

Enhancing performance through Raga understanding: Insights into L. Subramaniam's „Fantasy on Vedic Chants”

Magdalena SUCIU¹, Stela DRĂGULIN²

Abstract: *"Fantasy on Vedic Chants," a seminal work by L. Subramaniam, presents a unique fusion of Carnatic music and Western orchestration. Premiered at Lincoln Center in 1985, this composition integrates Vedic chants into a Western-style violin concerto, exemplifying a significant cultural and musical convergence. The concerto is structured in three movements, each reflecting different emotional aspects of the Carnatic raga system. This article highlights the piece's use of modal approaches and its impact on the performance. Through its integration of Vedic motifs and its exploration of spiritual and musical wisdom, "Fantasy on Vedic Chants" stands as a testament to Subramaniam's artistic vision and his contribution to global music heritage.*

Key-words: *Raga, Carnatic, integration, interpretation, performance.*

1. Introduction

Dr. Lakshminarayana Subramaniam stands out as one of the leading figures in the realm of crossover music today. His extensive contributions as a violinist, composer, and researcher have redefined Indian music, seamlessly weaving it into the fabric of Western musical culture without compromising its authenticity or altering its essence. Subramaniam has carved out a distinct and influential space for Indian music, particularly Indian violin music, within the domain of Western professional composition. This achievement avoids the common pitfalls of cliché that often accompany attempts to present an authentic cultural product to a diverse and widespread audience. He is arguably the most globally recognized name linked to both Indian music and the Indian violin.

¹ Transilvania University of Braşov.

² Professor PhD., Transilvania University of Braşov.

Subramaniam's path, marked by his pioneering role in the fusion genre, reflects his relentless commitment to fostering intercultural exchange. This approach is deeply rooted in his upbringing within the traditions of Indian music and is further enriched by his thorough study of European classical music. A key to understanding *Fantasy on Vedic Chants* lies in the foundational elements of Carnatic music, which play a crucial role in shaping Subramaniam's compositional style. This article seeks to explore the melodic aspects of his music, particularly through the use of the raga system.

2. The Unique Modal Approach in Indian Music

The Indian musical system is distinct from the Western one, particularly due to its incorporation of around 200 modes. Understanding these modes cannot be directly compared to the understanding of modes within Western music theory. Their diversity, combined with the concept of each mode's specific emotional quality, has led to a unique approach. This approach treats the modal system as a framework for improvisation rather than simply a classification system for compositions (Widdess 1995, 32). The two aspects of the modal system should be viewed as complementing each other, rather than opposing one another, building a richer semantic understanding of the concept. Widdess also emphasizes that performers must grasp the emotional essence of a mode for successful interpretation, as the Indian modal system, much like other Asian systems, leans more toward linking modes with melodies rather than associating them with a scale, as seen in Western music theory (*ibid.*). This discussion will focus on a few key concepts from the specialized literature while recognizing the lack of comprehensive scientific analysis of this system, which could pose challenges for those with a Western musical education.

Several key elements define the unique structure of a raga: the tonal system, the scale or sequence of notes, and the ornamentation system. The tonal system is based on the pitches that make up the foundation of the melodic structure, referred to as *svara*: Sa (shadja), Ri (rishabha), Ga (gandhara), Ma (madhyama), Pa (panchama), Dha (dhaivata), Ni (nishadha) (Manjabhat, et al. 2017, 6). Each raga is constructed on its specific melodic scale, which follows a particular sequence of intervals that may differ when ascending or descending. There are 72 primary scales, distinguished by their intervals, known as Melakarta Ragas, which serve as the basis for the numerous ragas that exist. A scale is defined by its two tetrachords. A crucial point in identifying a scale is the fourth note, which, as

mentioned earlier, has only two variations: Ma and Mi (an alternative for F#). This results in 36 scales where the lower tetrachord ends with Ma, known as Suddha Madhyama, and 36 scales where it ends with Mi, called Prati Madhyama. The primary structural rule of a tetrachord is that it includes no more than two semitones. For each of these two categories of scales, there are 6 possible interval structures for the lower tetrachord (chakra) and 6 for the upper tetrachord, the latter mirroring the interval structure of the former. This creates 36 unique combinations for each type (Suddha Madhyama or Prati Madhyama) (Ramanna 1995, 898). From these combinations, numerous other types of ragas, known as Janya, are derived, which may have fewer than seven notes or include additional notes.

