

shankarAbharaNam: Raga Lakshana

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shankarAbharaNam is a melody that enjoys great importance universally, in almost all the systems of music, from time immemorial. Almost similar to the Major Diatonic scale, or the C Major of Western music, this rAga enjoys a regal status in the realm of Indian music. Rightly has it been referred to as 'rAga rAjasya mELakaha' in the Chaturdandiprakasika. Even in the 12th Century, it was classified as a rAgAnga rAga by Parsvadeva, and it is one of the pUrva prasiddha rAgAnga ragas listed by Sarangadeva. Besides, most of the works on music have classified it as an important mELa. This rAga is only the nishAda mUrchana of the ancient ShaDja grAma scale and was known as ranjani in the mUrchana-jAti system. The rAga was very much in practice in the Ancient Tamil Music system as a sampUrNa scale known by the name paN pazhampanjuram. We have bilAval thAT of Hindustani music which corresponds to shankarAbharaNam. It has always maintained the status of a major parent rAga, giving rise to a number of janya ragas.

Being the 29th mELa, shankarAbharaNam is one of the six mELas that can boast of possessing symmetrical tetra chords in the scale arrangement, the other five being kanakAngi, hanumatODi, mAyAmALavagauLa, kharaharapriya and calanATa. The svaras are ShaDja, catushruti riShabha, antara gAndhAra, shuddha madhyama, pancama, catushruti dhaivata and kAkali niShAda. It may be of interest to observe the well-distributed svara intervals of shankarAbharaNa scale. S-R2, M1-P & P-D2: chatushruti interval; R2-G3 & D2-N3: trishruti interval; G3-M1 & N3-S : dvishruti interval. Thus it is one of those utama mELas having samvAdi pairs for all the svaras, like S-M1, S-P, R2-P, R2-D2 & G3-N3. It is not surprising that the rAga is so appealing to the senses and that it instantly ushers in a mood of sublimity considering that there is so much of samvAditva or consonance inherent in its structure. Also, all svaras excepting the madhyama, are tlvrA svaras. This shuddha madhyama here acts as a bridge and balances the tlvrA svaras of the pUrvaAnga and the uttarAnga, thus sustaining the innate sublimity of the melody throughout.

Subbarama Dikshitar states that it is the unanimous opinion of the pUrvaAcAryas that shankarAbharaNam is the most superior amongst all ragas. niShAda, gAndhAra, madhyama and pancama are the jlvrA svaras. He says all the svaras contribute equally to the rAga's rakti, though ShaDja is the main graha, amsa and nyAsa svara. He points out the 'nokku's for riShabha, gAndhAra, dhaivata and niShAda in the ascent and the 'odukkal's and 'iRakka jAru's for all the vikrta svaras in the descent. He specifies that usages such as S'\DP,- S'N(d)P,- S'(d)P,-M/P(g)R,S contribute largely to the ranjakatva of the rAga.

Though it is generally referred to as a sarva svara gamaka varika rakti rAga, and that too a major rAga giving endless scope for elaboration, there are certain restrictions when it comes to the gamaka patterns. The heart of shankarAbharaNam rests in the conspicuously plain antara gAndhAra, that produces a soothing effect amidst the tlvrA riShabha, dhaivata and kampita madhyama. Similarly the absence of kampita in niShAda is also significant. gAndhAra and niShAda are just characterized by nokku. This factor easily distinguishes this rAga from kalyANi, which admits of wide kampitam in these two svaras. Sometimes N admits of mild oscillation too, as in phrases like N,,SRGMGGRSN,, but even in such instances, niShAda sounds more like an anusvara to ShaDja, though it is intoned as N. Even if we observe the scalar arrangement of shankarAbharaNam, it can be noted that there is an alternate succession of plain and kampita svaras. This accounts for the classy, proportionate melodic structure of the rAga, and also to its sobriety. This sedateness is balanced by the gambhIratva that is created by the strong oscillation of riShabha and dhaivata. The svastAna gamaka in these two svaras (SR,,S and PD,,P) are beautiful.

