

Original Research Article

Tyagaraja Kritis in Dance: Challenges of Choreographic Adaptation and Interpretation

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Abstract: Tyagaraja (4 May 1767 – 6 January 1847), one of the Trinity of Carnatic music, composed approximately 700 surviving kritis primarily in Telugu in praise of Lord Rama, alongside musical operas such as Nauka Charitam and Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam. These compositions were created as acts of nadopasana (worship through music) and were not designed as choreographic texts — yet they have become indispensable to the repertoire of virtually every South Indian classical dance form, including Kuchipudi, Bharatanatyam, Mohiniattam, and Odissi. The challenge of adapting Tyagaraja's concert compositions for dance is multifaceted: the kritis are architected for musical elaboration through sangati (melodic variation), neraval, and raga improvisation rather than for movement vocabulary or narrative embodiment; the devotional-autobiographical nature of the lyrics (Tyagaraja addressing Rama in first-person intimacy) resists straightforward dramatic enactment; the use of over 200 ragas creates expressive richness that the choreographer must honour without being constrained by; and the sheer musical density of the compositions demands choreographic restraint rather than constant movement. This paper examines the principal challenges of choreographic adaptation of Tyagaraja kritis for classical dance, analysing: the structural features of the kriti form and their implications for choreographic design; the specific challenges of the sangati system for abhinaya; the devotional-autobiographical register of Tyagaraja's lyrics and its choreographic demands;

the adaptation strategies developed by major practitioners of Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi; and the specific opportunities that Tyagaraja's musical operas offer for dance narrative construction. The paper argues that the adaptation of Tyagaraja kritis represents one of the most intellectually demanding and aesthetically rewarding challenges in Indian classical dance choreography, requiring the choreographer to function simultaneously as a musical analyst, a devotional interpreter, and a narrative architect.

Index Terms: *Tyagaraja Kritis, Choreographic Adaptation, Sangati, Abhinaya, Kuchipudi, Bharatanatyam, Concert to Dance, Bhakti Rasa, Pallavi-Anupallavi-Charanam, Nauka Charitam, Pancharatna Kritis, Vira Bhakti, Musical Narrative, Dance Interpretation.*

I. Introduction:

Tyagaraja (1767–1847), widely recognised as the most influential composer in the history of Carnatic music, stands apart from the classical Indian vaggeyakaras who composed explicitly for dance. Where Narayana Teertha composed the Krishna Leela Tarangini as a dance-drama libretto and Kshetrappa created padams for temple dancer performance, Tyagaraja composed his kritis as nadopasana — the worship of the divine through music — sitting before the image of his beloved Rama, with no choreographic intention [1][2]. Yet it is precisely these concert compositions — structured for musical elaboration, dense with sangatis, addressed to Rama in the intimate first person of a devoted bhakta — that have become among the most widely performed compositions in classical Indian dance recitals of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The reasons are not difficult to understand. Tyagaraja's compositions offer the classical dancer extraordinary riches: the depth of bhakti rasa at the highest emotional register; the narrative richness of Ramayana episodes embedded in cryptic poetic phrases that invite choreographic expansion; the musical beauty of over 200 ragas each with its own emotional colour; and the sangati system of melodic variation that provides the choreographer with repeated opportunities for abhinaya elaboration [3][4]. But these same features also pose specific and formidable challenges to the choreographer seeking to convert a concert composition into a dance narrative.

This paper examines those challenges systematically, proceeding through: an overview of Tyagaraja and the compositional forms available for dance; the structural features of the kriti and their choreographic implications; the specific challenges and opportunities of the sangati system; the devotional-autobiographical register and its choreographic demands; strategies documented by major dance practitioners; and the particular case of Tyagaraja's musical operas as dance-adaptable narrative structures.

II. Tyagaraja and the Compositional Forms Available for Dance:

A. Vaggeyakara and His Compositional Range

Tyagaraja was born on 4 May 1767 in Tiruvarur, Tamil Nadu, into a Telugu Brahmin family with deep musical roots — his maternal grandfather was a noted veena player and court musician [1][6]. He received musical training under Sonti Venkata Ramanayya and became a profound devotee of Lord Rama, a devotion that animated every composition of his long creative life until his death on 6 January 1847 [1][6]. He composed most of his works in Telugu, which was the language of the educated classes of Thanjavur during his lifetime, making his devotional expression accessible to a broad audience [7].

