CARNATIC MUSIC THEORY
YEAR I

BASED ON THE SYLLABUS FOLLOWED BY GOVERNMENT MUSIC COLLEGES IN ANDHRA PRADESH AND TELANGANA FOR CERTIFICATE EXAMS HELD BY POTTI SRIRAMULU TELUGU UNIVERSITY

ANANTH PATTABIRAMAN

EDITION: 2.6

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Preface

This text covers topics on Carnatic music required to clear the first year exams in Government music colleges in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Also, this is the first of four modules of theory as per Certificate in Music (Carnatic) examinations conducted by Potti Sriramulu Telugu University. So, if you are a music student from one of the above mentioned colleges, or preparing to appear for the university exam as a private candidate, you’ll find this useful.

Though attempts are made to keep this text up-to-date with changes in the syllabus, students are strongly advised to consult the college or university and make sure all necessary topics are covered.

This might also serve as an easy-to-follow introduction to Carnatic music for those who are generally interested in the system but not appearing for any particular examination.

I’m grateful to my late guru, veteran violinist, Vidwan. Peri Srirama-murthy, for his guidance in preparing this document.

Ananth Pattabiraman

Editions


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About the author

Ananth Pattabiraman is a musician. At Kuyil, a startup he co-founded, he makes mobile apps for Carnatic music.

Carnatic apps can be found at https://kuyil.org
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Technical Terms

**Sangeetham**
The Indian term for Music. A group of musical sounds, which are called swarams that give melody and pleasant feelings to the ears, is called Sangeetham. Ancient writers hold the view that vocal music, instrumental music and dance together constituted sangeetham. Later, dance was separated from the first two.

**Shruti**
It is an audible sound which can be heard distinctly. It is a musical sound which a well trained human ear is capable of distinguishing. It is the key note or adhara shadjam, based on which all other swarams are derived.

**Swaram**
It is a musical note which is pleasing to the ears. There are seven basic swarams, known as Saptha Swarams. They are:

1. Shadjam (shortly Sa, notated as s)
2. Rishabham (Ri, r)
3. Ghandaram (Ga, g)
4. Madhyamam (Ma, m)
5. Panchamam (Pa, p)
6. Dhaivatham (Dha, d)
7. Nishadham (Ni, n)

**Arohanam**
Series of Swarams in the ascending order of pitch.

**Avarohanam**
Series of swarams in the descending order of pitch.

**Moorchana**
Arohanam and Avarohanam together is called Moorchana.

**Dwadasa Swaramsthanams**
Out of the seven swarams, Shadjam (Sa) and Panchamam (Pa) are constant. They are called achala swarams. The remaining five swarams (Ri, Ga, Ma, Dha, Ni) admit varieties and they are called chala swarams. In combination, both achala and chala swarams yield 12 different musical pitches and they are called Dwadhasa Swaramsthanams.
The Dwadasa Swaramsthyanams are:

1. Shadjam  
2. Suddha Rishabam  
3. Chatusruthi Rishabam  
4. Sadharana Gandharam  
5. Anthara Ghandaram  
6. Suddha Madhyamam  
7. Prathi Madhyamam  
8. Panchamam  
9. Suddha Dhaivatham  
10. Chatusruthi Dhaivatham  
11. Kaisika Nishadham  
12. Kakali Nishadham  

*Sthāyi*

A series of swarams—beginning with *Sa* and ending with *Ni*—is called sthāyi. (Equivalent Western term: *Octave*)

There are five sthayis:

1. *Anu-mandra* sthāyi  
2. *Mandra* sthāyi  
3. *Madhya* sthāyi  
4. *Thara* sthāyi  
5. *Ati-Thara* sthāyi

The sthāyi in which we normally sing is the madhya sthāyi. The swarams higher than nishadam of madhya sthāyi form thara sthāyi. So, swarams in thara sthāyi sound higher in pitch than the same swarams in madhya sthāyi. Immediately below madhya sthāyi *Sa* are mandra sthāyi swaram. They sound lower in pitch compared to madhya sthāyi swarams.

