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Ramnad Krishnan: Vidwan was first released in 1968

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RAMNAD KRISHNAN: Vidwan*

MUSIC OF SOUTH INDIA

Songs of the Carnatic Tradition



*Vidwan (Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu): an authority on his music; a master of his art

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Songs of the Carnatic Tradition

- 1 KRITI: *Ninnaḍanēla* (4:08)
 - 2 KRITI: *Pālinḥu Kāmāksi* (15:31)
 - 3 KRITI: *Abhimānamennaḍu* (13:08)
- RĀGAM – TĀNAM – PALLAVI:**
Tāmarasadala Nētri, Tyāgarājuni Mītri
- 4 **Ālāpana** (11:30)
 - 5 **Tānam** (7:17)
 - 6 **Pallavi theme** (1:31)
 - 7 **Pallavi niraval** (5:57)
 - 8 **Svara kalpana** (2:37)
 - 9 **Tani āvartam (drum solo)** (9:41)

Ramnad Krishnan, singer
V. Thyagarajan, violin
T. Ranganathan, mridangam
V. Nagarajan, kanjira
P. Srinivasan, tampura

*Vidwan (Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu):
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At the time of this recording, the artists were in residence as Visiting Artists in the World Music Program at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut.

The artistry of Ramnad Krishnan was recorded here for the very first time. When that great musician died of a heart condition in January 1973 while at the prime of his concert career, this recording and its companion album *Ramnad Krishnan: kaccheri* (Nonesuch H-72040) were cited as "a consolation to those who knew him well and will miss his music. . . . Krishnan manages to communicate the consummate grasp of technique and melodic imagination for which he was so widely respected" (Jon Higgins, *Journal of the Society for Asian Music*).

In 1988, twenty years after the release of the two-record set (HB-72023) on which this reissue is based, Nonesuch is privileged to present and preserve this rare musical legacy on compact disc.

Produced by Peter K. Siegel
Recorded December 1967 at Manhattan Towers Hotel, New York

Recording engineer/David B. Jones
Cover art/Bob Ziering
Mastering/Robert C. Ludwig (Masterdisk Corp.)
Coordinator/Teresa Sterne

South India's classical Carnatic music is based centrally upon a prodigious number of fully composed songs, most of which express intense religious sentiment. They date as far back as the 15th century, but the greatest flowering of creative effort in Carnatic music took place between 1700 and 1900 AD in the District of Tanjore. Here the music as we know it took definite shape, and thousands of compositions poured forth in eloquent religious and artistic expression.

Although the past 75 years have seen significant changes in the classical tradition and the context in which it is taught and performed, the link between religious life and musical activity is still strong. Classical songs abound in colorful descriptions of Hindu deities with their innumerable names and forms; and the rigorous discipline required of a classical artist is regarded as one of the most effective paths to spiritual enlightenment.

The economic upheaval that accompanied India's transition from colony to independent nation had a profound effect upon her music. Previously musicians had received generous patronage from *rājas* (kings) and wealthy landowners, and performed mostly in courts (*darbars*) for small and highly educated audiences. When this traditional source of support was cut off, musicians were forced to compete for the favor of the general public. This new audience has grown rapidly over the past half-century, radio stations regularly broadcast classical concerts, and the microphone makes it possible for crowds of over 12,000 to enjoy their favorite musicians at a festival. The heat of partisanship runs high among music lovers, and the Indian public follows its heroes from one *sabha* (concert hall) to the next with a loyalty comparable to that of American football fans.

The great majority of solo artists in Carnatic music are singers, for the music is primarily vocal and each musician, whether singer or instrumentalist, draws upon the same repertoire of art songs. An understanding of the text is essential to the successful rendering of a composition, and various subtleties of phrasing are as much a function of language as of musical line. A singer is invariably accompanied by violin, percussion, and drone.

The violin is played while sitting cross-legged, by placing the instrument firmly between foot and chest, making possible a rapid hand movement necessary for producing the slides, oscillation, and other types of ornamentation so characteristic of Carnatic music. It echoes and supports the singer and

2. KRITI: "Pālinu Kāmākṣi"

Rāga: *Madhyamāvati*

Ascent: C D F G B♭ c

Descent: c B♭ G F D C

Tāla: *Ādi* (4-2-2)

Language: Telugu

Composer: Syāma Śāstri

This *kṛiti* is preceded by a fairly short *ālāpana* (improvisation within the *rāga*, in free rhythm, by singer and violinist only). *Ālāpana*, the foremost type of improvisation in Carnatic music, enables a performer to explore the broad shape and characteristic phraseology of the *rāga*. This improvisation is the real test of a mature musician, especially when performed at some length.

