CHAPTER IX

9.0 THE AUTHOR’S CONCLUSIONS

From the preceding chapters we have tried to establish that the concept of layathwam is universal, latent in all activities of life, art and existence itself.

In addition we have painstakingly tried to exhibit the essentiality of Layathwam in Karnatic music- the pinnacle of world music as a creative fine art.

The way we have programmed the modalities of karnatic performance, through the Gamaka, Raga, Laya, Kalpita (composed) and Kalpana (creative) areas of music, brings about the palapable and perceptive presence of layathwam, to the most sophisticated and even spiritual realms.

As it is all-pervasive, Layathwam is like the universal Godhead (Brahman) of artistic performance. Layathwam gives a specific identity to any musical activity however short or long. It has the propensity of being measurable, when such measurement enhances its aesthetic appeal, as in Raga Tana Pallavi expositions. Similarly complicated sancharis of dance and mallaris played by Nadaswam / Tavil in the temple music, all exhibit particularly colourful manifestations of Layathwam.

It may also be seen that we have not set any of the practical demonstrations to strictly measurable rhythm, especially in the areas of alapana and tanam. I believe that the overall benchmark tends to be around 70 - 80 BPM - the tick tock or lub dub of the heart is as variable as anything that pulsates - the waves of the ocean, the sway of the trees in the wind. One can always perceive the rhythm within the rhythm, which is better conceptualised as "Brahmalayam". This concept was always central in the minds of my guru Chembai Vaidyanathar Bhagavathar, the mridangam legend Palghat Mani Iyer and my father Vishwanatha Bhagavathar whenever they spoke about the flow of rhythm in music.
9.1 The Approach to Layathwam

One can make a rendition by simply maintaining chandam (metre) on the shoulders of the tala angas. i.e. seating the letters of the lyric on the components of the tala which are moving cyclically. This type of rendition gives a clean but inane exposition.

The second option, is by means of exclusively following the lyric and the emotive factor – syncopating the tala with its angas, fine-tuning with the tala samam or eduppu. Here the rendition can become highly evocative and interpretative depending on the expertise of the performer.

In the second scenario, the singer is aware of the pervasive layathwam which leads him to feel the bhramalayam, which binds each letter of the lyric along with the bhava and swara movements, proficiently using the most suitable gamakas and guiding this musical movement along the entire span of each arvatham. The effect of this type of rendition is always amazing. It is as though the whole musical movement is couched in a transparent sheath of layathwa silk, which beautifully surfs over the tala angas, in whichever tempo it may be. What an experience for the performer as well as the listener!

I have experienced this ecstasy ad-infinitum:
* when my guru sang compositions such as Koniyadina Napai - Kamboji – (Veena Kuppa Iyer), and Subramanyaya Namaste - Kamboji – (Dikshitar).
* when he performed neraval in the Kriti Raghuvara - Pantuvarali- (Tyagaraja), on the line "Manusuna Neeke".
* during the josh and swing when he sang the devotionals like padams and javalis

The Bhramalayam was much more palpable when he sang viruthams in different languages. The Layathwam went hand in hand with the lyrics, never once slipping from the accuracy and clarity of diction. His voice modulations brought out the chaste bhava content - musical ecstasy at its best.
9.2 What is Brahmalayam?

Brahmalaya is the ethereal feeling of laya which is perceptible rather than perceivable in any musical activity eg alapana, song, creative passage, while singing a kriti.
My father used to illustrate the aspect of Brahmalayam by singing different kritis in the same raga. major ragas like thodi, kalyani, kamboji, karaharapriya, bhairavi and rakti ragas like sahana, shree, begada, sreeranjani, nattakuranji, gowla varali and purvi kalyani etc. All these ragas have so many hues and colours, and therefore depend on the artist's mastery in layathwam.

9.3 Layathwam and the Listener

No musical genre or form can become established should it fail to adhere to the aesthetic sensibility of the listener. Layathwam is perhaps the most universal aesthetic principle, and is therefore the common denominator, from the most sophisticated Karnatic rendition, to the primal sounds of tribal drumming. In contrast to the commonality of layathwam, taste in the intervals of shruti, can vary according to the musical culture.

However the intuitive appreciation of layathwam, runs deeper than simply ensuring an art-form’s success. It in fact makes the artist (and by extension the listener) conscious of the immanent pulsation of brahmalayam.
As the subconscious sound and rhythm becomes manifest, the artist first hears his own musical thought arising, and then hears his sound. This manifest sound is then heard by the accompanists, who interact and flow with it. The resulting music is then heard by the listeners, who also interact according to the virtual reality.

Only if the sound originating from the core being of the artist, can evoke a consonance from the core being of the listener, will the artist and the musical form be successful.

This flow of musical electricity, completing its circuit of polar opposites, IS Layathwam. Whilst occurring in the phenomenal world, it gives the appearance of diverse experiences, to
be had by diverse living entities. But when mastered and truly appreciated, it takes us to the realm of blissful freedom, where we realize our totality, our union with one another, and with our own source of existence.

Thus, the mastery of time, takes us beyond time!

9.4 Artists who mastered Layathwam

The great visionary of music and layam, **Palghat Mani Iyer** was a performing legend of all times and had a panoramic and futuristic vision about the greatness and power of music integrating the four pillars - swara, laya, pada, avadhana (creativity). His lecture-demonstrations which he gave very reluctantly were highly illuminating and precise, replete with personal anecdotes and examples.