Swarams in mandra, madhya and thara stayis form the normal range of human voice. Swarams that are lower than mandra stayi shadjam (anu-mandra sthāyi), and higher than thara sthāyi nishadham (ati-thara sthāyi) are sometimes used in instrumental music.
While notating, thara sthayi swarams are written with a dot above them, and ati-thara sthayi swarams with two dots above them. To indicate mandra sthayi, a dot below the swaram is added. For anumandra sthayi, two dots below each swaram are added.

**Purvānga**
The group of first four swarams of the Saptha Swarams—Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma—is known as the Purvanga.

**Uttharānga**
The group of last three notes—Pa, Dha, Ni—is known as Uttharanga.

**Dhāthu**
The swara part of the musical composition is known as Dhathu.

**Māthu**
The sahitya part of a musical composition is known as Mathu.

**Akshara Kāla**
Unit time in music is called Akshara Kala.

**Thrikāla**
Kala is refers to the speed of the musical piece. There are three kālas:

1. **Prathama Kāla** – First degree of speed. One note is sung in one akshara kāla.
2. **Dwitiya Kāla** – Second degree of speed, twice faster than Prathama kala. Two notes are sung in one akshara kāla.
3. **Tritiya Kāla** – Third degree of speed, twice faster than Dwitiya Kala. Four notes are sung in one akshara kāla.
Thourya Trikam
Vocal Music, Instrumental Music and Dance, all the three combined together is referred to as Thouryathrikam.

Tāla
Musical time or measure.

Avartha
It is the completion of a tala angas or time measure.

Angas, Shadāngas
In order to facilitate easy and accurate method of reckoning musical time, six angas have been devised. They are known as Shadangas or six angas. They are

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Anga</th>
<th>Sign</th>
<th>Number of Aksharas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Laghu</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>3/4/5/7/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Drutham</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Anudrutam</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Guru</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Plutam</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Kakapadam</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the thalangas, only 3 are widely in use. They are called Principle Thalangas. Here is the list of Principle Thalangas along with their way of counting:

1. Anudrutam (U) – One beat of the palm on the lap
2. Drutam (O) – One beat + One wave (usi or visarjitam)
3. Laghu (I) – One beat + Count of the fingers

Jāti
Of the shadangas, only laghu has variations in number of kriyas. It is called laghu jāti bedha. There are five jātis:

1. Trisra Jāti - 3 Kriyas
2. Chaturasra Jāti - 4 Kriyas
3. Kanda Jāti - 5 Kriyas
4. Misra Jāti - 7 Kriyas
5. Sankeerna Jāti - 9 Kriyas
**Sapta Tālas**

There are seven principle talas, they are called *Sapta Tālas*. They are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Tala</th>
<th>Sign</th>
<th>Akshara Kala</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Dhruva Tala</td>
<td>IOII</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Matya Tala</td>
<td>IOI</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rupaka Tala</td>
<td>OI</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Jampa Tala</td>
<td>I7UO</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Tripura Tala</td>
<td>I3OO</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Ata Tala</td>
<td>I3I3OO</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Eka Tala</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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- **Pocket Shruti Box**
  Carnatic Tambura

- **Sadhakam**
  Swara Gnanam Practice

- **Shruti**
  Carnatic Tuner
The System of 35 Talas

There are seven basic talas. All these seven talas are made of three basic angas:

1. Laghu  I
2. Drutham  O
3. Anu-Drutham  U

Here are the sapta talas with their symbol denoting their respective angas:

1. Druva Talam  IOII
2. Matya Talam  IOI
3. Rupaka Talam  OI
4. Jampa Talam  IUO
5. Triputa Talam  IOO
6. Ata Talam  IIOO
7. Eka Talam  I

Among the three angas, drutham and anu-drutham are fixed. They have fixed number of aksharas (drutham – 2 aksharas, anu-drutham – 1 aksharam)

