MahA VaidyanAta Iyer (1844-1892 A.D.), popularly known as shivan, was born in the village of VaiyacEri, near Ta njAvUr. His father, Pa ncanada Iyer, who gave him initial training is music, was a music scholar and devotee of Lord shiva. Of the four sons, shivan was the third, and his elder brother, RAmasvAmi shivan was also a proficient musician and composer.

Later, the shivan brothers learnt the subtle aspects of music from Anayya, and from MaNambucAvadi Ve NkaTasubba Iyer, a direct disciple of Saint TyAgarAja. Even as a boy of ten, VaidyanAta shivan could sing in all the three SthAyi-s with remarkable skill and accuracy. He used to sing in the GAndhAra shruti– the third kaTTai of Harmonium, and move between six kAla-s with great speed. At the age of 12, he gave his first public performance in KalliDaikuricci, in the distinguished presence of SubrahmaNya DEshikar and AmbalavAnA DEshikar, the Adhipati-s (chiefs) of TiruvADutturai Matham. Among the audience were two reputed musicians of that time, Periya VaidyanAta Iyer, and Cinna VaidyanAta Iyer. Impressed with his performance and the depth of his musical knowledge, SubrahmaNya DEshikar as well as the Sadas (assembly) conferred upon him the title MahA. His favourite musical form was Manodharma sa NgItaM (extempore rendition), and at a very young age, he became proficient in rendering AIpana, tAnaM, pallavi, neraval and kalpanA svara. He was also gifted with a magnificent voice. Once, during a pallavi competition, he thrilled the audience with an amazing exposition of nArAyaNagauLa rAgaM, and defeated one famous Pallavi VidvAn, VeNu, and won several laurels. Fiddle Ve Nkoba Iyer accompanied him on the violin. On another occasion, he stunned the Sabha with his famous pallavi in kalyANi rAgaM, set to Simhanandana tALaM, (the longest of the 108 tAla-s) consisting of 128 akShrarkAla-s, The sahityam of this lengthy and intricate pallavi reads:

गौरीनायक कनकसभा नायक
Later, he recast this pallavi into a tillAnA, “ThIM tara tiranA” in KalyANi, in the same Simhanandana tALaM. This tillAnA is also sung in rAga kAnaDa. VaiyanAtha Iyer was also a gifted performer of HarikathA kAlakShEpaM. Throughout his life, shivan enjoyed the healthy patronage of the rulers of RAmanAthapuraM.

The kAmbhoji pada varNaM, Pa NkajAkShi pai, and the nAgasvrAvali kRRiti shri sha Nkara GuruvaraM are his well-known compositions, among various other kRRiti-s in Tamil and Sanskrit. In addition, many of the compositions which are attributed to his elder brother RAmasvAmi, undoubtedly enjoy co-authorship with VaidyanAtha shivan, and contain the rAgamudra guha dAsa. Here is a partial list of such compositions by shivan brothers:

पािहमाम ् श्री राजराजेश्वरि (जनरञ्जनि)  
मनविनि वरु (कनकालिं)  
पद्मजाशि पै (काम्भोजि वर्ण)  
कंडेकणू (बेगड)  
एकालित्रू (नाष्टकुर निं)  
मुतुकुमारव्यने (शाङ्करार्थरण)  
उनतु पादें तुणयें (चकवांक)  
नटनं शेंय (केदारगोठ)  
श्री शाङ्कर गुरुवरं (नागस्वरावलि)  
मालु मरुगाने (बिरुलहरि)

In any case, MahA VaidyanAtha Iyer’s greatest contribution to CarNAtic music is of course, his famous 72 MELa rAgamAliKA. But this was not the first, single composition covering all the 72 mELa rAga-s. One LAvani VE NkTa Rao, a court poet in the Tanjore kingdom, a scholar in Marathi, Tamil and Telugu, and a brilliant exponent of LAvani (a type of Marathi folk style) singing, composed a version of the 72 mELa rAgamAliKA, called “BAhattara MELakartA” in Marathi. This composition begins with the phrases shrImAn Jokari RAjya ViShNu sama, and incorporates the RAga mudrain each line of the charaNaM. The theme is erotic, and is in praise of SakhArAm SAhEb, the son-in-law
of the ruler. MahA VaidyanAtha Iyer was entrusted with the task of setting this composition to music. He accomplished this with great ease in a short period of seven days, and was awarded 2000 rupees, besides many gifts. It is said that LAvaNi Ve NkaTa Rao played the mRRida NgaM to the singing of MahA VaidyanAtha Iyer. However, MahA VaidyanAtha Iyer did not relish the erotic nature of the theme and the nara stuti (praising a human) in this composition, so, he wrote a suitable alternate sAhityamin praise of Lord PraNatArtihara (shiva) of the mammoth temple at TiruvaiyAru. This is the version that is currently in vogue as the mELarAgamAlikA. The entire rAgamAlikAis set to Adi tALaM. The pallaviis sung in shrI rAgaM, followed by some beautiful jatiphrases in the tillAnA style; there is no anupallavi, and the charaNAM has 72 lines, one for each mELakartA, with the rAga mudra (signature) skillfully woven in each line. At the end of each mELa rAgaM, there is a chiTTa svaraM, and further, to enhance the beauty of the composition, his brother RAmasvAmi shivan added additional chiTTasvara-s at the end of each line, whose pUvA NgaM (the first half) is in the same mELaM, but the uttarA NgaM (the second half) is in the next mELaM. At the end of each chakraM, the pallavi is repeated in shri rAgaM, and after line 36, at the commencement of the Prati madhyama series, the jati phrases are also sung.

