

## Dr S Ramanathan - The Legend Lives on

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1. Varaalandu - Gurjari - Adi - Thyagaraja
2. Dorakuna - Bilahari - Adi - Thyagaraja
3. Nannu Brovu - Lalita - Misrachapu - Syama Sastry
4. Yarukkutthan Teriyum - Devamanohari - Adi - Gopalakrishna Bharati (S. Ramanathan?)
5. Bhava priye - Bhavani - Rupakam - S. Ramanathan
6. Tillana - Behag - Misrachapu - Ponniah (of the Tanjore Quartet)
7. Padi madi - Kharaharapriya - Tisratripita - Arunagirinathar
8. Manju nigar - Chenchurutti - Kavadi Chindu - Annamalai Reddiar

Varaalandu kummani.... With his characteristic plain notes, S. Ramanathan begins this recording. It is nearly ten years since Dr. Ramanathan died. And, truly, the legend lives on. At least in the mind of his fans like me, especially when listening to recordings like this. I could imagine Dr. Ramanathan, with his erect frame and imposing white beard, sitting on the stage; M. S. Gopalakrishnan (MSG, as he is known almost universally among listeners to Karnatic music) sitting at an angle, partially facing the audience with his unique facial expression that is half-way between a grimace and a grin; and Karaikudi Mani with his black beard and stern look. Each of them are superlative maestros in their own right. Dr. Ramanathan was perhaps the best combination in the Karnatic world of the scholar and the singer, the theoretician and the practitioner. For purely tonal excellence and mastery over the instrument, MSG is justly famous, as is his special blend of Hindustani and Karnatic music. Karaikudi Mani has, perhaps, been one of the few artists successful in blending the Pudukottai and Tanjavur traditions of mridangam playing. While each of them are excellent in their own right, their combination has also been superb in this recording.

Gurjari (or Gujjari) is a rare raga. To my knowledge, there are only two kritis in this raga - Varalandu by Thyagaraja and Gunijanadi by Dikshitar. Both differ in their approach to the raga and there are some differences in their versions of this raga. True to their styles, Thyagaraja presents a sprightly piece and Dikshitar, a more sedate, majestic interpretation. The raga is a minor variation of Mayamalavagaula, the 15<sup>th</sup> melakarta. As both songs illustrate, the raga tends to emphasize plain elongated notes. For example, the syllables "ra" and "kum" in the opening words Varalandu kummani are elongated. It is the kind of infrequently sung composition in a rare raga that Dr. Ramanathan reveled in - and the swaras he sings after the composition are evidence of this.

The most elaborate piece in the recording follows next. Dorakuna itu vanta seva is one of the few slow paced Thyagaraja compositions in Bilahari. There is an interesting legend associated with this song. After Thyagaraja finished his tutelage under Sonti Venkatramanayya, one day the guru assembled a group of Sangita Vidwans and asked Thyagaraja to sing before them. Thyagaraja sang an extensive alapana and tanam in Bilahari before singing this kriti. He then followed it up with neraval and kalpana swaras. Sonti Venkatramanayya was very happy with the performance and presented Thyagaraja with many of the prizes (birudus) that he had received as the court singer. As a tribute to Thyagaraja, he also said ``Dorakuna Ituvanti Sishyudu'' (i.e. can one be fortunate to get a disciple like you?). Thyagaraja's fame spread among musicians after this event.

The alapanas by Dr. Ramanathan and MSG prior to the composition are solid text-book versions with the right mixture of slow and fast paced phrases, and the neraval and swara singing keep up the tradition. Karaikudi Mani's thani avartanam is engrossing.

Yarukkuttan teriyum is a composition of Gopalakrishna Bharati. It is believed that the original music for this piece was lost and I have been told that Dr. Ramanathan re-tuned the piece in Devamanohari - thus

making it partially his composition. The opening phrases of the alapana clearly identify the raga - not for a moment is there any mystification. The composition also starts with a unique phrase that marks Devamanohari - Sa dha ni pa. While the standard avarohanam is Sa ni dha ni pa, even the omission of ni does not lead to any confusion. Of course, this phrase can occur in other ragas also - for example, in the janaka raga of Devamanohari - Kharaharapriya, but it would not be considered to be entirely representative.

Another rare raga presented here is Bhavani. A janya of the 44<sup>th</sup> melakarta, Bhavapriya (which is alluded to in the opening words of the composition - Bhavapriye Bhavani), there are very few compositions in this raga. Thyagaraja is said to have composed one kriti in this raga which is now lost. Apart from Kanikarumbuto (popularized by the late S. Kalyanaraman) and Unnai andri (a composition of the late M.M.Dandapani Desikar and popularized by the late M. L Vasantakumari), this composition of Dr. Ramanathan is the only one I have heard. Dr. Ramanathan presents it as only a composer can - full of feeling. The chittaswaras adorning the composition showcase the raga very well.

It is but appropriate that Dr. Ramanathan should end with a Kavadi chindu since he played a major role in popularizing this genre of songs. Kavadi chindus are a somewhat recent (a little over a hundred years ago) addition to Karnatic music and draw heavily upon folk music. Addressed to Lord Muruga, they have a typical lilting rhythm that distinguishes them almost immediately. The most famous composer of Kavadi chindus is Annamalai Reddiar of Chinnikulam (1865-1891) and Manjunigar is arguably the most commonly sung chindu in Karnatic music concerts.

The "sleeve notes" accompanying the CD are an interesting mixture of very detailed and absent information. For example, in the case of the tillana, the notes mention who the composer is, when he lived, which deity the tillana is in praise of and who built that particular temple. But nowhere is the raga mentioned. Nor are the ragas of the last two compositions mentioned. Talas for none of the songs are mentioned. The recording is quite good. Despite these minor flaws, I think the CD is very good, and is definitely worth looking for, especially for young students.