However, laghu varies in the number of aksharas depending upon its jāti. There are five jātis of laghu with their corresponding akshara kalas:

1. Trisra Jāti Laghu  (3 aksharas)  (Symbol) I₃
2. Chaturasra Jāti Laghu  (4 aksharas)  I₄
3. Kanda Jāti Laghu  (5 aksharas)  I₅
4. Misra Jāti Laghu  (7 aksharas)  I₇
5. Sankeerana Jāti Laghu  (9 aksharas)  I₉

Because of this jāti bedam of laghu, each of the sapta talas produce five thalas, by varying the jati of the laghu present. For e.g.:

1. Trisra Jāti Rupaka Thalam  -  OI₃
2. Chaturasra Jāti Rupaka Thalam  -  OI₄
3. Kanda Jāti Rupaka Thalam  -  OI₅
4. Misra Jāti Rupaka Thalam  -  OI₇
5. Sankeerana Jāti Rupaka Thalam  -  OI₉
In a similar manner seven talas of five jati each yield $7 \times 5 = 35$ Talas.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tāla</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Jāti</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trisram (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druva</td>
<td>IOII</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matya</td>
<td>IOI</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rupaka</td>
<td>OI</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jampa</td>
<td>IUO</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triputa</td>
<td>IOO</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ata</td>
<td>IIOO</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eka</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_table of 35 talas with their respective akshara kāla-s_

¹ If more than one laghu is present in the thala, all the laghus will have the same jaati.
Geetham

Introduction

Geetham generally means a song. The union of dhātu and mātu is known as geetham, i.e., the union of music and words (swaram and sahityam). Geethams are the simplest of melodies. The term geetham literally means a song, but in Carnatic music it signifies a particular type of composition.

The music of the geetham is simple melodic extension of the raga in which it is composed. Its tempo is uniform. It is a continuous composition without any sections pallavi, anupallavi and charanam. The geetham is sung without repetition from the beginning to end. Some geethams have two sections (khandikas) and some have three. Some geethams are concluded by repeating a portion of the opening part.

Geethams are learned after a course in the preliminary swara exercises and alankaras. There are geethams in all the sapta talas and their varieties. Geethams are of two kinds. They are:

1. Sanchari geetham (aka Sāmānya / Sadharana / Lakshya geetham)
2. Lakshana geetham

Sanchari Geetham

Sanchari Geethams (also known as Sāmānya or Sadharana Geethams) are usually in praise of God, musical luminaries and āhāryas. E.g.: The Sapta Tala Geetham in Nata Raga “Gana Vidya Durandara” in praise of Venkata Subbayya by Pydala Gurumurthy Sastry. Geethams are set in medium tempo. There are no sangatis or variations and the flow of music is natural. Neither intricate combinations nor terse sancharis are found in its music. The swarupa is well brought out in each case. For each note of the dhāthu there is usually a syllable in the sāhitya (lyrics).

Sometimes meaningless phrases are found interspersed in it. There are called Matrika Padas or Geetamalankara phrases. E.g.: aa yiya yiya in Arabi Geetham “Rere Sri Rama”. These phrases lend a characteristic beauty to the sahitya of geethams. They are introduced for ornamentation only. These syllables remind one of similar syllables occurring in sāma-gānam. There are instances of famous Sanskrit slokas which have been cleverly introduced as sahityas for sanchari geethams. The geetham in Bhairavi Raga Sri
Ramachandra and the geetham in Nata Raga Amari Kimari are well known examples.

In a geetham the number of swarams present in an āvartha is equal to the number of aksharas forming the avartha. The dheerga swaram being reckoned as two swarams will have two aksharas in the sahitya. The same is true for dheergam of three aksharas long. So, a geetham in chaturasra jāti dhruva tāla should not be taken as trisra jāti triputa tāla considering two swarams for each count. Likewise a geetham in chaturasra jāti rupaka tāla should not be taken as trisra jāti eka tāla with two swarams for each count and so on. This will not be in keeping with the rhythmical construction of the composition.

