

Lalgudi-An Epoch-Making Colossus

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Luck is known as *yoga* (ஔயாசம்) in Indian languages. Merit is known as *yogyata* (ஔயாச்யதை). Though these two words sound so similar, they are very rare to be seen in one and the same person and it is even rarer to see these two phenomena in proper proportion. A majority of all the famous musicians in our country are in their respective positions more because of luck than merit. It is not to say that they don't have any merit at all, but their luck would seem to have carried them to great heights beyond what they genuinely merit. There is a belief that one cannot become famous without some merit or other but still there are some famous artistes whose merit would need a giant microscope to isolate. There are also some artistes of high merit without matching recognition. Fame thrust upon an undeserving musician may at best be of some material benefit to him/her as long as luck lasts but only a musician of undoubted merit coupled with luck can be an epoch-maker and Lalgudi Jayaraman is a shining example. The dimensions of fame and luck of any person are visible to all but merit is properly evaluated only by a few. People usually judge the merit of a person under the influence of his name and fame, not realizing the fact that these two factors exist independent, and sometimes even opposite, of each other. Lalgudi Jayaraman's fame is known to everybody but his merit has perhaps been not fully evaluated by many, including musicians themselves.

Karnatic music is an ocean with many unfathomable facets and it is too much to expect any single person to have mastery

in all of them. Some of the more concrete branches of study in classical music can be listed as follows :

1. Sruthi-consciousness,
2. Grip in Laya,
3. Innate rapport with the classical idiom,
4. Resourcefulness in ragalapan,
5. Effective rendering of krithis,
6. Purposeful swara kalpana,
7. Meaningful pallavis,
8. Intelligent blending of tradition and innovation,
9. Requisite knowledge of musicology.
10. An overall sense of aesthetics,
11. Technical virtuosity of the artistes's instrument, the voice, if a vocalist and,
12. Composing ability.

The list is not exhaustive but will do for a broad study. Artistes with a good command in all these aspects can be counted in one hand with a finger or two left unutilized and Lalgudi Jayaraman will figure prominently in this small group. Let us examine each of these aspects.

1. Sruti consciousness

Sruti is a word freely used by all, hardly anybody knowing the full implication of the term. Even among seasoned musicians, only a small minority has a keen sense of it. Musicologists know the trade of giving impressive speeches on it, quoting slokas and sayings like 'Sruthi Maata...' etc., but rarely have any true 'experience' of Sruti Suddha Ananda.

An average listener can be expected to be able to recognize the sruti alignment when a singer or player stays in tara shadja or madhya panchama. This may be enough for a lay listener but a musician should know much more in detail, with a

super-refined sruti-awareness. His ear must be able to check that each note is in the right place even while negotiating a fast briga. A scientist can do this by checking the graph of a given fast phrase in a machine like the oscillograph but a musician must know even more than this because the nuances in classical music would need placing of one and same note in nearby but distinctly different spots in different ragas. For instance, the same chatusruti rishabha occupies a place discernably lower in the raga Saama than what it does in Kharaharapriya. Not only this, a swara occurs at minutely different phrases and phases. Chatusruti dhaivata in Kambhoji is a classic example of this. In addition there are other subtleties like the variance of timbre, shade and volume of each note in a raga which contribute to the quality of music. Sruthi-awareness is the combined name given to all these qualities. Great music is one in which all the above subtleties are taken due care of. Most artists do it out of intuition or lakshya gnana and only very few are able to achieve creation of great music with a cent percent 'consciousness' of what they are doing. Music at its best should be a happy blend of intuition and conscious effort of the musician, and can never be totally lakshya-based or lakshna-based. Lalgudi Jayaraman is a shining example of a happy synthesis of these two.

2. Grip in Laya

This is again a much misunderstood and misused term. There have been laya 'experts' to whom this skill has been like a weapon. Most of them had unmelodious voices and little raga gnana but were revered as 'terrorists' among musicians, particularly accompanists, and listeners. The regard shown to them was more out of fear than admiration. It was Lalgudi Jayaraman who exploded the myth that

concentration on laya would be only at the cost of melody. He was the first violinist to acquire the unique skill of presenting intricate pallavis and swaraprastharas couched in music soaked in raga-bhava. Pallavis of the earlier era were all either too simple and bland or too laborious and cumbersome. When Lalgudi showed the glorious path of blending intelligence diligently into creativity, many of the younger instrumentalists, even vocalists, are now following him to great advantage.

3. Classical idiom

I have had the pleasure and privilege of discussions on music with Lalgudi and I found that his intimate rapport with traditional ragas has a parallel only in the relationship that gopis had with Lord Krishna. Most of our artistes sing ragas mechanically as the small ants go round and round the mango, never actually realizing the actual sweetness which is known only to the bee inside. Lalgudi speaks of ragas (when he is in appropriate company) as if describing very close blood relatives, now and then pausing to inwardly enjoy the various manifestations of them. He has attained not mere Samrajya but veritable Sayujya with ragas, while to most of our musicians raga is either only a glorified skeleton of ascent and descent or some crude structure of intuition which they blindly identify with tradition.

4. Raga Alapana

It was Lalgudi who first showed the younger generation how to beautifully incorporate the vital phrases found in kritis into alapana and swarakalpana. He has virtually perfected the skill of giving out the best alapana of any raga in any stipulated duration. He once told me that he took care to accompany the vocalists

in TRS(!) principle i.e. to be compatible in Time (duration), Range (not touching trishayi for applause when the vocalist sang only one octave), and Style (playing raga in a style matching that of the main performer). How many of his contemporaries or seniors could do it with his ease and finis?

