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Karnatak Raga

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In Karnatak music, the term *rāga* encompasses the concepts of scale, mode, tonal system, melodic motifs and themes, microtones, ornaments, and improvisation within a three-octave range. In South India, raga is a major resource for composed (*kalpita*) and improvised (*kalpana*) classical music; it is also a foundation for nonclassical devotional songs (*bhajana*), storytelling traditions such as *harikathā*, temple music, dance music, and light classical music. Versions of ragas appear in film music, and some genres of folk music incorporate traces of ragas.

South India is distinct from the North in its physical, geographical, and cultural makeup, including its musical culture. Karnatak music is the art music common to all four South Indian states -Andhra Pradesh (Telugu-speaking), Karnataka (Kannada-speaking), Kerala (Malayalam-speaking) and Tamil Nadu (Tamil-speaking)—as well as to northern Sri Lanka, where a Tamil-speaking population, is concentrated. These regions share the theory and performance practice of Karnatak raga. Compared with northern Hindustani raga performance, southern ragas are shorter on improvisation (*ālāpana*), and the ornamentation is more rapid.

Historically, the southern area made contact with the outside world through maritime trade; it remained more or less isolated from the overland invasions from Asia minor that periodically changed and reshaped North India. This relative isolation led to distinct styles of architecture and

music, dance and drama. Oral tradition, however, transmitted by students of composers and performers, provides evidence that musicians were mobile. Interaction between North and South Indian performers took place through the royal courts, particularly those of Tanjore (now Thanjavur) and Mysore, where musicians of both traditions received patronage. The two performing traditions exhibit evidence of borrowing and adopting ragas.

RAGA CHARACTERISTICS

Tonal relationships and melodic movement in Karnatak raga are linear and horizontal in contrast to the harmonic and vertical relationships central to Western classical music. South Indian raga evolved over centuries, its distinct character established by the thirteenth century. Throughout its history, composers and performers have been

Page Image continually creating and recreating ragas through composition and improvisation. The term *rāga* is used in a variety of ways; its meaning is both abstract and elusive.

One meaning of *rāga* is color. Like color, raga has many shades, as many as there are performers. Composers and performers define and redefine specific named ragas. They base these definitions in part on the experience of performing and acquiring musical knowledge from their teachers.

The word *rāga* is derived from the root *rañj*, which means being affected, moved, or delighted. The term thus expresses wide ranges of emotion: feeling, intensity, passion, love, and beauty. It refers to the performance and experience that both informed and not-so-informed listeners share. Ragas *āsāvēri* and *punnāgavarāli*, for example, evoke melancholy, *kīrāvani* and *vasanta* ragas evoke serenity, and *nīlāmbari* and *yadukulakāmbhōjī* feelings of devotion. Lakshmana Pillai, a Karnatak performer, wrote in 1912: "Each raga comes and goes with its store of smiles or teats, of passion or pathos, its noble and lofty impulses, and leaves its mark on the mind of the hearer" (Popley 1966:66).

Ragas are associated not only with a mood or passion, but also with a time of day. In theory, a particular raga should be performed at a prescribed time of day or night. This time theory may have derived horn the daily routine in Indian households, which is marked by auspicious and inauspicious periods for carrying out particular activities (Popley 1966). Musicians have traditionally believed that performing ragas at a certain time of the day not only increases their auspiciousness but also erases inauspiciousness and brings good luck.

In present-day South Indian concerts, musicians accept the time theory of raga and its principles, but do not diligently practice it. Some traces exist in the theatrical traditions of *kathakaḷi* (in Kerala), *yakṣagāna* (in Karnataka), and *terukkūttu* (in Tamil Nadu), where performers sing certain ragas as background accompaniment for particular mythological characters, to evoke emotions associated with a certain time of day. In *nāgasvaram* 'double-reed pipe' ensembles, players still follow the practice of performing particular ragas at specific hours for temple rituals.

SPECIFIC MEANINGS IN PRESENT-DAY PRACTICE

With every performance, a musician re-creates an individual raga out of melodic material that has specific sound characteristics, melodic shapes and ornaments, and that generates specific moods and emotions. Each individual raga has a definite character, an individual identity, and a name.

The word raga also means improvisation on a melodic entity. In Karnatak music, the term *ālāpana* refers to improvising on a particular raga; however, in the South Indian music world, raga also means nonmetered improvisation. Musicians often refer to the *ālāpana* section of a performance as "raga."

Karnatak ragas consist of pitches (*svara*) arranged in characteristic ascending (*ārōhaṇa*) and descending (*avarōhaṇa*) patterns forming scales. The scale patterns

Page Image may employ stepwise or oblique motion, a combination of both steps and leaps, or other permutations and combinations.

Each raga has prescribed functional tones. These include a tonal center (*jīva svara*), final tone (*nyāsa*), initial tone (*graha*), weak tones (*alpatva*), passing tones (*bhāśāṇga*), and ornamented tones (*gamaka*), which include a wide range of shakes, turns, slides, and long pure tones (*dīrgha śuddha svara*). Musicians bring out the essence of raga (*bhāva*) by employing characteristic motives (*saṇcāra*) derived from the thematic stock of tonal clusters (*prayōga*). A drone, consisting of the tonic, fifth, and sometimes fourth scale degrees, serves to enhance the microtonal inflections (*śruti*) of the raga, and provides a constant pitch reminder throughout the performance (Neuman 1980; Row 1977).

The raga is a tonal framework with defined individual pitches, characteristic ornaments, and microtonal variations. These characteristics guide performers as they spontaneously create melodic patterns (Rowell 1992).

COMPONENTS OF KARNATAK RAGA

As in a recipe, where certain ingredients are essential, so in South Indian raga, certain sonic elements must be present for a correct performance. These elements are primordial sound (*nāda*), tonal system (*svara*), pitch (*śruti*), scale, ornaments (*gamaka*), and important tones. These individual elements contribute to shaping the South Indian raga (figure 1).

Primordial sound (*nāda*)

South Indian music culture distinguishes between the concepts of organized, cultivated sound (*nāda*), and noncultivated, ordinary sound (*śabda*). The cultivation of *nāda*, one of the basic components of raga, is a much-respected concept in Karnatak tradition. The realization of *nāda* is a crucial aim of composer-performers of the past and present. However, the sound that is audible to human ears is only a fraction of primordial sound. The musician-performer's ultimate aim is not only to perfect the technique of sound production, but to experience, realize, or be united with the primordial, latent sound housed within the human body. Performers often communicate this abstract concept to students when teaching raga performance (figure 2).