This is not a composition that we hear in a concert platforms. Occasionally, in the past, one or two chakram-s of this lengthy composition has been rendered by singers like Musiri SubrahmaNya Iyer, and Smt. M. S. SubbalakShmi. In June 1989, the Gramaphone Company of India (HMV) released an album (LP No. ECSD 40553), and simultaneously, a 60 minute cassette (No. HTCS 03B 3346) under the title: mELa rAgamAlikA cakra, where Smt. M. S. SubbalakShmi melodiously sings the complete rAgamAlikA with all the above-mentioned features and ciTTa svara-s. Another audio-cassette is excerpts from a live recording of a Music Academy concert by Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer, that features selected chakram-s from the mELarAgamAlikA.

The theme of this rAgamAlikAis advaitic, and highly philosophical, and is packed with several well-know (and not so well-known) anecdotes from ancient mythology. A full-fledged commentary in Tamil, known as shivapriya, written by V.S.V GurusvAmi shAstrigal of VaragUr is available in a 1989 Music Academy publication, The mELarAgamAlikA of Maha Vaidyanathan Sivan. This tamil book, edited by T.S.Parthasarathy, also includes the notations of the rAgamAlikA, as sung by M. S.
Subbalakshmi. The text of the original Marathi language rAgamAlíkA, BAhattara MELakartA of LAvaNi VE NkáTa Rao is also given in this book. This text (with notations in English) appeared earlier in the scholarly work, The SaMgéra CUDAmÁni of GovindAchArya (Edited by Pandit S. Subrahmanya Sastri, and published by The Adyar Library, 1938).

Another valuable book, MELarAgamAlíkA of MahA VaidyanAtha shivan, edited by Pandit S. Subrahmanya Sastri, published by the Adyar Library and Research Center, Madras (1937), later revised by Smt S. Sarada (1979) (in Sanskrit and English) provides Notations in both English and Sanskrit.
हनुमतो दिनिहमवं स्तुवतः सुतुनमतोऽददा भूतिभूषण ॥ ८॥
भानुकोटिसागरां महेश धेनुकासुरमारकवाहन ॥ ९॥
आनन्दनाटकप्रियामरवर श्रीनन्दनाटवीहववाहन ॥ १०॥
कोकिलप्रियास्रिकसल्याङ्कोकुलपालनपुरबभवं ॥ ११॥
बहुरुपातिह भवान भान मुहुःधूरूर्जितभक्तजनन ॥ १२॥
धीरभ्रात्यागक्रिय वीरभ्रादिपालितशारण ॥ १३॥
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श्रीमार्गविन्युतमालाघर टक्कारविन्युतचाप ॥ १९॥
महानं भैरवीमारुतिभरतीसहायदेवैननंतकोप ॥ २०॥
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गौरिमनो हरस्मय स्ततं गौरिय वत्से रमते भवति ॥ २३॥
योऽसौ अरुणप्रियादित्यः तं त्वा सा श्रृद्धिरान्नत भवति ॥ २४॥
मारसीवदन्त निरहद्रारञ्जनामुत्मेत्त्वा स्तुवन्ति ॥ २५॥
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सारसा गीती कौरी दिशा में तरसा अज्ञीकृतत्त्वदन ॥ २७॥
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(प्रणातार्थ स्थो पुरारे)
(प्रतिमयमें ३७-६२)

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(प्रणतार्तिहर प्रभो पुरारे)
॥ इति श्रीमहावैद्यानाथशिविविचित्रिता मेलारागामालिका समासा ॥

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