Thyagaraja Then & Thyagaraja Now
Prabhakar Chitrappu

The Then was not so long ago. It was 1854, just over 150 years, when Thyagaraja was still a live person, in flesh and blood, with all his human characteristics and scholarship. No more and no less.

Since then, however, Thyagaraja has grown both more and less. He grew more in fame and less in detail. His music propagated and flourished, bringing joy to multitudes and livelihood to musicians and others in related professions. The details blurred and Thyagaraja as a man and the totality of his works became hazy and sometimes a matter of myth.

It does not have to be so. We know of many men and women that lived centuries before, whose lives and work details are still preserved with great care and pride. As examples come to mind such names as Mozart, Beethoven, Franklin, Lincoln etc, whose lives are so well documented. Unfortunately of the pride of our music, Thyagaraja, we know comparatively little.

One may say, however, that Thyagaraja is mainly known for his music. That makes for the most important person - the "Musical Thyagaraja". Thanks to his devoted students and their lineages of subsequent musicians, this Thyagaraja is well preserved. The rest is - the "Other Thyagaraja". Is it so important if this Thyagaraja is only vaguely known? Is not such knowledge strictly secondary?

In this essay, I shall attempt to make the point that even the Musical Thyagaraja is not completely known. As for the value of trying to understand the Other Thyagaraja, it is simply the curiosity of history and science.

The 'Musical Thyagaraja'

I hope that I am wrong and that my knowledge is highly deficient, but I think that much remains to be known about our "Musical Thyagaraja". I shall try to justify my ignorance with some examples. A simple one is the number of kritis that Thyagaraja wrote. We have come across the number of 24,000 kritis, equal to the number of slokas in the Valmiki Ramayana. However, no book that I have come across or a web page that I saw has even 1,000 songs! What happened to the rest? How could his faithful disciples not have cared to document so many thousands? Or was that number only a hyperbole? My point is that this is a simple and basic fact of the Musical Thyagaraja and we do not seem to have an accurate answer.

Even among published works, there is not a complete agreement. One of the first books that I referred to was "The Spiritual Heritage of Thyagaraja", written by C. Ramanujachari & V Raghavan (published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras in 1981). This book cataloged but only 564 songs, with several well known songs missing, including the famous Nata raga kriti Jagadanandakaraka. A more comprehensive and almost monumental work is the "Compositions of Thyagaraja" written by TK Govinda Rao (published by Ganamandir...
Publications, India in 1995). This book contains an envious number, 688, of kritis, whereas a more recent book "The Complete Kritis of Sri Thyagaraja" by Maddali Venkata Subbayya (published by Icfai University Press in 2006) contains 716 kritis. And then there is a recent recording by Nedunuri Krishnamurthy of 8 Thyagaraja kritis, that were apparently hitherto unknown and were discovered from the Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavathar manuscripts by two Professors from Hyderabad in 2005! After laborious comparison of all these works, the total is now 726.

But then there must be more. It is mentioned that Thyagaraja composed this kriti "Svari Vedralina Parthasarathyny ganare" in Raga Todi, when he visited the famous Parthasarathy Temple in Madras ("Sangita Jagadguru Sri Thyagaraja Kirtanalu", by Bhavaraju Narasimharao, T.S. Parthasarathy and published by Triveni Publishers, Machilipatnam in 1988, and also "Great Composers, Book II, Tyagaraja (2nd Edition) by P. Sambamoorthy and published by The Indian Music Publishing House in 1970). However, I could not find even the lyrics in any of the books I have had access to so far. There may be more such known and yet unknown (to the general public) kritis of Thyagaraja. Of course, I do not have all the books on Thyagaraja kritis, especially those in languages other than Telugu and English, and it is quite possible some of my curiosities are put to rest there.

Now let us consider the musical renderings of the songs, for which the lyrics are available. Are the recordings of all these songs publicly available, for reference purposes at least? I have but 467 and I know that others have over 600 renderings. But are these renderings complete? It is well known that most musicians typically limit themselves to rendering Pallavi, Anupallavi and usually the last or the mudra charanam. We also know that at least some songs have more than one charanam. Are we missing something in omitting these additional charanams? If not, why would a great composer like Thyagaraja compose them in the first place? Out of curiosity, I tabulated the number of charanams for all the 726 kritis and plotted them in a graphical form, as shown below. It is interesting to observe that most kritis have either 1 or 3 charanams, whereas highest number of charanams in 23! Many of the songs with a large number of charanams are usually the bhajana type of kirtanas, which are musically simpler.
The 'Other' Thyagaraja

It is fascinating now to turn towards the body of knowledge or lack thereof about the 'Other Thyagaraja'. In addition to recognizing various holes in our knowledge of the personality and life of Thyagaraja, even what we know of it appears to have undergone interesting transformation from the Then to Now. As pointed by William Jackson in his book "Thyagaraja: Life and Lyrics" (published by Oxford University Press, Madras in 1991), biographies get replaced in time by ‘hagiographies’ (i.e. biographies that idealize or idolize the person -especially a person who is a saint). The idea is that, while the original biographies are probably more descriptive of the real and human Thyagaraja, later works tend to dilute or delete some details and accentuate or exaggerate other aspects. These changes are typically driven by the changing view of the individual over time. The human Thyagaraja simplifies and evolves into a stereotypical vision of a typical bhaktha and saint. Let me illustrate this by quoting a rather amusing paragraph from one of the early biographies, titled "Thiagaraja: A Great Musician Saint" by MS Ramaswami Aiyar and published by Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, originally in 1927 and reprinted in 1986. It reads....