The extent of oscillation in madhyama is variable. It is either rendered plain (as in PGMGRS and S,/PMG,) or with ardha kampita (as in SRGM,, SP,M,, and RGMGGRSN), or with dlrga kampita

when it is combined with pancama (M~,P, and GM~,P/D,^NS'). It is this last mentioned tlra madhyama that is widely used in bEgaDa (besides its own bEgaDa M), one of the classic janyas of shankarAbharaNam. The ardha kampita madhyama is imbibed by its other janya nllAmbari.

It is not uncommon to hear plain svaras in this magical rAga, especially in the dhATu and jaNTa prayOgas like RNSDNPDMGMRGS, SSRGGMMP and GGMMDDNNR. Such usages abound in 'calamEla', the aTa tALa varNa of Swati Tirunal. The sprightly nOTTu svara sAhityas of Muttuswami Dikshitar are all wrapped up in such plain svaras, akin to the Western band airs. Herein one can come across phrases like SGS, MRM, GPMR, SNP, etc.

gAndhAram functions as an important amsa and nyAsa svara. No delineation of this rAga would be complete without highlighting the importance of G. And equally significant is the combination of G and M. pancama and madhyama are other amsa, nyAsa svaras. There cannot be any nyAsa or amsa on riShabha, dhaivata and nishAda. Unlike kalyANi, niShAda is generally treated as a passing note here, but its role is more significant as an anusvara, rather than as a whole svara. It is common to hear ShaDja varjya and pancama varjya prayOgas both in the ascent and descent of kalyANi, which is the prati madhyama counterpart of shankarAbharaNam. These types of varjya phrases enhance the interest in shankarAbharaNam too, but only in the ascent (GMDNRSNDPMGRS - N.RGMGRS - N.RGMDDPMGRS). Combinations like SP, MG, S/D~, PMG, -S'^N(d)P,- /S'DP,- PS(d)P- S,(d)P, etc. are commonly employed to add beauty. samvAdi and stAyi combinations like SP,- SM,- SS', - S'P, etc. are used but those like GD, GN, RD are better avoided lest they should suggest kalyANi.

shankarAbharaNam is a pancasvara mUrcanAkAraka mELa. If the tonic note is shifted to riShabha, gAndhAra, madhyama, pancama or dhaivata, the resulting ragas would be kharaharapriya, tODi, kalyANi, harikAmbhOji and naTabhairavi respectively. It could be noted that the madhyama mUrcana of this shuddha madhyama mELa gives rise to its prati madhyama counterpart.

This tristAyi rAga is a parent of numerous popular janyas such as hamsadhvani, Arabhi, pUrNacandrika, janaranjani, aThANa, bilahari, kEdAram, kannada, dEvagAndhAri, etc. The nishAdAntya, pancamAntya ragas like kuRinji and navrOj are only replicas of shankarAbharaNam, but due to the truncation, they admit of limited sancAras and are usually rendered in madhyama shruti. Nevertheless they possess their own melodic individuality. It is said that shankarAbharaNam itself, in the period of ancient Tamil music, was initially only reckoned as a madhyama mUrcana of the shuddha scale (harikAmbhOji), though it was also a paN (sampUrNa rAga). The strings of the yAzh or the harp were tuned to the svaras of shuddha scale, and when the need to play paN pazhampanjuram arose, the tonic note was shifted to the madhyama string of the yAzh and played or sung. Thus because of the limitations of the yAzh and also of the human voice, the range of the tEvAras in shankarAbharaNam was restricted to the tAra stAyi ShaDja. Later with the advent of the vINa, the rAga evolved into a wholesome sampUrNa rAga, fulfilling the requisites of a mELa.

It can be safely claimed that shankarAbharaNam is the most utilised rAga all over the world. This ghana raga would readily accommodate any kind of musical creation, be it classical, semi-classical or light, kalpita or manodharma sanglta, would suit any emotion, any tempo - viLamba, madhyama or durita. It is not surprising that there are innumerable compositions in this rAga by all composers.

