

The Brilliance of Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi

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In the galaxy of all time great vaggayakaras of Carnatic Music, Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi is one of the brightest shining stars. He is said to have lived between the period of Purandara Dasa and Annamacharya and the Trinity and his date is placed roughly between 1700-1765. Venkata Kavi was a great personality, an innovator who contributed a lot to Carnatic Music but his works were hidden from the mainstream music field for almost 200 years.

“The 20th century saw the emergence of the mostly hidden works of three major composers – Annamacharya, Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi and Swati Tirunal,” observed the late Shri T S Parthasarathy, a renowned musicologist and former secretary of The Madras Music Academy. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer had no hesitation in writing that “Venkata Kavi’s stature equals that of the revered Carnatic Trinity - Tyagaraja, Muttuswami Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri”. Decades earlier, GNB had written a whole article on Venkata Kavi’s greatness as a composer. However, the majority of Venkata Kavi’s brilliant works and original contributions are still unknown to mainstream performers, musicologists, music promoters, music lovers and the media. But this situation is changing fast with the emergence of many of his works.

Consummate composer

Today, around 400 compositions of his are available to us and these reveal that he was a complete master of the science and art of music in all senses of the term – melody, rhythm or lyrics and was fluent in Sanskrit and Tamil. He was proficient in a variety of musical forms such as the krti, tillana and kavadichindu. He composed several types of krtis – some with madhyama kala passages, some with more than one charana but with the same tune, others with multiple charanas in different tunes, some with just a samshti charana, some with gati bheda and so on. He used talas and themes that not many other Carnatic composers have preferred to handle.

Though his accomplishments are staggering, it is hardly surprising as legend has it that Venkata Kavi had his musical insights from Lord Krishna himself, in the Kalinga Nartana Temple in Oottukkadu, a small village about 10 miles from Kumbhakonam. Venkata Kavi’s own words lend credence to this belief. In the anupallavi of his Sriranjani composition, *Guru padaravinda komalam*, he declares:

*paramayogayagam vedam padittilen
Padittadu pol nadittilen
Parvai onrile vilainda bhagyamidu*

Yarkkumidu aridanadu parimala sad (guru padaravinda komalam).

'I have never studied the scriptures or yoga nor pretended to have done so. I received my whole fortune through the benevolent glance of my guru.'

Venkata Kavi composed at least 14-15 songs only on the greatness of Guru. A few of them suggest that he may also have had another human guru.

Musicianship

The greatest evidence of his musical pedigree is his compositions. There are several references to good musical approach, practices and even technical terms of ornamentation like *aahatam* and *pratyaagatam*. Venkata Kavi believed that music had to be blended with bhakti in order to shine. His philosophy, *bhakti yoga sangeeta margame paramapavana mahume* is exactly similar to Tyagaraja's *sangeeta gnanamu bhakti vina sanmargamu galade*. A great illustration of the adage, 'great minds think alike'. Venkata Kavi's works are an ideal combination of music, devotion, intellect and a soul that was in a state of spiritual bliss.

It will be best to study every facet of his musicianship separately – melody, rhythm lyrics, themes, etc. Though volumes can be written about each one of them, let me attempt to give a glimpse here.

Melody

Venkata Kavi had a vast knowledge of music and musical nuances. He used a wide variety of ragas ranging from the well known such as Todi, Kalyani, Kharaharapriya, Shahana, through minor ones like Kannadagowla, Jayantashri, Malavi, Umabharanam and also a few that are seldom used today like Balahamsa and Rasamanjari. In some instances, his works are the first or only ones to be available in a given raga. Examples: *Sri Shivanayike* in Lalitagandharvam and *Padasevanam* in Deeparam.

His vision of the raga and melody as a whole is considerable and can be seen in the number of different styles in which he composed various krtis in the same raga. For instance, his krtis in Madyamavati – *Shankari Sri Rajarajeshwari, Sundara nandakumara, Aadadu ahangadu vaa Kanna* - bring out different facets of this beautiful raga. He also employed attractive swaraksharas – a technique where the lyrics match the solfa notes of the tune. He has also incorporated raga mudra (names of ragas of the composition) in several krtis. Examples: Shuddhasaveri, Navarasakannada. Several other compositions contain names of many other ragas mentioned in some other contexts.

Rhythm

Venkata Kavi's command over rhythm has been without precedent and has not yet been surpassed. He made complex eduppus (starting or landing points of various sections of a composition) seem like child's play and used them naturally, without ever affecting the flow of the music or the lyrics. His handling of talas like Khanda Dhruvam, Sankeerna Mathyam, and Khanda Triputam would leave even seasoned musicians and scholars awe-struck. Again, he has made the talas look as simple as, Adi or Roopakam, which only a genius of the highest order can do.

