

## **Kalpana Swaram singing – trick or treat?**

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I have come across many excellent amateur musicians who learn songs with confidence but when it comes to “manodharma sangeetham” or creative aspects in Carnatic music, many are ill at ease. Out this set of people, in my experience, a relative majority is willing to give raga alapana a shot – the World of Alapanas, while certainly complex and requiring good “gnanam” (knowledge), is a free flowing one. On the other hand, the Worlds of Neraval and Kalpana Swarams include the additional dimension of tala or rhythm.

We’ve all heard of the phrase “sruti maatha laya pitha” – my Guru Padmabhushan Lalgudi Sri Jayaraman used to tell me that laya is equated to pitha or father due to its strictness! While Mom Sruti is certainly important and fundamental, the strictness of Dad Laya often throws the Child (i.e., the student of music) into a state of tension and frenzy!

This article, although by no means exhaustive, aims to demystify some the elements of kalpana swaram singing and show some pointers to successful and (hopefully) tension free kalpana swaram singing. In the accompanying MP3 file, I have sung examples of the various aspects discussed in the article to help illustrate the techniques.

In a typical scenario, the musician chooses a point in a song or pallavi (in a ragam-thanam-pallavi exposition) and breaks into kalpana swarams. I’ve attempted to enumerate some interesting aspects of kalpana swaram singing -

1. **Progression from simple to complex:** A typical example of kalpana swara singing starts off with short, simple swarams which may be a few notes long and progresses into longer and more complex patterns. Each round of kalpana swarams ends at the particular point in the lyric chosen.
2. **Ending a kalpana swaram:** One key aspect is that considerable practice and expertise is required before a musician acquires the ability to end each round of swarams while meeting the rhythmic and melodic requirements - often this ending is not predetermined, but arrived at in a very spontaneous fashion. My Guru has often pointed out to me that patterns that counter the beat often give a certain punch and make the kalpana swarams sound more interesting.
3. **Importance of “eduppu”:** “Eduppu” denotes the starting point of the lyric that follows each round of kalpana swarams. The eduppu may be on the samam (coinciding with the beat) or anaagatha (the talam precedes the music) or atheetha (the music precedes the talam). There is no rule or requirement that one has to choose a particular line of a given song for kalpana swaram singing. Musicians often choose different lines of the same song in different concerts, or show variations by ending the kalpana swaram at different points in the same line of lyric!
4. **Slow and fast tempo swarams** – Very often, kalpana swarams are sung in slow tempo first and fast tempo subsequently. The sedate, slow tempo (chauka kaala) swarams provide ample scope for gamaka (microtones) based and pidi (typical phrases in a given raga) based exploration of the raga, while the fast tempo

(dhurita kaala) swarams add an exciting crescendo effect and often include interesting calculations and swara patterns.

5. **“Kanakku” or calculations:** Musicians often use calculations to enhance the flavor of a kalpana swaram rendition. The complexity and extent of use of calculations depend on the musician’s school of thought (some schools employ this technique more than others) and less often, on the extent of mastery over rhythm (some musicians are extremely proficient in laya or rhythm and enjoy performing challenging complex calculations in an ex tempore fashion).
  - a. Use of some standard calculations or korvais– a typical example would be the 5\*3 sequence, say in Kalyani raagam, G R S N D, R S N D P, G M P D N. Other korvais may take up the span of an entire avartanam (tala cycle) and may be repeated 3 times with the same basic rhythmic structure but different melodic patterns to accentuate the effect.
  - b. “Poruttams” or calculations customized to eduppu: The Lalgudi bani is well known for this technique. Instead of using a standardized calculation, the rhythmic pattern is customized to merge seamlessly with the melodic pattern of the lyric. Often, the calculation is done so subtly that the listener may not even realize its complexity!
6. **“Sarva laghu” swarams:** This style of swaram singing brings out the beauty of the raga without resorting to heavy calculation. My Guru used to reiterate in his classes that sarva laghu swaram singing is by no means inferior to calculation oriented singing. When employed skillfully, it greatly compounds the overall harmony of rhythm and melody, a feeling described in kutchery (concert) parlance as “sowkhyam”
7. **Importance of variety:** Ending kalpana swarams in different notes and then blending the ending aptly with a suitable sangati (melodic embellishment) of the lyric is yet another advanced level technique.
8. **Focal notes/patterns:** Traversing up and down the scale without any patterns or focal points will result in monotony and the performer will likely run out of ideas. One technique that is often employed is the use of “focal notes” – these notes are chosen to suit the raga in hand, and patterns are built around that given note. Sometimes, different rounds of kalpana swarams focus on different focal notes.
9. **“Koraippu” :** Often performed as a grand finale to the kalpana swarams for the main piece(s), koraippu (literally meaning reduction) involves starting with longer swaram patterns around a focal note (say, 4-6 avartanams) and progressively performing shorter patterns (2, 1, ½, ¼ avartanams etc.), with each pattern ending in one or more focal notes. The alternation between the main performer and accompanists provides an interesting contrast. The koraippu may be followed by a korvai to nicely wind up the kalpana swara singing.
10. **Other advanced techniques** – In a typical Chatusra nadai (4 subdivisions per beat), some sophisticated techniques include but are not limited to tisram (3 subdivisions per beat), chatusra tisram (the underlying gathi is still chatusra but each note takes up 3/4<sup>th</sup> of a beat) and use of swaraksharams (the swara and syllable being similar).

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