

Shri Shyama Shastri

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[The 150th Anniversary of Shri Shyama Shastri, one of the Great Trinity of Karnatic music composers, was celebrated by the Music Academy, Madras during its 51st Annual Conference in December 1977. A souvenir containing articles, a pictorial album and a bibliography of Shri Shyama Shastri, was published. All the musicians rendered in their concerts one or more kriti-s of Shyama Shastri, Subbaraya Shastri and Annaswami Shastri. In the Experts Committee meetings held during the morning, several papers, talks and demonstrations dealt with various aspects of Shyama Shastri's music: his raga-s, tala-s, svarajati-s etc. Every morning the proceedings started with the rendering of one or more compositions of Shyama Shastri and a special competition was also held in the kriti-s of Shyama Shastri.]

Shyama Shastri belonged to a Tamil-speaking Smarta Vadama Brahmin family, associated with the worship of Goddess Kamakshi at Kanchi. Owing to the political disturbances in the northern region, his family, like those of several others, moved south to the Cauvery delta, where continuing the noble mission of the great Cholas, the Nayak and Mahratta kings had reared a religious and cultural haven. With the idol Bangaru Kamakshi, the family stayed at Tiruvarur for about three decades before they moved with the deity to the West Main Street of Tanjore, where a new permanent temple was built for the Goddess. It was when the family was at Tiruvarur that the composer was born in 1762 (Chaitra, Krittika). His house is now purchased and preserved by the promoters of the Music Trinity Commemoration Sabha of Tiruvarur. His "sarman" was Venkatasubrahmanya, his popular name Shyama Shastri, and the 'mudra' he later adopted in his compositions, 'Shyama Krishna'.

As his compositions show, Shyama Shastri studied Sanskrit and Telugu. For the same *dhatu* in Kalyani, we have two *matu*-s of his in Sanskrit and Telugu, *Himadrisute* and *Birana varalichi*. He also composed in Tamil, though of these Tamil pieces of his only *Tarunamidamma* in Gaulipantu is now known. The writer has seen in the manuscripts examined by him a piece, marked as set in Paraz, partly in Sanskrit and partly in Tamil; the earlier part begins thus, *Kamakshi lokasakshini Kaumari manoharini*, and the latter, *Santatam ennai rakshippaye*, but the latter Tamil part alone seems to have been current separately. (See T. Sankaran, *Shilpa Shree*, 15-4-1940.)

Worshipping Kamakshi at the temple and at home, Shyama Shastri had little occasion to go out of Tanjore, but his pieces suggest that he went to the neighbouring Tiruvayyaru and sang of Dharmasamvardhani, to Jambukeshvaram and sang of Akhilandeshvari, and also to the more distant Madurai where he sang nine pieces on Minakshi. The pieces on Devi Brihan-nayaki refer to Gokarneshwara and suggest that he went to Pudukottai State which was nearby and to Tiru-Gokarnam, on the outskirts of the city. While

all his pieces are on Devi, chiefly Kamakshi, there are also, among the published and the unpublished *kriti*-s, a few on Subrahmanya. We may not find among his compositions several types as in those of the other two masters, but besides *kriti*-s, he also composed *tanavarna* and *svarajati*-s, and the Bhairavi, Todi and Yerukala Kambhoji *svarajati*-s of Shyama Shastri can be counted as the composer's specialities comparable to the *pancharatna*-s of Tyagaraja and *ragamalika*-s of Dikshitar.

There is a limitation inherent in the subject of Shyama Shastri that handicaps contributions on him which, in the manner of his own contributions, have necessarily to be brief. This handicap, I must hasten to point out, does not imply any limitation to the genius of the composer. What I have in mind is, literally, restricted scope, innate in the subject in a two-fold manner: firstly, by quantity, and secondly, by quality. By the quantitative limitation, I would like to refer to the comparatively small number of compositions left by him. Sometimes, as we know, genius is also measured by quantity which includes variety; but this is not so much a gross test on the basis of numbers as a test of genius insofar as the number and variety indicate the fecundity, the infinite invention of the creativity of the artiste. Going by that underlying principle, we may not find any difficulty in recognising what is also not uncommon in the artistic field, namely an outstanding contribution which is select, yet not extensive. With one Bhairavi Varna, one stands immortal. In fact, the story is told that one Sangitaswami advised Shyama Shastri to take Adippayya as his Guru. There are also immortal poets with only one poem or play to their name. Few and fine are the productions of our great composer. His Bhairavi *svarajati* is one of the three epics of its class; his Manji will outlive all attempts on its life by vandalised renderings in Bhairavi; and his Ananda Bhairavi will continue to give ineffable bliss as that of few others can.

