music, a shrewd awareness of the prevailing musical trends and a very positive expectation and hope for the art to flourish further in future!