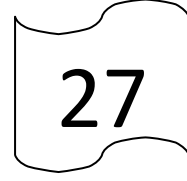


Tanjore Tradition of Veena Playing

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Abstract:

Tanjore is one of the prominent seat of music. The name Saraswathy Veena is synonymous with Tanjore due to its patronage and development during the Nayak rule. It was during the rule of Raghunatha Nayak along with his able minister Govinda Dikshitar the present day Veena was designed. The structure of Tanjore Veena is unique and different with that of the Veena's of other region due to its intricate ornamentation and carving. The thickness of the resonator, the bridge and the other components used in the making of the Tanjore Veena is its characteristic and unique. The Tanjore Veena playing is more of Gayaki style with more gamaka nuances than right hand instrumental plucking techniques. The alapana is given more importance than the tanam playing. The ragas explored are more classical and the pace is slow. The right hand playing and the left hand plucking are very specific to this style. Several vainikas belonging to this style had contributed immensely in upholding this tradition of Veena playing.

Keywords – Vadyatraya, Raghunatha Nayak, Plucking techniques, Gayaki Style, resonator, bridge and frets.

Introduction:

Our Mother land is known and cherished by others for its rich culture and heritage. During its course of civilization, specific land marks emerged as the pillar or seat of our culture. Tanjore is one such distinguished metropolis that had contributed immensely to Indian art forms from time to time. Among its rich and unique cultural forms, music is one that flourished in both the fields namely the lakshana and lakshya.

The Carnatic classical music genre comprises of the vocal and instrumental traditions. Among the copious musical instruments, Veena is a lute with Indian origin and occupies the first place in the vadyatraya instruments. The origin of Veena could be traced from the Rig Vedic age i.e., 3500 to 2500 BC.

Saraswathi Veena or Tanjore Veena:

The name Saraswathi Veena is synonymous with the Tanjore Veena which is very significant in both its organology and playing. Even though there are several other regions that had their own



Veena traditions, the contribution of the rulers of Tanjore region, especially Nayaks is highly commendable. It was during their rule the present day Saraswathi Veena was fabricated and hence it is named as Tanjore Veena. Like the unique art of Tanjore the making of the Veena involves intricate craftsmanship which makes it more ornamental than Veena's made in other regions.

Objective:

In this context, the objective of this paper is to bring out the salient features of the tradition of Veena in its construction and playing in Tanjore region. To understand its tradition the historical perspective, i.e., the contribution of the Nayak rulers and their patronage to this are form is also discussed. The contribution of the Vainikas in beholding this tradition and making this as a bani will also be elucidated.

Role of Nayaks – A Historical perspective:

The Nayaks rule in Tanjore spanned roughly to a period of one hundred and fifty years i.e., from the second quarter of 16th century to the third quarter of 17th century. The Nayaks first started their rule under the patronage of the Vijayanagara rulers and later became independent and successful sovereign. The Nayaks of Tanjore include Sevvappa Nayak (1532-1580 AD), Achyuttappa Nayak (1580-1600 AD), Raghunatha Nayak (1600-1634 AD) and Vijayaragava Nayak (1634-1637 AD) who was the last Tanjore Nayak ruler.

Sevvappa Nayak who was the founder of the Nayak rule in Tanjore was a great exponent of advita and a notable scholar in whose reign Govinda Dikshitar was appointed as a minister. Tanjore started becoming a hub for eminent composers, poets, scholars and artists.

Raghunatha Nayak:

The most illustrious of the Tanjore clan of Nayaks and also the main prop of their glory and fame. He was the one to revive and develop the cultural activities for which Tanjore has been cherished till date. It was due to his contribution that Tanjore emerged as a home for Carnatic music. Raghunatha Nayak was an expert in both the theory and practice of Carnatic music and has authored two books namely the Sangeetha Sudha and Bharatha Sudha in Sanskrit that talks about the nuances of Carnatic music.

It is believed that during his rule along with his minister Govinda Dikshitar the today's 24 fretted Veena was introduced. Even though we cannot find the exact structure of the Veena some of the other treatise like Sahitya Rathnakara written by Yagnanarayana Dikshitar we could find the names of the parts of the Veena where the description of the Veena performance by the Royal King himself in his father's court. It also refers to his skill and ability to play different tunes on



the Veena.

Structure of today's Tanjore Veena:

Today's Tanjore Veena is known for its intricate and attractive craftsmanship thus making it unique and specific. Veena has the pride of being the national instrument and also the Queen of instruments, the Tanjore Veena has been recognized and given the GI (Geographical Indication) by the High court, thus making it the first musical instrument to get such a registration in the country.

Parts of Tanjore Veena:

1. Wood – It is the special variety of matured Jack wood grown in Tanjore area. After the proper seasoning the resonator or the kudam of the Veena is carved. The kudam of the Tanjore Veena is much thicker and tension resistant. The thickness of the wood also facilitates carving of intricate designs on to the kudam of the Veena making. It is unique from the Veenas made in other regions.
2. The top plank that covers the resonators is also thick in Tanjore Veena in order to hold the bridge and the strings to withstand the tension while playing.
3. Bridge – This plays an important role in emanating the nadam from the resonator. This is made of exquisite brass metal. There is a slight curve on the bridge that facilitates the unique timber characteristic of Tanjore Veena.
4. A long dandi according to the thickness of the resonator is fixed to the resonator. The dandi bears the 24 frets made of metal and fixed on the wax and charcoal powder.

