

The Art of Niraval Singing

- Madurai R Sundar

'sangIta shAstra gnAnamu sArUpya sowkyathamE manasa'

Proficiency in traditional music leads to a sublime mode of worship capable of conferring on the devotee the bliss of attaining the same form as the worshipped

- Saint Tyagaraja

Introduction to the different aspects of Carnatic Music:

The elements of Carnatic music can be broadly divided into two categories - kalpita sangitam and manodharma sangitam. 'Kalpita sangeetam' refers to the aspects of music imparted by teacher to the taught. The rudimentary swara exercises, geethams, varnams, kritis, keertanas, javalis and padams are examples of 'kalpita sangeetam'. 'Manodharma sangeetam' refers to the creative aspects of music such as raga delineation, niraval, swara singing, tanam, pallavi and viruttam. It should be emphasized that the basic principles and the modus operandi of these aspects are also imparted by the teacher. However the student in the process of evolving as a mature musician forms his/her own style of developing and presenting these.

More than a century ago, when 'kriti' forms were not in vogue, carnatic music concerts were basically an elaborate raga, tanam and pallavi. 'Niraval' singing must have gotten a lot more attention at that time. Amongst yesteryear musicians, Musiri Subramania Iyer developed a very distinctive style of niraval singing that eventually became his trademark.

I have sat through mesmerizing niravals by my guru Madurai Sri. T.N.Seshagopalan. Particularly, I can recall a concert where he was elaborating 'krupAnidhi ivaraippolE kidaikkumO inda daraNi tannil', a very powerful line from Gopalakrishnabharati's Abhogi raga song 'SabhApatikku'. Sri. TNS brought the essence of the lyrics by combining the words in different ways 'daraNi tannil kidaikkumO?' 'inda daraNi tannil kidaikkumO?' 'ivaraippolE inda daraNi tannil kidaikkumO?' 'krupAnidhi ivaraippolE'... and so on. Soaked in the beauty of Abhogi, it was an ethereal experience. An effective niraval has the innate capacity to move the audience to tears. It exemplifies the personal experience the composer must have gone through to come out with such beautiful songs.

Let us examine some of the aspects of niraval singing in this essay.

Basics of Niraval singing:

Niraval singing, per se, is very exacting and demanding. It calls for a deep understanding of sahitya and the quintessence of the raga.

The word niraval seems to be a coinage in Tamil. In Telugu the equivalent word is 'nimputa' which literally means to 'fill up'. Saranga Deva in his work on music 'Sangita Ratnaakaramu' refers to 'rUpaka Alaapti' which means raga delineation through verses. This perhaps is the closest definition of 'niraval'. In Tamil Music, there is reference to 'niraval' as 'pAttaalathi'. The term 'sAhitya prastAram' is well-nigh the best description of what niraval singing is all about.

While developing niraval, we need to keep the raga bhava and sahitya bhava in focus. Before embarking on a study of 'niraval', we need to understand the underlying differences between niraval and sangati. The sangatis in a kriti are swara-pattern based. When you analyze the stack of sangatis in a kriti, you will notice how the phrases are swara-pattern based. This testifies to the fact that kritis lend themselves to notations.

For an example, if you look at the first few sangatis of 'vAtApi GaNapatim', they go as

1 g,,,, r,,, s, - s,n, | p,r,,, - s, | r,,, - s,r, ||

2 g,srg - r,,, s, - s,n, |p,r,,, - s, | r,,, - snsr ||

3 gpggrs - rgrsn - grsn | p,r,,, - s,r,,, -snsr||

The emerging progression from one sangati to the next, is a swara pattern that is developed to fit the verses appropriately.

In sharp contrast, the niraval is raga-based. While developing a niraval, a musician conceptualizes in terms of raga phrases rather than swara patterns. The words are fitted into raga phrases that would bring out the mood of the 'sahitya' appropriately.

Sahitya-anubhavam:

The term 'sahitya prastaram' obviously highlights that the sahityam is the crux of niraval singing. To inculcate the sensitivity of sahityam in niraval singing it becomes imperative that a musician becomes sensitive to sahityam even while rendering kritis. This will give a natural flair to niraval singing apart from providing a clear diction to the presentation. Clarity of lyrics in vocal presentation transports music into a sublime state where the musician and members the audience can re-live the moments of ecstasy the composers must have experienced.