The compositional range available to the classical dance choreographer within Tyagaraja's corpus is substantial. Srividya Angara, a Kuchipudi practitioner who created the thematic production Manomanthana based

exclusively on Tyagaraja's works, identifies five categories: kritis (standalone lyrical compositions in pallavi-anupallavi-charanam structure), Divyanama Sankeertanas (suited for group devotional singing), Utsava Sampradaya kritis (for festival contexts), Pancharatna kritis (five grand compositions in the ghana ragas), and the two surviving musical operas — Nauka Charitam and Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam [8]. Each category presents a distinct set of choreographic opportunities and challenges.

B. *The Pancharatna Kritis and the Concert Register*

The Pancharatna kritis — five gem compositions in the ghana ragas Nattai, Gowlai, Arabhi, Sri, and Varali — represent the pinnacle of Tyagaraja's concert composition and are the works most fully architected for musical elaboration rather than movement [1][7]. Noted dancer-practitioner Lakshmi Vishwanathan, who undertook a sustained project of dancing to Tyagaraja's compositions beginning in 1986, observes that the Pancharatna kritis present particular difficulty for dance: their musical density, elaborate sangati structures, and extended durations make sustained abhinaya taxing, and their lyrical content does not always suggest a clear narrative sequence for choreographic development [9]. Her exception — the Pancharatna in Arabhi ragam, "Sadinchene" — she chose specifically because the theme is based on Krishna rather than the first-person Rama-devotion that characterises most of the Pancharatnas, making it more susceptible to narrative embodiment [9].

C. *The Musical Operas: Nauka Charitam and Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam*

Tyagaraja's two surviving musical operas represent a fundamentally different choreographic opportunity from the standalone kritis. Nauka Charitam (The Boat Episode) is a one-act opera with 21 kritis set in 13 ragas and 43 verses in Telugu, presenting an entirely imaginary episode from Krishna's life that has no basis in the Bhagavata Purana [10][11]. Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam is a five-act opera with 45 kritis set in 28 ragas and 138 verses, treating the story of Prahlada's unfaltering devotion through Tyagaraja's own distinctive theological lens — notably, Prahlada addresses his songs to Rama rather than to Vishnu, reflecting Tyagaraja's own devotional worldview [10][11].

Both operas were composed in what is described as the Yakshagana style — a tradition of narrative drama through music that was indigenous to Andhra Pradesh and with which Tyagaraja had direct engagement [8]. The Kuchipudi yakshagana tradition has been specifically cited as having inspired these musical operas, making them particularly well-suited for adaptation within the Kuchipudi dance-drama form, where yakshagana-derived structural conventions are part of the inherited repertoire [8][15]. The operatic structure — with character entries, dialogue, and plot development already built into the compositional sequence — provides the choreographer with a ready-made narrative framework that is absent from the standalone kritis.

III. Structural Features of the Kriti and Choreographic Implications:

A. *The Pallavi-Anupallavi-Charanam Architecture*

The kriti form that Tyagaraja elevated to the apex of Carnatic concert music is structured in three sections: the pallavi (the opening refrain, typically 1–2 lines, which introduces the musical idea), the anupallavi (sub-refrain, extending the musical idea in a different register of the octave), and the charanam (the elaborative section, proportionally longer, which deepens the musical and lyrical content) [3][12]. For the choreographer, this structure presents a set of decisions absent from other South Indian compositional forms. Unlike the padam, in which the lyric is the primary vehicle and the emotional situation is tightly defined, the kriti's structure subordinates lyric to musical elaboration: the pallavi is repeated after each charanam, and the musical content — the raga's expressive

range, the sangati variations, the rhythmic interplay with the tala — often carries as much or more expressive weight than the words themselves.

The choreographic challenge is thus one of priority: does the dancer primarily illustrate the lyric text (sāhitya abhinaya), or primarily respond to the musical character of the raga and its sangatis (rāga abhinaya), or attempt a synthesis of both? Lakshmi Vishwanathan's practice reflects a considered approach to this question: she treats each Tyagaraja kriti as an invitation to expand beyond the literal text, using the musical structure as a framework for narrative elaboration that goes beyond what the words say [9]. The famous example of “Ksheerasagara Sayana” in Devagandhari: the text describes Krishna in Vishnu's cosmic form, but she wove into the choreography the entire episodes of Gajendra Moksha and Draupadi's rescue, treating the musical phrases as entry points for narrative expansion rather than as boundaries of the choreographic content [9].