"In appearance, Thyagaraja was a tall, lean man of brown complexion. His shoulders were broad,...face stern...jaws fleshy but a little pointed at the chin...thulasimala around his neck; gopinama on his forehead; his right hand, ornamented with a golden ring in the forefinger and a pavithra in the ring finger; the white silk-lined cloth worn with careful folds between and the red silken turban with a broad unfurled tail flowing behind....

Our musician inherited impetuosity and irritability of temper, so much so, that, in spite of his being otherwise good, he was highly disagreeable to his disciples and would at times treat them with harshness. For instance, a certain boy was, according to the custom of the day, acting as a servant to Thiagaraja in return for the music he learnt. The guru used to scold him downright for delay in the services, such as getting things ready for pooja, as well as, in repeating the songs taught and would even belabor him soundly. One day. The boy faced the guru and said to him point blank: "For my dullness in learning music, I may be cudged; but for your quickness in losing temper, you certainly deserve thrashing"!

Even his more important disciples, such as Umayalpuram Brothers, Manambuchavadi VenkataSubbaier, Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavathar etc, had some experience of harsh treatment at the hands of their guru. One evening a few of them intruded upon a marriage party in a village near Thiruvaiyar and eagerly listened to a dancing girl’s Javali, for which their guru had the greatest aversion. His pupils however liked it immensely and, on returning home, repeated it among themselves. Next morning, Thiagaraja came to know what had happened the previous day and vented his anger thus: "You Imps! To attend a marriage uninvited and without my permission is itself a
fault; to see there a dancing girl is an offense; to hear her sing a lascivious Javali is a sin; but to make bold to repeat it inside my roof and to my hearing .... What shall I say?". Forthwith, the imps were driven out and had to forgo their morning meal."

I would suspect many modern biographies may choose to omit such details!

I wonder if there is word similar to hagiography to describe the idolized depictions of how saintly personalities looked. Take for example, the following two pictures.

Contrasting Portraits of Thyagaraja

The one on the left is taken from the early biography by MS Ramaswami Aiyer, mentioned earlier. The picture is apparently in the Jagan Mohan Palace in Mysore. Notice how amazingly realistic the portrait is. One can clearly see the stern but calm look as well as details of several physical features.

The picture on the right hand side is one many people are probably familiar with. It is due to S. Rajam and has become almost universally used in our times. It is a beautiful picture, with ethereal and out-of-this-world transcendence. However, it lacks realism and seems like to simplified caricature of what one wants Thyagaraja to look like, as opposed what he really looked like. This is probably just one example of how society replaces truth with what it wants to see.

Thus, a careful comparison of various existent informations available about Thyagaraja is a good start to identify commonalities and contradictions. To this can be added findings of carefully conducted new research. But where is the source material for such research? To me, Thyagaraja's own songs are a rich and possibly underutilized source of information. While the lyrics carry the music
and tell about Thyagaraja's devotion, interestingly, one also comes across occasional sparks of information about his way of life, personal habits, etc. And clearly such information would be authentic, as it would really be an autobiographical account, unaltered in time! I give below a well known song whose lyrics appear to give a glimpse of how Thyagaraja working style.

**Kaddanuvariki in Raga Thodi**

**Pallavi**

*Kaddanuvariki Kaddu Kaddani MoralaNidu*

*Peddala Maatalu Nedabadda Mouno ?*

**Anupallavi**

*Addampu Chekkillache Muddugaaru Momu Chuda*

*Budhi Galginatti Ma vadda Ravademi ra*

**Charanam:**

*Niddura Niraakarinchi Mudduga Thamboora Bhatti*

*Shuddha maina manasuche suswaramu tho*

*Paddu Thappaka Bhajiyinchu Bhakta Paalanamu Seyu*

*Taddayashalivi Nive Thyagaraaja Sannutha!*

**Meaning:**

For those who say "there is", will the words of the elders who plead "yes, there is", "yes, there is", become false today?

How is it that you do not come near us, who have an intention to see the sweet face with mirror-smooth cheeks?

Spurning sleep and lovingly holding the tambura,

With a clean mind and with pure notes,

Oh the One praised by Thyagaraja! You are the compassionate One

That takes care of devotees, who worship you without breaking the vow!

The kriti seems to suggest that Thyagaraja spent late hours in the night, singing and perhaps composing new songs also. He would sit with a clear mind and sing in clean notes to the strumming of his Tambura. Is that how he created the gems that we now enjoy again and again?

**In Conclusion:**

Of course, one can go on asking many more curiosity questions. How long did he take to compose a kriti typically? Did he have intermediate versions that he improved upon? Were they documented?
Indeed, we know that the famous kritis Jagadanandakaraka and Endaro Mahanubhavulu both contain multiple mudra charanams. It is reasonable to think that Thyagaraja himself added these extra charanams and made sure that there was no doubt in it, by adding his signature again!

How about the chronology of his compositions? Are the dates known when he composed each kriti? Did not his students, who took such pains to write down the lyrics and the music, write down a few numbers to capture the date?

We know that the house in which Thyagaraja lived most of his life and produced for us the ocean of musical bliss has been around – alas, up until a year or so ago, when it was demolished for a modern memorial to be built in its place! What a sad development for the admirers of Thyagaraja and his history! Are any of his personal belongings preserved? His Tambura? His Veena?

This is the end of this article, but the beginning of a search for many answers. Over the years, I have tried to collect as much authentic information as is available about Thyagaraja, and more recently, I have begun to disseminate it via the website www.thyagaraja.org. I would be grateful if you would look at it and join me in my search for more answers.