

The Perennial Appeal of Thyagaraja Kritis

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The question may be asked whether it is difficult to compose *kritis* in carnatic music. The short answer is no; it is quite easy for one with proficiency in language and sound *swara gnana* compose *kritis*. In short, a *sahithya* properly annotated with *swaras* is within the reach of any reasonably competent individual with linguistic ability and *swara gnana*. But they would lack aesthetic appeal. They would not be worth more than passing attention and are the easiest to forget.

The one and only dependable test of greatness in music is the test of time. Thyagaraja's *kritis* have not only stood the test of time but also to this day nobody has unraveled the secret of their impact on the listeners. It is therefore worth attempting an answer to the question: "What is it that makes a *kriti* have universal and more importantly perennial appeal?" His *kritis* are a shining and perhaps the only example of what distinguishes a mere composition from divinely inspired *kritis*.

The range and depth and the sheer number of *ragas* and their accompanying *sahithyas* that Thyagaraja has handled or sung make us wonder in sheer amazement and incredulity as to how any one human being could have achieved so much. But then Thyagaraja was no ordinary mortal. He indentified himself with Sri Rama, his *Ishta Devata*. He asks Sri Rama in *Syamasundaranga* (*Dhanyasi*): "*Ishta daivamu nee vera, ilanu Thyagaraju vera?*" (Is Thyagaraja different from you?)

Though it is easy to interpret Thyagaraja's *kritis* with reference to *bhakthi* or in terms of his words and their meanings, yet they are something more than *bhakthi* and words.

To meditate or concentrate on any object is difficult. Mind by its very nature is uncontrollable and therefore, it has to be reined in and made to focus on the object of meditation by a tremendous effort of one's will-power. This is known as *chitta ekagratha*.

In the case of Thyagaraja, he did not have to make any effort to concentrate. The divinely inspired melody centreing on Sri Rama and Sri Rama alone gripped his mind from his very birth. This melody did not fade or was it disturbed at any time either by wealth or adulation. He had no choice.

The 'divinely inspired melody' is something that cannot be defined or explained. It manifested in him as sudden instinctive flashes of creative power. It is this inner melody that expressed itself as single-minded devotion to his *Ishta Devata*. Innate to him was this mystical relationship with Sri Rama, and out of this relationship his *kritis* came as spontaneous offerings to Him. We may see how Thyagaraja himself has explained his mystical relationship with Sri Rama.

In Kalaharana (*Sudha Saveri*) he sings: “*Chutti chutti pakshulella chettu vedakureeti bhuvini puttagane nee padamula pattukonna nannu brova...*” (just as birds flying round and round ultimately seek the tree for rest, I have sought you and held fast to your feet from my very birth...)”)

Again in *Pattividuvaradu (Manjari)* he declares : “*Puttinanade nijabhaktini medakatti...*” (from my very birth, you have blessed me with true devotion...)

He uses the word ‘*baludagu*’ (mere boy) in *Ne Pogadakunte (Desikatodi)* i.e. he asks Sri Rama: “what do you lose if your praises are not sung by a mere boy like me?”

Many such references can be given to underline Thyagaraja’s communion with the divine even from his birth. This explains the compelling power and attention that his *kritis* have commanded from the date of their composition to the present day. And if we are sensitive enough, we can feel and even experience the ineffable and divine mesmerism of his *kritis* which elevate us to a higher plane of emotional bliss. It is this factor that distinguishes his *kritis* from other compositions.

When you experience the bliss that thousands of others do while listening to the Thyagaraja *kritis*, you have added definitely to the enduring satisfactions of life.

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