B. *The Sangati System: Musical Density and Choreographic Opportunity*

Perhaps the most significant structural feature of Tyagaraja's kritis for choreographic adaptation is the sangati system — the cascading melodic variations through which a single lyric phrase is sung repeatedly to progressively elaborated melodic patterns. Tyagaraja is credited with perfecting and systematising the sangati technique, developing it as a distinctive contribution to the advancement of the kriti form and to musical performance in general [11]. Some accounts note that Tyagaraja may have adopted the sangati technique from dance, where variations on a phrase are made for abhinaya to bring out different shades of the underlying emotion [11]. Whether or not this derivation is accurate, the sangati system creates the distinctive texture of a Tyagaraja kriti as heard in concert: a single line of text sung to five, six, seven, or more melodic variations, each illuminating a different musical possibility within the raga.

For the dance choreographer, the sangati system is simultaneously the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity in Tyagaraja's compositions. The challenge: the dancer cannot simply repeat the same gesture or facial expression for each sangati without the abhinaya becoming monotonous. Each sangati repetition of a lyric phrase must offer a different sanchari bhava (transitory emotional elaboration) that explores a fresh angle on the text's core emotion. This demands from the choreographer an extraordinarily fine-grained analytical intelligence — the ability to identify five or six distinct emotional or narrative angles on a single lyric phrase — and from the dancer an equally fine-grained expressive range. The opportunity: the sangati system provides the choreographer with exactly the structural repetition that abhinaya requires to build and deepen emotional resonance. Lakshmi Vishwanathan captures this dynamic precisely: Vishwanathan notes that Tyagaraja's technique of condensing mythological reference into a single phrase, then repeating that phrase through multiple sangati elaborations, creates precisely the structural scaffold that abhinaya requires to build cumulative emotional depth [9].

IV. The Devotional-Autobiographical Register and Choreographic Demands:

A. *The First-Person Bhakta: Challenges of Embodiment*

The most profound choreographic challenge in adapting Tyagaraja's kritis is the devotional-autobiographical register of the lyrics. Most of Tyagaraja's approximately 700 surviving kritis are directly addressed to Rama in the first person of a devoted bhakta: they are songs of personal pleading, of intimate devotion, of joyful praise, of playful reproach, of profound surrender [1][2][14]. The ‘I’ of a Tyagaraja kriti is specifically Tyagaraja's own ‘I’ — the historical poet-composer addressing his personal chosen deity in a mode of relationship that is intensely individual and explicitly spiritual. This creates a choreographic problem that has no easy solution: the classical

dancer embodying a Tyagaraja kriti must find a way of inhabiting a first-person devotional address that belongs to a specific historical person's spiritual autobiography, without distorting either the lyric's integrity or the dance's dramaturgical requirements.

Different choreographic strategies have been developed for this challenge. The most common approach is to transform the first-person devotee-address into a narrative abhinaya of the deity or episode being referenced. When Tyagaraja writes "Nannupalimpa" (to protect me), addressing Rama, a choreographer might interpret the lyric's imagery of Sita seeing Rama for the first time — as Lakshmi Vishwanathan did, portraying Sita's heart responding to Rama's entry into Mithila, transforming what is formally Tyagaraja's own devotional plea into Sita's rapturous devotion [9]. This approach treats the kriti as a gateway to Ramayana narrative rather than as a first-person spiritual autobiography, an act of creative license that the dance tradition sanctions but that requires careful aesthetic judgement to execute without distorting the lyric's emotional truth.

B. *Bhakti Rasa as Choreographic Horizon: The Vira-Bhakti Register*

Tyagaraja's compositions establish a specific rasa register for the choreographer: what may be called vira-bhakti — the heroic enthusiasm of total devotional surrender, in which love for Rama is experienced not as passive submission but as an active, energising force. Srividya Angara identifies this quality directly in discussing Manomanthana: through her Manomanthana production, Angara found in Tyagaraja's compositions a kindred emotional vocabulary — the composer's passionate, multifaceted devotion to Rama, encompassing love, longing, reproach, and surrender, resonated with her own practice of turning to a transcendent consciousness for both questions and answers [8]. This vira-bhakti register — devotion that is emotionally full, sometimes demanding, sometimes playful, always directed — gives Tyagaraja's kritis their particular vitality as choreographic material and distinguishes them from the more passive devotional surrender of sweeya shringara compositions like those of Annamacharya.