Tonal system (*svara*)

The Karnatak tonal system includes seven basic pitches, expressed by sol-fa syllables that represent Sanskrit words: Sa (*ṣaḍja*), Ri (*ṛṣabha*), Ga (*gāndhāra*), Ma (*madhyama*). Pa (*pañcama*), Dha or Da (*dhaivata*), and Ni (*niṣāda*). The tonic (Sa) and the dominant (Pa) are stable tones and remain unchanged in the tonal system. The remaining five tones (Ri, Ga, Ma, Dha, Ni) can be raised (*tīvra* 'sharp') or lowered (*śuddha* 'flat'), making twelve tones in the octave scale. The present-day Karnatak raga system includes another four enharmonic tones: Ga (as the third degree Ri 2),

FIGU
1

Term	*Types*
Nāda	sound
Svara	seven, twelve, and sixteen tones in the octave
Śruti	pitch, drone, microtone, and intonation
Scale	ascending (*ārōhaṇa*) and descending (*avarōhaṇa*); interval structure, ornaments (*gamaka*), and tonal hierarchy (*vādi, samvādi,* and *anuvādi*)

Components of a Karnatak raga.

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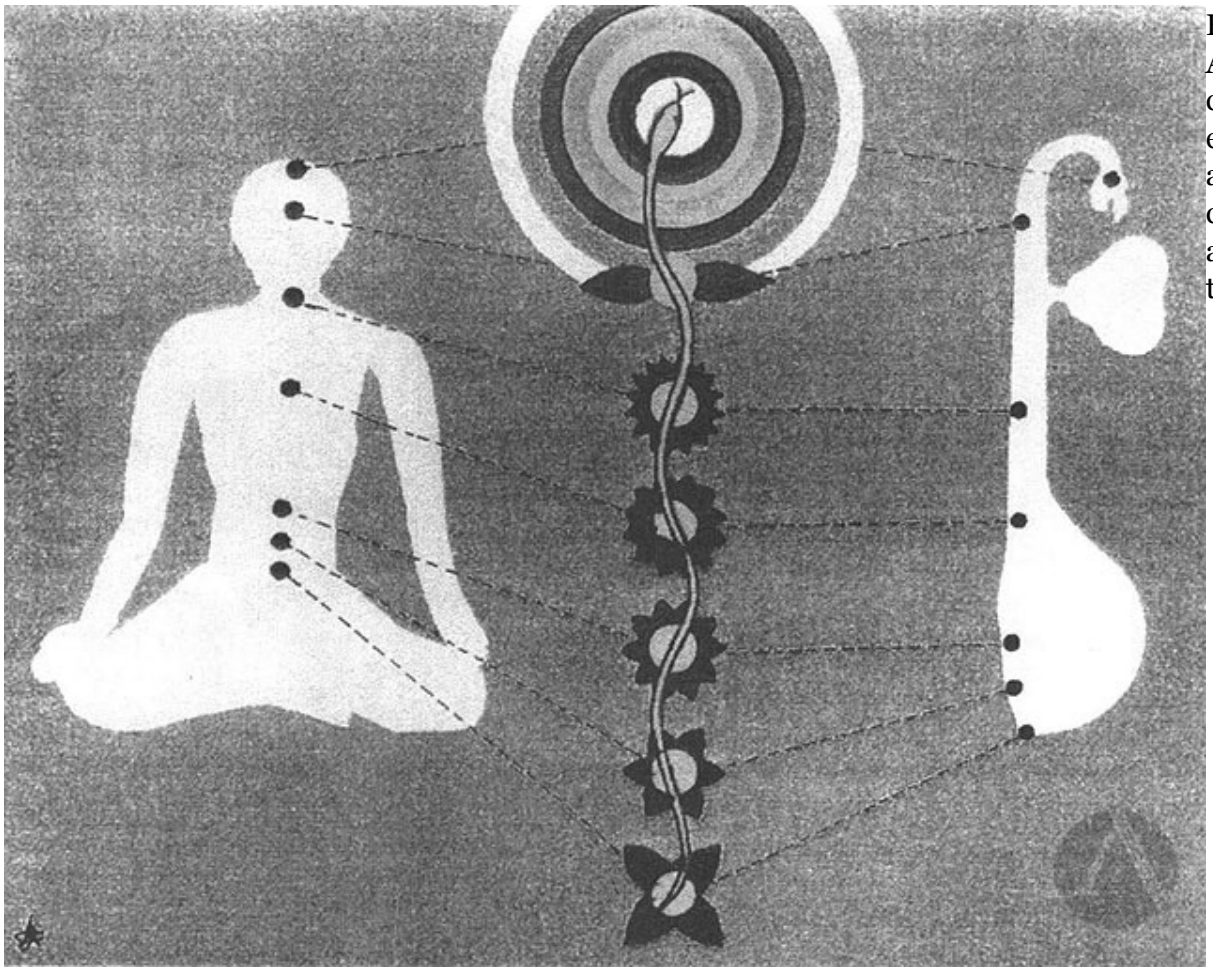

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production of the voice and instruments. From Anantapadmanabhan 1954, plate 4. Published w
permission.

Ri 3 (as the fourth degree Ga 1), Ni (as the tenth degree Dha 2), and Dha 3 (as the eleventh degree Ni 1). The octave thus has twelve pitches but sixteen different names (figure 3).

Meanings and contexts of the term *śruti*

Another important component of taga is *śruti*. The word *śruti* appears in both musical and philosophical works in India, connoting what is heard or received. One specific meaning of the word *śruti* is drone. In present-day performance practice, the drone consists of the fundamental tonic pitch (*ādhāra ṣaḍja*), the upper tonic (*tāra ṣaḍja*), and the fifth scale degree (*pañcama*), inclusive of its harmonic series. Occasionally a performer shifts the fundamental tone Sa to the pitch of the fourth scale degree (Ma), raising the fundamental by a fourth in order to expand the octave for certain tagas or to emphasize aspects of a raga in a higher range.

In Karnatak music, the main performer selects the fundamental pitch (*śruti*) according to his or her vocal or instrumental range, and tunes the drone accordingly. The melodic and rhythmic accompanists are then obliged to tune their instruments to the fundamental pitch of the principal performer. This flexible, unfixed pitch (*śruti*) is an important characteristic of the South Indian

performing tradition.

A third use of the term *śruti* is to denote microtones. The delicate microtonal inflections are among the elements that make Karnatak ragas different from Hindustani ragas. Furthermore, the twelve intervals in the octave are uneven, and this tonal phenomenon distinguishes Indian music from the Western musical scale. The number of microtones is theoretically uncountable, but performers believe that a trained musician can hear twenty-two *śruti* in an octave (see figure 3). Karnatak ragas have various kinds of tonal inflections and shades that give them shape and character.