5. Kriti-rendering

It is a well-known fact that most of our soloists have no knowledge of the Sahitya of Kritis. One famous vainika told me, "Remembering the Sahitya is vocalists' headache, we are blissfully free from that botheration". The irony of it is that he is himself a composer too! I was surprised when Lalgudi Jayaraman once asked me the meaning of the word 'Dega' (vulture) in Telugu and later I noticed how he took great care of each word and phrase in the Kritis he played. Intent listeners would have noticed how he used appropriate inter-woven strokes while playing the word Pinnalai (பின்னலை பின்னின்றிழுப்பான்) and with a long drawn phrase during 'Izhuppan' and also the word ஓயாத தொல்லை - with an effect of onomatopoeia - all in that great hit of his, 'Teerada Vilaiyattu Pillai'. Leave alone instrumentalists, how many of our vocalists have command over Sahitya?

6. Swarakalpana

This is another aspect of classical music that has been raised to new heights by Lalgudi. Swaraprastara has the main purpose of protecting and projecting the ragabhava in a more concrete form than alapana. While alapana is sung without Tala, swaram is always sung with it and has the additional function of highlighting the rhythmic aspect, which is colloquially called 'Kanakku'. There is a deep-rooted wrong notion that 'Kanakku' is detrimental to ragabhava and soukyabhava. It was Lalgudi who consolidated and established

the style of fusing Kanakku and ragabhava, a beginning of which was introduced earlier by great masters like GNB. Long drawn swaraprastaras, korvais and intellectual landings and endings were all areas in which new horizons were traced by the one and only Lalgudi.

7. Pallavis

Lalgudi is the only violinist who has created pallavis with a purpose, a delight for the commoner and the learned lot alike. The first pallavi of his with which I fell in love at first hearing was Ananda Natana praka sa, sabhe...sa, sarve sa, which shines with intellectual brilliance in contrast with the simless word structures of pallavis of the earlier era.

Tradition & Innovation

8. Tradition has become the catch word for dullheads amongst musicians who have no creativity to back upon. Absence of innovation gives room to gathering of rust and is certainly not true sticking to tradition. The very thought of composing a Tillana in a raga like Desh is a bold innovation and while sticking to the traditional format, Lalgudi's Tillanas have lent a new status to this genre. He has boldly embellished many a traditional kriti and made them acceptable to wider audiences. There is hardly any area in classical music which has not enjoyed the King Mida's touch of Lalgudi.

Musicology

9. Some years back when a learner announced that he has passed B.Com., a doyen mridangist asked whether it was above Matriculation or below. Literacy level among musicians has since improved but many are still musicologically illiterate. Only the other day a leading violinist was enquiring whether Bhashanga raga had something to do with Bhasha (language)

and he could not even read the name Mnemonics. In the midst of such musicians who knew nothing other than earning applause in a concert, Lalgudi can easily be given an exalted place. He might not have had formal university education but he has taken pains to gather enough information and knowledge of relevant musicology by study and shrewd observation. He is one of the very few performing artists who can impress an audience with a lecture/demonstration.

10. Aesthetic Sense

Only a born aesthete like Lalgudi could have given a new lease of life to violin solo concerts. Solo concerts by the violinists of the generation preceding his were mere rituals (I have not heard Govindasami Pillai who belonged to still earlier generation). A violinist can aspire to play solo only when he has some stuff other than and addition to what he plays as accompanist, to offer By this yardstick I found only Lalgudi (and one other violinist) fit to be in the vanguard of 'bow'ers.

11. Technical virtuosity

Every instrumentalist will have his strong points. In violinists, some have richness of tone (and this is not Lalgudi's forte), some have a marvellous fingering technique, some have a natural melody and sweet bowing etc. There was an opinion about the late Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu that his command over violin was more than that of his command in music. Lalgudi is a rare combination of Himalayan heights in technical virtuosity and oceanlike depth in knowledge and experience of music.

12. Composing ability

There are more composers than singers today everywhere, but it is only a

horizontal growth, with few of them genuinely contributing to the cause of music. Lalgudi Jayaraman is sure to find a prominent place among composers of Tillanas and Varnams. Though there have been many earlier giants in the field, I came across listeners' request for Tillanas from the audience only for Lalgudi's compositions (and those of one other contemporary composer of Tillanas). Musically lilting, arithmetically tight and brilliantly innovative - are the prominent features of Lalgudi's Tillanas.

This century is seeing a good crop of violinists who have all been outshining the vocalists, but Lalgudi seems to me to be a most complete musician of our times, possessing all the above virtues and more in ample measure.

No wonder, most of the young violinists are treading his style irrespective of who their actual gurus are. It is said of the great pre-shakespearean literateur Sir Phillips Sydney that he was 'one in whom all the Muses met'. That can very well be said of our Lalgudi.

Even Thyagaraja had detractors and Lalgudi is not free from them. I have focused only on his great musicianship and I know how the fellow-professionals frown at some of his steps and stands which they themselves would not refrain from, given a chance.

May Lord Almighty keep this musician of unique accomplishments and attainments fit as a fiddle for many more decades of service to Music. ●