

## Theme and Variation in *Meru Samana*, a Kriti of Saint Thyagaraja

SEAN LUYK

“The flexible nature of the musical sounds enables an artiste to portray even the subtle shades of different ragas. Even a single note or svara can transport the mind of the listener to a higher plane”<sup>1</sup>

When approached with the task of writing a paper on theme and variations for this volume of the McMaster Music Analysis Colloquium, I was posed with the dilemma of writing an engaging paper on a genre that I had limited familiarity with and in a form that is traditionally restricted to the canon of Western Art music. I was looking for a musical genre that *involved* the listener in the process of thematic variation, and much in the spirit of my epigraph, could “transport the mind of the listener to a higher plane.” My love of South Indian Classical Music (referred to hereafter as *Carnatic* music), led me on a journey of musical discovery; I had to learn the complexities of music outside of my Western Classical training and adapt the oral and improvisatory nature of Carnatic music to a Western analytical format. In this paper, I feel I have been successful at describing the ways in which variation occurs, however I must point out that the true application of thematic variation is best understood by listening to this music.

I am indebted to the work of Robert Morris, who presented a sophisticated paper on theme and variation in the *kriti*.<sup>2</sup> I intend to present the various ways in which thematic variation is present in the Carnatic *kriti* much in the spirit of Robert Morris’ work. For this purpose, I will include audio examples from my chosen *kriti*. Transcriptions did not fully represent the detail of this music, thus I have disregarded using them. In lieu of notated examples, I compare the themes in the audio examples, to the subsequent variations.

I discuss the *kriti Meru Samana*, in *raga mayamalavagaula, adi tala*.<sup>3</sup> This recording<sup>4</sup>, (Ramnad Krishnan singer; V. Thyagarajan, violin; T. Ranganathan, *mridangam*; V.

---

<sup>1</sup> M.B. Vedavalli, *Sangita Sastra Sangraha: A Guide to Theory of Indian Music* (Chennai: M.B. Vedalli, 2001): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Morris, “Variation and Process in South Indian Music: Some *Kritis* and their *Sangatis*,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 23, no.1 (April 2001): 76-89.

<sup>3</sup> *Raga* refers roughly to ‘scale’ in Western music, however each *svara* (note) has an individual identity complete with characteristic *gamakas* (ornaments); *raga mayamalavagaula* is an 8-note raga consisting of the relative pitches C-Db-E-F-G-Ab-B. *Tala* refers to the additive rhythmic cycle that structures a Carnatic composition; *adi tala* is an 8 beat cycle, divided into *angas* (groups of *lakshanas* (beats) of 4+2+2).

Nagarajan, *kanjira* and P. Srinivasan, *tambura*) from Wesleyan University while the performers were in residence, illustrates extensive use of *niravai* (melodic variation). Particularly in the *charanam* section, on the word ‘*galamuna*’ the singer improvises a series of melodic variations using improvised solfège as his basis (*svara kalpana*).

\*\*\*\*\*

The venerable Saint Thyagaraja (1767-1847), one of the “musical trinity” of Carnatic music<sup>5</sup>, composed a great deal of *kritis* (at least 700 confirmed to be authentic). The early *kritis*, as Robert Morris points out, involved only minor thematic variations.<sup>6</sup> Morris explains Thyagaraja’s introduction of thematic variation in *Kritis*:

Thyagaraja...introduced into the *kriti* extensive melodic/rhythmic variations called *sangatis*...with his use of *sangatis*, the *kriti* was expanded into a long, dynamic composition, often containing a climax replete with intricate motivic development.<sup>7</sup>

It is these features of motivic development that I intend to explore in this paper. I will branch out from Morris’ discussion on *sangatis*, discussing *svara kalpana*<sup>8</sup> as well, and providing a general overview of the implicit uses of thematic variation in this music.