The composition itself is in a slow cycle of *Ādi tāla* (eight beats), with two subdivisions for each beat. Towards the end of the piece, Krishnan performs a second type of improvisation called *niraval*. He takes a line of text from the song and improvises new melodic variations upon it while strictly maintaining the original rhythmic setting of words within the *tāla*. Then the violinist takes his turn, and although he cannot enunciate the words, he represents the shift from one word to another through the precise use of his bow.

Finally Krishnan introduces *svara kalpana*, in which the singer improvises rhythmic and melodic permutations using the sol-fa syllables, or names of the scale degrees: *sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni*. The violinist answers with his own *svara kalpana* in alternation with the singer, and they finally return to the composition and finish it.

Syāma Śāstri's text enumerates several characteristics of the mother goddess Kāmākṣi: the remover of all sins, giver of boons to all who seek her, the embodiment of compassion, mother of

the universe, goddess who dwells on the highest golden peaks of the Himalayas. He then chides her gently for failing to remove all obstacles to his happiness, even after he has prayed in many different ways. This common theme in song literature gives the composer an opportunity to exploit the rich ambiguity of Telugu words and suggest many different aspects of deity.

3. KRITI: "Abhimānamennaḍu"

Rāga: *Bēgaḍa*

Ascent: C E D E F G A G c

Descent: c B A G F E D C

Tāla: *Ādi* (4-2-2)

Language: Telugu

Composer: Patnam Subramania Iyer

Bēgaḍa rāga is frequently heard in South Indian concerts, and is a great favorite with the public. The ascending scale is of the type known as *vakra* (crooked); it is not a simple unbroken tone series, but doubles back upon itself twice before finally completing the octave. It also skips the 7th degree of the scale. The descending pattern, in contrast, includes all 7 scale degrees, and moves in orderly sequence down the octave. Careful attention to Krishnan's opening *ālāpana* will reveal exactly this configuration, for a singer must observe the characteristic shape of the *rāga* with utmost fidelity.

The composer argues with his deity, Lord Rāma, trying to coax a little attention from him. "When are you going to bless me, O Rāma? How can you be angry with me when I put myself completely at your mercy? I think of you as my own mother and father combined; so if you don't show compassion, who else will?"

RĀGAM-TĀNAM-PALLAVI: "Tāmarasaḍaḷa Nētri, Tyāgarājuni Mitri"

Rāga: Bhairavi

Ascent: C D E \flat F G A B \flat c

Descent: c B \flat A \flat G F E \flat D C

Tāla: Ādi (4-2-2)

Language: Telugu

Rāgam-Tānam-Pallavi is the *pièce de résistance* of any major South Indian concert. Unlike most other items, it is almost entirely improvised, and is heard after about two and one-half hours of singing, when the performers have created a kind of musical momentum and are able to give of their best.

4. *Ālāpana*. The *ālāpana* for this item may sometimes go as long as half an hour, depending upon the scope of the *rāga* and the mood of the solo artist. The singer starts in his lower register, carefully exploring subtle melodic elements that are most eloquently characteristic of the *rāga*, the violin following in close imitation. *Ālāpana* is performed around key areas of the *rāga*, in sequence from lower octave to higher fifth to higher octave, and then back down to the original tonic, with occasional broad gestures that encompass the singer's entire range. Various important tones are stressed (such as the upper octave 2nd degree of the scale, in this recording), serving as points of departure and return. The violinist takes his solo, and the *ālāpana* ends with Krishnan coming down to rest at the place from which he began. The formal shape of an *ālāpana* may be described as an arch, within and around which innumerable smaller shapes take form and merge with each other in what is surely one of the richest and most fascinating situations in the world of music.

5. *Tānam*. Here the improvisation falls into a more regular rhythmic pulsation, now and then subsiding into free rhythm as in the preceding *ālāpana*. There is, however, still no formal rhythmic cycle (*tāla*), and the drums are silent.

6. *Pallavi* theme. Krishnan has chosen a line from one of Tyāgarāja's *kritis*, in praise of the lotus-eyed goddess Amba (otherwise known as Pārvasī, Devi, Kāmākṣī). The line (called *Pallavi*, as distinct from the *pallavi* section of a *kṛiti*) is first presented in its simple, pre-composed form, then given one or two melodic variations in the style of *niraval*. This *Pallavi* is in a slow eight-beat cycle of *Ādi tāla*, with the theme starting halfway between beats one and two.