When lyrics are fit into musical form (especially development of sangatis) it is very likely to undergo distortion popularly known as 'sahitya chEdam' or 'pada chEdam'. While many have argued that such distortions are inevitable, I personally do not believe so. A relentless sensitivity to lyrics can give a musician ways and means of imbibing sahitya anubhavam.

There are a few points that can, to a large extent, help us avoid pada chEdam.

1 The correct duration (mAttrA) for each syllable.

eg. the word 'nirmala' should not be elongated to 'neermala'.
the word 'sakala kalaavANI' must not be shrunk to 'sakala kalavANI'.
In both cases, we get into 'anartha' - blasphemy

2 Syllables must not be stuck together with 'non-existing' connectors.

Often noticed violations is 'bhajanaseya' sounding like 'bhajjanaseya'.

While pronouncing a word or a phrase, every syllable must be distinct, while several syllables should be strung together to make the word or phrase. It is like a garland of flowers, each flower having its own identity while still forming the garland as continuum.

3 Incomplete phrases

In many instances the meaning of the lyrics may not complete within one rhythmic cycle. In such cases the sangatis must not be built around one cycle.

A standing example is the anupallavi in Tyagaraja's 'emi cEsite nemi' (todi - misra cApu)

kAma mOha dAsulai - sree Ramuni

This phrase means 'Rama is a slave to desire and lust'!. That is far from what Tyagaraja says. Says he

'kAma mOha dAsulai srI rAmuni
kattu teliya lEni - vArilalO?'

Emi cEsitEnEmi srI rAmA
swAmi karuNalEni - vArilalO?

- Of what avail is anything done by people who are slaves to desire and lust and do not understand the commandments of Rama?

4 Words splitting over two rhythmic cycles.

An outstanding example of this is the 'marugElara', a Jayantashri raga composition of Tyagaraja
marugEla carAcara rUpa - parAtpara sUrya sudhAkara lOcana!

- The Universe itself is your form with the the sun and the moon as your eyes.

The words 'parAtpara' splits over two rhythmic cycles necessitating singing the whole anupallavi in cycles.

While avoiding these traps is difficult, an effort to do so is the mark of a conscious musician.

Choice of lyrics for niraval:

It has been a myth that niraval must be sung in the second part of anupallavi or the first part of caraNam or the last part of caraNam. While this rule may work in many cases, it is not a rule. The first step for an effective niraval singing is the selection of lyrics.

1 The phrase being developed must have a complete meaning and must highlight lofty ideas.

For an example, niraval for 'mamata bhandana yuta narastuti sukhamA?' by itself means 'is it blissful to ingratiate people with arrogance and self-conceit?'. Instead contrasting the above phrase with 'sumati tyAgarAjuni kIrtana sukhamA?' will compare and contrast the bad and the good. This is undercurrent of the song 'nidhi cAlA sukhamA' (KalyANi - misra cApu - Tyagaraja)

2 In 'gnAnamosaga rAdA' (purvikalyANi - rUpakam - Tyagaraja), the opening lines of caraNam 'paramAtmudu jIvAtmudu padunAluku lokamulu' although is a complete phrase, its meaning relates to the pallavi line of the song. Together the meaning goes as 'Can't you give me the knowledge that paramAtmA, jIvAtma, the fourteen worlds are all the same? - (advaita)'. It may be more appropriate to sing niraval in 'paripUrNa nishkaLanka niravdhi suka dAyakA' (Supreme and Perfect! O Impeccable! Bestower of eternal bliss!).

3 Songs like 'Meenakshi mEmudam dEhi' (purvikalyANi - Adi - Mudduswamy Dikshitar) offers various phrases for niraval singing namely

'mInalocani pAshamOcani mAnini kadamba vanavAsini'

'madhurApuri nilayE maNi valayE'

'madhumada mOdita hrudayE - sadayE - mahAdEva sundareshapriyE'.

It is to be noted that by and large kritis with NamAvalis and adjectives provide a larger selection of niraval lines.

Mode of singing niraval:

1 Niraval must be subtle, leisurely and suggestive.

The pace of niraval, in general, must be leisurely (vishrAnti). What is vishrAnti? It is the sense of composure that is exhibited by the musician which eventually pervades the concert hall. In this state, the mood of the raga and sahitya can be brought out very effectively. Hovering around a certain note and building melodic patterns culminating in upper sadjam is an effective way of expressing the emotion of the lyrics. Suggestive and subtle phrases definitely add extra charm to the presentation.