What is the limitation by quality which makes it difficult to dwell at length on Shyama Shastri? Here it is that he stands apart from his two great compeers. Compared to their output which was on an epic scale, we may characterise our composer's as on a lyric scale. Indeed there are some prominent differences between Ayyarval and Dikshitar on the one hand and Shastrigal on the other. It is not without significance that, unlike Tyagaraja and Muthuswami Dikshitar, Shyama Shastri's music did not give rise to any set of adherents or schoolmen, whose worship often becomes warm, partial and eloquent. To draw an analogy from mythology, Shyama Shastri may be compared to Brahma in the Trinity; he may not have sects like those of Shiva and Vishnu. But is Brahma not the great creator, though none has raised a temple for him?

One may also be prompted to make another, a technical, distinction now quite often heard, among these three: namely that while Tyagaraja may be said to have emphasised *Bhava*, and Dikshitar, *Raga*, Shastrigal may legitimately be considered to have been attracted to the charm of rhythm, *Tala*. This may not be taken in an absolute manner; but it does contain an idea which may be pursued with advantage; for herein lies the clue to the discovery of the correct attitude to Shyama Shastri as composer and to the essential

nature of his compositions. The burden of conveying elaborate lessons of spiritual experience and moral endeavour, which Tyagaraja included in his life's mission, never weighed with Shastrigal; nor the technical anxiety with which Dikshitar sought to label the *raga*-s in his compositions or his zest for summarising in his song-texts *Shri Vidya*, *Vedanta* and the *Sthala Mahatmya*-s of the innumerable shrines that he visited. In short, Shastrigal was an absolute musician, his song absolute music. In fact, the very absence of the over-anxiety to go on composing and composing, reveals him to be a selective artiste. His *kriti*-s show an obvious spontaneity and effortless ease. In the words of the late K. V. Ramachandran, Shyama Shastri attained maximum effect with minimum effort. Even the 'Svarakshara' beauties of his *Sahitya* are the by-products of the same felicity.

That Shyama Shastri specialised in *Tala* requires a more refined statement. The manuscript of the *Tala* charts said to have been worked by him need hardly be produced. For, here again he was not one who set much store by one element; in him *Tala* is so grounded in *Raga*, that the two together produce a marvellous whole. With *Bhava*, *Raga* and *Tala* in one fine blend, his compositions become an artistic creation which cannot be tampered with; the mould is unique and admits of no *sangati* or flourish; and the pace of the song is again so unique that if you force it even a little, the rhythm becomes too palpable; you can, of course, infuse into the pace leisure — but moderately and not so much as Dikshitar will admit of — and if you have the "dham" for it, as they say, with "bigu" and "odukkal-s" you can unfold before the listeners the power and beauty of the piece moving before the eyes with the same dignity with which the composer calls upon his Mother again and again as "Samaja-gamini" and "Mada-gaja-gamana"!

That Shastrigal did not charge his songs with deep thoughts, like Tyagaraja did, should not blind us to the fact that Shastrigal was as great a *Bhakta* and his *Vairagya* was as firm as that of Ayyarval or Dikshitar. In piece after piece, Shastrigal affirms his faith in the Goddess and Her compassion, and his aversion to wait upon the proud rich. One may recall the final passage in the Ananda Bhairavi song *O Jagadamba*:

*Mariyadalerugani dushprabhula
kori Vinutinmpaga varam bosogi*

or that in *Ninnuvina* in Purvi Kalyani,

*Parama-lobhulanu pogadi pogadi yati
Pamarudai tirigi vesari
Sthiramuleka ati-capaludaitini
Nachinta deerchave vegame brocutaku*

In a Todi piece, *Vegamevacchi*, he echoes Tyagaraja's *Dhyaname Varamaina* and says that beyond the Mother's *Dhyanam*, he knows of no *Mantra* or *Tantra*. But one supreme quality that Shyama Shastri achieved by the simplicity of his *Sahitya* is the directness of appeal. You see in the songs one who is directly speaking to Mother. In songs like *Brovavamma*

(Manji) or *Mari vera* (Ananda Bhairavi), one cannot help being placed in the very presence of the Goddess. The simple repetitive addresses

*Janani,
Talli,
Amma,
Ninuvina gati,
Namminanu,*

and sometimes repetitions of words like *Nammiti*, *Nammiti* twice and even thrice, and the not infrequent use, in effective places, of the address-syllable "O" singly or in repetition, will not fail to transport one to the very ineffable presence of the Mother. Such poignant expression of simple feeling more readily opens that inner well of the tears of bliss than thought-laden compositions which take you through long cerebral *prakara*-s.

