



REVATHI R

Recently, Parampara dedicated a whole day to Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi's saptaratna kritis with short concerts, each highlighting one kriti. Prof. Madhusudanan Kalaichelvan highlighted the significant features of these kritis in his lecture, such as the sixth, which lists the 63 Nayanmars, whose names differ in length and are fitted within the rhythmic meter. Also, the saptaratnas are in Adi tala, but the differences in melody and rhythm make each stand out. Prof. Kalaichelvan compared the poet's devotion to Andal's Thiruppavai verses. He said that the order of the saptaratnas is such that they are alternatively on bhagavatha or a devotee and on the deity. The last of the set is based on the philosophy of saranagati or surrender. He drew similarity between the two poets - Venkata Kavi and Andal in each saptaratna. He was supported by Vidya Kalyanaraman on the vocals.

'Bhajanamruta' in Nattai, a salutation to the bhagavathas, mentions the devotees of Vishnu such as Prahalada, Narada, Anjaneya, Guha, Sabari as well as Siva bhaktas such as Nandi, Matanga, Vyagrapada, Manickavachagar and Sundarar. A kriti that is comparable to Tyagaraja's 'Endara mahannubhavulu' was presented by young Ashwath Narayanan. The reference to Purandaradasa and Tulasidas in this composition speaks of the regard that Venkata Kavi had for these composers. The spins in the lyrics throw a challenge to singers, which Ashwath handled well. He also took up 'Thaye Yashoda' (Thodi), 'Madhura Madhura' (Atana), 'Sonnadai kel kannu' (Pantuvavali), and a tillana in Surutti with lyrics in pallavi, anupallavi and charanam unlike the conventional tillanas with lyrics only in charanam.

While in the first saptaratna, the swara-sahitya charanams go back to the pallavi after each of the multiple charanams, the second one in Gowla, 'Aganitamahimadhuta,' the charanams are composed with the first charanam as the anchor. The charanam lines return to the line 'Namo namaste,' which has a variation in each of the sangatis while rendering the other charanams. The last charanam is a long one in madhyamakala, which mentions many less-known characters of the Mahabharata like Pippilada, son of Sage Dadhichi, Nahusha and Ambarisha. Prof. Kalaichelvan explained the significance of the lyrics with the ashtakshara mantra, Om Namo Narayanaya, woven into

Celebrating the deity and devotee

Young vocalists captured the scholarship and deep devotion of Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi, which make his Saptaratnas special



Young brigade Anahita and Apoorva, (top) Ashwath Narayanan and Bhargavi Balasubramanian.

the charanams.

Sisters Anahita and Apoorva sang this kriti beautifully demonstrating the difference in each of the charanams. They also presented 'Mahashaya nandana' (Abhogi) and 'Ganayami sathatham' (Begada).

Composition on Radha

'Madhava hrudi khelini' set in Kalyani is composed entirely on Radha and her Krishna bhakti. Jayadeva's compositions on Radha could probably have inspired Venkata Kavi. Thus, Carnatic music got a rare composition on Radha. In 'Padmavati Ramanam' (Purvikalyani), Venkata Kavi refers to Jayadeva as 'Kavi Raja.'

Similar to the Gowla kriti, this composition also has the first charanam as the anchor charanam but is a deceptively simple line - 'Radhe rasayuta raasavilase'. According to Prof. Kalaichelvan, the bhakti of Andal, wearing the garland which was meant for the deity, is similar to the devotion of Radha portrayed in the kriti.

Sunil Gargyan presented this ratna with all its poetic and melodic beauty. He also rendered 'Gopa kumara' (Atana) with multiple madhyamakala charanams that are of single and two lines, 'Sarva jeeva dayakari' (Suddha

Prof. Madhusudanan Kalaichelvan in his lecture on Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi's saptaratna kritis drew similarity between him and Andal in each saptaratna

saveri) and 'Vandhu ketpar illoyu' (Hindolam).