Compositions:

There are innumerable compositions in shankarAbharaNam of all genres. calamEla of Swati Tirunal and sAmi ninnE kOri of Vina Kuppayyar are standard starters in a concert. manavi cEkkona rAdA, the padavarNam of Ponnaiah Pillai is an elaborate piece that tests the skills of a dancer. It is a pity that this varNAM is not utilised in music concerts.

As usual with great ragas, the Tiruvarur Trinity has produced masterpieces in this raga too. Shyama Sastri's sarOjadaLa nEtri and the rare dEvi mina nEtri, the former in madhyamakAla and the latter in caukakAla provide ample testimony to the inimitable craftsmanship of this great composer. The exact point at which neraval was to be done for sarOjadaLa was the subject of a raging discussion in print between TT Krishnamachari and Kalki Krishnamurthy.

Versatility marks the eternal quality of the compositions of Tyagaraja. shankarAbharaNam is no different. The bard has gifted the world with about 20 songs, all different in melodic structure and individuality, each outlining a different aspect of the rAga. The very popular enduku pEdhdala, the philosophically advaitic and musically sublime manasu svAdhInamai, the cauka kAla masterpiece Emi nEramu, the evergreen swaraAga sudhA rasa which expounds the great purpose of music, bhakti bhikshamiyyavE wherein the bard pleads to Rama to grant him devotion as alms and budhirAdu, wherein the saint moans the silly and stupid ways of the world and mariyAda gAdura - all these kritis have only shankarAbharaNAM in common, but, what the poetry speaks of, the music underlying each of the pieces conveys in tone and with ultimate perfection, thereby rendering each of those compositions unique in raga bhAva. Who else but the Sage of Tiruvaiyyaru could achieve such excellence in the world of tonal art? With the infinite musical possibilities of shankarAbharaNam, is it any wonder that the great Tyagaraja has coaxed the raga to yield all kinds of rasas? His other compositions include eduTa nilicitE, endukI calamu, ramA ramaNa and many others. He has also composed a number of divyanAma kIrtanas in shankarAbharaNam, of which the brisk ones like gatamOhA srita pAla and varallagAna IOla are akin to the western notes.

Muttuswami Dikshitar's popular akshayalinga vibhO has the same dhAtu as Tyagaraja's manasu svAdhInami in the pallavi. If the prosodic beauty in the anupallavi blends perfectly and is stunningly beautiful musically, it is due in no small measure to the great scope that the rAga possesses as to the limitless creativity of Dikshitar. His dakshiNAmUrtE in jhampa tAla is another masterpiece that testifies to his genius and wherein the music itself reveals in subliminal tone, the truth of Silence as exemplified by Lord Dakshinamurti Himself. Such is the soulful quality of the song. girijaya ajaya and sadAshivam upAsmahE bring out the highly creative Dikshitar. In these two songs, he has explored certain rare combinations spanning the three octaves. All said and done, his navAvaraNA kriti in shankarAbharaNam is a class by itself. What better way to invoke the Goddess than to just sing the pallavi lines of this masterpiece? The elevating quality of the riShabha of shankarAbharaNAM is utilized to create the effect and the presence of the Shrine itself. Dikshitar's nOTTuswara songs, numbering around 40 are all based on shankarAbharaNam and correspond to western tunes.

Other compositions that testify to the classicism of shankarAbharaNam are entanuchu of Subbaraya Sastri, mahima teliya taramA of Anayya, shankarAchAryam of Subbarama Dikshitar, dEvi jagajjanani, the navarAtri kriti of Swati Tirunal, muthukumarayyanE of Ramaswami Sivan, etc. Songs like konjam dayai, kanjamalaradu, mahAlakshmi and akhilANDa nAyaki of Pananasam Sivan, alarulu guriyaga of Annamacharya, bAgumIra of Vina Kuppayyar, ADiya pAdA of Gopalakrishna Bharathi are some of the other compositions that we get to hear in this rAga. Besides, Kshetrayya's sundasEpu and Govindaswami Ayya's mAnamE bhUShaNamu are works of great grandeur.