A performer also uses the term *śruti* to communicate that his or her instrument is in tune with the drone, as well as with the individual tones and intervals of the raga being performed. In this sense, "being in *śruti*" is a very important component of raga performance.

Page Image

a

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ṣaḍja	*Ṛṣabha*	*Gāndhāra*	*Madhyama*	*Pañcama*	*Dhaivata*	*Niṣāda*
Stable				Stable		
Sa	Ri	Ga	Ma	Pa	Dha	Ni
do	re	mi	fa	so	la	ti

b

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Sa	Ri_1	Ri_2	Ga_1	Ga_2	Ma_1	Ma_2	Pa	Dha_1	Dha_2	Ni_1	Ni_2
C	D♭	D	E♭	E	F	F♯	G	A♭	A	B♭	B
		Ga	Ri_3						Ni	Dha_3	
		E♭♭	D♯						B♭♭	A♯	

c

S	R_1R_2	R_3R_4	G_1G_2	G_3G_4	M_1	M_2M_3	M_4P	D_1D_2	D_3D_4	N_1N_2	N_3N_4
C	D♭	D	E♭	E	F	F♯	G	A♭	A	B♭	B

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corresponding Western sol-fa syllables; *b*, expanded twelve-tone scale system showing Karnatak syllables (subscripts indicate *śuddha* 'flat' and *tīvra* 'sharp'), Western equivalent pitches (taking the fundamental pitch), and Karnatak/Western enharmonic tones; *c*, Karnatak syllables for the twenty-two unequal scale divisions (*śruti*), with the closest corresponding Western pitches (taki as the fundamental pitch).

Raga as scale

The contemporary raga consists of an ascending and descending scale pattern. Both ascent (*ārōbaṇa*) and descent (*avarōbaṇa*) must have at least five tones, although some rare ragas have only four tones in either ascent or descent. Raga performance uses the scale pitches but does not present pure scales. A particular raga melody moves in tonal clusters (*saṇcāra*), which act as reference points as a performer explores the tonal material of the raga. Scales provide a tonal boundary and establish rules for melodic performance, rules to which all performers adhere. Typical scale features also help listeners identify ragas.

Interval structure

The interval structure of a raga scale is a basic identifying feature. The important Karnatak raga *Śankarābharaṇa*, often performed in present-day concerts, resembles the Western major scale in its interval structure. In South Indian sol-fa syllables, its scale is Sa Ri 2 Ga 2 Ma 1 Pa Dha 2 Ni 2 Sa, equivalent to the Western scale tones C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C. The tones Ma 1, and Dha 2, regarded as flat and sharp in Karnatak music, are considered natural tones (F and A) in the Western system.

Ornamentation (*gamaka*)

Ornamentation (*gamaka*) is essential in Karnatak raga performance. In the broadest sense, *gamaka* encompasses controlled shaking, articulating, sliding, glottal stops, and other vocal or instrumental manipulation. In the Karnatak music tradition, musicians do not conceive of the tone of certain pitches (*svara*) separately from their ornament (*gamaka*). When two ragas have the same scale pitches, the integrally associated ornamentation of certain tones serves to differentiate between the two (Kassebaum 1987). Beyond this distinction, performers also personalize their style by employing ornaments in particular ways for certain tones. This leads to considerable differences in individual styles of singing or playing a raga.

Performers perceive ornaments as part of a raga. Since the performance tradition does not stipulate particular ornamentation for each raga, performers use *gamaka* in a very personal way to express the flavor (*bhāva*) of a raga, to communicate their own feelings, and to evoke emotions in their audience. Students can learn ornaments only from the teacher who has guarded and preserved the technique as a treasure, expressing

Page Image a style of singing raga. Only the ardent and talented students are capable of absorbing the complexities of raga ornaments. The best become master performers and preservers of the guru's raga-performing tradition.

***Ornaments* (gamaka)**

Writers on music from the seventeenth century onward have variously classified *gamaka* into groups ranging from six to twenty-two. Classification schemes of fifteen (*pañcadaśa gamaka*) and ten (*daśavidha gamaka*) became the most widely known. In each scheme, writers assigned each ornament a name and a notational symbol. From the performer's point of view, ornaments generally fall into two broad types: oscillations or shakes (*kampita*); and accents, slides (*jāru*), and glottal stops. Oscillations between two tones range from two shakes to as many as fifteen or more, depending on the raga and the performer's style. Distinct types of *kampita* include three oscillations combined with glottal stops and four or more oscillations combined with wide tonal leaps. There are also many forms of tonal accents and glottal stops. *Rāga śankarābharaṇa* illustrates the complexity of ornaments in Karnatak music.

***Ornaments in* rāga śankarābharaṇa**

Rāga śankarābharaṇa appears in many ancient raga classification systems as well as the relatively recent seventeenth-century theoretical scheme of Venkatamakhi (see below). *Śankara* is another name for the major Hindu deity Shiva; *ābharaṇa* is the name of the serpent that he wears as a neck ornament, which is associated with this raga. All the major and minor Karnatak composers have created compositions in this raga. In concerts, musicians often perform it as an *ālāpana* before a composed piece (*kriti*), as well as in its elaborate form of improvisation (*rāgam-tānam-pallavi*).

Śankarābharaṇa is notable for all its tones (besides Sa and Pa) having some kind of ornament in performance (*jāru* 'quick slide type', *kampita* 'oscillating type', and combinations of accents and glottal stops). Performers ornament the tones Ri 2, Ga 2, Ma 1, Dha 2, and Ni 2, providing different ornaments in ascent and descent (figure 4): thus the direction of a raga melody determines the kind

of ornament a tone is given.

In ascent, the second scale degree Ri 2 (D) and sixth degree Dha 2 (A) receive wide ornaments (*kampita*), stretching from their lower to upper neighboring tones before landing on the principal tone (Sa Ga 2 Ri 2 or C-E-D; Pa Sa Dha 2 or G-C-A). The third scale degree Ga 2 (E) and seventh degree Ni 2 (B) receive similar kinds of ornaments (*kampita*), both moving from the lower neighboring tone to the principal tone. The fourth scale degree Ma 1 (F) is artfully oscillated with its lower neighboring tone (Ga 2 Ma 1 Ga 2 Mai or E-F-E-F).