7. *Pallavi niraval*. Singer and violinist perform melodic improvisation in medium and fast speed, always maintaining the relationship of words to *tāla* with absolute precision. The two drummers must anticipate what the soloist will do, and exercise their own inventiveness upon the melodic material. Usually the singer composes his *Pallavi* before the concert, and the accompanying artists must be absolutely alert to discern what complex rhythmic setting he has devised. Before starting *svara kalpana*, Krishnan sings the original *Pallavi* melody, first at half speed, then regular, and finally in *tisra kala*, where he subdivides each half-beat into three parts, setting up a wholly new cross-rhythmical relationship between words and *tāla*. This makes tremendous demands upon the accompanists, who must perform rapid mental calculations in order to space the phrases accurately. It's an exciting moment in the concert, and professional reputations are often on the line.

8. *Svara kalpana*. Using the *Pallavi* as a point of return, singer and violinist alternate improvisation of new melodic and rhythmic material, in two speeds.

9. *Drum solo*. The *tani āvartam* ("rhythmic dissertation") is an essential feature of any Carnatic concert. Here the drummers are given free rein to demonstrate the incredible range of South Indian drumming, from the subtlest rhythmic and tonal nuance to a dazzling display of controlled technical virtuosity. *Mridangam* and *kanjira* take turns working out cross-rhythmic inventions, always in precise relationship to the *tāla*. Individual turns become shorter, as they toss spontaneous ideas back and forth. The solo ends in a joint rhythmic cadence known as *korvai*, in which a complex pattern is repeated three times, and resolves itself exactly one-half beat into the *tāla*, where singer and violinist enter with the *Pallavi* melody.

Krishnan sings a brief series of fast variations on the *Pallavi*, to wind up this masterful performance.

Notes by Jon B. Higgins
Wesleyan University
Middletown, Conn.

The Artists

Ramnad Krishnan is esteemed by South Indian musicians and audiences alike. He studied singing, first at the age of six with his brother Lakshminarayana Iyer, and then with C. S. Sankara Sivam of Ramnad. Krishnan gave his first major recital at the age of 14, and has since performed regularly throughout India. In 1959 he was selected by All India Radio to contribute regularly to their concert programs, and recently was heard throughout the nation in a full-concert broadcast, as part of a special series of performances by leading Hindusthani and Carnatic musicians. Ramnad Krishnan is fully accomplished in all phases of Carnatic singing, and the wit and precision of his rhythmic improvisation (*svara kalpana*) are particularly impressive. He joined the faculty of Wesleyan University as Visiting Artist in South Indian vocal music in September, 1967.

V. Thyagarajan is one of the leading violinists in South India, and has accompanied all the top-ranking soloists. He began studying (also at age six) with his grandfather, K. N. Srikarthiah, and continued with his father, K. S. Venketaramiah, himself a widely respected musician. He has performed throughout India since 1947, and is a regular artist with All India Radio. Thyagarajan excels in the subtle art of accompaniment, and brings to his performance a rare combination of deference and lyric skill. He is currently on the faculty of Wesleyan University as Visiting Artist in South Indian violin.

T. Ranganathan, a well known *mridangam* player, studied with the master Palani Subramania Pillai, and for many years has accompanied his sister, Balasaraswati, the noted classical *Bharata Natyam* dancer. He has toured with her twice throughout the United States, participated in the Bath Festival in 1963, and performed in several European cities in 1965. His broad experience in both dance and concert accompaniment has given him an unusual flexibility and range of playing style. Mr. Ranganathan was Wesleyan University's first Visiting Artist in Eastern music in 1963-64, and has recently resumed his position as Visiting Artist in South Indian *mridangam*.

V. Nagarajan, brother of the violinist Mr. Thyagarajan, studied with Tanjore Ramdoss Rao, Tanjore Vaidyanada Iyer, and most recently with Palghat T. S. Mani Iyer. He plays both *mridangam* and *kanjira*, and has accompanied many eminent soloists throughout India. Mr. Nagarajan developed a remarkable *kanjira* technique, enabling him to produce an unusual warmth and depth of tone. He joined the faculty of Wesleyan University in 1967 as Visiting Artist in South Indian *kanjira*.

P. Srinivasan comes from a family of musicians in South India. As Technician in the World Music program at Wesleyan University, he is in charge of a large collection of Oriental instruments, and serves as photographer as well as *tampura* player. Mr. Srinivasan is skilled in maintaining and repairing musical instruments.