Maestros' Renditions

No musician worth his/her salt can do without shankarAbharaNam. We have Ariyakkudi's good rendition of bhakti bhikshamiyyavE and akshayalinga vibhO. Semmangudi's competent rendition

of swara raga sudhA rasa and his grand, yet moving first kAla swaras for the song once in an FM radio programme in 1984, with T. N. Krishnan and Trichy Sankaran will always remain in memory. He learnt Dikshitar's dakShiNAMUrtE from T. Brinda and sang it often in concerts. But his best rendition of the song is available in a private recording without accompaniments excepting K. S. Narayanaswami's vINa. Semmangudi also sang Enduku pEddhala often as do other musicians.

Tanjavur Sankara Iyer once sang a beautiful AIAPana of the raga as a prelude to dakshiNAMUrtE, the rendition of which too was inspiring, at the Max Mueller Bhavan in Madras. Appropriately and wisely, Sankara Iyer sang svaras only in the first kAla. This thoughtful action of his added to the transcendental quality of his rendition.

Brinda-Muktas' large repertoire in shankarAbharaNam included Shyama Sastri's sarOjadaLa nEtri, Tyagaraja's manasu svAdhInamaina, Emi nEramu and buddhi rAdu, Dikshitar's akshayalinga vibhO and dakshiNAMUrtE, the Kshetrajna padams mAnamE bhUShaNAMu and sunda sEpu. dakshiNAMUrtE was popularised on the concert platform by them and it is their family's 'sothu' (property), so much have they made that song their own. akshayalinga vibhO in their version has a lot of differences from that we get to listen usually. The polished rendition of the three kritis of Tyagaraja mentioned above was a lesson in how they should be sung. As usual with the padams, they were a class by themselves and the sisters' emotive singing of mAnamE bhUShaNAMu and sunda sEpu was like caviar, never failing to thrill rasikas who knew the true value of those compositions. Their grandmother Dhanammal's 78 rpm recording of Anayya's mahima teliya taramA, wherein she has both sung and played the vINa is a 3 minute vintage that is the rarest of ethereal shankarAbharaNam.

In 1982, Balamurali Krishna gave a concert at the Vani Mahal, Madras, where he sang an exquisite shankarAbharaNam followed by a sublime version of manasu svAdhInamaina. His correct enunciation of the lyrics sought to highlight and bring out the total beauty of Tyagaraja's masterpiece. A radio concert of the maestro featuring Emi nEramu proved how, if he wanted, Balamurali could offer chaste music.

M. D. Ramanathan too had a large repertoire in shankarAbharaNam. manasu svAdhInamaina, sarOjadaLa nEtri and akshayalinga vibhO were some of his favourites and, in his own inimitable style, MDR gave a unique character to these songs. His AIAPana for 20 minutes once, at the Sastri hall, was so bhAvA oriented that it struck an emotionally responsive chord in the fortunate few rasikas present that day. Utilising only the Shadja, riShabha, gAndhAra and madhyama for about 10 minutes, the maestro wove magic through the notes.

Among instrumentalists Flute Mali and vINa K. S. Narayanaswami revelled in playing shankarAbharaNAM. Mali's foray into the mandra niShAda and dhaivata for about five minutes at the end of an AIAPana resulted in rasikas holding their breath, before the breathtaking finale made them cheer the genius repeatedly. The venue was The Mylapore Fine Arts Club in the 1970s. What exquisite gamakas and kArvais Mali wove in the mandra region!

K. S. Narayanaswami strictly adhered to lakShaNa. His mITTu and gamakas would be just right. He could get to the very soul of shankarAbharaNAM with just a couple of mITTus. He could clearly bring out the subtlety of the varying madhyamas of shankarAbharaNAM. An example of his great vidvat was had at the Krishna Gana Sabha in the 1980s where he played this rAga. KSN never hung on to the strings, never kept on pulling them. He just cajoled a bit here, coaxed a bit there and let the glides and curves happen. The shankarabharaNam he played that day was a rare instance of lakShaNa walking hand in hand with lakShya to produce exquisite music. One also had the opportunity to interact with KSN on this raga at the home of one of his disciples. The way he explained and demonstrated how one should limit oneself to the correct mITTus and pulls to produce chaste music was a revelation.