2 Word combinations

Certain times the theme of the niraval can be introduced by developing the lyrics by tagging on words.

'shuka saunakAdi sadArAditAm - shudda tAmraparNi tatastitAm' (srI kAntimatim - Hemavati - Adi - Mudduswamy Dikshitar) can be introduced as

'ArAditAm... sadA ArAditAm ... shukha saunakAdi sadArAditAm'.

When lyrics are paraphrased and presented this way, it highlights the lyrics and the reason why the composer chose those words to express his thoughts.

3 While singing niraval in madyama (medium) or durita (fast) tempos, care must be taken with lyrics and aesthetics. There should be no compromise on either. Chowka (slow) and medyama (medium) paces are very suitable for niraval. In songs where we start off niraval in the slow pace, it is generally recommended to move to medium pace to give variety before starting off kalpana swaras. Medium pace niraval must have gamakas built-in to give the wholesome effect. In songs where the niraval lines are in fast speed with packed words (for an example the madyama kala lyrics in Mudduswamy Dikshitar's compositions), developing niraval needs years of practice and perfection before presenting in a concert.

4 Although niraval is invariably followed by swara singing in a concert, it is not a mandate. In the course of a concert if the musician feels that niraval would shine better by itself, it is perfectly alright to sing niraval and proceed with the song.

5 While singing niraval for rAgam-tAnam-pallavi, the anuloma and pratiloma (the four speeds - slow, sama-kAla, tishram and catushram) aspects can be baked in.

6 The placing of words within the rhythmic cycle must be adhered to as much as possible. Although a little off-beat is allowed, it must not be so contrived as to cluster words in a few aksharas. What we popularly call as 'odukkal' will certainly add punch to niraval singing. Odukkal is basically taking lyrics off-beat like $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ of an akshara.

7 When singing kalpana swarams and finishing with the lyrics, a complete phrase of the lyrics must be presented. For an example, after swara singing, it will be more appropriate to say 'vatapi GaNaptim' as a whole or 'vatapi' instead of 'vatapi gaNa'. The musician needs to make sure that the phrase presented is also a positive attribute. After singing niraval to the lines 'ghana pApa haraNA kamanIya caraNA' (in manavi cEkonavayya - a SarasAngi raga kriti of PattaNam Subbramania Iyer), singing swaras and finishing with 'ghana pApa' is not very tasteful. In such instances other significant lines from the kriti may be chosen for niraval and swaras.

8 The duration of niraval for a song is basically dictated by the sense of proportion. A song of the magnitude and grandeur of 'balagopala' in bhairavi can justify a lot longer niraval than 'chintayamA' in the same raga. Rakti ragas give a lot of scope for developing niraval. To expound niraval in ragas where the contours are limited, a short and sweet presentation will highlight the niraval without making it sound repetitive.

In the final analysis, the art of niraval singing, in its ultimate form, uplifts music by several notches to a form of supreme bliss. It creates a thought-provoking approach to music in general and 'sahitya' in particular. It brings out the underlying theme of the songs, the emotional content and gives us glimpses of the composers' personal experiences. In its purest form it takes us closer to 'nAda brahmam' uniting the jIvAtmA with paramAtmA.

Footnotes:

"Sangeeta Ratnaakaramu (Ocean of Music)" was written by Saranga Deva (1200-1247 AD). Saranga Deva was a musician in the court of Simhana of Yadava Dynasty. Simhana ruled Devagiri region of Maharastra, Doulatabad as Capital City. In Sangeeta Ratnaakaramu on music, Saranga Deva describes music from the Bharata's time to his contemporary music.

Acknowledgements:

I should like to express my sincere gratitude to my gurus Vidwan Madurai Sri. T.N.Seshagopalan and Vidushi Smt. Ananthalakshmi Sadagopan, who are a perennial source of knowledge, insight and inspiration to me. Thanks are due to Vidwan Sri. S.R.Janakiraman for freely sharing with me his erudition on niraval singing. Last but not the least, my thanks to my disciple Sri. Samir Rao for helping me with editing this essay.