I had the good fortune to be closely associated with the great stalwarts- **Palghat mani iyer**, **Palani Subramanya Pillai**, **Kumbakonam Rajamanikkam Pillai**, **Madurai Mani Iyer** and others. I was able to witness first hand the way they interacted musically and created the pure aura of exemplary music.

The subject matter always hovered around layathwam in manodharma sangitham and compositions. The feeling for a phrase in music or rhythm while in motion, either to stretch it to the limit within the fixed parameters of the ongoing talam- or to crunch it out of shape to accommodate another idea, all done without spoiling the aesthetics, by sheer magic of artistry.

Many examples can be sighted such as neraval in Palinchu Kamakshi at Chala Bahuvidamuga - Mani Iyer would sing and improvise superbly with unique grip over the musicality and laya. Rajamanikkam pillai would respond in his own inimitable way on the violin, highlighting the use of gamakas and other embellishments to bring out the layathwam. **Palani Subramanya Pillai's** interpolations with ganjeera, spilling the magic of pure rhythm to match the musical wizardry. Within these magical moments, the ongoing tala becomes a mute spectator.
Legendary exponents of music - an array of vocalists and instrumentalists, held an unswerving command over the interpolative and interactive Layathwam in raga alapana, kriti, neraval, kalpana swaram et al.. The majestic singing of my Guru Chembai, the lilting and aesthetic style of Madurai Mani Iyer, the simplistic looking forays of the unique Maharajpuram bani, the precise tightrope-walking style of the great Ariyakudi bani, the sober and soulful music of the legendary MS Subalakshmi, the charismatic bani of Semmangudi, all stand testimony to the importance of layathwam. It is obvious that all these masters enjoyed great popularity and a cult following because of their individual mastery of the layathwam.

Among the instrumentalists I have to mention the incredible musical genius of the Nadaswaram maestro TN Rajarathnam Pillai who I started listening from my 5th year till he passed away in his 52nd year. There are no words to describe his genius of understanding each swara in its entirety and its relationship to the others - vadi, samvadi and rakti. The gamakas were at the mercy of his nimble fingertips. The effervescent flow of the masculine, majestic and imploving nada pravaha from his lips made time stand still. He enveloped his musical flow with layathwam. Whether it was begada or bilahari, natai or nattakuranji, the jaru arohi, avarohi and all the different varieties of technical expertise were transformed into a soul stirring downpour of musical ecstasy. He transcended the boundaries of tala and kalapramana. He interrupted or concluded a swara prathara by a crisp alapana, modulated by the layathwam to bring about myriads of musical expressions employing few phrases. One could never transcribe all that into notation.

The great soloist violin maestro, Dwaram Venkata Swami Naidu, was a purist of the note and beat. His performances were always marked by the purity at the nano levels. He could generate the entire effect of the voice when he played songs like Durmargachara, Intha Sowkyamu etc - the song would swing along in a divine laya cocoon. He was partially blind and could not see the tala, but by instinct he was conscious of precision and perfection and spent hours perfecting his bowing techniques to gain perfect layam which is after all layathwam.

The genius of Flute Mahalingam is universally acknowledged. He was my senior, a good friend, admirer and philosopher to me. His supremacy in the Karnatic music world was
mainly due to his involvement with the layathwam. When he played Chinnanadena (Raga kalanidhi –Tyagaraja) you could hear the words so clearly and evocatively that it would seem the song was beyond the constrictions of the tala element!

It was a near impossibility for normal accompanists to please him. What he wanted to do with the music on any given day, was a spontaneous reaction to the aesthetics of the raga, song and laya. Only those who were highly perceptive and of agile intellect could match him. Such concerts were few but they stood the test of time.

The emotive Tamil renderings of Isai Arasar Dandapani Desikar were considered by my guru as monumental edifices pouring out great sentiments though his sonorous and crystalline voice. The Laya followed as a shadow but layathwam was at the forefront. e.g. Varugalamo, Jagatjanani, nay all the songs he sang as Nandanar, are immortal renditions which exemplify the union of raga, rasa, laya and bhava. They also highlight the unique flavour and beauty of the great Tamil language in song.

The baritone phenomenon M.D. Ramanthan was a legend who truly believed in layathwam. His rendition of any composition from the vast Karnatic repertoire, was totally different from all the others. His choice of kalapramana was based on the evocativeness of the chandam and its musical interpretation. His vilamba kala kritis would appear as ati-ati vilamba by the standards of other musicians. But for him this tempo was the most comfortable way to render them. His music never sagged because of his baritone voice and the vocal resonance and poise acquired by him through sadhana. The implicit understanding of raga, rasa, laya bhava allowed him to create great musical edifices with a casual approach.

One could go on and on about such great legends to substantiate all that has been said on layathwam in Karnatic in music. As an upasaka of Karnatic music for over seven decades - as a performer of vocal music and the peerless percussion instrument the mrdangam, it emboldens me to conclude with the words, “the most important and vital aspect of Karnatic music is the all pervasive influence of layathwam”. Whether it be alapana, kriti, manodharma, neraval, swaram et al, only true involvement with layathwam can make the performer and listener perceive better, understand better, enjoy better and elevate themselves into the realm of musical and spiritual ecstasy.