Geethams are compositions in ati chitra tama mārgam. They are in ekākshara kālam (one swara per count of tāla). Purandara Dasa’s introductory geethams in praise of Vigneswara, Maheswara and Vishnu are sometimes referred to as Pillari Geethams. The significant introduction of vowels in the very first geetham is noteworthy and justifies the genius of the composer. Pydala Gurumurthy Sastry was a prolific composer of geethams after Purandara Dasa. He is referred to as “Veyyi Geethamla” Pydala Gurumurthy Sastry. After him no noteworthy composer has composed sanchari geethams.

Gānakrama: Order of Singing a Sanchari Geetham

Geethams are sung from the beginning to the end without repeating the avarthas. If a geetham consists of two sections (Kandikas) as in Kalyani Kamala Jādala, the second section is sung after the first.

Types of Sanchari Geethams

There are different categories of Sanchari Geetham:

Pillari Geetham

Geethams written in praise of Gods like Vigneswara, Mahesara, Mahavishnu etc. are called Pillari Geetham. E.g. Sri Gananadha in Malahari Rgam, Rupaka Talam.

Gana Raga Geetham

Geethams written in gana ragams like Nata, Gowla, Arabi, Sri Rgam, Vārāli are called gana raga geethams. E.g. Re Re Sri Rama in Arabi Rgam, Triputa Talam.
Rakthi Raga Geetham

Geethams set to rakthi ragams like Mohanam and Kalyani are called Rakthi Raga Geethams. E.g. Vara Veena in Mohana Ragam, Rupaka Talam.

Raga Malika Geetham

In a same geetham, if more than one ragam is used, it is called a raga malika geetham. This type of Geethams are not in use today.

Notable composers who wrote sanchari geethams:

- Purandara Dasa
- Paidala Gurumurthy Sastry
- Govindhacharya
- Venkata Makhi
- Rama Mathya
Lakshana Geetham

In a Lakshana Geetham, sahityam will describe the lakshna of the ragam in which the geetham is set to. There will be a small deiva sthuthi too.

Lakshna geethams describe

1. whether the ragam is a melakartha ragam or janya (derived) ragam. If it is a janya ragam, it describes the melakartha it is based on,
2. whether the ragam is a bāshānga or upānga ragam,
3. whether the ragam is audava, shādava, or sampoorna ragam,
4. the ārohana and avarohana of the ragam,
5. whether there is any vakram or varjam in the moorchana of the ragam,
6. the jīva (essential note), nyasa (ending note) and graha (starting) swarams of the ragam.

Lakshna geethams for many ragams are available.

Notable composers of lakshana geethams:

1. Venkatamakhi
2. Paidala Gurumurthy Sastry

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2 Subbarama Dikshitar’s Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini contains many of the lakshana geethams by Venkatamakhi. See: http://ibiblio.org/guruguha/ssp.htm
Swara Pallavi

Introduction

A Swara Pallavi (also known as Jathi Swaram) is a kind of composition which has only the dhāthu part (swarams) with no sāhityam. They are taught after geethams but before varanams. These are scholarly compositions and their dhathu has the raga bhāvam. Usually swara pallavis are set to madhyama kalam (medium tempo) and set to adi or chapu talas.

Swara pallavis can have 2 or 3 parts in the following manner:

1. Pallavi – Anu pallavi – Charanam
2. Pallavi – Charanam

Swara pallavis usually have 4 to 8 charanams. In some charanams, mridanga jathis are heard, hence the name jathi swaram.

Compositional structure of a swara pallavi is same as that of swara jathi. The only difference between them is, a swarajathi has the māthu part (sahityam) whereas a swara pallavi doesn't have any lyrics.

Gānakrama: Order of singing of a Swara Pallavi

Pallavi is sung first, followed by the charanams. At the end of each charanam, pallavi is sung again. So the order of singing is like this—

Pallavi
Charanam 1 – Pallavi
Charanam 2 – Pallavi
etc.