In descent, there are both oscillating (*kampita*) and slide (*jāru*) ornaments combined with a glottal stop. The seventh scale degree Ni 2 (B) starts from the upper neighboring tone and oscillates between two tones (Sa Ni 2 Sa Ni 2 or C-B-C-B), whereas the sixth degree Dha 2 (A) and second degree Ri 2 (D) combine a slide with a glottal stop (Sa Dha 2 Ni 2 or C-A-B, and Ma 1, Ri 2 Ga 2 or F-D-E). The fourth scale

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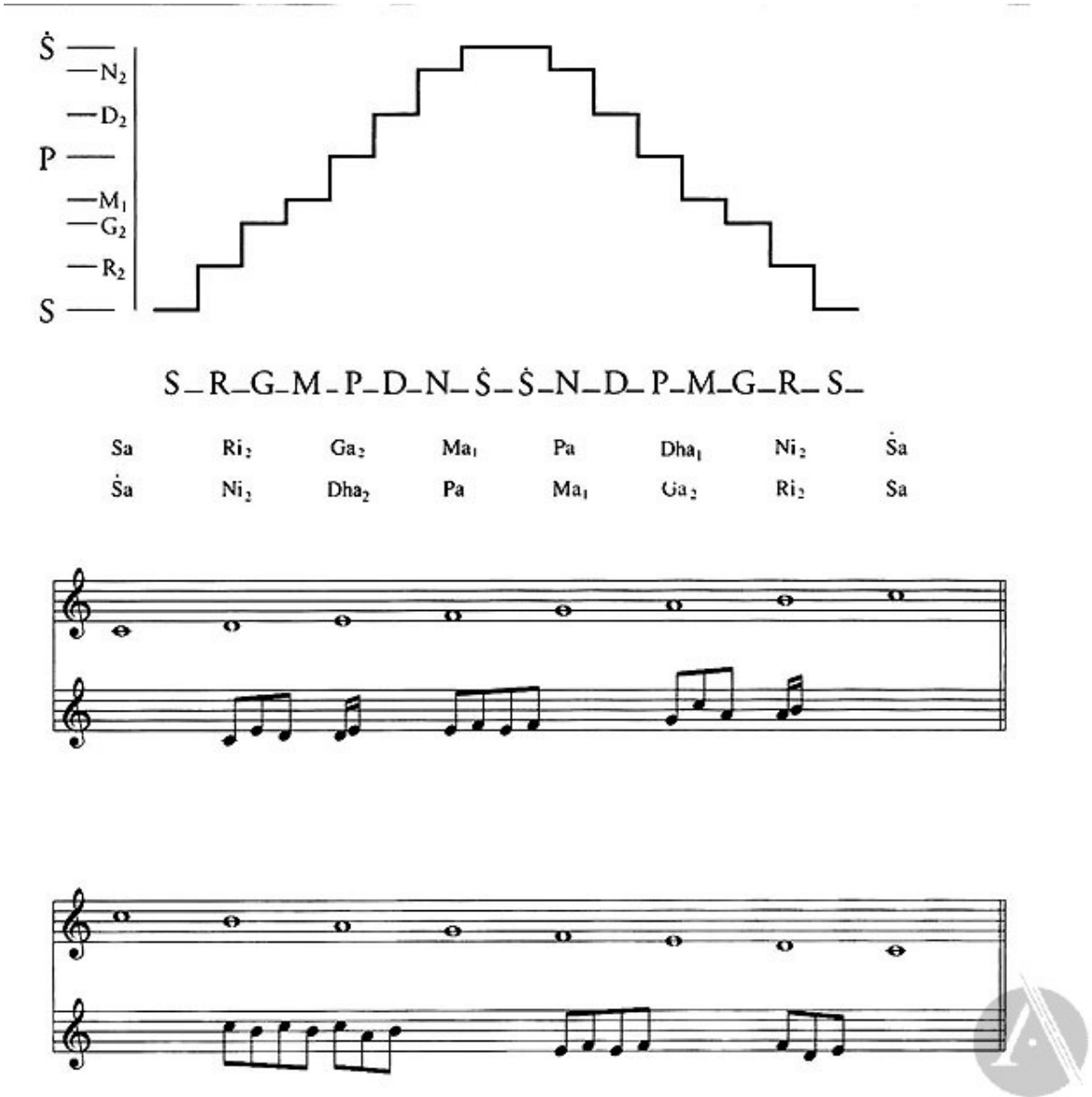

FIGU
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descending scale of *rāga śankarābharaṇa*: in graphic representation and in Indian solfege, sho interval structure with subscripts; the ornamentation (*gamaka*) integral to the scale pitches is s in Western notation.

degree Ma 1 has the same ornament as in the ascent. The integral nature of ornaments in Karnatak raga performance distinguishes it from Hindustani music, in which performers much prefer pure tones and slides to widely ornamented tones.

Tonal hierarchy in raga

In all ragas, certain pitches are more important than others, comparable to the role of tonic and dominant pitches in Western music. The most important tone is the *vādi* or *jīva svara* 'soul tone'. Its counterpart is the *samvādi*, a perfect fifth or fourth away from the soul tone. Usually in raga performance, tones a half step from the soul tone are considered *vivādi* 'dissonant' tones. Another tone class is *anuvādi* 'assonant' tones. These help to bring out the essence of the raga, and may be used frequently in some ragas but not in others. Certain tones in a raga are considered weak tones, and are not given prominence. A raga's initial tone (*graha*), final tone (*nyāsa*), and highest tone (*tāra*) also play an important role in shaping the melodic performance. Performers do not usually verbalize tonal hierarchy, but learn it from practicing ragas and imitating the teacher.

Tonal hierarchy in rāga śankarābharaṇa

Rāga śankarābharaṇa provides an illustration of tonal hierarchy: the second, sixth, and fourth scale degrees (Ri 2, Dha 2, Ma 1) are the important tones. Pitch Ri 2 is the predominant *vādi* or *jīva svara*, and Dha 2 is the *samvādi*, a fifth apart from the *vādi*. The fourth degree Ma 1 is hierarchically important, and many characteristic melodic phrases include this tone. Ma 1 may be considered the assonant (*anuvādi*) of *rāga śankarābharaṇa*.

Page Image

Western scale	C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Rāga śankarābharaṇa	Sa	Ri_2	Ga_2	Ma_1	Pa	Dha_2	Ni_2
Stable tones	X				X		
Vādi with *gamaka*		X					
Samvādi with *gamaka*						X	
Anuvādi with *gamaka*				X			
Unornamented tones, accents, slides			X				X

FIGU
Impo
and
ornamented tones in *rāga śAnkarābharaṇa: vādi* 'soul tone', *samvādi, anuvādi* 'assonanr', and unornamented tones or tones with accents and slides.