3. The Musical framework of “Fantasy on Vedic Chants”

Fantasy on Vedic Chants had its world premiere at Lincoln Center on September 12, 1985, performed by the composer himself. The New York Philharmonic Orchestra, under the direction of Indian conductor Zubin Mehta, delivered the performance. This event was a notable cultural milestone, marking a significant moment in contemporary music history as it symbolized the bridging of Indian and Western musical traditions. The *Violin Concerto* is composed of three movements (fast-slow-fast), each centered around a Vedic chant that serves as the aesthetic and structural foundation. The term “concerto” is used to describe this piece, but it is more of a compromise due to the absence of a precise equivalent in Western music terminology. The elaborate development of the ensemble, which incorporates all the instruments on stage, leans towards a symphonic style with a featured violin. However, the violin emerges as the dominant voice, surpassing its typical role within a balanced ensemble. The opening three notes are pivotal, encapsulating the core of the piece and serving as the impetus for the layered development that follows, appearing in various forms throughout the composition.

The piece shares several characteristics with a traditional genre of music from southern India, known as *Kriti*, which has been practiced for over six centuries. *Kriti*, which is the structural basis for a Carnatic composition or concert, is similarly divided into three parts: *Pallavi*, *Anupallavi*, and *Charanam*. Another shared feature between *Kriti* and Subramaniam's work is the repetition of the initial melodic line in later sections. In *Kriti*, this thematic line typically concludes each section, whereas *Fantasy on Vedic Chants* adopts a more flexible approach, with the thematic repetition occurring at various points. This flexibility illustrates one of the ways in which the fusion of Indian and Western musical traditions is realized (Subramaniam, 2012). Given that this is modal music, where the focus is on

melody and rhythm rather than harmony, it is expected that the concerto includes extensive sections based on horizontal, modal thinking.

3.1. How the First Movement sets the framework

The piece opens with a harp passage (measures 2-3) that anticipates the Vedic chant underlying the entire composition, built around the three notes: re, mi, and fa. In this introduction, the harp plays the notes of Kalindaja Raga in descending order (avarohanam), starting from the tonic of the piece, indicated as E in the score. Kalindaja Raga is a *janya raga*, derived from one of the 74 Melakarta Ragas (specifically, Vakulabharanam) discussed earlier, as it omits the sixth degree of the scale. The fact that the lower tetrachord spans a perfect fourth classifies it within the first category of Melakarta, known as Suddha Madhyama. From the standpoint of Western music theory, this melodic structure might be interpreted as a Mixolydian mode with a lowered second degree, which is the fifth mode of the harmonic scale (whether major or minor), with an undefined third.



Fig. 1. "Kalindaja Raga" (Kaufmann 1976, 115)

The intended melodic character of this raga is most effectively realized through execution almost *sul tasto*, maximizing the bow length according to the note durations, while avoiding pressure on the string and instead lifting the wrist to support the bow's weight. The performer might experiment with a non-vibrato technique or something close to it. If vibrato is used, it should be of medium to high frequency with minimal amplitude to maintain interpretive precision in line with the composer's intentions. To achieve the emotional effect of suspension in this section, it's crucial to avoid dynamic fluctuations, ensuring a steady and consistent bow speed, weight application, and vibrato throughout.

3.2. Function and Melodic Content of the Second Movement

The second part of the concerto, the briefest section at 45 measures long, functions as a short interlude between the adjacent sections. In traditional Indian classical form, this section aligns with the Anupallavi, which is the middle part containing the second verse and can be optionally included in the form (Ramanna 1995, 912). As with the first part, the harp begins the musical discourse in the first

measure, presenting the dominant “B” and the tonic “E”, continuing from the preceding tonal realm. However, the melodic content aligns only partially with the key of E major explored earlier. In the first eight measures of the thematic period (phrases I-II), the harmonic material, through the natural G note, suggests a connection to Hanumatodi Raga (with tonic E), the eighth raga in the Melakarta system.



