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“CELESTIAL FINGERS”

A Tribute to Vīṇā Maestro Emani Sankara Sastry

On the occasion of his birth centenary

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Abstract

As a musical instrument, the vīṇā is much sought-after for the understanding of gamakas or embellishments, the heart and soul of Carnatic music. These gamakas are invariably created by deflecting the strings on the frets of the vīṇā using the index and middle finger of the left hand. Fifteen types of gamakas can be attributed to vīṇā playing according to Sangita Sampradaya Pradarśini of Sri Subbarāma Dikshitar. The tonal quality of the vīṇā depends on the plucking of the strings using the index and the middle finger of the right hand and these are called ‘meetu’s and there are 15 types of meetus. The little finger of the right hand is used for striking the side strings upwards corresponding to the beats of a tala.

Mahā Mahōpādhyāya Sri Emani Sankara Sastry has widely employed the different types of gamakas and meetus while performing and often created his own, thus proclaiming his individual style and his innovative spirit. The Kartari meetu, the chakra tana and the rare gamakas produced using all the four strings either one by one or all together were his forte and earned him numerous rasikas. His music was enjoyed even by the layman, while it was cherished by the entire music fraternity and accepted globally. Apart from employing unique techniques in vīṇā playing which was at once very mellifluous and adhering to tradition, he was a much sought-after teacher in that he took keen interest in the development of every student and



practiced methods which the student could easily grasp. His composing skills brought him several awards and recognitions all over the world.

The aim of this paper is to study and enlist the various hand techniques and fingering methods applied by Sri Emani Sankara Sastry during his concerts and also to project his various other dimensions such as composer, teacher and so on.

Keywords: vaiṇikā, vīṇā, gamaka, meetu, orchestra, plectrum

Introduction

Vīṇā has been an integral part of Carnatic music and has a hoary tradition. References to the vīṇā can be found in the Vedās, the Rāmāyanā, the Bhāgavatā and the Purānas as well as the Sūtrās and the Āranyakās. Among the Vedās, Samaveda describes the singing and chanting called Samagana. During Vedic rituals, the Sama vedi (Udghāta) invokes the celestials to accept the offerings, while his wife plays the vīṇā.

Sage Yāgnavalkya says, “the one who is proficient in vīṇā easily attains moksha”.

वीणावादनतत्त्वज्ञःश्रुतिजातिविशारदः ।

तालज्ञश्चअप्रयासेनमोक्षमार्गसगच्छति ॥

Gāndharva Vedā, one of the upavedas describes the rules for playing various musical instruments. Vīṇā gets a special position among these instruments. Vīṇā has been described widely in the music treatises with all its glory, and has thus played a major role in the growth of Carnatic music.

South India has seen many stalwarts in Carnatic music in both vocal and instrumental music. The great composers of the Pre-Trinity period and the Trinity composers themselves were all associated with the Vīṇā. Sri Muthuswamy Dikshitar, one among the Trinity, himself was a great vīṇā player and his proficiency in vīṇā playing can be seen in his compositions. There were many popular vīṇā players who not only excelled in playing the vīṇā but also were highly talented as composers, organizers and promoters of Indian music across the world.



Many vīṇā players of yesteryears carved a niche for themselves in the field of Carnatic music, through their unique styles and playing methods. Their playing styles and finger techniques were often associated with their region. Region-wise vīṇā playing styles gave rise to Tanjore style, Karaikudi style, Mysore style, Vizianagaram style, Bobbili style and so on.

Further there were individual styles which were identified through the names of the playerswhopromoted these styles and passed them onto others. Thus came Dhanammal style, Emani style, Chittibabu style and Balachander style. Their styles still exist unsurpassed and inimitable. The everlasting style and performance of Emani Sankara Sastry are going to be highlighted in this article along with his other facets of his personality such as composer, teacher and so on.

Emani Sankara Sastry – Vainikā par Excellence – My Humble Offering

Sri Emani Sankara Sastry's daughter Smt. Emani Kalyani, being the disciple of her father, is a renownedvīṇā vidushi. She is celebrating the birth centenary of Sri Emani Sankara Sastry, which falls in September 2022, by organizing many concerts to commemorate the occasion. Greatly inspired by the albums of Sri Emani Sankara Sastry I have become an ardent fan of his style of playing. Enthused to write about him, I present below a few nuggets of information about Emani Sankara Sastry, his achievements, his unique style of playing and his musical career, having obtained material on all of these from his daughter, whom I had the good fortune to meet in person.