Sidelight:

The film world has unfortunately not utilised this rAga properly in its full classical form, though there are umpteen light numbers based on this rAga. P. U. Chinnappa's 'chandrOdayam idilE' for a 1940s Tamil film was an example of pure shankarAbharaNAM.

The delightful song 'doe a deer' sung by Julie Andrews in the English film of the 1960s 'The Sound of Music' is plain shankarAbharaNam.

Raja Saraboji II, the king of Tanjavur, (reigned 1798-1832) was a great patron of the arts. His court boasted of great musicians such as Sonti Venkataramanayya, Pallavi Gopala Iyer, Todi Seetharama Iyer, Chowkkam Srinivasa Iyengar, Vina Subbukutti Iyer, Talanayar Krishna Iyer and Rettai Pallavi Sivarama Iyer etc.

The Tanjavur court reverberated with music performances by these and other visiting musicians and dance performances. One of the court musicians was Narasayya. Once, Narayasayya sang an elaborate shankarAbharaNAM with such beauty and rAga bhAva that mesmerised the whole court including Saraboji. Ever to recognise exceptional talent, Saraboji immediately decreed that henceforth the musician should be addressed as shankarAbharaNAM Narasayya. The rAga became Narasayya's property. At all his performances he was requested to sing shankarAbharaNAM. Narasayya could elaborate the raga for hours together without repeating sangatIs. Such was his prowess in the raga.

Once Narasayya faced a severe financial crisis. Being a self-respecting man, he could not bring himself to ask for charity from anyone. But the problem had to be solved. He therefore decided to undertake a trip to Kapisthalam, a village on the banks of the Cauvery, about 12 miles from Tanjavur. Here resided Ramabhadra Moopanaar, a landlord and a prominent personality of the area. He was also a great lover and patron of music. The recently deceased Karuppaiah Moopanaar, Congress party leader, was a great-grandson of Ramabhadra Moopanaar. The latter had hosted even the great Thyagaraja at his home in Kapisthalam. Narasayya went straight to Moopanaar's house and asked him for a short-term loan of 80 sovereigns of gold. Ramabhadra Moopanaar asked Narasayya whether he could offer any security in lieu of the loan. Narasayya told Moopanaar that he had an invaluable AbharaNAM (jewel) and that he could offer that as hypothecation. 'Ah, let's see that AbharaNAM', said Moopanaar. 'No, that AbharaNAM can't be seen, it can only be heard. It is my own property. It is the raga shankarAbharaNAM. I am pledging shankarAbharaNAM with you and promise you that I shall not sing the raga until I repay the loan', said Narasayya. The amused Moopanaar insisted on a promissory note to the effect that Narasayya would not sing shankarAbharaNAM anywhere before returning the 80 sovereigns of gold.

Thereafter, Narasayya stopped singing shankarAbharaNAM. His rasikas sorely missed his delectable delineation of the rAga. Whenever a request was made to Narasayya for shankarAbharaNAM, he demurred and declined to sing either the rAga or any compositions in it. He however did not offer any explanation.

Once, there was a wedding at the house of Appuraya, an official of the East India Company at Kumbhakonam. Appuraya arranged for music concerts by many stalwarts of that time. Narasayya was also slated to sing. On the day of Narasayya's performance, there was a huge turnout. Appuraya requested Narasayya to begin his performance with the shankarAbharaNAM varNAM. Narasayya was taken aback as it was difficult to refuse Appuraya's request. He therefore explained to Appuraya that he had pledged his favourite raga with Ramabhadra Moopanaar for a loan of 80 sovereigns of gold and that without repaying the loan, he, Narasayya, could not sing shankarAbharaNAM. Appuraya was shocked that a great raga could be thus hocked. He

