

Forgotten Composers

Carnatic Music: The Lives and
Contributions of Forgotten and
Lesser-known Composers



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1. REDISCOVERING THE LOST AND FORGOTTEN

One of the oldest and greatest musical traditions in the world, Carnatic music has been enriched by the contributions of countless composers. These vaggeyakaras belonged to Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Telangana. They shone bright in the Carnatic music firmament and are remembered till today, immortalised by their compositions and the glorious music they created.

However, not all of them received their due in the pages of music history. Some of them were forgotten over the years. Their compositions faded away from concert platforms and lessons of music-teachers. Their artistic endeavours and achievements as composers were slowly consigned to obscurity.

This book is a humble attempt to present the lives and contributions of a few Carnatic-music vaggeyakaras of the past centuries who created works of much musical merit. However, for various reasons, their works receded into oblivion.

These are the forgotten composers, or near-forgotten vaggeyakaras.

Their compositions have fallen off the music map. Well, almost.

These vaggeyams which have much musical worth have been unjustly forgotten and struggle to remain in public memory.

The valuable contributions of these highly talented composers do not feature in most textbooks of music or in lessons of teachers within and outside the academic space.

These estimable compositions don't feature in the mainstream concert space or most workshops. It is rarely that one finds these creations in the regular performance repertoire of musicians.

In effect, the work of these forgotten or lesser-known composers has been pushed to the fringes, if at all it is still remembered.

This is not to say that their output was on a par with the Trinity and that these forgotten/lesser-known composers deserved the same position as these three greats in music history. All that is being said is that their work did not receive the recognition proportionate to its musical merit. Also, that over time, even the very memory of their compositions began to fade.

Despite their impressive output as composers, they gradually descended into oblivion.

Some of these lesser-known composers have been luckier than the others. Or rather, their works have been more fortunate. A handful of each of their works survive in performance repertoires of a very few musicians or find occasional mentions in workshops. However, that is about it. Thus, only a few of their oeuvre are remembered and rendered.

The rest of their works are forgotten or still untraceable as of now and exist somewhere, awaiting discovery.

As for the less fortunate of these forgotten composers, their creations have disappeared almost completely from the kutcheri scene. These compositions are languishing in the dark and dusty confines of music history.

A few old books containing the compositions—many of them sans notations—are the only remembrances of their vaggeyams. In many cases, even these books contain only part of the composer's output. The composer's descendants too have no idea of where the rest of the compositions can be found.

Some composers like Thirupathi Vidyala Narayanaswami Naidu, Duddu Seetharama Sastry and Ogirala Veeraraghava Sarma have been largely forgotten today, but in their own time, they were widely renowned performers and received respect and appreciation from the giants of Carnatic music across south India.

In the case of Naidu and Veeraraghava Sarma many eminent musicians of Chennai also learnt and rendered their compositions. M.S. Balasubrahmanya Sarma is still remembered in some quarters because he became an A-grade artist of All India Radio (Madras) at barely 13 years of age and later performed multi-raga RTPs, intricate gathibheda pallavis and earned the title Laya Brahma! However, his compositions are all but forgotten.

Hence, it is important to note that the names that figure in this book may still be remembered in some quarters as great musicians and scholars too, but their contributions as vaggeyakaras are largely forgotten. In other words, their role as composer is forgotten. This explains their inclusion in this book.

Even the average music lover who can perhaps recall a few of these names would be hard put to name a couple of compositions of each of them. The above three composers are good examples of this. So, in effect they fall under the category of forgotten or lesser-known composers.

The main reasons for these vaggeyakaras becoming forgotten or near-forgotten composers are: lack of a solid shishya-parampara

during the composer's time or an unbroken line of the same; disciples who did not do much to preserve, present and promote the guru's works; little or no documentation of the compositions; inadequate preservation of even the documented works; lack of notation/proper notation even in preserved works; the indifference of the composer himself; descendants who were not aware of the value of the work left behind and hence did not make adequate conservation efforts; the absence of powerful royal patronage in this region which meant many things like lack of performance opportunities in which the composer could have showcased his compositions and absence of funding for documentation of the compositions.

Also, it is a well-known fact that many music maestros in the two Telugu states have been consigned to obscurity or had to migrate to neighbouring states to receive their due. Perhaps this is only part of the larger phenomenon in these Telugu states wherein great achievers among sons of the soil have gone uncelebrated after their death and been relegated to footnotes in history.

It is also well-known that there was no royal patronage of Carnatic music in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh during this time on the scale that was witnessed in other parts of south India. Karnataka had the Mysore Maharajas, Kerala the Travancore royals and in Tamil Nadu, there were the rulers at Madurai and Thanjavur.