The *raga*-s in which he composed again show his essential pre-occupation with music, for almost all of them are *Rakti raga*-s. As the very symbol of the *Great Bhairavi* in Her eternal Ananda, it may be that the *raga* Ananda Bhairavi appears to be his favourite but in no *raga* does he fail to make his unique effect, coupled with the inseparable charm of the inimitable gait, *gati-vinyasa*, imparting a *mudukku*, as it is said, with the *Atita* and *Anagata Graha*-s. It appears to me that among his immediate predecessors, Pallavi Gopala Iyer (and to some extent Matrubhutayya of Tiruchi—*Ni mati sallaga*) and their style, which seems closest to Shastrigal's, exerted an influence on Shastrigal. The pace, diction, the vocatives, apostrophes and epithets of Gopala Iyer's songs on Devi could easily be mistaken for those of Shastrigal. There are indeed common expressions in the *Devi-Kriti*-s of Gopala Iyer and Shastrigal. Shastrigal's fascination for the *Rakti raga*-s and the *mishra* and *chapu* gaits might have fed on the *daru*-s of the *nataka*-s of the Bhagavata Mela.

The inimitable style of Shastrigal received, as it were, an extension of life in 'Kumara', the great composer's son Subbaraya Shastri, whose contributions relieve to some extent the quantitative limitation of Shastrigal's compositions; Shyama Shastri includes Subbaraya Shastri; indeed, to me it appears that the art of Karnatic *kriti*-composition reached its acme in the author of *Janani minu vina* and *Emanine*.

Incidentally, it may be noted that *Himachalatanaya* (Ananda Bhairavi) and *Sankari Sankari* (Kalyani) bear the 'Kumara' *mudra*. The art of composition also flourished in the next generation and we have in vogue a few pieces of Annaswami Shastrigal, most of them in Sanskrit. Annaswami Shastrigal's son Venkatasubrahmanya Shastri, known generally as Shyama Shastri, was a school teacher and good in drawing. After retirement, he stayed in Madras and was a Member of the Experts Committee of the Music Academy.

Regarding the paucity of Shastrigal's compositions: he is said to have composed about 300 pieces; he might not have composed so many but certainly they were far more than those now in vogue. Subbarama Dikshitar

said that he was going to bring out an edition of the songs of Shastrigal but unfortunately this and other volumes planned by him could not be brought out. I have examined song-manuscripts with *Nagasvarakara*-s at Tiruvarur, the native place of the composer to which I have the honour to belong. I have myself in my collection some manuscripts collected from difficult sources. I have examined also the only one palmleaf manuscript of Shyama Shastri's songs in the custody of the composer's descendants. I find from all these sources a few additional compositions not yet brought to light: a Sanskrit piece in Gaulipantu, *Puraharajaye palaya mam*; a Telugu piece, *Nanubrova vada vegame neevu vinavamma Devi*, noted as in Gaulipantu in one manuscript and as in Kanakangi in another; a Kapi-Adi piece *Akhilandeswari*; one on Brihadamba in Jaganmohini-Adi (*Dayajooda*); *Kanakagirisadana* in Kedaragaula; and possibly a few more. There is also confusion about the exact *raga* of a few pieces; for example; *Devibrova samayamide* is in Chintamani in the manuscript with the composer's descendants at Tanjore, in Shanmukha-priya in a manuscript with a Nagasvara family at Tiruvarur and in Padmaraga (?) in another manuscript examined and copied by the writer. *Ninnu vina marigalada* (Ritigaula) is noted as in Abheri.

It is because of his qualitative excellence that Shyama Shastri has gained a secure and luminous place among the makers of modern Karnatic music, though his contribution has not been much quantitatively. We are now in the 150th year after the passing away of this musician; it may be hoped that before it is too late we may recover more of his masterpieces and bring into vogue types of compositions which are, let me repeat, unique in the style forged by themselves. In fact the composer himself, in his song in Ananda Bhairavi *Pahi Sri Girirajasute*, prays to Mother that She may endow his genius with a unique style — *Dehi Mater Anupama-Gatim*.

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THE SHYAMA SHASTRI FAMILY TREE