To balance the ornamented tones, performers sometimes the third degree Ga 2 and seventh degree Ni 2 as long held tones. The fundamental tone (Sa) and fifth degree (Pa) are the stable tones; musicians may slide onto or upper neighboring tones but never ornament them with oscillations (*Kampita*) *Rāga śankarābharaṇa* has no weak tones (figure 5).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Indian music has its roots in the chanting of metered sacred verses (Sāmaveda). Priests in Vedic times (1500-600 B.C.) sang these sacred chants with tonal inflections and prescribed melodic direction. Present-day raga similarly has prescribed melodic direction, but raga has evolved into a

"melody type."

Around the ninth century of the common era, raga seems to have become a separate entity. The author Matanga described raga in his treatise *Bṛhaddeśī* as, a collection of pitches, comparing it with a village (*grāma*), a collection of people.

In his *San.gītaratnākara*, the thirteenth-century author Sarngadeva introduced the term *jāti*, meaning not only an assemblage of pitches but a scale type with defined characters. The *jāti* was able to generate ragas if the fundamental tone (Sa) was moved to different pitches in the octave scale. The author described two species of ragas with defined interval structures, known as *ṣaḍja grāma* and *madhyama grāma*, as "generating" ragas. This concept of source (or major) scales, and derived (or minor) scales existed in South India long before this time: ancient Tamil musicians of the fourth and fifth centuries, for example, classified ragas as, *paṇ* (source) and *tiram* (derived).

Theoretical works on Indian music confirm that what we hear as raga in present-day practice dates back to around the fifteenth century. The fundamental tone Sa became established as the tonic for the whole tonal system. Around the same time, a continuous drone provider was introduced to reinforce the Sa as the fundamental tone and thus stabilize the melodic system (Rowell 1992).

Raga and the Hindu devotional (*bhakti*) movement

In the fifteenth century a great saint, Purandara Dasa, lived in what is now Karnataka state, propagating the concept of surrendering oneself to the divine energy (*bhakti*). Purandara Dasa used raga with his vernacular Kannada texts as a medium to convey *bhakti* concepts to the common people, since the existing Sanskrit texts reached only the literate few, not the unlettered masses. In the process, Purandara Dasa also systematized Karnatak musical practice. He is well known for developing a method of teaching Karnatak ragas to students, a model still used today, with some added components [see K ARNATAK V OCAL AND I NSTRUMENTAL M USIC].

Karnatak raga classification

Since the fifteenth century, South Indian theoreticians, much influenced by the

Page Image Sanskrit language structure, classified ragas according to a logical and formulaic framework. These writers considered ragas with certain defined characteristics as source (*mēḷa*) ragas. Such ragas served as source material not only for improvising and creating abundant melodic patterns, but for creating other ragas through a process of shifting the tonic (*mūrccanā*) to other scale tones. Scales built on different scale degrees resulted in new scales with different interval structures, called derived ragas.

Venkatamakhi devised a grand scheme for categorizing ragas in his seventeenth-century theoretical work *Caturdandī Prakaśikā*. He incorporated many features of previous systems and perfected the formula that served neatly as a framework. According to Venkatamakhi's system, there are seventy-two *mēḷa* ragas, and each *mēḷa* has the potential of generating many more ragas. Musicians proudly accept Venkatamakhi's classification as a theoretical system in present-day Karnatak music, but performers do not study the system directly. In practice they learn ragas (both source and derived) from their teachers as clusters of tonal patterns in the form of compositions.

***Parent ragas* (janaka) *and derived ragas* (janya)**

Venkatamakhi divided Karnatak ragas into two categories: (1) parent raga (*janaka, mēḷa*, or *mēḷakarta*), and (2) derived raga (*janya*). The parent raga must adhere to three distinct features: first, the raga must consist of all seven notes (Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni) both in ascent and descent; second, the tones must move in stepwise order, without skips or change of direction; and third, the interval structure must be the same in ascent and descent.

Śankarábharaṇa is a parent raga in Venkatamakhi's scheme. Its ascent and descent have the same seven tones, in stepwise order (see figure 4).

Many derived ragas have existed for centuries, but a few contemporary South Indian composers continue to create new ones. A lively debate on the newly invented ragas appears in Indian newspapers, magazines, and in music conferences. One way of legitimizing a new raga is through scholarly discourse substantiated with musical demonstrations.

Derived ragas can have many varied characteristics. They often take an irregular (*vakra* 'crooked') motion, either in ascent or descent or in both. Some derived ragas take extra tones not belonging to the raga structure. Others are pentatonic, taking five tones both in ascent and descent, or have a hexatonic, six-tone scale. Derived ragas may take an oblique pattern in ascent, and six or seven tones in descent. There are infinite possibilities for producing *janya* ragas (figure 6).

Oral tradition

While theoreticians were constructing a classification system in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, composers and performers were simultaneously preserving the raga tradition in their composing, performing, and teaching. Both source and derived ragas existed for centuries before the theoretical system was devised.

Even to this day the performance tradition (*samprndāya*) preserves ragas in compositions (*kriti* and *kīrtana*) and in medleys or garlands of ragas (*rāgamalikā*). Different singing styles prevail among performers, depending on the lineage of major composers or of the composers' disciples (*śiṣya*). Performing traditions follow the raga models of the three major eighteenth-century composers' lineages, those of Muttusvami Diksitar, Syama Sastri, and Tyagaraja. Karnatak musicians greatly revere these three composers for their different interpretations of a single raga. Many disciples of these major composers have contributed to raga development through their own compositions.