‘Mahā Mahōpādhyāya’ Sri Emani Sankara Sastry was born on 23rdSeptember 1922 in Drāksharamam, Andhra Pradesh, in a family of celebrated classical musicians. His father was Vainikā Bhūṣana, Vīṇā Acharya Achutarama Sastry, an eminent vīṇā player of his time and a contemporary of Sangameshwara Sastry and Vīṇā Venkataramana Das, notable vainikas of Andhra Pradesh.

Sankara Sastry started his tutelage or rather imbibed the talent naturally from his father at a very young age, and his grasping ability was so high that he started playing the vīṇā, with all



the gamakas and nuances of the classical tradition and with technical perfection. He performed all over India and abroad. He introduced the contact mike as he was keen that his music was audible even to the rasikas seated in the last row in an auditorium.

Emani Sankara Sastry as an Orchestral Composer

He joined the Gemini studios in Madras and worked as a music director for ten years directing music for many hit films in Hindi. Later he joined as the producer of music at All-India Radio, Madras. He created many compositions for the National Orchestra. He presented a number of classical, thematic orchestral compositions and folk melodies bringing out the special tonal qualities of Indian instruments and synthesized musical patterns with a distinctive touch of his own. Some of his innovative orchestral compositions are mentioned below.

Adarśa śikharārohaṇam, in which he used six vīṇās, is based on the theme of the conquest of Everest by Tenzing Norgay. In Swara Tarangini he integrated numerous sounds that gradually crystallize into musical swaras suggesting the origin of sound and music. He also created a unique orchestral composition based on raga Todi, which won the appreciation of musicians and music lovers. Bhārata Jyoti and Saumya Purush were thematic compositions on Pandit Nehru and his achievements, and Mahatma Gandhi and his ideals respectively. Bhramara vinyas was a thematic composition depicting a day in the life of a bee, which won him laurels at the Prix Italia.

Emani Sankara Sastry as a Classical Composer

1. Apart from his orchestral compositions Sri Sankara Sastry has composed a number of compositions which include kritis on various deities, Bhajans, Jāvalis and Tillanās.
2. His compositions are rich in music and language. Each composition contains Pallavi, Anupallavi and Caranams as in the case of kritis of great Vāggeyakārās like the Trinity and other composers.
3. Some of his kritis are decorated with chittaswaras while some are enriched by sangathi variations.
4. Rāga bhāva and Charming Sāhitya are given the utmost priority in his compositions.



5. Śabda alankārās like Prāsa and Anuprāsa are also employed in his compositions.
6. ‘Sankaranuta’ or ‘Sankarasannuta’ is the mudra used by Sri Sastry.

In the book on Emani Sankara Sastry, authored by Prof. Smt. K. Sreeranjani Subba Rao, the lyrics of some of his compositions have been given in both English and Telugu. The meanings of the lyrics and the ragas in which the compositions have been set, have also been explained. The list of the compositions is given below:

S.No.	Title of the composition	Rāgā	Tālā
1.	Nannubrovave Amba	Bhairavi	Adi
2.	Namassivaya Namō Namō	Śankarābharaṇam	Adi
3.	Nannubrovave Tripurasundari	Todi	Adi
4.	Adimurty Sachitananda	Begada	Adi
5.	Narayanapriye	Haripriya	Adi
6.	Neerajakshi	Neetimati	Rupakam
7.	Needasudanu	Varāli	Adi
8.	Pāhigaṇanayakam	Viśārada	Adi

Two of his jāvalis namely ‘Manchi Dinamu’ in the raga Khamās set to Adi Tala, and ‘Netikitelese’ in the raga Jhunjhuti set to Rupaka Tālā, and a Tamil composition ‘Śanmukha Muruga’ in the raga Sāveri set to Rupaka Tala are also given in this book¹. ‘Although Sankara Sastry’s compositions are composed with great musical and literary value, they are less popular than they were supposed to be. Non-availability of sahyta with notation could have been one of the reasons. However, his compositions are sterling work even for generations to come’². A few compositions available with notation are given in Telugu script³.