\*\*\*\*\*

First, I would like to outline the essential features of the *kriti*, in the style of Thyagaraja. Interpolated into the explanation of the *kriti*, I use various musical terminologies from the Carnatic tradition. In all cases, brief descriptions of the concepts appear in endnotes. For more detailed descriptions, please refer to the glossary of terms at the end of this paper. A melodically and rhythmically driven composition, a *kriti* traditionally sets devotional themes to music, however *kritis* have since evolved to have secular or heroic themes as well.<sup>9</sup> A *kriti* performance in its traditional context includes a soloist (a vocalist who sings the text), a melodic accompanist (often a violinist), a rhythmic accompanist (playing the *mridangam*, a double headed drum), a *tambura* (drone instrument), and sometimes a *kanjira* (similar to a tambourine).<sup>10</sup>

Formally speaking, *kritis* are divided into three major sections: the *pallavi* (“sprouting”), *anupallavi* (“continuation of the sprouting”) and *caranam* (“foot”). The *pallavi* is essentially the ‘theme’, both musically and poetically, of the *kriti* and acts as a refrain

<sup>4</sup> Ramnad Krishnan Kaccheri: *A Concert of South Indian Classical Music*. © 1971 Nonesuch Records, H-72040, 33 rpm.

<sup>5</sup> T. Viswanathan and Matthew Harp Allen, *Music in South India: The Karnatak Concert Tradition and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 19. The musical *Trimurti* (trinity) of Carnatic music refers to the most revered composers of the late eighteenth through mid-nineteenth century. It consists of Syama Sastri (1762-1827), Thyagaraja and Muttusvami Dikshitar (1776-1835).

<sup>6</sup> Morris, “Variation and Process in South Indian Music,” 75. The predecessor to the *Kriti* is the *kirtana*, which involved only minor thematic variation.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Melodic variations using Carnatic solfège symbols (sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, da, ni)

<sup>9</sup> M.B. Vedavalli, *Sangita Sastra Sangraha*, 83.

<sup>10</sup> T. Viswanathan and Matthew Harp Allen, *Music in South India*, 19.

after the *anupallavi* and *caranam* sections respectively. Thus, the form is<sup>11</sup>:

A	B	A'	C	A'
Pallavi	Anupallavi	Pallavi reprise	Caranam	Pallavi reprise

The overall form does represent strict theme and variation, but within each section, thematic variation occurs independently of the overall form (including variations set by traditional performance practice and improvised variations). Furthermore, as will be discussed, the original *pallavi* theme is varied in each of its succeeding reprises. In this *kriti* in particular, immense variation occurs in the *caranam* section.

It is essential that the *pallavi* theme is recognizable, thus the variations are not overly ornate or numerous in this section.<sup>12</sup> The *anupallavi* introduces a new set of text and is concluded with a *pallavi* reprise. The final section, the *caranam* is essentially the conclusion of the *Kriti* and often the most intense; the *pallavi* reprise concludes this section as well, reiterating the devotional theme. The overall form can be compared to “an essay wherein *pallavi* can be compared to the introduction or sutra, *anupallavi* to the vritti or body, and *charana* to the conclusion or bhashhya of an essay.”<sup>13</sup> This rhetorical feature of the *kriti* is difficult to grasp on paper, but from listening to this *kriti* it is clear that there is a progression of intensity, and a true sense of conclusion in the *caranam*. The *pallavi* theme also is subject to gradual growth and development at each of its reprises.

In each section of a *kriti*, the phrase is exposed to a variety of *sangatis*, “variations on a musical theme. Each *sangati* will be based on and an improvement of its preceding *sangati*.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, *sangatis* can be said to be *autogenic* that is ‘self-generating’.<sup>15</sup> It is this autogenic process which I will now begin to explore as it is manifest in each section.

\*\*\*\*\*

The *pallavi* phrase is recited on the *eduppu* (downbeat, which rarely falls on beat one). In the *pallavi* of this *kriti*, the *eduppu* falls on beat two of the 8-beat cycle. Each recitation of the *pallavi* phrase is thus driven towards beat two. The *jiva svaras* (cadential tones) in this particular raga are E and B, which lead to F and C respectively.<sup>16</sup> In the *pallavi* theme, it is clear that C and F are emphasized tones. The main *pallavi* phrase *merusamanadhira* starts always on C, and the subsequent phrases, *varada raghu vira jutamu rara maha* begin and are always lead towards F. Below is a chart outlining the original *telugu* text of this section, with English translations.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Taken from T.Viswanathan and Matthew Harp Allen, *Music in South India*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Dr. S. Bhagyalekshmy and M.N. Moorthy, *Golden Treasury of Compositions of Saint Tyagaraja* (Trivandrum, South India: CBH Publications, 1993): 10.

<sup>14</sup> M.B. Vedavalli, *Sangita Sastra Sangraha*, 89.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, “Variation and Process in South Indian Music,” 73.