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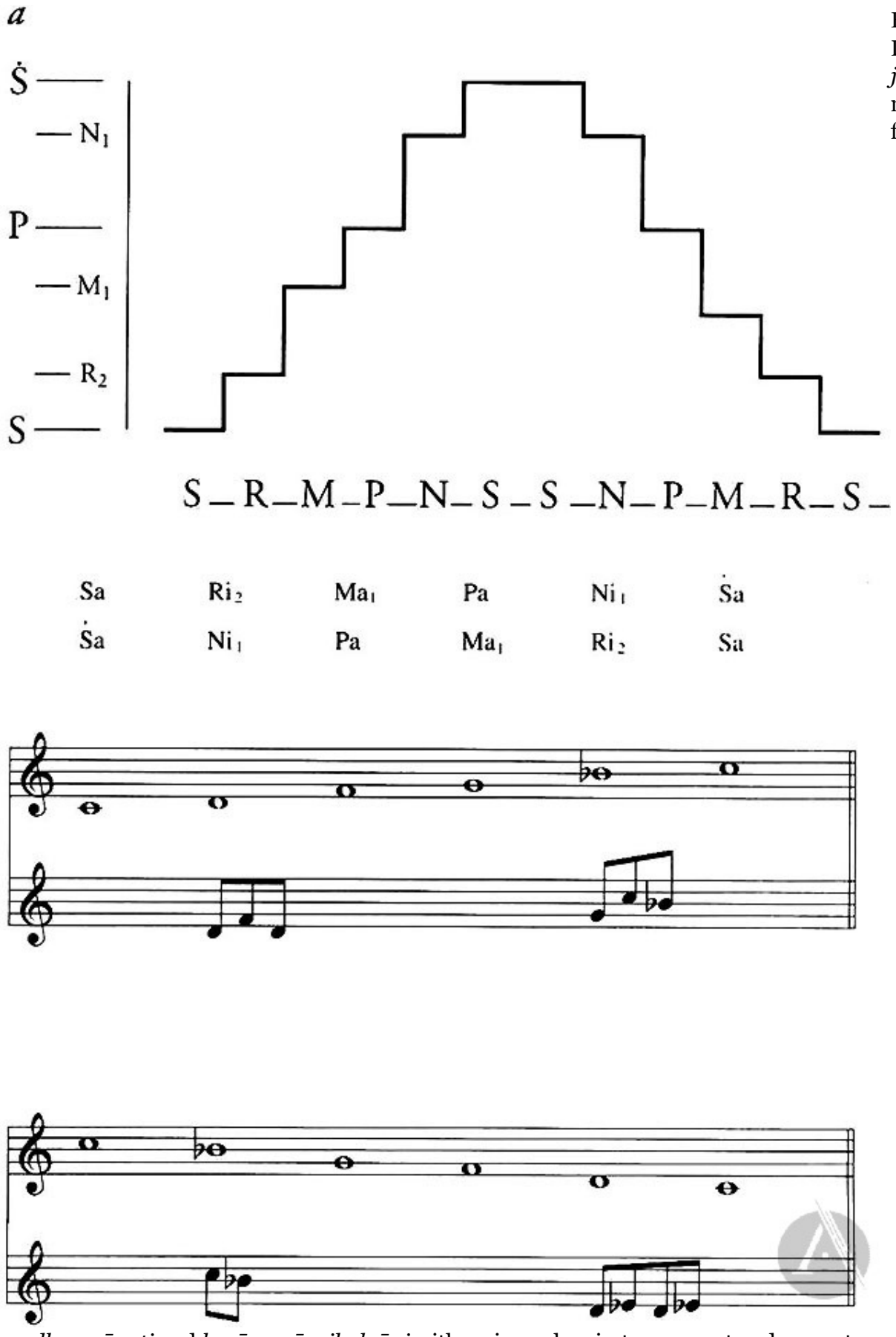

FIGU
Deriv
janya
ragas
five-t

madhyamāvati and *b, rāga pūrvikalyāṇi* with an irregular six-tone ascent and seven-tone desc

shown in graphic representation and Karnatak sol-fa syllables; the ornamentation (*gamaka*) int to the scale pitches is shown in Western notation.

RAGA IN IMPROVISED FORMS

Karnatak music consists of two major kinds of repertoire: composed music (*kalpita saṇgīta*) and music improvised during a performance [*kalpana saṇgīta*). Raga and its components are essential for both. Composed music embraces a variety of compositional forms. Improvised music, identified as *kalpana saṇgīta* or *manōdharma saṇgīta* 'music of imagination' (terms coined by the musicologist P. Sambamurthy in the early twentieth century), encompasses several types: unmetered improvisation on a raga (*ālāpana*), improvisation on a section of a composition (*niraval* or *sāhitya prastāra*), improvisation using solfege within the time cycle (*svara kalpana*), and nonmetered improvisation on a Sanskrit poem (*śloka*), Tamil poem (*viruttam*), or Telugu poem (*sīsapada*).

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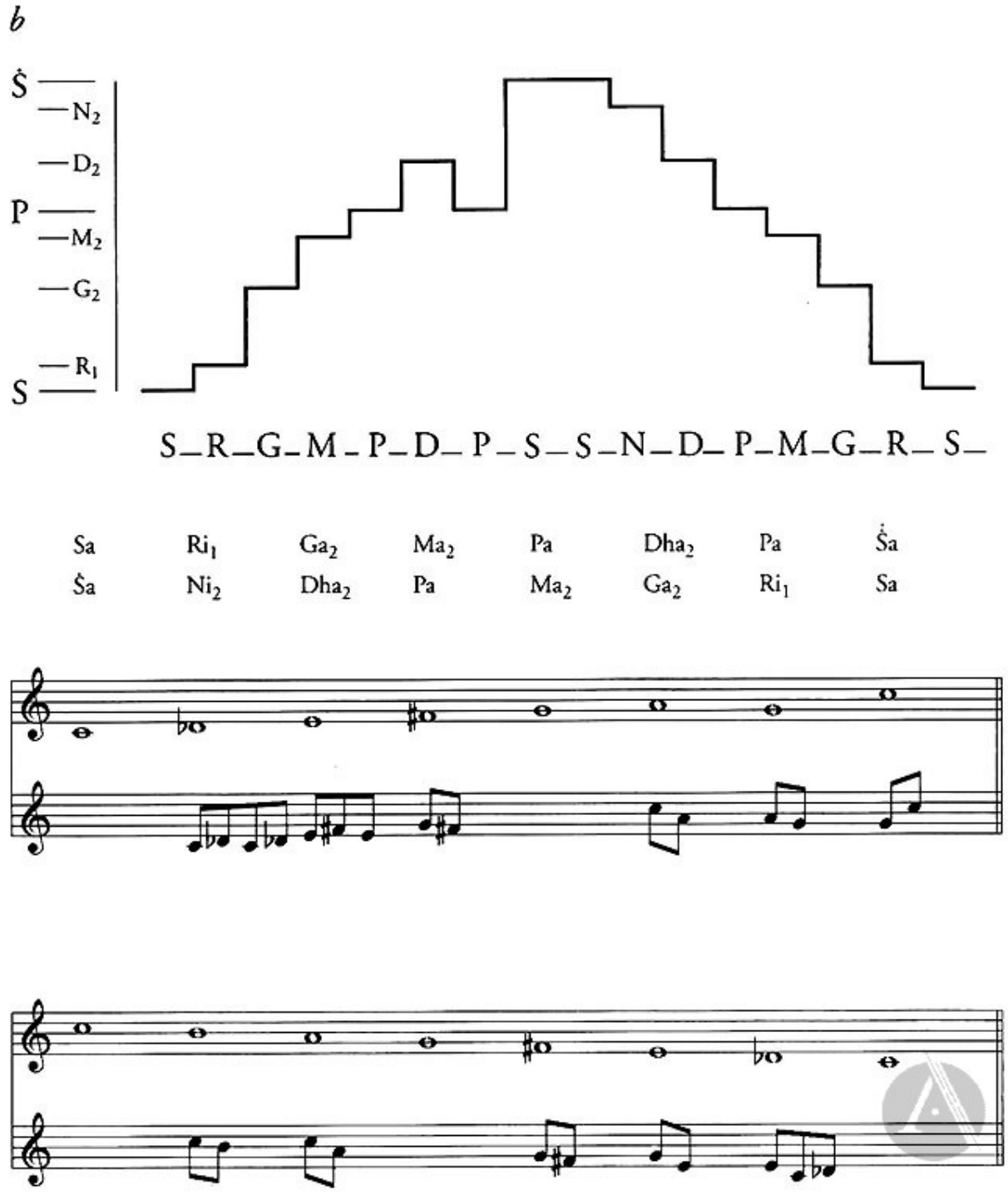