Emani and his disciples

¹K. Sreeranjani Subba Rao, Emani Sankara Sastry - an Ennobling Veena Artiste. pages 61 to 89

² Ibid page 91

³ Ibid pages 91 to 94



He had a number of disciples and some of them popularized his music during his time and even after his time. His most distinguished disciples are Chittibabu, S.N. Satyamurthy, V. Saraswathi, M.Y. Kāmasāstry, S.N. Ramachandra and his own daughter Vidūshi Smt. Emani Kalyani Lakshminarayana.

Chittibabu, a very devoted and dedicated disciple of Sri Sastry, achieved great heights in vīṇā playing and was very innovative like his guru. People used to gather in large numbers to listen to his templebells, the Vedic Hymns, his signature Cuckoo song and the western-music based compositions of his own. He received many awards and accolades like his guru. He was honored with 'Padmasri' by the Government of India and awarded 'Honorary Doctorate' by the famous and prestigious Andhra University which delighted his guru⁴.

S. N. Satyamurthy was very fortunate to have been gifted with the vīṇā which Emani used to play and even now he keeps the vīṇā with great respect and preserves it as a treasure. Satyamurthy was very close to his guru and also his family members. His long association with his guru also helped him to understand the personality of his guru, which he describes as, "In Emani we see a healthy blend of the traditional, modern and glowing vidvat combined with great Sadhana"⁵.

Smt. Kalyani Lakshminarayana, despite being the daughter, never took any liberty in learning or practicing vīṇā. She strictly abided by his playing techniques and maintained the discipline and decorum while performing with her father. She accompanied her father during many of his performances in India and abroad. Depending on the situation, Emani would play some items which were not planned or prepared well before. But Kalyani used to be very attentive and always proved herself whenever she accompanied him. She mentions about this as "Each performance along with my father was a different kind of experience"⁶.

⁴ Ibid page 153

⁵ Ibid page 154

⁶ Ibid page 144



During the personal interview⁷, Vidūshi Smt. Emani Kalyani Lakshminarayana, shared with great enthusiasm, her father's playing techniques and his teaching methods. Some important techniques and methods of his teaching are itemized below:

Finger techniques

- i. Emani Sankara Sastry never used a plectrum to pluck the strings; he used only his nails as he was very particular that the tonal quality of the vīṇā should be kept original.
- ii. He used all his ten fingers on the vīṇā, and often used his right thumb to pluck, while playing on the third string or the mandra string.
- iii. He used the length and breadth of the vīṇā to produce different sounds and musical expressions.
- iv. He utilized all the four main strings and three tāla strings and played on all the three and half octaves.
- v. He used to tap the bridge while playing svara prastārās and create rhythmic patterns along with the accompaniments, like a jugalbandi.
- vi. He used soft meetu or plucking whenever or wherever applicable and in order to make it audible he introduced and started using the contact mike for the first time in concerts.
- vii. He introduced 'Kartari meetu' (means scissors) keeping his right-hand forefinger and middle finger in a crossed position in places where syllables like 'sri' or 'pra' occur in the sahityas of the composition.
- viii. He was the one who introduced 'Chakra tānam' in which he used his right-hand fingers, and created very innovative expressions by plucking in a circular movement while playing tānam.
- ix. He managed to execute the dasavidha gamakas on his vīṇā. Apart from that he applied Tribhinna, Caturbhinna and Dvibhinna gamakas. Tribhinna gamaka is produced by playing together the first three strings with the right hand while the left hand will be on the frets. Caturbhinna gamaka is produced using all the four main strings and Dvibhinna gamaka is produced using the first two strings. These gamakas were invariably used by him while he was playing tānam.

⁷ Interview dated the 6th March 2018



- x. He fixed two more special drone strings to his vīṇā so that the effect produced while playing created the impression of an orchestra⁸.

