

AN APPRECIATION

# SRI TYAGARAJA

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Exactly five years ago, the Sangeet Natak Akademi celebrated the bi-centenary of Sri Shyama Sastry and I had the privilege of presiding over the function. This year (May 1967-68) we are celebrating the bi-centenary of that great saint and music composer, Sri Tyagaraja, and it has been my proud privilege again to preside on this occasion.

Sri Tyagaraja was born in 1767 at Thiruvarur, which is one of the well-known sacred places in South India. While he was still a boy his father Ramabrahman migrated to Thiruvayyar, another sacred place on the banks of the Kaveri. Here Sri Tyagaraja studied music with Sonti Venkataramanayya, who was a musician attached to the Tanjore Court. I propose here to refer to his outstanding qualities as an eminent *vaggeyakaraka*, or composer. To truly evaluate them, it is necessary to emphasise two of the prominent traits in his character, which bear strongly on his music, one is his *bhakti* to Rama and the other is his worship of *nada* as divine. He was initiated in the *Taraka Rama Mantra* and threw himself heart and soul into the contemplation and meditation of Rama and of his great qualities. Though Tyagaraja describes Rama as a *para-brahma*, transcending Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, actually his conception of him was as of a personal God. In other words, his was a *sagunopasana*. In his songs he is in raptures in describing the beauty, the grace, the sweetness of speech and the life of Rama. How this influenced his music, it will presently be found. Secondly, he worshipped music as divine. In

the song *Shobhillu Sapta Swara* in raga *Jaganmohini*, he extols the beauty of the *sapta swaras*. In the *kriti*, *Nada Tanum Anisam* he declares adopting the invocation stanza in *Sangita-Ratnakara*, that the *sapta swaras* constitute the body of Lord Shiva. Thus, *Rama bhakti* and *nadopasana* are the two cardinal features of the music of Sri Thyagaraja.

To appreciate the great contribution of Sri Thyagaraja to our music it is necessary to picture to ourselves the state of music in South India before his times. Leaving folksongs out of account, music can be classified into two categories — devotional and aesthetic. The hymns of the *sama veda* were set to music. Following this, sacred music has always occupied an important place in the culture of this country. To this category belong the *tevarams* of the Saivaite Saints, the *prabandams* of the Vaishnavite Saints in the 17th to the 19th century in South India, the *devar namas* in Canarese of the *dasa* Composers from the 10th to 14th century. Subsequently, songs in Sanskrit came to be composed as part of the worship of deities and these came to be called *bhajan* and this stream has continued to flow uninterrupted down to the present. The object of these songs is to inculcate *bhakti* and the emphasis is therefore on the words and their meaning. They are set to music but the purpose is only to enhance the devotional appeal of the songs. Therefore, they are in popular *ragas* and the melodies are simple.

Alongside the sacred and *bhajan* music, there was also a development of music as an art. This also has been traced to the *samagana*, in which *sapta swaras* are used and they are in what is known as *kharaharapriya* scale.

It was on this foundation that *jathis* and *murchanas* were developed resulting ultimately in the evolution of the *melas* and *ragas* of the present day. It is for this reason that the *Sangeet Ratnakara* declares that Brahma evolved music out of *samagana*.

The two categories of music aforesaid — *bhajan* music and art music — existed side by side all through the ages. There was no necessary connection between the two. There were *bhaktas* who sang *bhajan* songs but were indifferent to art music and likewise there were exponents of art music who were indifferent to *bhajan* songs. This dichotomy would

appear to have been a normal feature of South Indian music, until we come to the beginning of the 18th century. At that period a new form of composition called *kriti* came into vogue which sought to combine both *bhakti* and art music. Songs were composed in praise of God but they were set to melodies with an eye to their aesthetic excellence. This form of composition was perfected by Shri Tyagaraja and his two illustrious contemporaries, Muthuswamy Dikshithar and Shyama Sastri, who are called the Trinity of classical South Indian music.

It has been already mentioned that the two outstanding characteristics of Shri Tyagaraja were his *Rama bhakti* and *nadopasana*. In his *kirtanas* he emphasised the importance of both these elements. He has often said that a mere knowledge of music without *bhakti* is useless, as for example, in *Sangeetha Jnanamu Bhaktivina* in *raga Dhanyasi*. Likewise he has emphasised the beauty of *ragas* and *swaras*. For example, in the *kirtana*, *Mokshamu Galada* in *raga Saramati*, he affirms that it is only through music that divinity is reached. In the *kirtana*, *Nada Loludai* in *Kalyana Vasantha* he prescribes *nadopasana* as means of attaining *brahmananda*. One great result of this combination of *bhakti* and art music has been the spread of knowledge of classical music. Persons who listened to the *kritis* of Shri Tyagaraja for their *bhakti* content gradually came to acquire a knowledge of the *ragas* in which they are composed and thus there has been a popularisation of classical music on an unprecedented scale. Likewise, musicians who are purely art-minded came gradually to acquire *bhakti* and thus the gulf between the two classes of music has been greatly bridged. The value therefore of the contribution of Shri Tyagaraja and this contemporaries to classical music cannot be over-estimated.