<sup>16</sup> An ethnomusicological convention of putting a raga in C is used here.

<sup>17</sup> This is the text and translation as it appears on the album, see note 16 for bibliographic information.

<i>Pallavi</i>	merusamanadhira varada raghu	O Rama, steadfast like the great Meru
	vira jutamu rara maha	mountain, pray, come to me so that I can see you.

The *pallavi* takes twenty 8 beat rhythmic cycles to complete. The opening of the *pallavi* begins with an initial tuning note on the syllable ‘me’. It is important to note that in standard Carnatic performance, the soloist chooses which tonic pitch is to be used for the performance, thus, the raga used does not necessarily begin on ‘C’. Following this initial tuning, the *mridangam* enters, signaling the beginning of the song. The title phrase, *merusamana* is repeated four times over four rhythmic cycles, without variation between repeats. I am taking this to be the ‘theme’ in the *pallavi* section for a few reasons. Firstly, this line is the title phrase of the song, and the devotional message is nowhere more clear than in this line. Thyagaraja was a devout follower of Rama, so it is fair to conclude that this is the main spiritual message to be understood in the song. This phrase is subjected to melodic variation over a series of two rhythmic cycles.

It is evident that the techniques of growth and development vis-à-vis an intensification of the thematic material are used here. The running 16<sup>th</sup> note expansion<sup>18</sup> of the theme outlines the scope of the *raga*, presenting the virtuosity of the singer as well. The singer uses various ornaments as a way of intensifying the theme: the singer slides between notes (*jaru*), and also stresses (*janta*) the cadential pitches. This type of expansion and intensification on a syllable is found throughout the *kriti*.

Following this, the unvaried theme is repeated on the title phrase *merusamanadhira*, which adds the next line of text, *varada raghu*. This is repeated once, without variation. The function of this unvaried repeat is to reiterate the phrase in its most simple form, as to not take away from the narrative message. The next line is introduced, *vira jutamu rara maha* and is repeated once unvaried; again unvaried repetition is used in order to reiterate the phrase in pure form. The variation of *merusamana* with the text *varada raghu* added is introduced again at this point, repeated. Another recitation of the line *vira jutamu rara maha* is recited once. This section is now concluded with a return to the initial *pallavi* phrase *merusamana*, with a slight melodic slide on the syllable *na*, with the *jiva svara* from E-F emphasized. Thus, it is clear that the *pallavi* theme utilized variation, yet included various repetitions of the text as a means of highlighting the message of the *pallavi*. As mentioned earlier, because the *pallavi* returns as a reprise following the *anupallavi* and *caranam*, it is essential that variation is at minimum. A two cycle instrumental break leads into the *anupallavi* section.

\*\*\*\*\*

The *anupallavi* in this *kriti* speaks to the spirit of its definition, that is, “continuation of the

<sup>18</sup> I have chosen to conceptualize in 16/4, rather than in 8/8 in order to avoid 64<sup>th</sup> notes.

sprouting.” This section takes a total of fourteen 8 beat cycles to complete. Below is the text of the *anupallavi* with an English translation:

<i>Anupallavi</i>	Sarasara poyyarapu nadalanu	With the captivating beauty of your form,
	Niradakantini nithivini maha	your graceful gait, your shining blue body.

The first two cycles recite the *anupallavi* theme on part of line one, ‘*sarasa poy*’. Note that whereas the *eduppu* of the *pallavi* was on beat two, the *eduppu* has been moved closer to beat one, specifically is has been moved to the second half of beat one. This certainly adds contrast and intensity when compared to the *pallavi* that was just heard.

In the subsequent cycle, the same elided line is repeated, yet an ornamental ‘shake’ on the syllable *sa* is added. The fourth cycle introduces the remainder of line 1, ‘*yarapu nadalanu*’. Cycles 5 and 6 present an unvaried version of line 1, in order to reiterate the *anupallavi* theme. Cycles 7 and 8 repeat the previous two cycles, yet add shakes to the syllables *sa* and *poy*, thus autogenically varying the theme. Cycles 9 and 10 introduce half of line 2, ‘*niradakantini*’, holding the concluding syllable *ni* throughout cycle 10. Cycle 11 picks up from cycle ten, adding ‘*radakantini*’ to the held ‘*ni*’ of cycle 10. Cycle 12 completes line 2, adding the antecedent, ‘*nithivini maha*’. Cycle 13 and 14 recite line two in its entirety, without variation. Thus, it can be seen how each cycle builds upon the previous, hence continuing the “sprouting,” but reiterating the theme of the respective section. I found this to be quite interesting rhetorically; the lines are spread out through a number of cycles, with slight variations adding to the excitement of the message being presented. I have called this interruption, for lack of a better word.