Concert techniques

- i. He justified the instrument and brought it to a larger audience. He was the first to use the contact mike so as to make his concerts reachable to the person sitting in the last row also.
- ii. He generally started his concerts with a varṇam and ended with Vedic hymns. He included all types of melodies such as folk music, chords from Western Music and sangathis in the Hindustani style so that he was able to satisfy all types of rasikās.
- iii. He used to play straight notes, long notes, vigorous gamakas and light gamakas, all with precision. None of his melodic expressions was left unheard. Even the pause or silence in between his music brought meaning. He used to say that this was musical silence and the best gamaka. One may recall here the phrase ‘unheard melody’ in the language of Shelley.
- iv. He included the gamakas played on a Nāgaswaram. He adapted whatever music he heard; inspired by instruments like sitar or sarod, he introduced techniques practiced in them in his own musical platform.
- v. Though he excelled in playing rāgā alāpanā and svara prastārās, he specialized in playing tānam extensively. He used Tālā strings continuously during tānam in order to keep an undercurrent of rhythm.
- vi. He used to play the mridangam beats on the gourd of his vīṇā, simultaneously during his vīṇā recital, giving the jazz music effect to his audience⁹. He also used to produce guitar sounds from his vīṇā. He was popularly called ‘One man Orchestra’ and ‘One man Symphony’.
- vii. Occasionally, he had instrumental support of violin maestros such as Lalgudi G. Jayaraman and M. S. Gopalakrishnan.

⁸Dr. B.N.V. Parthasarathy, ‘Emani Sankara Sastry – a one man symphony’, Hindu Post, July 14,2021

⁹Ibid



- viii. Sri Sastry used to play on the vīṇā, his own compositions such as kirthanas, javalis and bhajans in his concerts. At times, he used to sing while playing on the vīṇā.
- ix. He also strictly followed the traditional style of vīṇā playing in music sabhas and places wherever the traditional Carnatic recital was meticulously adhered to.
- x. Emani adopted some of the techniques of the Tanjore style and mixed with Andhra style of playing, and he made further developments with his own individual skill and genius. He was perhaps the only Vainīkātō to modulate the volume of the pluck so soft such that it sounded like a human voice. At the same time, he maximizes the potentiality of the instrument by producing purely string effects which are equally beautiful¹⁰.
- xi. The total impression covered by his style is a sense of completeness in all aspects. Sankara Sastry could perhaps be called the pioneer of the modern style of Veena playing¹¹.

The unique teaching methods of Emani Sankara Sastry

- i. He usually never taught the basic exercises like sarali varisai etc. in the beginning. His way of teaching differed in that he introduced the notes gradually to the beginners, such as short notes, cut notes or staccato notes and long notes.
- ii. He would then introduce jāru gamaka or the sliding of one note to another using a single meetu. Then he used to make them play two swaras in one single fret and slowly introduce the spuritām.
- iii. From jāru gamaka, he would go to Prathyāhata gamaka, and emphasize on a particular note in a phrase to get an expression or bhāva. He would also teach gentle fading of notes and prolonged sustenance.
- iv. Gradually he would start with phrases like rmg, gpm, mdp, pnd etc. with a glide. This would enable the students even to play a little alāpanā using such phrases.
- v. He used to evolve continuously his teaching methods, so as to help his students play the instruments well. He had made a deep study of gamakas to which he added a few more gamakas like Dhvibhinna and Caturbhinna.

¹⁰K. Sreeranjani Subba Rao, Emani Sankara Sastry - an Ennobling Veena Artiste. page 130

¹¹ Ibid page 131



- vi. He taught music to many students and treated them as his own children.

The above-mentioned exercises and gamakas were demonstrated by Smt. Emani Kalyani through the rāgā Kīrvāṇi.

Awards and Honors

- i. Emani Sankara Sastry received many awards and accolades of which the titles, like *Vaiṇikā Sikhamani, Vaiṇikā Siromaṇi, Vīṇā Gāna Gandharva, Gānarūpa Kalāsaraswathi, Vīṇā Vādanatatvagna, Gandharva Kalānidhi, Gāna Kalā Dharā, Vīṇā Chakravarthi, and Vallaki Vallabha* are very significant. He was also conferred the title ‘MahāMahōpādhyāya’, by the Banaras Hindu University, the most prestigious award being received by a South Indian musician for the first time.
- ii. He was specially invited by the violin maestro Yehudi Menuhin, to participate in the Festival of International Music Council in Paris on 8th January 1974.
- iii. He was called “Harbinger of Indian art abroad” by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.
- iv. He was the recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi award, Sahitya Kala Parishad award, Padma Sri award and an Honorary Doctorate from Andhra University.
- v. He played an outstanding Sankarabharanam at the Rostrum held under the patronage of UNESCO, at Alam Atta, Soviet Union wherein eminent artists from thirty nations participated, and he won the Asian Rostrum award for the year 1973. From then on, he was addressed as “Sankarabharanam Sankara Sastry”¹².