Fig. 2. “Hanumatodi raga” (Kaufmann 1976, 52)

This set of ragas is designed to represent a specific *rasa* (emotional flavor) in distinct ways: it conveys a reflective and emotionally intense *rasa* during the slow passages, and a celebratory *rasa* in the faster sections, thus balancing the emotional weight of the former state (Ghosh and Mahābhārati 2011, 1087).

The major third (G#) is introduced only in measure 10 to establish the mode's character. In Western terms, this is akin to the Phrygian dominant mode, a topic discussed in previous chapters. In the realm of Indian classical music, this mode aligns with Vakulabharanam raga, the fourteenth main raga in the Melakarta system. The *janya* raga Kalindaja, which is presented in the introductory part of the piece, is derived from Vakulabharanam.



Fig. 3. “Vakulabharanam raga” (mm. 2-13/15-20) (Kaufmann 1976, 109)

When interpreting the thematic period, the execution parameters align with those established in the introduction, reflecting the same intimate quality. The enhanced melodic complexity of the phrases supports a more intricate dynamic framework. The score's notated ornaments are flexible; Carnatic music's improvisational nature encourages personal embellishments of the melodic line. Performers can introduce double appoggiaturas or create ornament combinations on a single note, such as mixing a single or double appoggiatura with a lower mordent. Generally, upper mordents are to be avoided. Additionally, multiple appoggiaturas, like the one in measure 15, should be played non-legato at the bow's tip, using a short bow segment with moderate pressure, and each note should receive a slight impulse.

In measures 37-45, the piece revisits its initial phrase, featuring the descending variant (avarohanam) of the Kalindaja raga on the harp, followed by a three-note Vedic chant on the violin.

3.2. Concluding themes and Ragas in the Last Movement

The third movement is the largest section of the composition, consisting of a series of juxtaposed sections based on the responsorial principle. Here, the solo violin matches the role of various orchestral parts, either solo or in different timbral settings, participating in the imitative-responsorial structure that underpins this section. The cadenza appears midway through, allowing the violinist to showcase their solo capabilities. I identified six imitative-responsorial segments throughout the piece, each consisting of distinct, short subsections, which I refer to as fragments. These fragments combine to form six larger sections symmetrically placed around the cadenza.

In measures 73-104, the third major section unfolds. Despite the key signature of four flats, the melodic content of this section shows distinct characteristics that move away from a traditional Western tonal approach. The lack of the leading tone “G” throughout excludes A \flat Major. The leading tone has been substituted with “G \flat ”, which also makes F Minor improbable. Nevertheless, “F” serves as the tonic of the mode. This section corresponds to a variant of Hanumatodi Raga, specifically the janya raga Shuddha Todi, which we previously discussed. This raga retains the melodic material of Hanumatodi, minus the fifth scale degree, classifying it as a janya raga.

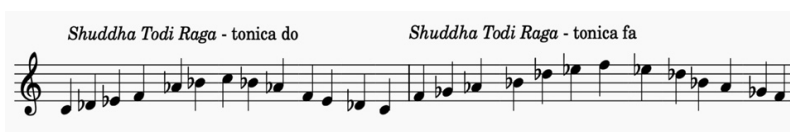


Fig. 4. “janya raga Shuddha Todi” Section III (Kaufmann 1976, 54)

Given that the agogic context here is characterized by both a brisk, incisive tempo—driven by the initial use of eighth-note pedal in the string parts—and an intensified dynamic range, we can infer that this section exemplifies the second rasa (emotional quality) of the raga, specifically the celebratory one. This progression continues from the macroformal perspective of the rasa presented in the second movement, thus fully realizing the conceptual framework of Hanumatodi Raga (refer to Figure 2).

In terms of the melodic content, several novel elements appear in the post-cadenza section. Between measures 260-267, a janya raga emerges over two measures, characterized by a major anhemitonic pentatonic structure of type III. The connection of this raga to one of the 72 Melakarta scales is uncertain, as it might be linked to either the Hanumatodi family (the eighth raga), known as Adbhodam (Kaufmann 1976, 69), or the Natabhairavi family (the twentieth raga), where it is recognized as Hindōlam (Kaufmann 1976, 221). Given that the former has already been identified within the piece (see Figure 2), attributing this raga to the Hanumatodi family in this context seems justified. This raga is noted for its suitability for improvisation, making it a preferred choice for Indian classical music performances.