The choreographic body quality required for Tyagaraja's vira-bhakti register is characterised by openness, uprightness, and directional energy: the chest open, the gaze elevated and outward, the gestures projecting confidence and the emotional fullness of one who knows their devotion is received. This body quality is quite different from the contracted anguish of Kshetrappa's vipralambha shringara or the equanimous stillness of Annamacharya's shanta-bhakti, and it requires specific training and orientation from the dancer who has primarily worked in those registers.

V. Choreographic Adaptation Strategies: Practitioner Perspectives:

A. *Narrative Expansion from Lyric Fragments*

The dominant choreographic strategy for adapting Tyagaraja kritis, documented most extensively in Lakshmi Vishwanathan's essay 'Nine Steps to Visualising Tyagaraja Kritis,' is what may be called narrative expansion from lyric fragments. Tyagaraja does not dwell at length on Ramayana episodes; a single phrase, by its sheer beauty of rendition, can touch the mind [9]. The choreographer's task is to identify such phrases — those in which a mythological reference, a descriptive image, or an emotional gesture concentrates a whole narrative possibility — and to expand from that fragment into a choreographic sequence that illuminates the episode the phrase evokes.

Illustrative examples abound in Vishwanathan's account: from the phrase "Ajanubahuyuga Sri Janaki pathi" (descriptive of Rama's long, well-built arms) in "Nadhupai," she choreographed a detailed sequence describing Rama's majestic persona and wove into it the entire episode of the Sita swayamvaram; from the phrase "Soora

Ahalyanu joochi brochithivi” (thou didst redeem the valiant Ahalya) in “Sri Rama Padama,” she brought to the fore the entire episode of Ahalya’s liberation [9]. In each case, the choreographic content exceeds the literal lyric text but remains rooted in it — the expansion is generated by the text’s allusion, not imposed upon it arbitrarily.

B. *Artistic Licence and the Boundaries of Interpretation*

Vishwanathan explicitly acknowledges the necessity and the risks of artistic licence in Tyagaraja choreography: choreographic interpretation of Tyagaraja’s works demands disciplined creative freedom: the choreographer is entitled to expand beyond the literal text, but must do so with awareness that audiences familiar with the compositions will hold the interpretation to high standards of devotional integrity [9]. The audience for a Tyagaraja-based dance performance is often deeply familiar with the compositions in their concert form — they know the sangati structures, the raga characteristics, and the textual content intimately. A choreographic interpretation that distorts or misrepresents the emotional register of a kriti risks alienating these informed listeners in a way that choreography based on lesser-known compositions would not.

The choreographer must therefore calibrate the degree of creative expansion carefully: enough imaginative elaboration to generate dramatic interest and the sustained abhinaya that dance requires, but not so much creative freedom that the work’s devotional authenticity is compromised. The ideal outcome is captured in the response Maharajapuram Santhanam gave after attending Vishwanathan’s Tyagaraja Ramayana programme: the compositions had been so enriched by the dance interpretation that he could never hear them in quite the same way again [9] — a response that suggests the choreography had deepened rather than diverted the musical experience, enriching the listener’s future encounters with the compositions rather than replacing them.

C. *The Pancharatna Challenge: Dancing to Grand Concert Forms*

The Pancharatna kritis present special challenges documented by practitioners. Their musical architecture is designed for extended concert elaboration: the sangati structures are among the most extensive in the Tyagaraja corpus, the ragas (all ghana ragas: Nattai, Gowlai, Arabhi, Sri, Varali) are among the most sonically demanding, and the emotional content — predominantly philosophical praise rather than narrative episode — resists the situational construction that Kuchipudi abhinaya choreography typically requires [3][9][16]. The dancer who attempts a full Pancharatna must sustain abhinaya through extremely long compositions without the support of clear narrative development. Vishwanathan’s strategy was selective — choosing “Sadinchene” in Arabhi because of its Krishna subject matter — and this selectivity itself suggests that not all Tyagaraja kritis are equally suitable for dance adaptation: the choreographer must exercise critical discrimination in selecting which compositions offer genuine choreographic potential.

VI. Nauka Charitam As Choreographic Narrative: A Case Study:

Tyagaraja’s Nauka Charitam — a one-act opera with 21 kritis in 13 ragas, narrating the imagined episode of Krishna and the Gopis on a boat — represents the most choreographically integrated work in the Tyagaraja corpus because it was composed with dramatic structure already embedded in the compositional sequence [10][11]. The Nauka Charitam opens and concludes in the same raga (Surati), a structural device from the Yakshagana tradition that frames the dramatic action with musical symmetry, and its character entries, dialogue, and narrative arc are encoded in the compositional sequence [10].

