

Sarali varisai

Raga: Mayamalavagowla (15th Melakarta Ragam)

Arohana: S R1 G3 M1 P D1 N3 S

Avarohana: S N3 D1 P M1 G3 R1 S

Talam: Adi

Notation Courtesy: Rani, www.karnatic.com and Chitraveena Ravi Kiran's book

Notes from Chitra Veena Ravi Kiran's book (with some additions):

Getting Started: Sustaining Notes - KARVAI

The first step is to have a tanpura or shruti box, which will provide the basic note "Sa" and the fifth note from it, which is "Paa". You can seek your guru's help in determining your ideal pitch, which enables you to traverse at least two octaves (from Paa in the lower octave to Paa in the higher octave) comfortably over a period of time. It is equally vital to learn to tune either of these instruments from one's master. Then listen to it carefully and try to register the notes (sa - pa - sa) in your mind.

Then try to sing these two constant notes tunefully, making an effort to understand the relationship between the *frequencies* that "Sa" and "Pa" are sung at. Subsequently, the teacher will introduce the rest of the notes, and here again, you should try to make yourself aware of where (in terms of frequency) they are, with respect to "Sa". Singing in tune is the primary source of joy.

Now the teacher can introduce a raga, say Mayamalavagowla, for the basic exercises. Mayamalavagowla is the 15th melakarta with the notes: S R1 G3 M1 P D1 N3 S.

Most teachers prefer to use this raga because it has different intervals. Once the student achieves sufficient command over these exercises, the same can be attempted in other melakarta ragas.

One should now try to hold every one of these notes tunefully as long as possible. This sustenance of a note is called "kaarvai." Attention should be given to singing in tune, holding one's breath and releasing it with a good tone. This exercise is a must, before the sarali or other varishais are taught. This should be done without tala initially, until the students learn to sing or play the notes perfectly. Karvais are used at all levels in Carnatic music and they can create a very soulful, tranquil and evocative atmosphere. At the very fundamental level, they build a scientific approach to the rest of the music that students will subsequently be introduced to. An artiste must be able to hold any note steadily and tunefully for at least 10-15 seconds and gradually increase this to a minute.

Additional notes: What are the *sruti* aspects we would like to learn from sarali swaras? I will use the word "sruti" to refer to a note or a tone or a frequency (eg: expressed in swara form as "sa", "ri", "ga", "ma", "pa", "dha", "ni") and its relation to a base frequency (eg: "sa" as expressed by the background tambura or sruti box). When a learner listens to or sings the syllable "sa", what should he/she look for?

First, since our music is expressed with respect to an arbitrarily chosen sruti note (eg: the tambura or sruti box), the student should first LISTEN to the tambura or sruti box, close ones eyes and try to "feel" the music of the note to get a rough *visual* idea of where the note "sa" is (i.e. an understanding of where "sa" is **absolutely** located in the "space" of musical frequencies). You can outwardly express this understanding by indicating a level with your hands.

This understanding is important because, once you listen to some other note (expressed simply as "aaaa", i.e. as akaaram), you should be able to say whether that note is *higher* than "sa" or *lower* than "sa" (i.e. a relative understanding of notes **relative** to "sa"). You can outwardly express this relative understanding by raising or lowering your hand relative to the original level for "sa."

The next step is to go deeper, and ask, "how much is the note higher or lower than sa"? You can raise or lower your hand proportionately to reflect your understanding. Once you do this, you can replace the original sa with another note as the reference and ask if another note is higher or lower than it, and by how much? I have some examples of this in the audio lesson.

Getting a true and deep appreciation of note location on the frequency scale is a non-trivial task and must be revisited over the long-term. This knowledge is called "*sruti jnana*" or knowledge of sruti! By the way, in this process you have also learnt the basics of the hand-waving histrionics of several carnatic music vocal artistes!

The next step is to go beyond listening and into singing. When musicians start, they first tune their voice to the sruti by singing saa-paa-saa. Lets start with "saa." What does it mean to sing "saa" correctly when there is no one (but yourself!) to tell you whether you are correct or wrong?

The important point is that when you sing anything, you have to keenly LISTEN TO YOURSELF singing! This is easier said than done, because it is very hard to have your mind do a balancing act of BOTH the output (i.e. singing) and the input (listening). I have also observed that my ears tend to block a little when I am singing and makes this a little more harder. But this "feedback" is very important because then you can compare the feedback to the reference "saa" and as you practiced earlier, distinguish whether what you are CALLING "saa" is indeed the frequency of "saa" or if it is higher or lower! You can again do your act with the hand to judge whether the note you are singing is higher or lower than the reference. Once you have established this, you can try to correct your output online till you reach the correct level of "saa". I must say that I have found this step (the student able to recognize and correct the note sung to match saa) to be the biggest stumbling block among beginners.