Fig. 5. “raga Adbhodam” (Kaufmann 1976, 69)

After this section, the composition progresses through a series of segments, first eight measures long and then four measures long, each presenting different janya ragas from various families within the Melakarta system. These melodic segments are all based around the tonic “E”, to which they have been transposed. Specifically, between measures 268-275, the Hamsanandi raga appears. This raga, a hexatonic version of the Gamanashrama family and numbered 53 in the system, also encourages improvisational development of motifs.



Fig. 6. “Hamsanandi raga” (Kaufmann 1976, 578)

Between measures 276-283, the Revagupti raga appears, a pentatonic variant of the fifteenth raga, Mayamalavagowla.



Fig. 7. “Revagupti raga” (Kaufmann 1976, 127)

Measures 284-291 present melodic material corresponding to Seemantinipriyā, from the Rāmapiyā family, number 52. This is a hexatonic scale.



Fig. 8. “Seemantinipriyā raga” (Kaufmann 1976, 573)

In measures 292-299, we encounter Mohanam, a pentatonic scale derived from Harikamboji raga (28), which is one of the most commonly used pentatonic structures in global music.



Fig. 9. “Mohanam raga” (Kaufmann 1976, 353)

Next, between measures 300-307, another janya from the Sankarabharanam family (29) is featured, namely Suddha Sāveri, also a pentatonic scale.



Fig. 10. “Suddha Sāveri raga” (Kaufmann 1976, 440)

Measures 308-315 contain the melodic material of Bhānumanjari, a hexatonic janya from the raga family numbered 34 in the system, Vāgadhīśvari.

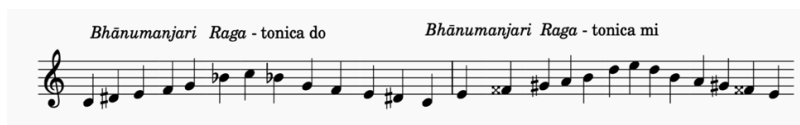


Fig. 11. “Bhānumanjari raga” (Kaufmann 1976, 466)

Hamsadhwani, a pentatonic janya of Sankarabharanam (29), is presented between measures 316-319. This raga is frequently used in compositions dedicated to the deity Ganesha (Ghosh and Mahābhārati 2011, 407).

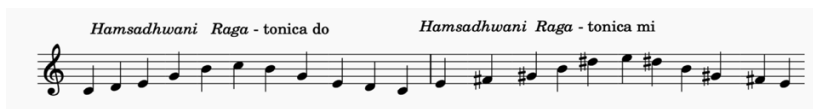


Fig. 12. “Hamsadhwani raga” (Kaufmann 1976, 423)

Finally, between measures 332-335, the entire melodic material of Ramapriya raga (number 52) is observed.



Fig. 13. “Ramapriya raga” (Kaufmann 1976, p. 567)

4. Conclusions

At its core, “Fantasy on Vedic Chants” melds distinct elements into a cohesive whole: the structure of Carnatic music alongside a Western orchestral approach. Subramaniam masterfully blends these aspects, crafting a sonic experience that transcends both time and cultural divides. A key focus of our analysis is the idea of musical symbiosis, evident in the flawless integration of Carnatic melodic shapes with Western orchestration. This synergy highlights how these two cultural traditions can mutually enhance each other. The skilled application of a modal framework forms the basis for a soundscape that is both evocative and engaging, drawing the listener into a melodic world that bridges traditional and contemporary elements. While the analysis of “Fantasy on Vedic Chants” is not all-encompassing, it has effectively identified the elements that give the piece its uniqueness, originality, and intrinsic value. By using the Vedic motif as a central compositional element and integrating it with the Carnatic raga system and a fusion style, Subramaniam’s work stands as a testament to his exceptional artistic talent and his significant contribution to both Indian and global music. His incorporation of the Vedic motif throughout the concerto’s movements explores deep realms of wisdom and spiritual reflection. These thematic elements enable the work to achieve a transcendent quality, enriching it with a nuanced, multi-

layered significance typical of exceptional artistic creations in the human cultural heritage.

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