The *anupallavi* is also a development from the *pallavi* in that the middle register of the *raga* is well represented. As the *pallavi* drew melodic material mostly from the first hexachord, the *anupallavi* begins on G, and is surrounded around the middle register. Furthermore, it may be argued that the increase in rhythmic intensity in the *anupallavi* section is a variation in itself. The function of the *anupallavi* is contrast, both musically and rhetorically.

After the *anupallavi*, the *pallavi* reprise (A’) occurs. The autogenic variation procedure is quite evident in this reprise; the original *pallavi* theme (A), if taken as one continuous section (removing the variations on the text) was compared to this first reprise, it is evident that thematic variation is occurring. Taking eight, 8 beat cycles to complete, this *pallavi* reprise subjects variations similar to in the *pallavi*. However, the first recitation of *merusamana* is subjected to a scalar variation on the syllable *ma*. Thus, this is a variation on the prime unvaried theme that occurred in the *pallavi* theme the first time. The subsequent cycles recite the remaining lines of the *pallavi* phrase. The final cycle is similar to the last statement of the *pallavi*; the variation is similar, yet the number of

notes that are varied on the syllable *na* are increased, as well as the fact that the *a* of that syllable is also subjected to undulations. Thus, the first *pallavi* reprise represents a growth in variation technique as compared to the *pallavi*. Furthermore, the fact that the *pallavi* reprise is completed in only eight cycles allows the message of the text to be delivered in a diachronic manner, that is, without interruption.

\*\*\*\*\*

I will now move on to discussing the final section, the “foot” or *caranam*, which takes approximately 70 cycles to complete. Prior to the exciting use of *svara kaplana*, the first two lines of the *caranam* phrase are subjected to similar musical and rhetorical features as in the *anupallavi* section. Below is the text of the *caranam* with English translation:

<i>Caranam</i>	Alakala muddunu tilakapu dirunu	The lovely curls on your forehead, the attractive design of your tilaka (forehead mark)
	Taluku jekkulace danaru nammomunu	Your blooming cheeks, the brilliance of your face
	*Galamuna sobhillu kanakabhusanamula	And the golden jewels that adorn your neck
	Dalitadurmanava tyagarajacita	O destroyer of evil men, worshipped by Tyagaraja

The first two cycles introduce *akala muddhunu*, half of the first phrase. The third cycle melodically ‘shakes’ on the syllables *mu* and *nu*. At this point, the fourth cycle provides the consequent phrase, *tilakapu dirunu*. Cycles five and six repeat cycles three and four without variation. This technique of ‘spreading out’ antecedent and consequent phrases, and then repeating them in full form was also found in the *pallavi* and *anupallavi*; this unifies the three sections.

Moving on to the second phrase, again the antecedent *taluku jerrulace* and consequent, *danaru nammomunu* are spread out over two cycles. *Taluku jekkulace* is now repeated, with only a slightly noticable variation on the syllable *la*. The consequent phrase is now stated again, without variation.

At this point, a total of ten rhythmic cycles have elapsed. The key phrase for improvised variation, ‘*galamuna sobhillu*’ is now introduced, followed by its subsequent phrase, *kanakabhusanamula*. This phrase is repeated, with a shake on the syllable *so*. The phrase is again repeated, yet the syllables of *galamuna* are grouped each into groups of three (e.g. dotted quarter notes in 16/4 time; dotted eighths in 8/8 time). Furthermore, in this variation, the syllables *so*, and *lu* are subjected to an increase in quick melodic movement through the raga, with ornamental shakes. Cycle 16 completes the phrase, and one repeat of *galamuna sobhilu* is stated with minor variation on *so*. This is followed

by a 4-cycle instrumental ‘break’. An interesting means of variation occurs here; the subsequent to the antecedent phrase are stated with a 4 cycle instrumental break in between, thus ‘spreading out’ the line in time, much as occurred in the *anupallavi*. This is similar to the ‘spreading out’ that occurred in the *pallavi* and *anupallavi*, except rather than melodic variation as a means of interrupting a phrase, instrumental breaks are used.