This step above is also an example of putting a few basic ideas together -- listening to a frequency, judging its relative position and singing it at the same time. If you cannot get this right, I would suggest decomposing this and doing each piece separately (i.e. divide-

and-conquer: listen only, listen+judge, sing only, sing+listen, sing+listen+judge). You can skip some of these combinations if it comes naturally to you: you just need to be aware and able to do any one of these things on demand...

The next step is to sharpen these pieces of understanding and pick up some related concepts:

- **Relative Positions:** Try deliberately singing the *syllable* "sa", but sung at a higher or lower *frequency* than the tambura sruti. Can you do it?
- Can you listen to yourself and judge where the syllable you are singing is relative to the reference? Can you start higher?
- Can you make it come back to the correct frequency location without taking a new breath, and just sliding to the correct position? Do you know appreciate the difference between *saying the word "saa"* in some frequency vs *singing* it at the correct frequency?

RaviKiran Notes (contd):

Musical Phrases: Gradually simple combinations of notes can be tried. Teachers can introduce small musical phrases like GM , - GMP, - DDP, - PMG, - MGR, - GMGRS- and so on. Over a few sessions, the phrases can get perceptibly sophisticated.

Akaaram: After a few such sessions, the same phrases can be rendered using the vowel "a" as in "America". This is called "akaaram" and it is a very integral part of Carnatic music, with particular reference to vocal music. Thus, exposure to akarams is very essential at this stage, albeit in a simple form.

Practical Exercises: Phase II:

Varishais - Sequences:

The great composer Purandara Dasa, hailed as the Father of Carnatic music, created a set of fundamental exercises nearly 500 years ago, which are followed even today. There are 4 main types of varishais.

Sarali Varishais: These fundamental sequences enable the student to get a feel of melody with rhythm. The logic is quite obvious here. The 1st varishai is a plain ascent and descent of the notes of the raga. The 2nd varishai focuses on the second note from S, namely R (in the ascent) and N (in the descent). The 3rd varishai centers on the third note (G and D) in the ascent and descent respectively. The fourth varishai concentrates on the fourth note M and P. This goes on upto the 7th varishai. The last 3 are general exercises. Some books have split the last sarali varishai into 5 parts, but singing it as a single varishai is more instructive.

Janta Varishais: These are forceful sequences, which facilitate the students to add weight and majesty to their voice. They make use of a form of ornamentation called "spuritham" which is rendering a note twice: plain the first time, and with force from the previous note (i.e. the note just below this note in frequency) in the raga the second time. Teachers must take care that the concept of spuritham is very clearly embedded in the

students' minds. The tendency to render it in a bland and insipid manner should be avoided.

Melsthayi Varishais: These are higher octave sequences, which increase the students' vocal or instrumental range. Again, the logic is easy to understand. The first is the simplest and every subsequent exercise adds a new phrase to the previous one. The progressively cover notes upto Pa in the higher octave.

Dhatu Varishais: These are zigzag sequences that increase the students' overall command of notes.

Alankarams: These are multi-tala sequences composed in the 35 talas. But usually 7 of these are selected and taught to the students.

Students should be taught to render all these exercises in at least 3-4 speeds. Once they perfect this technique, they could practice most of them in the 3rd speed. It is ideal to render each varishai twice, once just with the swaras, and again, with akaaram.

Speeds in Carnatic music: In carnatic music, speed is relative. It is measured as the number of notes per beat of the tala, rather than the number of notes per second or minute.

The first speed is rendering one note per unit of the tala. The 2nd speed is exactly double of this, i.e. two notes per unit. The 3rd speed is four notes per unit. The 4th is eight notes per unit. The 5th is 16 notes per units and 6th speed is 32 notes per unit.

Speed of the tala is rarely varied; only the speed of the music is. But even this is not accomplished in an arbitrary manner. There is a mathematical precision to it. For instance, the 2nd speed is exactly twice as fast and the third is exactly twice as fast as the second and so forth.