continued) Derived (*janya*) ragas: *a*, five-tone *madhyamāvati* and *b, rāga pūrvikalyāṇi* with a irregular six-tone ascent and seven-tone descent, shown in graphic representation and Karnatak fa syllables; the ornamentation (*gamaka*) integral to the scale pitches is shown in Western nota

Ālāpana is a rhythmically free improvisation performed within the framework of a raga [see K ARNATAK V OCAL AND I NSTRUMENTAL M USIC and CD track 4]. The performer's objective in performing *ālāpana* is twofold: to reveal the "essence" of the raga, and to create melodic patterns related to the ascent and descent of the raga scale. A vocalist uses neither text not sol-fa syllables, only meaningless vocal syllables, and closely follows the raga's characteristics such as interval structure, ornaments, and tonal hierarchy. A well-known Karnatak vocalist and exponent of *ālāpana*

was Sangita Kalanidhi T. Brinda (figure 7). Instrumentalists such as the revered flute player T. Viswanathan (figure 8) also perform *ālāpana*, using articulations appropriate to their instrument that closely imitate the vocal syllables.

In *sāhitya prastāra* or *niraval*, improvisation on a section of a *kriti* composition, the performer retains the composed text and tala cycle, but creates melodic variations within the tala structure for which knowledge of and strict adherence to raga idioms is essential.

Another form of raga improvisation, *kalpana svara* or *svara kalpana*, employs solfège and often follows *niraval* in a *kriti* performance. A musician performs solfège improvisation within the framework of a particular tala cycle, and employs raga idioms as in *niraval*.

A vocalist usually sings a Sanskrit, Tamil, or Telugu poem toward the end of a concert by improvising in a *rāgamālikā* 'garland of ragas'. This is nonmetered improvisation similar to *ālāpana*, in which the performer uses the text freely to bring out the essence of the raga and the meaning of the text.

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Thaikkuttathil, used with permission.

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Viswanathan playing the South Indian flute, c. 1992. Photo by Nancy Wooltz, used with permissi

There are three varieties of improvised music, usually performed in sequence: *rāgam-tānam-pallavi*. In this context, the word "raga" (*rāgam*) refers to the nonmetered improvisation ālāpana, which is usually longer than the typically brief *ālāpana* preceding a *kriti* composition. The biographies of great nineteenth-and twentieth-century performers such as Pallavi Gopala Ayyar and Maha Vaidyanatha Ayyar show how much concert time they devoted to the performance of *rāgāmtānam-pallavi* and how well known they were as experts at improvisation.

Tānam, also known as *ghana* 'weight, dignity' or *madhyama kāla* 'medium speed', is nonmetered improvisation with a definite pulse. Vocalists articulate the pulse by singing vocables *anan-tam-tvam*, or *nan-tam-nom* (Sanskrit, 'endless thou') in deep tones. On stringed and wind instruments such as vina, *goṭṭwāidyam*, violin, and flute, musicians employ special plucking, bowing, or lipping techniques to produce the vocable sounds. It is possible to perform *tānam* in any raga, but five in particular— *nāṭa, gaụa, ārabhi, varāḷi*, and *śrī*—are called *ghana* ragas, and performers often use them to explore *tānam*.

Pallavi is a precomposed piece usually set within one tala cycle. While improvising, a performer retains the basic compositional structure throughout the performance and creates skillful melodic patterns on the original raga or in a garland of ragas.

Learning and performing

To perform *ālāpana* and other forms of improvisation, a student must thoroughly learn the idioms of

the raga on which the improvisation will be based. The student needs to learn compositions in several genres (*verṇam, kriti*, and *padam*, for example) based on one particular raga to grasp fully all of that raga's complexities. Teachers present these compositions to students in levels of increasing difficulty.

Karnatak music is taught aurally. Although twentieth-century composers notate their works in *svara* notation (solfège), the written form is little more than an aid to memorization that has already taken place. Notation serves to assist recall for future

Page Image reference. Students learn primarily through listening and imitating, not through direct teaching of *ālāpana* (Viswanathan 1977). A teacher may impart, with or without sung sol-fa syllables, short raga phrases as independent units to be imitated but not closely memorized. However, listening and practice may be considered the most important parts of the learning process in the Karnatak tradition. The student listens to the teacher play or sing during lessons and performances, and also listens to performances of other musicians. Through these processes the student develops a mental model of a raga idiom inclusive of all the components of raga. The student further increases competency in performing ragas by learning a large repertoire of composed forms. The ability to improvise evolves naturally, without special effort; at some point in the process the student becomes competent to perform *ālāpana*.

A competent performer has mastered the elements of raga—sense of pitch (*śruti*), sense of time (*laya*), ornaments (*gamaka*), dynamics, aesthetic judgment, use of tones, and voice quality—and is capable of expressing mood and feeling in musical performance. The musician must be in harmony with all these elements, and must have mastered all the vocal or instrumental techniques necessary to perform raga effectively.

Voice quality is an important aspect of vocal *ālāpana* performance. Karnatak performers and audiences highly regard a gifted voice, but also prize a trained voice capable of producing all the techniques required in raga performance. Of the two, mastery of technique is more highly valued: older singers continue to be respected as raga *ālāpana* performers, even if their vocal timbre is no longer youthful.