Admittedly, in this region, there were small samsthanams, zamindars and wealthy locals here and there who did support and reward some of these composers. Duddu Seetharama Sastry is a prominent example. However, the scale of patronage was nowhere comparable to that which existed in the neighbouring states.

Finally, the composer himself may not have been very interested—for whatever reasons—in the proper documentation, dissemination or preservation of his compositions.

Many a composer created his vaggeyams extempore and did not commit it immediately or later, to writing. Neither did his disciples.

In some cases, the composition was scribbled on a scrap of paper, or handwritten in a notebook which went from tattered to lost, over time.

There are instances in which the composer committed the notation and words to the back of an envelope!

In a few cases, the composer had disciples and/or descendants who were trained in classical music. However, even this was no safeguard against his compositions fading from the kutcheri scene because he himself did not keep systematic records of these musical creations or inform the shishyas or family members whenever he composed a piece.

Even in cases where a composer did keep records of a part of his output, he did not inform his family members about the whereabouts of these books or notes nor did he instruct his family members to preserve them. So, information about these compositions virtually died with the composer.

Generations later, came a descendant who cobbled together some information with great difficulty from other sources and created a repository of compositions. However, even this, according to him may or may not be the entire output.

The indifference to proper documentation and preservation, has been the weak link in many a forgotten composer's legacy.

For all these reasons, family members or any expert/musician this writer spoke to in the past few years regarding a composer were not able to say with certainty if the works available today constituted the entire body of work of that composer. So, whether it was due to the composer's own neglect or indifference or that of his descendants, compositions may have been lost.

Hence this disclaimer: The works mentioned in every chapter for each composer may only constitute a part of his entire output.

Sadly, thus, it is possible that some of the best works of a composer have been irretrievably lost. It is entirely possible that this is the case with Mallekonda Ramadasu.

Also, some composers created the compositions for their inner satisfaction, or as a prayer, and were not interested in taking them beyond this private space. So, knowledge of their vaggayams remained confined to their family members or close disciples.

Some, in their humility, regarded the works of the Trinity and other greats more worthy of their time for performing and teaching. Descendants and/or students of these composers revealed this to us.

So, comparing their own output to that of the Trinity, these forgotten composers would feel modest to the point of not committing their work to a permanent record. Or even performing it in public. Both of which would have ensured the survival of their creditable works for posterity.

The same attitude was the reason why some composers did not make their students carry their legacy forward with the effort it deserved. For example, Duddu Seetharama Sastry would dissuade students who came to him asking him to teach them

his compositions. Sastry would ask them to focus instead on the compositions of the Trinity which he said were more worth their time.

Also, during their performances and workshops, some contemporary musicians tend to steer clear of lesser-known composers and focus their attention on the more famous ones for obvious reasons. This contributes, gradually, to the fading away of the vaggeyams from performance spaces. In the extreme case, the composer's work sinks into oblivion, completely.

The simplicity of the sahitya or the colloquial words used by some of these lesser-known composers may have been the reason why some musicians considered them 'low-brow' and did not want to render them.

At the other end, the technical challenge which the works of the composers pose could have been daunting. This seems to be true at least in the case of the illustrious musician-composer Ajjada Adibhatla Narayana Das often called Laya Brahma, a vocalist and veena-exponent who played this instrument with three gathis in unision.

The sheer technical complexity of his works and their esoteric nature have deterred many musicians from attempting to render them. His musical tour de force Janaki Sapatham has 36 vivadi ragas!

As for Narayana Das' masterpiece, Dasa Vidha Raga Navati Kusuma Manjari, it is mind-bogglingly complex. It has been described as a musical wonder, a monumental work and a test to musicians. It is a ragamalika with 90 ragas and a Panchamukhi thala prayogam!

Turn to the chapter on this composer and read the paragraphs detailing these two musical creations to understand

why, possibly, his compositions don't find space on kutcheri platforms today.

Happily, there are exceptions. In the case of a few composers, some of their heirs and/or interested musicians have turned protective caretakers. They have retrieved their ancestor's compositions (or at least as many as they could) and published the same as books.

However, even after this, there is not enough awareness in the music world about these books so the composers still remain largely forgotten.

The 15 composers covered in this book are Bommaraju Seetharamadasu, Prayaga Rangadasu, Mallekonda Ramadasu, Yedla Ramadasu, Patrayani Seetharama Sastry, Mahendravada Bapanna Sastry, Kaivaram Yogi (aka Yogi Amaranareyana), Muniapalle Subramanya Kavi, Thirupathi Vidyala Narayanaswami Naidu, Ajjada Adibhatla Narayana Das, Tumu Narasimha Dasu, Ogirala Veeraraghava Sarma, M.S. Balasubrahmanya Sarma, Kocherlakota Ramaraju and Duddu Seetharama Sastry.

