

Veena is a very ancient South Indian Carnatic musical instrument. Veena is a generic Sanskrit word - 'Vanyathe iti veena' - a plucked string instrument or thathavadya or chordophone. Its origins are found in Rigveda and Atharva Veda where a string instrument called 'Vana' is mentioned which is said to have evolved into 'Veena'. The human body is compared to veena. Sage Narada is said to have played a Veena called Mahathi. Goddess Saraswathi who plays the veena 'Kachchapi' is worshipped as the mother of this instrument. Ancient scriptures including Bharatha's Natya shastra describe several types of veena – Rudra Veena, Saraswathi Veena, Vichitra Veena, Chitra Veena, Sitar, Pinaki Veena, Eka-Tantri, dwi-Tantri, shathatantri-veena. Ravana is supposed to be an expert on veena. Veena played in the present day is the 'Saraswathi veena'.

Saraswathi Veena consists of a large resonator or kodam which is hollowed out of a suitable wood, usually jack-fruit wood. The end of the kodam tapers out to a hollow long neck called 'dandi' upon which 24 brass or metal frets are set using black wax. A tuning box curves down which is ornamented with a dragon head called 'yali'. A small wooden bridge called 'kudurai' is placed on the kodam on which a convex brass plate is glued using resin. 4 main strings are attached to the end of the resonator across the bridge and above the fret board to four pegs in the tuning box. 3 subsidiary drone strings are attached on a curving side bridge which leans against the main bridge and stretch on the players' side of the dandi to matching pegs. A smaller secondary resonator is placed below the dandi close to where the yali begins. This is a supporting resonator for the player. Of the main strings the front two strings on the players' side are made of steel and the other two either with brass or copper. They are tuned in order as Adhara Shadja, Mandhara Panchama, Mandhara Shadja and Anu-Mandhara Panchama. Hence the range on a Saraswathi Veena spans over 3 and a half octaves from Anumandhara Panchama to Athi-Tara Shadja. Veenas are also made Ekanda with single piece of wood.

The term 'style' or 'Bani' has originated owing to variations in playing techniques as a result of regional variations, types of materials used in veena-making, structure of veena. Added to these, in the present era there is pronounced effect on the styles due to extensive use of technology. This is understandable since the veena is a very soft instrument and the subtle nuances cannot be heard easily on a huge concert platform. Added to these, Veena being a very delicate and big instrument, problems of portability have to be addressed. Here again, thanks to modern technology, there is plenty of research focusing on maintaining the quality and appearance of the veena while improving its portability.

The banis or styles of playing are very much influenced by

1. particular regions which were patronized by royal courts in their states, hence different styles evolved

2 materials available for veena making such as jack wood, rose wood, mango wood

3 Veena makers adapted different shapes of the kodam, dandi, etc resulting in differences in the construction

4 Various adaptations to modern technology can change audio quality and style

a. use of pick-ups, microphones, processors and speakers to modify or enhance the audio quality

b. use of sympathetic strings, magnetic stings, wooden frets, keys similar to those in guitar for tuning

c. use of special veenas such as fiber veenas, electronic or digital veenas, dismantlable veenas –to overcome difficulties in transportation, maintenance, handling. Some newly developed veenas include Shiva veena, Tarangini Veena, Madhura Veena, Ravana Veena, Sunadhavinodhini.

Traditionally four styles of veena playing have become popular after trinity. Their compositions were initially played and sung at Tanjore (Tamil Nadu), which became gradually popular in other

centers Mysore (Karnataka), Vijayanagar( Andhra) and Travancore (Kerala) where they received royal patronage from their respective rulers.

The styles can be Gayaki (Vocalised), Thanthrakari(Instrumental) or a combination of the two.

These styles are distinguishable since one can observe several features in terms of meetu, usage of tala strings, either being more gayaki or more thanthrakari, variations in right and left-hand techniques, speed, gamaka, tonal variations, stress given to overall presentation of ragam and lyrics.

Prominent features of the Banis or styles

Mysore Bani

The Mysore Bani has a charm of its own due to its special meetu. Important artists of this style are Veena Sheshanna, Veena Subbanna, Mysore Venkatagiriappa, Dr.V.Doreiswamy Iyengar, Vid. R.S.Keshavamurthy, Vid.R.K.Suryanarayana, Prof.R.Visweswaran and their disciples who have carried forward the style. The main features of this style arises due to the difference in the construction. The main resonator in the Mysore Veena is very thin and hence too much pressure exerted on the bridge through string inflexions and deep gamakas will slightly sink the top board. Hence to suit the construction the style is more tantrakaari or instrumental. Notes are played more on the frets with shallow gamakas. Tribhinna is used by playing three strings simultaneously or successively. Extensive use of janta and dhaatu swaras are typical of this style. Sound right-hand technique produces the desired nuances. Split-finger techniques help in ease of playing fast passages. Mysore tanam is very noted for its melodic effects. Veena is played using finger nails instead of plectrums. Sharp tone for the instrument is preferred. Style being thanthrakari brings out special melodic effects.