Lyrical felicity

Venkata Kavi's class in Sanskrit or Tamil is in a league of its own. His remarkable Niagara-like flow and choice of words that are music to the ears even when rendered without melody, often conceals his deep scholarship. His vocabulary is stupendous and he has used words and phrases that are hardly otherwise found in Carnatic literature. Sanskrit scholars have found uncommon words and even common ones like *bhaja*, *bharita* and *chandra* used in several novel contexts.

Venkata Kavi was a man for details. His expression is facile that every song comes alive with whatever theme he has touched. His works transport us to wherever he wants us to be not merely because of a colourful imagination but also because of his ability to describe even minor details. For instance, in his krti *Ranganatham anisham* - Gambheeranattai, he talks of the Lord of Srirangam being situated between two rivers while most other compositions only mention the banks of Cauveri. In another krti, 'Gajamukhanujam', he talks of the kunkuma in the centre of Lord Subramanya's ash-lined forehead.

Taking another popular example, one can vividly visualise the scene in *Taye yashoda* - Todi where the gopis are complaining to Yashoda about her son Lord Krishna. This song actually has 8 charanams and each one describes the pranks of Krishna very humourously. Not so well known is the superb reply by the Lord to every one of these charges in another piece, *Illai illai* - Mohanam, also with 8 charanams.

Interesting features and innovations

Lyric-based variations (sahitya-sangatis): Sangatis are pre-composed variations in a composition and rendered in a disciplined manner (as opposed to variations born from free improvisation). Usually, variations are melodic in nature while the lyrics remain constant. Several of Venkata Kavi's pieces have such sangatis but he has also shown the concept of *lyrical variations*. For instance, in the pallavi of his *Abhogi* piece, Mahashaya hrdaya, he has composed 3 variations in the madhyamakala passage as given below:

- (i) *madhukara champaka vana vihara manamohana Madhusoodana navabhooshana*
(ii) *madhukara champaka vana vihara nava pallava padakara madana gambheera*
(iii) *madhukara champaka vana vihara govardhana dhara bhujaga nartana charana*

Originality in structure: Having exhibited his mastery in the straightforward and the conventional, Venkata Kavi goes on to show his innovative skills. There are also compositions where Venkata Kavi has varied the ratios or inserted madhyamakalams between slower passages within a given section as in the pallavi of Padmini vallabha – Dhanyasi.

Emphatic Finales: Venkata Kavi was a master of finishes. In several songs, his endings are in interesting rhythmic patterns. Example: Bhuvanamoha – Dhanyashi, where he has capped off the charanam with a pattern of 6 repeated 11 times, which is a wonderful way to get to half a beat landing (which is the commencing point of the pallavi) from the beat after 2 cycles of Adi tala. The words are superbly woven in lilting Sanskrit:

atinootana kusumakara vrjamohana saraseeruha dalalochana mamamanasa patuchorasu- swarageetasu- muraleedhara suramodita bhavamochana

There are many other instances of similar endings in krtis like Alavadennalo – Paras (5th charanam) and Mummada vezhamugattu Vinayakan (Nattai).

Themes

Venkata Kavi has composed on a wide range of themes. Most people are familiar with some of his works on Lord Krishna but he has composed with equal felicity on other deities as well, such as Vinayaka, Tyagaraja (of Tiruvarur), Kamakshi, Rama, Kartikeya, Narasimha, Anjaneya, Ranganatha, and also on Soorya, Radha and other such important mythological characters. He has composed on great people such as Shuka Brahma rishi, Jayadeva and Valmiki. Besides, he has composed several songs on the greatness of Guru, and general philosophy and approach to God. His works contain references to Azhwars, Nayanmars, Ramanuja, Tulasidasa and many other greats, which reveal not merely his knowledge of their works and contributions but also his high reverence towards them.

Operas

That Venkata Kavi has composed an entire opera narrating Krishna's birth and childhood, beginning from Devaki-Vasudeva's wedding and Kamsa's curse is evident from the publications of Needamangalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavatar and

family, such as Rasaganam. There are also group songs describing Krishna's wedding with Rukmini and another group covering his marriage with Radha.

There is also a set of songs narrating the story on Lord Rama's childhood starting from Dasharatha's Putrakameshti yagna to Rama's trip with Vishwamitra. Each song is so vivid and the description of the demoness Tataka alone is worth the whole read! There is a lovely single ragamalika piece 'Sri Rama jayame jayam' which covers the whole Ramayana.