Within the Karnatak performance tradition, musicians are expected to feel and communicate bhakti (devotion) and *rasa* 'mood'. The two elements of feeling and communicating are not so much separate or independent as complementary. Since mood and feeling are complex and subjective—and to a degree culturally determined, learned, and responded to—perhaps individuals can learn and experience them only through performance (figure 9).

Many generations of South Indian performer-composers have created compositions as a learning tool, and have taught them to their disciples. The disciple absorbs the complexities of ragas both formally, through these excercises, and informally, by spending much rime in the teacher's presence and offering personal services to the guru and his or her family. The guru first accepts the student, who must show competence in musicianship (the ability to improvise "on" and "in" a raga) and imbibe other musical behavior and etiquette. Only then does the guru accept the student as a full-fledged disciple (*śiṣya*). The new disciple seeks to gain respect and status as a performer by pleasing first the teacher and then audiences, connoisseurs, and music lovers.

As an experienced performer, the student shoulders the responsibility of preserving and disseminating the guru's musical (raga) style and tradition. Musical lineages through hereditary and nonhereditary musicians have survived and thrived in this manner for centuries.

The normal performing ensemble includes a main performer, the ever-present drone, and an accompanying melodic instrument—vina or violin. The accompanying instrument quite literally follows the principal melodic part, although players occasionally modify melodic phrases, producing

a heterophonic texture.

In the past, vina players performed not only as solo instrumentalists but often as accompanists in vocal *ālāpana* performance. After its introduction into Indian classical music in the 1830s, the Western violin proved to be more appropriate as an accompanying instrument because of its flexibility and volume. In South Indian concern today, the violin is almost always the accompanying instrument for vocal or instrumental *ālāpana* performance.

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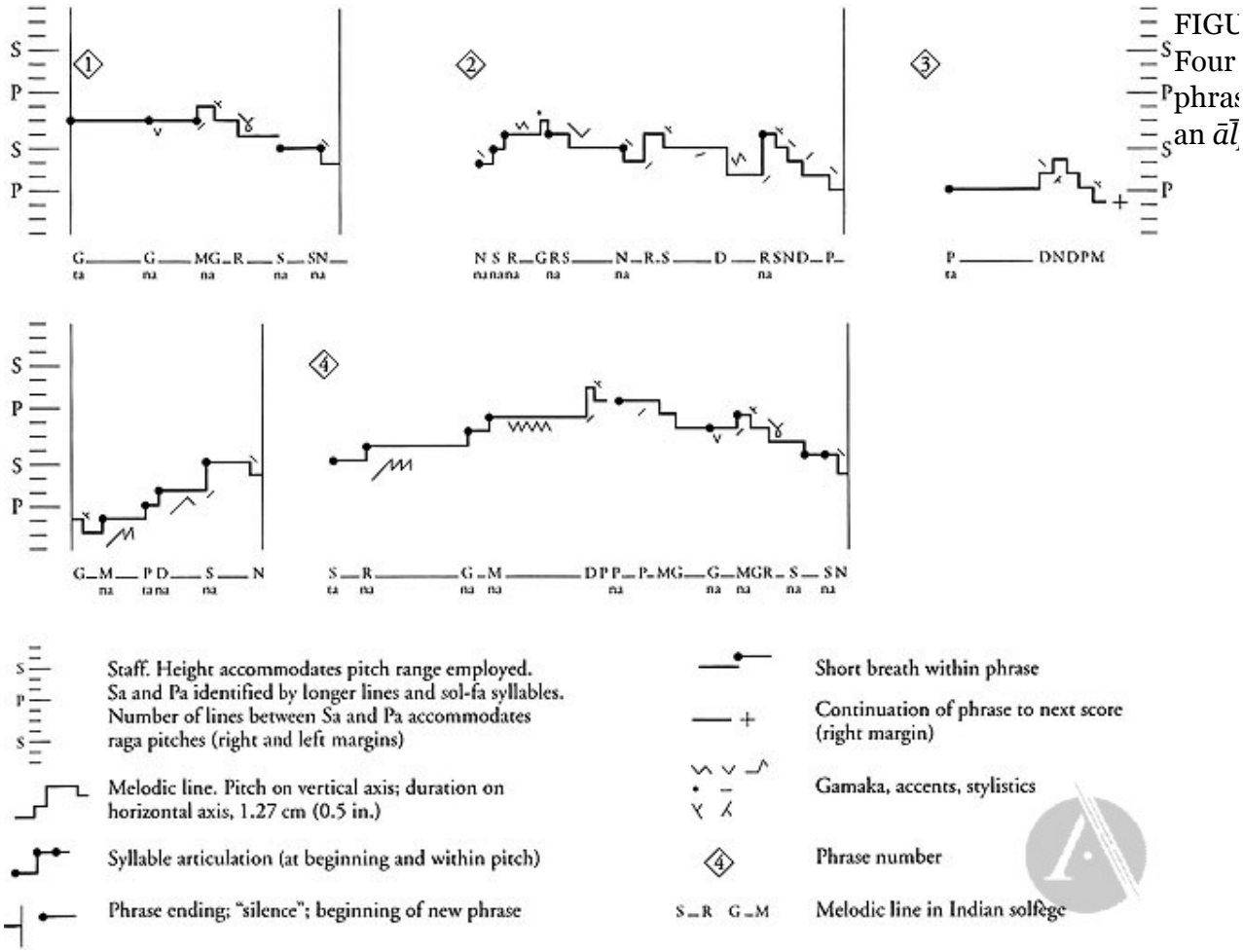

FIGU
Four
phras
an *ālā*

performance in *rīga śankarābhara ṇa* by T. Viswanathan (Viswanathan 1973). Transcription by Gayathri Rajapur Kaseebaum.

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Raga improvisation and gender

Before the 1920s, *ālāpana* performers were predominantly men. However, women musicians who belonged to certain communities with long musical lineages were exponents of the most challenging compositions (*padam* and *jāvaḷi*) that epitomize the raga essence [see S OCIAL O RGANIZATION OF M USIC AND M USICIANS: S OUTHERN A REA]. They performed in musical gatherings and in temples, but never on the concert stage. In the early 1920s, female pioneers (the legendary Vina Dhanammal, Coimbatore Tayi, Dhanakoti, Bhavani, and a few others) revolutionized musical practice by performing ragas and compositions on the concert stage (in both purely musical and dance events). They paved the way for the many prominent female concert musicians of today