immediately sent a messenger with 80 sovereigns of gold and a letter with instructions to bring back the promissory note. When the messenger reached Kapisthalam and gave the gold to Moopanar, the latter, a gentleman and a great rasika to boot, himself rushed to Kumbhakonam. The musician and rasikas were waiting. Moopanar went to the dais and met Narasayya and Appuraya. He said, "Had Narasayya asked me for money with all the privilege that he had with me, I would have happily given him. It hurt me very much that he should ask for a loan. Everyone knows that I am a great rasika of Narasayya and our intimate relationship. Since he was very formal with me and insisted on a loan, I also decided to follow the proper procedures and insisted on hypothecation. No one has absolutely any right to subject art to bondage. As punishment for this sin of mine, I have decided to forfeit both the interest as well as the capital. I also request Narasayya to sing shankarAbharaNAM." So saying, Ramabhadra Moopanar gave the 80 sovereigns of gold to Narasayya.

That was the story of shankarAbharaNAM being hocked. Strange indeed are the acts of men of the arts and their patrons.

Sangeetham Raga Team

Sanjay's Reflections:

Whenever I think of this raga I am reminded of an interesting incident. A friend of mine, an amateur musician and keen enthusiast, once asked me " Who discovered shankarAbharaNAM? I want to congratulate him!" He was so enamoured by the beauty of this raga that he wondered if there could be someone who actually discovered it!

shankarAbharaNAM immediately brings to mind a sedate and serene thought. Just a kArvai in the antara gAndhAra conjures images of the Dakshinamurti deep in penance!

The music community for long has associated shankarAbharaNAM with the inimitable MSS. Her soulful renditions of the various great compositions especially some of the rarer ones like sadAshivam upAsmahE and ATTra piravi (Tiruvembavai) can never be forgotten. I recently came across an old 78 rpm record of Dhanammal rendering mahima tEliya and also singing snatches of the song in between. It is a most quaint and haunting piece.

Traditional favorites of shankarAbharaNAM have included Semmangudi (many many songs, the Poochi tillana and that brilliant RTP - tsakkaga nI bhajana), MDR (again many many songs and a wonderful RTP starting with the words "sa ri ga madhava nannu brOva vayya" in svarAksharam), Ramnad Krishnan (can we ever forget that akshayalinga vibho!), Madurai Mani Iyer (His inimitable tUkkiya tiruvaDi with neraval in the line "yettanayO piravi"), all members of the Dhanam school including Brinda, Muktha, Viswa (especially dEvi mIna nEtri of Syama Sastri), and Ariyakudi (a terrific enduku peddala with Papa and Pazhani). GNB was not really known for his shankarAbharaNAM but I still thought his versions of songs like nannubrOva, manasu svAdina and Emi nERamu were quite exquisite.

Listening live I have enjoyed some of the best shankarAbharaNAM s from KVN (again many songs but bhakti biksha being special), DKJ (a terrific RTP in the Academy starting with the words "samAnama, sabhApatE, sadAshiva" again in svarAksharam), TNS (his eduta nilacite is really something special), TMT (a wonderful RTP in an AIR recital in khanda gati) and Maharajapuram Santhanam (one particular rendition of mahAlakshmi jagan mAta in an AIR recital).

Of the songs that I learnt from my Guru Shri KSK, I really treasure some of the shankarAbharaNAM songs like an aTa tAla varnam of Madurai Subramaniya Iyer, bAgumIra of Vina Kuppayyar and Elaku daya vaccura (I forget the composer). It is strange that

shankarAbharaNam has not really been the forte of the Nagaswaram players. We hear more about tODi and kAmbhOji. I think this raga is made more for the Vina and is evident especially in the Dikshitar masterpieces where the subtle nuances and graces are brought out beautifully. I can never forget once when Shri S.Balachander during a lecdem, just played the gandhAra, looked up and asked "What rAgam could this be?" and many responded immediately "shankarAbharaNam!

CONCLUDED