This paragraph details why certain composers could not be included in this book despite great efforts to source information about them. In some instances, the descendants were willing but helpless. They told us that they did indeed know about the compositions and were in possession of a copy or two of the same. However, unaware of the value of this material, they had allowed it go to seed over the years. So when this writer met them, all they had to show were some tattered books with faded letters. They also said that this was only a part of the material and other books had been completely ruined and hence irretrievably lost. They regretted these developments but were helpless to recover anything now and so was this writer.

The list of composers covered in this book is by no means an exhaustive one. There are many more worthy composers but given space constraints, only 15 have been included.

Many others are worth rediscovering and celebrating. As the great composer Thyagaraja said in his great Sri raga composition in Telugu in these immortal words: “Yendaro Mahanubhavulu, Andariki Vandanalulu”. ‘There are many great persons. Salutations to all of them’.

Also, the articles do not claim to be exhaustive. Each one is more like an introduction to the composer’s life and works. It attempts to shine a light on the composer’s life, his evolution as a musician and contributions to Carnatic music.

Also, the order in which the composers appear in this book is purely alphabetical. It is not related to the time in which they lived. It is also not an arrangement in order of merit. The order is in no way a judgement of their worth.

Finally, with regard to music, listening is believing.

Hence, links to renditions have been provided for each composer.

In some chapters, there are multiple links given for the same song. This is because there are different renditions of the same song by different musicians. Secondly, even though there are several links with renditions by the same musician, they are still given because, as everyone knows, no two renditions by the same performer of the same song will ever be exactly the same.

Disclaimer—all youtube links were checked and found to be functional at the time of publication.

For those readers who would like to know more about the composer, there is a list of resources at the end of each chapter.

This will help them visit the place of origin of the composer and the temples at which he worshipped and the presiding deities which inspired his work.

Details of the memorial to the composer are also given wherever one exists. Contact details of places and persons from which book(s) on or by the composer can be obtained are also provided, wherever available.

2. THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

Countless composers have contributed to making Carnatic music a great art-form which is nationally and globally recognised and respected. This is of course, apart from the practitioners, the vocalist and instrumentalists who perform the art, and its teachers and theoreticians. All these people have spread the fragrance of south-Indian classical music around the world.

There are some musicians who combine all these roles! Every now and then you come across an artiste who is a composer, vocalist, instrumentalist, teacher and theoretician all in one! Some of the forgotten or lesser-known composers in this book are examples of the same.

There have been a few champions of the neglected vaggayakaras. If the works of the forgotten or near-forgotten composers have not been completely erased from history, it is because of their efforts.

They include individuals and institutions/trusts. Among the individuals are a few contemporary musicians who are admirers and/or pra-shishyas. They are rendering and teaching these compositions and thus ensuring the composers are not totally forgotten.

Many of them told this writer that they felt it was their duty to recognise the great treasure left behind by earlier composers and preserve it for future generations.

Some of the men and women who made pioneering efforts in this regard are no longer with us. These include giants like

Voleti Venkateswarulu, Nedunuri Krishnamurthi, Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna and many other greats of the past. They unearthed and polished many forgotten compositions and restored them to a place of respect, if not prominence.

Balamuralikrishna's efforts as described in the chapter on Mallekonda Ramadasu provide a road-map for any musician who wants to revive a worthy composer's legacy.

Contributing to the revival in these times are a handful of contemporary research scholars. They are shedding light on some of the forgotten composers and their vageyams.

These creations are a beautiful blend of music and words, dhaathu and maathu, and will enrich any concert.

The compositions cover the entire range of compositions in Carnatic music – geethams, swarajathis, varnams, keerthans, krithis, thillanas, padams and javalis. Bhakti, vairagyam, shringara, nindasthuthi—there is a wide range of bhaavas or emotions in these compositions.

Several composers employed rare ragas too and with finesse. A few even created new ragas. Smruthiranjani aka Smrithiranjani raga by Patrayani Seetharama Sastry is an example. Another is Vijayasankari raga by M.S. Balasubrahmanya Sarma.

All these forgotten compositions and their creators are worth rediscovering and their music is worth celebrating. This will not only be the best tribute to each of them but also enrich the music world.

These musical treasures need to be preserved and handed over to future generations of students and performers.

As pointed out earlier, it is possible that even now what has been discovered of the forgotten composers may only be a part of their work. This problem also presents a great opportunity.

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