As a dance-drama, Nauka Charitam offers the choreographer advantages unavailable in standalone kritis: the characters are defined, the dramatic situation is established within the compositional structure, and the narrative

progression is built into the raga sequence. The choreographer's primary task is not to construct a narrative from lyric fragments (as with standalone kritis) but to embody and enact a narrative that is already architecturally present. This is precisely the skill for which Kuchipudi, with its Yakshagana inheritance of narrative dance-drama, is particularly well-equipped. The documented influence of Kuchipudi yakshagana conventions on the Nauka Charitam's compositional structure creates a natural affinity between the work and Kuchipudi choreographic methods [8].

VII. Comparative Analysis of Tyagaraja Compositional Categories for Dance:

Table 1 presents a systematic analysis of the principal categories of Tyagaraja's compositional output and their relative choreographic accessibility and challenge for classical dance adaptation.

Table 1: Tyagaraja Compositional Categories – Choreographic Accessibility and Challenges

Compositional Category	Representative Works	Choreographic Advantages	Principal Challenges
Standalone Kritis (devotional-bhakti)	Nannupalimpa (Mohana), Ksheerasagara Sayana (Devagandhari)	Rich raga palette; sangati opportunities; Ramayana fragments for expansion	First-person bhakta address; non-narrative structure; sangati density demanding sustained sanchari
Pancharatna Kritis	Endaro Mahanubhavulu (Sri), Sadinchene (Arabhi)	Grand musical framework; emotional depth; extended abhinaya canvas	Musical density resists sustained narrative; predominantly philosophical content; duration challenges
Utsava Sampradaya Kritis	Various festival compositions	Celebratory mood; accessible bhakti register; diverse themes	Less musically complex; narrative potential more limited
Divyanama Sankeertanas	Group devotional compositions	Devotional clarity; accessible raga structures	Group singing format; less suited to solo abhinaya elaboration
Nauka Charitam (Opera)	21 kritis in 13 ragas	Pre-built narrative arc; character-defined; Yakshagana-derived structure	Requires full ensemble; single Krishna episode limits thematic range
Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam (Opera)	45 kritis in 28 ragas, 5 acts	Extended dramatic arc; moral-devotional depth; diverse characters	Scale demands full production; Tyagaraja's unique Rama-centric theology requires explanation

VIII. Conclusion:

This paper has examined the challenges and strategies of choreographic adaptation of Tyagaraja kritis for classical Indian dance, identifying the specific structural, devotional, and practical dimensions of this adaptation process.

Four principal conclusions emerge. First, the concert-composition nature of Tyagaraja's kritis presents genuine and distinctive challenges for dance adaptation: the sangati system, the first-person bhakta register, and the musical density of the compositions all resist straightforward choreographic treatment and require active creative solutions. Second, the strategies developed by major practitioner-choreographers — particularly the technique of narrative expansion from lyric fragments, documented in Lakshmi Vishwanathan's account of her Tyagaraja Ramayana project — demonstrate that these challenges are productively surmountable by the dancer who approaches the compositions with sufficient musical knowledge, literary engagement, and choreographic intelligence. Third, the selectivity required in choosing which Tyagaraja kritis are suitable for dance adaptation is itself an important choreographic skill: not all kritis offer equal choreographic potential, and the discrimination

between those whose lyric fragments and sangati structures invite dance elaboration and those that remain more purely musical is a critical pre-choreographic act. Fourth, Tyagaraja's musical operas — particularly *Nauka Charitam* with its Yakshagana-derived structural conventions — represent the most naturally dance-adaptable works in the corpus, offering narrative architecture and character definition that standalone kritis lack.

The broader significance of the challenge examined in this paper extends beyond Tyagaraja: the conversion of concert compositions into dance narratives is a recurring challenge across the classical Indian dance tradition, and the strategies developed for Tyagaraja adaptation — selective lyric expansion, sangati-based sanchari elaboration, raga-responsive body quality, and calibrated artistic licence — offer transferable principles for choreographic adaptation of any concert-form composition. Future research priorities include: a systematic analysis of which specific Tyagaraja kritis have been most frequently adapted for dance and what choreographic strategies have been employed across different lineages; a comparative study of how Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam choreographers have differed in their approaches to the same Tyagaraja compositions; and an examination of the audience experience of Tyagaraja-based dance productions among listeners who know the compositions in their concert form.

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