Describing Krishna

From praising the devotees, the fourth saptaratna moves on to describe Krishna. In this composition, Venkata Kavi writes about Krishna's flute, his music and his grace. Set in Kiravani, the kriti 'Bala sarasa murali' has in it phrases like 'sura sannuta' and 'sura vandita' to experience the divine music. The charanams return to the pallavi in this composition with a couple of them modifying the beginning of the pallavi from Bala to mean 'Gopala.' Bhargavi Balasubramanian pictured the phrases well and presented the kriti bringing out its elegance. She also sang 'Pavana kumara' (Vasanta) from the set of Anjaneya saptaratna, 'Yennaththal sonnalum' (Vachaspati) and 'Adum

varai' (Heseni).

Bhargavi, inspired by her guru Chitravina Ravikiran, maintains a website www.venkatakavi.org compiling Venkata Kavi's history, compositions with audio and video samples. For this event, she had helped the artistes, with lyrics, notations and patantara of the saptaratnas. She acknowledged the effort put in by the musicians for the event.

As is evident from the first line, the fifth of the Saptaratnas, 'Jatadhara Sankara' in Thodi is on Lord Siva. The lyrics sketch the 'ananda tandava' of Siva in its entirety, with the fourth charanam listing the instruments played. The charanams are anchored round the first charanam 'paalaya lokam adhuna'. The swaras in the first charanam also display the interesting descending pattern, called 'gopuchcha yati.' The first charanam gets two more lines as the finale to the composition that adds to the lyrical beauty. Akshay Padmanabhan did justice with an elaborate alapana, niraval and swarakalpana at the anupallavi line 'natanananda chidambarananda.'

His other renditions were 'Maragatha manimaya' (Arabhi), 'Vishati vishati' (Gowrimanohari) and a captivating 'Naan enna tavam' in Khamas.

Line up of Nayanmars

The spectacular description of all the Nayanmars is the highlight of the sixth composition of the saptaratnas. 'Aalavadhennalo' in Paras has six charanams apart from the first. The swara-sahityams come back to the third line 'innavaril oruvaripole,' where the poet exclaims when he would become a devotee like the Nayanmars.

With each charanam ending in different interesting rhythmic patterns, the composition demands involvement in the lyrics. Vocalist Baby Sriram handled the kriti with skill. Her diction deserves mention. She said, "Though I have seen the images of the Nayanmars in temples, this concert gave me the opportunity to know their names

at one go. I read the names many times to get them right and enjoyed learning and presenting this composition."

Baby's other presentations included 'Sarasija bhava jaye' (Kalyani), 'Eppadithhan en ullam' (Neelambari) with lyrics set in madhyamakala in pallavi, anupallavi apart from an independent stanza in the same pace, 'Padmavati Ramanam' (Purvi kalyani) and a tillana in Sindhu Bhairavi

Daily offering

'Sundara nandakumara' in Madhyamavathi has all that Venkata Kavi offered during his daily puja. The charanams mention simhasanam, paadyam, arghyam, achamaneeyam, dhoopam, deepam, bhuktam and thamboolam in the correct order. The composition has even the list of prasadam offered to the deity in one of the charanams.

Nisha Rajagopalan maintained a soothing tempo throughout this composition, particularly when it has all the charanams beginning before the start of the tala and the madhyama kalams begin at the start of the tala. Similar to Paras, it takes the third line of the charanam 'grahaana Rajagopala' after each swara sahitya charanams. The finale was enjoyable with niraval and swaram at the anupallavi lines 'mandhara gridhara.'

Nisha sang 'Senapate' (Gowla), 'Arulalan thiramellam' (Sankarabharanam) and thoughtfully concluded with the Radhakalyana oonjal - 'sama mudal vedangala.'

Popularising his work

Scholars Dr. Subbaraman and his sister Alamelu, who continue popularising Venkata Kavi's compositions, were honoured. The nephew and niece of Needamangalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavathar, who brought out many of Venkata Kavi's compositions, were curious to know how the younger musicians render the composition. Dr. Subbaraman informed similar celebration is organised every year on the composer's birthday by the Needamangalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavathar Trust.

For Vedanth Ramanujam, promoter of Parampara, the inspiration to organise this event came from the concert he had organised on Venkata Kavi's compositions on Janmashtami this year. "When I thought about an event to focus on these kritis, Bhargavi suggested that the saptaratnas could be a good start," he said.

www.venkatakavi.org offers a wealth of information on Venkata Kavi. His compositions are available with audio and video samples.