### Tanjore Bani

The kodam in Tanjore veena is much thicker and tension resistant. Sound board has a slightly arched profile with two types of holes - 38 small holes arranged in circle around two rosaces, and a large circular opening which can be closed with a stopper. These and few other small differences in the making of Tanjore veena assists in pulling on single fret for several notes, producing more subtle gamakas. Thus playing style is different with its own unique features. The Tanjore school has given rise to two or three distinct styles- 1. Gayaki Style, 2. Karaikudi bani originated by Karaikudi brothers-Subbarama Iyer and Sambashiva Iyer, 3. Individual Banis - a.Veena Dhanammal b. Dr. S. Balachander with their own unique inimitable styles

### Gayaki Style

Gracefulness of Nadam, reproducing vocalized dynamics, particularly in rendition of compositions, less importance to rhythm –based playing, elaborate, graceful ragalapana with gamakas, leisurely pace are characteristics of this style which emerged at Tanjore court even during the time of trinity. Sri. Muthuswamy Dikshithar is a very well known veena player. Veena Dhanammal, Vid. K. P. Shivanandam, Vid.Sharada Shivanandam, Vid.Pichumani Iyer, Vid.Vidya Shankar, Smt. Kalpakam Swaminathan, Smt. Padmavathy Ananthagopalan, Vid. K. S. Narayana Swamy are representative artists of this style.

### Karaikudi Style

Vid. Ranganayaki Rajagopalan, Rajeshwari Padmanabhan, Prof.Subramaniam are the forerunners of the Karaikudi style, characterized by balance between right and left hand, horizontal sliding and pulling of string, absence of vibrato, use of tala strings for keeping tala during rendition of composition, use of paired notes during tanam similar to jod in Hindustani music, sustaining notes by pausing for aesthetic effects.

### Individual Styles

1. Veena Dhanammal developed her own unique, simple, pleasing and vocalized style employing elaborate left- hand technique to reproduce exact vocal gamakas- separation of fingers, occasional use of gentle pluck with left hand finger. This produced an effect like sweet tinkling of bells. Her veena was mostly tuned to female voice G or G# whereas Veenas are usually tuned to D# or E.
2. Dr. S. Balachander revolutionized the Gayaki style by his aggressive style and special pulling technique to produce 4 or 5 notes or more on a single fret. This produced more continuity in the passages bringing it closer to vocal style. Thus he has been exemplary in bringing out vivid and pleasant ragalapanas even in vivadi ragas. Through Gayaki style, Tanjore artists virtually sing through their veena.

### Andhra Style

Andhra veenas are much similar to Tanjore Veena except for the special Bobbili veenas, many of which use mango woods. This style can be distinguished by the variety of meetus, elaborate right hand technique, high speed rendering of ragam, tanam. Veena Venkataramanadas was noted for his shatkaala tanam holding Veena vertically. Sangameswara Shastry, Vasa Krishnamoorthy, Emani Shankara Shastry and his famous disciple – the legendary Dr. Chittibabu, Ayyagari Syamasundaram are noted artists of this bani. It is said that many artists of this school practiced alankarams in 3 octaves-3 speeds non-stop a thousand times every day- a practice called 'Veyisadhakam'. Sri. Emani Shankara Shastry, one of the greatest exponents of Andhra Bani, expanded this style by introducing a variety of meetus and tonal variations. He also introduced for the first time playing using contact mikes so that subtle nuances could be audible. Andhra style is noted for high speeds and special instrumental effects. It is a very lively captivating style. Dr. Chittibabu added a lot of lively instrumental effects including westernization to this style.

### Kerala style

## Veena Styles

Written by Vidushi Y.G.Parimala

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Veenas are constructed at Trivandrum and are similar to Tanjore veenas but much broader, majestic and less decorated. Sri.M.K.KalyanaKrishna Bhagavatar, Trivandrum R.Venkataraman, K.S.Narayanaswamy, Subramanya Iyer, Thrissur Anantha padmanabhan are noted artists of this style which resembles Tanjore Gayaki style of meetu and Chitta tanams like Mysore style.

### My thoughts

Each style of veena playing has its own grace and beauty. The playing style is greatly influenced by the structure of the veena. Now in modern era with so much technology, playing styles are further getting modified and artists are trying to amalgamate the existing styles in their own unique ways, resulting in pronounced varieties in the banis itself which is a very promising trend. This shows the immense possibilities of veena playing and the greatness of the instrument. Thanks to the higher and higher standards being set by the present generation artists like Vid. Jayanthi Kumaresh, Vid.D. Sreenivas, Vid. Rajesh Vaidya, to name a few.

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