Carnatic music- Swara Kalpana
By Smitha K. Prasad

Dear readers, as you are well aware by now, Carnatic music offers immense opportunities for an artist to showcase his/her creativity while staying within the framework of the grammar of Carnatic music. This month, I will take a detailed look on one such aspect of creativity viz. *swara kalpana* (spontaneous improvisations of *swaras*).

In previous columns, I have explained the differences between *kalpita sangeetham* and *manodharma sangeetham*. To recap briefly, *kalpita sangeetham* refers to preset compositions-examples range all the way from the initial structured lessons like *geethams*, *swarajathis* and *varnams* and later on to *krithis*, which are also preset, but offer scope for creativity. *Manodharama sangeetham* refers to spontaneous improvisation- this improvisation usually occurs as *alapana* (elaboration of the *raagam*), *neraval* (spontaneous improvisation of a preset line in a *krithi*), *kalpana swaram* (spontaneous improvisation in *swaras*), *tanam* (method of *raagam* improvisation using rhythmic syllables) and *pallavi* (another method of *raagam* elaboration where a single line is chosen for elaboration and sung in various tempos).

In *swara kalpana*, the musician presents aspects of *raga bhava* (characteristics) through the medium of *swara sancharas*- i.e. the notes of the *raga* are rendered in their *sruthis* with *gamakas* (ornamentation of notes) and intonation. *Kalpana swaras* are usually sung for any section of the *krithi* or even a relevant line of the composition; very rarely does one hear *kalpana swaras* for other compositional forms such as *varnam*.

Kalpana swaras should always be viewed as a method of bringing out the *raga bhava*. One of the important points while performing *kalpana swaras* is that the *swara* pattern always ends on a note from where it is suitable to render the line of lyrics chosen. The rendering of the *swara* passages usually starts off in a slower speed (*madhyama kala*) and transitions to the *druta kala* (faster speed); however it is not unusual for musicians to render *swaras* in either of these speeds. *Swara kalpana* passages are ideal for musicians to show their command over *laya* (rhythm) aspects- it offers the scope to sing free-flowing *swaras* (*sarvalaghu swaras*) or create interesting rhythmic *swara* patterns (*kanakku*), changes in *nadais*, etc. The cardinal rule of *swara kalpana* is that it is composed by the artist spontaneously and not written out beforehand.

Till we meet next time, do listen to examples of *kalpana swarams* in different ragas- you will be able to find many samples from different artists on the Internet.

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