At this point, this phrase is subjected to a series of complex sangatis, alternating with periods of 4 cycle instrumental breaks. I will generalize on how these sangatis work, as I wish to focus more attention on the *svara kalpana* in the next section. These alternating passages of sangatis on *galamuna* with 4 cycle instrumental breaks increase the intensity leading to the *svara kaplana*.

\*\*\*\*\*

The *caranam* section in this *Kriti* is an exciting example of the use of *svara kalpana*, (improvised melodic variations using solfège symbols). Unlike *citta svara*, *svara kalpana* are entirely improvised. They “can occur in *pallavi*, *anupallavi*, and *charanam*...they replace one or two words in a phrase of the original theme. The *svara* passage may then be expanded gradually.”<sup>19</sup> The solfège symbols used in Carnatic music are: *sa-ri-ga-ma-pa-da-ni*. The singer uses these syllables as the basis for complex improvisations, which in this *kriti* result in providing an exciting climax.

In this *kriti*, the third line is subjected to improvised *svara kalpana* beginning at cycle 38. In Carnatic music, rhythmic divisions are often considered in reference to their respective ‘speed’. Thus, the singer begins by improvising using solfège symbols at ‘first speed’ (16<sup>th</sup> notes), and then moves on to second speed (32<sup>nd</sup> notes). These improvised passages at first speed alternate with recitation of the word *galamuna*, with limited variation. These passages alternate with 4 cycle instrumental breaks. The speed and occurrence of the solfège syllables increases after each instrumental break. This grows in intensity to a point where the second speed *svara kalpana* are occurring, and it sounds as if the song has sped up. This is misleading, as what is really occurring is a change of rhythmic ‘mode’. There is an interesting ‘shape’ to these alternations of instrumental breaks, *svara kalpana* and recitations of the phrase. The number of beats allotted to the *svara kaplana* increases and decreases as so: 4-8-16-8-16. The final 8 and 16 beat sections of *svara kalpana* are at second speed, not only showing the virtuosity of the performer, but also providing an exciting climax.

In the final *svara kalpana* cycle, the singer reaches an E above the raga. This is the highest note sung in the *kriti* and placed ideally before the final phrase of the *caranam*. Musically, this binds the three formal sections as it signals the end of the *kriti* is approaching. The fourth and final line of the *caranam* is now recited in a similar manner as in the *anupallavi*; a convention of Carnatic music to use material from the *anupallavi* at the end of the *caranam* is common. Another convention that is found in this section is

<sup>19</sup> Bonnie C. Wade, *Music in India: The Classical Traditions*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979): 198.

the inclusion of the composer’s signature, *tyagaraja* at the last line of the *caranam*. A *pallavi* reprise occurs, again taking eight cycles to complete, with an instrumental break completing the *kriti*.

\*\*\*\*\*

I hope that my analysis has proved worthwhile for the reader. The subtle *sangatīs* in the *pallavi* and *anupallavi*, and the improvisatory *svara kalpana* in the *charanam* produce an exciting feeling of growth and development for the listener. The *pallavi* reprise acting as a structural base aids in the rhetorical coherence of this *kriti*. Tyagaraja’s addition to the *kirtana* of intense *sangatīs* has allowed for the *kriti* to change into what Robert Morris calls “dynamic composition.”



### Bibliography

- Bhagyalekshmy Dr.S., and M.N. Moorthy. *Golden Treasury of Compositions of Saint Tyagaraja*. Trivandrum, South India: CBH Publications, 1993.
- Kalyanaraman, Shivkumar. Krithi Archive.  
[<http://www.ecse.rpi.edu/Homepages/shivkuma/personal/music/merusamana.htm>] last accessed: December 1, 2005.
- Morris, Robert. "Variation and Process in South Indian Music: Some *Kritis* and their *Sangatis*." *Music Theory Spectrum* 23 no.1 (April 2001): 76-89.
- Vedavalli, M.B. *Sangita Sastra Sangraha: A Guide to Theory of Indian Music*. Chennai, M.B. Vedalli, 2001.
- Viswanathan T., and Matthew Harp Allen. *Music in South India: The Karnatak Concert Tradition and Beyond*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Wade, Bonnie C. *Music in India: The Classical Traditions*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979.

### Discography

- Ramnad Krishnan Kaccheri: A Concert of South Indian Classical Music*. © 1971  
Nonesuch Records, H-72040, 33 rpm.