The Admirers of The Maestro

Prof. Smt. K. Sreeranjani Subba Rao, a vīṇā artiste and a great admirer of the legendary vīṇā maestro, has authored the book namely Emani Sankara Sastry – An ennobling Vīṇā artiste. This book carries an in-depth study of the maestro’s life and time, his contribution to the art and the greatness of the vīṇā. The well-structured episodes from his life are shared in eight chapters with photographs of the maestro and his family and friends.

¹² Dr. B.N.V. Parthasarathy, Emani Sankara Sastry – a one man symphony, Hindu Post, July 14, 2021



The Music Academy, Madras issued a Special souvenir¹³, on Sri Emani Sankara Sastry, in which many music connoisseurs and a few of his disciples felicitated him. Some excerpts are given below.

1. Prof. N. S. Ramachandran admiring the talents inherited by Sankara Sastry from his father and also his own innovation states: “*Sri Achuta Rama Sastry stood out for his mastery over the presentation of kirtanas and svara prasthārās. Sri Sankara Sastry had inherited the vidvat and talent of his father in the fullest measure. A clear harp and vibrant till in the Tara sthāyi or low rumbling thunder in the mandra octave, a leap over the octaves chasing the phrases all come out of his nimble fingers with effortless ease. Upon from his nails, he utilised the skin surface also for particular effects and tonal values. He used all strings, all octaves and created a ‘Concord’ of sweet sounds*”.
2. The legendary critic Subbudu says, ‘*Emani is a many-faceted maestro. He is a musician, scholar, teacher, composer and the greatest performer. Emani is steeped in tradition. All his innovations are within the orbit of the well-laid grammar of classical music*’.
3. Lālgudi G. Jayaraman says, “*He is a real Nadōpasaka; he has demonstrated many varieties of tone of the vīṇā by different methods of plucking the strings*”.
4. S. Gopalakrishnan (Conductor and composer, AIR National Orchestra) exclaims, “*Composing for orchestra is the most challenging as there are no written pattern like the musical forms such as varṇam, kriti, Padam, jāvali and tillana. Emani has brought the national orchestra to the front*”.
5. The great legendary film playback singer PB Srinivas, who was introduced by Emani Sankara Sastry to the music world, has composed a poem on Emani in English namely, “**Celestial fingers**”. A few lines from his ode are quoted below:

***‘Emani was one of those ascetics, who could taste
sweet happiness even in bitter sorrow!***

***He created a transcendental style of his own with
a delicate and individualistic pluck!***

Overwhelmed by his fluent rendering,

¹³Emani Sankara Sastry Felicitation Committee Special Souvenir, 1973.



listeners used to be wonder struck!

*Plucking the veena-strings, with his
celestial fingers ingeniously created!*

*A technique that had earnestly and
efficiently delineated!.....'*

6. Emani's disciple S.N. Satyamurthy remarks in admiration: *'The House of Emani' – The house of Vīṇā Acharya Achutarama Sastry was well known for its great musical tradition. Achutarama Sastry's father Emani Subbarāya Sastry was also a great vaiṇikā of his day. The traditional skill and chaste musical sensitivity had been nursed and nurtured, imbibed and interpreted from generation to generation.*

Conclusion

Sri Emani Sankara Sastry enjoyed popularity all over India and was highly acclaimed in countries outside India. He won the approbation of the learned and the laity because of his innovative creations and widely acclaimed performances in different genres of music namely Carnatic, Hindustani, Western, Vedic and light music. His overall concern for his audience and his mastery over the instrument earned him all types of rasikas which he cherished till the end. It is the good fortune of the rasikas that the beautiful trend set by Emani Sankara Sastry is continued by his illustrious daughter, reminiscent of the gurukula type of learning of yore. It is the duty of rasikas and musicians alike to keep alive for posterity, his extraordinary style, which 'age cannot wither nor custom stale'.

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