Compositions describing *Mahabharatam*, *Daksha Yagam*, *Prahlada Charitam*, *Dhruva Charitram* and stories of several aazhwars and nayanmars have also been found. All in all, Venkata Kavi has composed the maximum number of operas among Carnatic composers.

Group compositions

Venkata Kavi has also composed several group krtis like Saptaratnas, Kamakshi Navavaranam, and Anjaneya Pancharatnas. Besides, he has composed several shlokas like Madhava panchakam, Nrsimha panchakam, Ranganatha Panchakam and so on.

His **Saptaratnas** are similar in style to Tyagaraja's pancharatnas in musical structure. They have pallavi, anupallavi and a set of madhyamakala charanas which can be rendered as swaras and lyrics. The 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th and 7th songs have an anchor charanam like Samayaniki in Sadhinchane. Sometimes, it is not the first line of the charanam but the 3rd line that is the anchor and Venkata Kavi has set the landing points in several complex ways, which again offer proof of his rhythmic skills. The saptaratnas are:

1. *Bhajanamrta – Nattai*
2. *Aganitamahima – Gowla*
3. *Madhava hrdis khelini – Kalyani*
4. *Balasarasa murali – Keeravani*
5. *Jatadhara – Todi*
6. *Alavandennalo – Paras*
7. *Sundara Nandakumara – Madhyamavati*

Navavaranam

Venkata Kavi's Navavaranam abounds in Srividya Upasana aspects and show his scholarship in no small measure. Apart from the main 9 songs for the nine nights, he has also a Vinayaka stuti, Dhyana stuti and a Phala stuti too. There are several similarities (and differences) between his Navavaranam and that of Dikshitar but both reveal the composers' scholarship in the mantric and tantric aspects of Devi worship. These are:

Sri Ganeshwara – Shanmukhapriya – Adi – Vinayaka stuti
Vanchasi yadi kushalam – Kalyani – Adi – Dhyana stuti
(1st avaranam) Santatam aham seve – Deshakshi – Adi
Bhajaswa shree – Nandanamakriya – Adi
Sarvajeeva dayakari – Shuddhasaveri – Mishra Chapu
Yoga yogeshwari – Anandabhairavi – Khanda Triputa (2 kalais)
Neelalohita ramani – Balahamsa – Khanda Dhruvam (2 kalais)
Sadanandamayi – Hindolam – Sankeerna Matyam
Sakalaloka nayike – Arabhi – Adi
Shankari Shri Rajarajeshwari – Madhyamavati – Adi
Natajana kalpavalli – Punnagavarali – Adi

There is also another song in Surati (Srichakra matangi) which is listed in some schools as the 9th avaranam but the Punnagavarali one is much more probable between the two. Shuruti krti seems to be more of a mangala krti than Haladharanujam (Manirangu – Adi), listed in some schools as the mangala krti.

Venkata Kavi has revealed more proof of his vidwat in talas like Khanda Dhruvam, Sankeerna Matyam and Khanda Triputa. The 4th avaranam in Anandabhairavi has a Madhyamakala, where he has evenly split the 9-beat tala into 4 equal parts of 2.25 matras each. The 5th avaranam in Balahamsa is, probably the weightiest piece of this group, set in a majestic gait in the 17 akshara tala and has 2 superb madhyamakalams. This 8th avaranam in Madhyamavati has been set in 2 gatis – Chaturashram and Tishram.

Attitude

Probably even more amazing than all of the above is Venkata Kavi's mental state. His works reveal his almost consistent high state of bliss – which no ordinary person can achieve. His works scarcely contain any autobiographical sob stories and show that he had reached tremendous spiritual and philosophical heights. His works also reveal the proximity he felt towards God and show his deep bhakti. ***All in all, Venkata Kavi was a great man who remains immortal through his genius.***

Some available books

- “Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi – Life and Contributions” An analytical study
- “Kamakshi Navavaranaams and Saptaratna Krtis of Oottukkadu Venkata Kavi (lyrics and notations)

CDs/DVDs featuring Venkata Kavi's compositions

- Saptaratna – Rajalakshmi Audio
- Songs of the Nine Nights – IFCM/Planworks
- Ranganathaya Namaha – Ranganatha Temple, Pamona, NY

- *Sahityanubhava – Carnatica.net (CD and DVD)*
- *OVK Festival 2007 and OVK Masterpieces – Shakti Extratainment – CD and DVD*

Please email carnaticworld@yahoo.com for more info.