The songs of Sri Tyagaraja are varied in character. They can be classed under three categories: firstly, those in which the *bhakti* element predominates; secondly, those in which the emphasis is on art-music; and, thirdly, those in which *bhakti* and art elements are both well matched. In the first category fall the songs known as *Divyanama kirtanas*. The emphasis therein is on *bhakti* and the music is in familiar *ragas* and the melodies are simple. Then there is the second category of compositions in which the emphasis is on art, though the element of *bhakti* is also present. Richness of *ragabhava* is of the essence of these *kritis*. Now, the concept

of *raga* is the most distinctive feature of Indian art music. What are *ragas*? These are sound pictures which are regarded as distinct personnae. They transcend words. Our tradition regards them as divine personalities. The featuring of *ragas*, that is, *raga alapa* has always been considered to be the highest form of art. This tradition has come to us from the days of Bharata and it has continued without a break. Even at the present day it is *raga alapa* that is regarded as the climax in music concerts. There are many *kritis* in which Tyagaraja has pursued this ideal. The *pancharatna kirthana* for example, are rightly regarded as master-pieces of classical music on account of the richness and fullness of the *raga sancharas* therein. In this category fall *kritis* like *Chakkaniraja* in *raga Kharaharapriya*, *Darini Telusu* in *raga Shuddha Saveri*, and others. Tyagaraja shares the distinction with Muthuswamy Dikshithar, of having handled the largest number of *ragas*. In familiar *ragas* like *Todi*, he has written a number of compositions exhausting, so to say, the *raga sancharas*. There are several *ragas*, like *Ranjini*, for example, which he alone has handled.

Another remarkable contribution of Sri Tyagaraja to art music lies in his improvisation of what are known as *sangatis*. Before Tyagaraja, the scheme of composition was that for every *sahitya* there was a distinct melody and if a melody had to be changed fresh, *sahityam* therefore should also be given. It is for this reason that we find that in the compositions of Kshetragna, for example, the melody variations are rich and the *sahitya* is also correspondingly profuse. Sri Tyagaraja adopted the method of varying the melodies, with the same *sahitya* contents. Thus, we have a succession of *sancharas* of the *raga* built on the same *sahitya*. In other words, with the minimum of *sahitya*, he produced the maximum of melody. These variations are known as *sangatis*. In general, the purpose of the *sangatis* is only elaboration of *raga sancharas*. But occasionally, they also serve the purpose of expressing different shades of emotion. An illustration of this might be found in the *pallavi* of the *kirtana*, *Namo-Rala Kim* in *raga Devagandhari*. Thus we find that Tyagaraja has handled a large number of *ragas*, bringing out their full features in the form of *sangatis*. It is this richness of the *raga-bhava* that gives him a place among the greatest of the composers of art music.

Then we come to the third category of compositions in which

equal emphasis is laid both on *bhakti* and on art music, in which the *raga sanchara* is eminently well-suited to the sentiments expressed in the song and in which *raga* and *bhava* blend like Shiva and Sakti. It has been already pointed out that the *bhakti* of Sri Tyagaraja towards Rama was in the nature of *sagunopasana* and that he conceived of him as a personal God and that he looked to him for protection. Tyagaraja was often in trouble with his brother and with his neighbours. Many of the songs which he wrote on these occasions expressed his sorrow and disappointment at his neglect by Shri Rama. In these songs we find that the melody is very appropriate to the sentiments expressed.

In the song *Etula Brothuvo* in *raga Chakra-vaka*, he says, "I have led a wretched life; how can you save me?" and the melody is expressive of this sentiment. In the song *Noremi* in *Varali* he says "how can I face you when I have committed so many sins?" Here again the sense and the melody make a powerful combination. In the song *Sarivari Lona* said to be in *raga Bhina Shadjam* — but what would appear to be more correctly *Bhina Panchamam*, — Tyagaraja says "Rama, why do you see me humbled by my equals? Does it give you satisfaction to receive *pooja* from them and neglect me?" In these and many other songs Tyagaraja uses with great effect *ragas* used in art music for expressing *bhakti* and it is in this class of composition that he excels. To this category must be added several of the songs in his operas *Nauka Charitra* and *Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam*.

Tyagaraja was learned in Telugu and Sanskrit. *Ramayana* and *Bhagavatha* were his favourite works. His songs contain numerous allusions to *puranic* stories. Like Purandara Dasa he embodied ethical and philosophical truths in his songs. Poetic expressions and *alankaras* form another attractive feature of his songs. His *sahitya* is very rich in its musical qualities. His songs are for the most part in Telugu which has been described as the Italian among Indian languages and a few of them are in Sanskrit. Even the Telugu songs are saturated with Sanskrit words and the result is that we have a highly musical combination of soft and sonorous sounds. To listen to Tyagaraja is to listen to sweet sounds.

There is *madhurya* in the music of Tyagaraja, there is *madhurya* in