Notable composers who wrote swara pallavis include

• Srimān Sriramacharyulu
• Swathi Thirunāl
• Ponnayya Pillai
Biographies

Paidala Gurumurthy Sastry

Paidala Gurumurthy Sastry belonged to the 18th century. He lived in a village called Kayattaru in Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu. He was a Telugu Brahmin belonging to the Murikinati sect.

He was well versed in the four Vedas and was an expert in music and literature. He was a contemporary to Ramaswamy Dikshitar and a disciple of Sri Sonti Venkata Subbyyar. He was a great scholar in both lakshya and lakshana (theory and practice) in music. He has composed many geethams, lakshana geethams, prabhandams and keerthanas. He has composed 1000 geethams and is known as Veyyi Geetham Paidala Gurumurthy Sastry. He was the most notable composer to compose geethams after Purandara Dasa. His mudra is Gurumurthy. He was honoured by Manali Chinnaiah Mudaliar many times in Madras for his scholarship in music and literature.

He composed Gana Vidya Durandhara—a saptageetham in Nata ragam—in praise of Venkata Swamy. All his compositions are in Sanskrit. The sahityas are in praise of God. His keerthana Neeraja nayana in Dhanyasi ragam, Sadapathim in Mohana ragam and the lakshana geetham Kamsasura in Shahana ragam are very popular among his compositions. Among his disciples is Kanchipuram Gudala Seshayya Sastry who wrote many well-known keerthanas and swarajatis.

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Purandara Dasa

Purandara Dasa was a composer lived in the 15th -16th (1486-1564) century. He was the first person to systematize the learning of Carnatic music. He composed saralis, jantas, alankaras, geethams and devar namas. In recognition of his foundational contributions, he is known as adhi guru and karnataka sangeetha pithamaha.

Purandara Dasa was born as the only son of Varadhappa Naik, a diamond merchant, and Kamala Bai. He was born in Purandaragudda near Hampi in Bellary district, Karnataka. His original name was Srinivasa and he was fondly called as Sinappa. He was brought up with all comforts and great care. He was a scholar in Sanskrit and literature. He married Saraswathi Bai at the age of 16. He lost his parents at the age of 20. He took over the responsibility of his father's business. He was very successful and he became very wealthy in a short period of time. He came to be known as Navkoti Narayan.

As his wealth grew up, he became merciless. But his wife was just the opposite. Once a poor brahmin came to him and asked for some money to perform the thread ceremony for this son. When he refused to help, the brahmin went to Dasa's wife and sought her help. She gave him her nose ring and the brahmin took it to Dasa's shop to sell it. Dasa realized that the ring was similar to that of his wife's. He rushed back home and demanded his wife to show the ring.

Saraswathi Bai didn't have the ring any more and she couldn't tell the truth to her husband. With a troubled mind, she decided to kill herself by drinking poison. Surprisingly, the ring was there in the bowl where poison was supposed to be there. She gave it to Purandara Dasa and told him the whole story.

Amazed to hear the story, Dasa sent his servants to find the poor man. The servants couldn’t find him anywhere. It was at this time that Dasa composed his first song Mosa Poyidhe (Kannada) in Atana ragam.

This incident changed him completely. He went on a pilgrimage from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari three times. He gave all his wealth to charity. He taught Vedas and Upanishads to people. Vyasaraya Pitathipathi Swamiji Satyadharma Tirtha gave him the name Purandaradasa.
Purandara Dasa composed sarali, janta, alankaras and pillari geethams to facilitate the learning of Carnatic music in a systematic way. He was the root cause in introducing Mayamalava Gowla ragam in all these 15 abyasa ganams. He has also composed thana varnams and padha varnams. He has also composed over 47,500 devar namas in Kannada. He was the first person to compose in Kannada. His mudra is Purandara Vittala.

~ End ~

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