Advanced exercises:

Some *selected* varishais can be repeated with:

- Akaram, Ee-kaaram, U-kaaram
 - With Gamakas, in different speeds
 - In different sampurna ragas: Kalyani, Shankarabharanam, Kharaharapriya, Thodi
 - In selected symmetrical janya ragas (without tala): Mohana, Hamsadhwani, Sri ranjani,
 - In selected asymmetrical janya ragas: Bilahari, Mohana Kalyani
 - In selected vivadi ragas: Ganamurthi, Chala Natai
 - In bhashanga ragas: Bhairavi
 - In different nadais: thrishram, khanda, mishra
- (this is particularly useful for instrumental practice)

Notation hints: (this notation follows Rani's notes in www.karnatik.com)

s = sa ; r = ri ; g = ga ; m = ma ; p = pa ; d = dha ; n = ni ;

Capitalized letters are in the higher octave

1. Simple ascent/descent

Laya pattern: 1234 5678

s r g m | p d | n S ||

S n d p | m g | r s ||

2. Focus on R and N

Laya pattern: 12-12-1234 and 1234 5678

s r - s r - | s r | g m ||

s r g m | p d | n S ||

S n - S n - | S n | d p ||

S n d p | m g | r s ||

3. Focus on G and D.

Laya pattern: 123-123-12 and 1234 5678

s r g - s | r g - | s r ||

s r g m | p d | n S ||

S n d - s | n d - | s n ||

S n d p | m g | r s ||

4. Focus on M and P

Laya pattern: 1234-1234 and 1234 5678

s r g m - | s r | g m - ||

s r g m | p d | n s ||

S n d p - | S n | d p - ||

S n d p | m g | r s ||

5. Focus on P and M (dheergam); and R, N

Laya pattern: 1234 56-12 and 1234 5678

s r g m | p , - | s r ||

s r g m | p d | n S ||

S n d p | m , - | S n ||

S n d p | m g | r s ||

6. Focus on G and D

Laya pattern: 1234 56-12 and 1234 5678

s r g m | p d - | s r ||

s r g m | p d | n S ||

S n d p | m g - | S n ||

S n d p | m g | r s ||

7. Focus on N and R (dheergam)

Laya pattern: 1234 56-7, and 1234 5678

s r g m | p d | n , ||

s r g m | p d | n S ||

S n d p | m g | r , ||

S n d p | m g | r s ||

8. Zig Zag with Focus on "pmgr" and "mpdn"

Laya pattern: 1234 -4321 and 1234 5678

s r g m | p m | g r ||
s r g m | p d | n S ||
S n d p | m p | d n ||
S n d p | m g | r s ||

9. Zig Zag with Focus on "pmdp" and "mpgm"

Laya pattern: 1234 -4321 and 1234 5678

s r g m | p m | d p ||
s r g m | p d | n S ||
S n d p | m p | g m ||
S n d p | m g | r s ||

10. Focus on P (dheergam) and the region between G and N;
and practicing resting on G (nyaasa swaram)

Laya pattern: 1234 56-12 and 1 , , , 1 , , , and
1234 - 4321 and 1234 5678

s r g m | p , | g m ||
p , , , | p , | , , ||
g m p d | n d | p m ||
g m p - g | m g | r s ||

11. Focus on dheergams at S, N, D, P.

Simple patterns: "Snd", "Ndp", "Dpm"

and the region between G and N (finishing phrases)

Janta at p, p,

S , n d | n , | d p ||
d , p m | p , | p , ||
g m p d | n d | p m ||
g m p - g | m g | r s ||

12. Preview of Janta (sphuritam) concept: "SS", "nn", "dd", "pp".

Simple patterns: "SSnd", "nndp", "ddpm"

Dheergam at "paa"

and the region between G and N (finishing phrases)

S S n d | n n | d p ||
d d p m | p , | p , ||
g m p d | n d | p m ||
g m p - g | m g | r s ||

13. ZigZag Patterns: "srgr G", "gmpmP",

Dheergam Focus: G, P, D

and the region between M and N (with a lot of emphasis on zigzag and D-notes)

s r g r | g , - | g m ||
p m p , - | d p | d , ||
m p d p | d n | d p ||
m p d p | m g | r s ||

14. Dheergam at P and S.

Jantas at D and M

s r g m | p , | p , ||
d d p , | m m | p , ||
d n S , | S n | d p ||
S n d p | m g | r s ||

Sarali Varishai in four speeds:

First speed - *one note per unit*

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
s r g m p d n S

Second speed - *two notes per unit*

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
sr gm pd nS Sn dp mg rs

Third speed - *four notes per unit*

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
srgm pdnS Sndp mgrs srgm pdnS Sndp mgrs

Fourth speed - *eight notes per unit* [listen](#)

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
srgmpdnS Sndpmgrs srgmpdnS Sndpmgrs

5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
srgmpdnS Sndpmgrs srgmpdnS Sndpmgrs