The Tanjore Veena is characterized with the body of the resonator and the dandi painted and engraved with delicate wood work comprising of pictures of Gods and Goddesses or motifs of flowers and birds. Thus giving a unique and elegant beauty to the Tanjore Veena.

Tanjore bani of Veena playing:

Tanjore style of Veena playing is referred to as Gayaki style i.e., similar to that of Vocal. No extra instrumental pluck or techniques are used instead whatever a voice can sing. The normal range of playing is between 1.5 to 2 octaves which is the range of a vocalist. The playing involves more deflection of string to produce gamaka. To facilitate the frequent pulling of the strings the Veena is tuned to D# or E which is higher in other styles of Veena playing e.g., Mysore style.

Less prominence is given to the rhythm based exposition hence there is a limited right hand



plucking technique involved in Tanjore style of Veena playing.

Since this style replicates vocal music the plucking is done based on the sahitya syllable in a composition. The number of plucks is determined by the number of letters in the sahitya. The karvai or the long notes are denoted by no pluck in other words the long notes or karvais do not have plucks.

Tanjore style involves the playing of more elaborate alapana than in other styles. The raga used for exposition are classical major ragas such as thodi, bhairavi, kamboji, karaharapriya, begada etc., In Mysore style of playing more of rakthi ragas such as kalyani, mohanam, poorvikalyani and more Hindustani ragas such as kapi, hamir kalyani, jenjooti, behag etc., are often used.

Tanam is one of the special feature in Veena playing where it is played in every main piece of the concert. The tanam is played either in one raga or as a ragamalika tanam. In Mysore style there is a tradition of playing ragamalika tanam in gana ragas namely natai, goula, arabhi, varali and sri. In Mysore style the tanam exposition is more elaborate than the alapana.

The compositions are also played in slow tempo when compared to that of Mysore style.

Plucks and Gamakas employed in Tanjore style of Veena playing:

Veena playing generally involved the right hand plucking and the left hand playing. These playing techniques are specific and unique for each style or bani. In other words it could be said that these specific techniques are also the determining factor for a bani or a style. The following are the characteristic right and left hand techniques for Tanjore style of Veena playing.

Right hand plucking techniques:

The right hand technique plays a vital role in producing the tone or nada in a Veena. Proper plucking should be executed for playing the swara or sahitya for each type of gamaka, for exhibiting the dynamics in a composition, to show the different forms of kalpita and manodarma sangeetham. Even though there are several types of plucking techniques, some are specific for Tanjore style of Veena playing and some are common for any style or bani.

1. Tarjari meetu: Plucking downwards with the index finger. The speed of the pluck depends on the tala, kalapramana, nadai etc.,
2. Madhyama meetu: Plucking downwards with the middle finger.
3. Kanishta meetu: Striking the tala strings upwards using the little finger.

The above said plucking technique is common for all the style of Veena playing. But when compared with that of other styles the speed of the plucking with index finger and middle finger is slower in Tanjore style. The intensity with which the plucking is done is



also more when compared to that of the other styles. This is because more swaras are played in single pluck. During the krithi exposition the pluck is done only for the sahitya. This uniqueness in the plucking makes this style 'Gayaki bani' or the vocal singing.

4. Paattu meetu: plucking the string with the forefinger then gently stopping the vibration with the middle finger to give emphasis for the sahitya . For example in the krithi 'Kuzhaloodhi' in raga kamboji the opening phrase is 'd ś n , d' tara sadjam is plucked after plucking daivata and is immediately stopped thus making the short swaram 'd ś' . Then the swara 'n' is played as a long note since the sahityam is a long letter. Thus the duration of the pluck depends on the sahityam whether it is a long or a short letter.

5. Usi meetu: Normally the tala strings are used as a drone and also to keep up the tala. When a note is sustained for an interval of 2,3,4,6 or more to determine the time the tala strings are plucked depending upon the number of intervals, the tala string are used to determine the beat in a tala. For example in adi tala the first beat and the two beats in drutams are indicated by putting tala. Likewise in other talas to the beat is denoted by a tala. The tala strings are also used intensively in tanam playing which is a very characteristic for the instrument. Tanam playing is enhanced by the use of the tala strings. While playing the compositions the tala string is used to show the beat in a tala so it is used on the swara itself i.e., it is used along with the pluck. But in tanam playing the tala string is not used on the pluck but after the pluck or in between the plucks eg., m m g p t p r r g p t p (where p is pluck and t is striking the tala string). In raga or alapana playing when a note is sustained for a longer duration or to distinguish two phrases the tala string is used. Among the three tala string only one is strummed while playing the alapana but in tanam playing all the three tala strings are strummed. When compared to other styles of Veena playing the plucking technique in Tanjore style is very simple and specific. The strumming of other strings for effect is avoided.

6. Swara meetu and Sahitya meetu: As the name suggests, the swara meetu is used while playing the swara form like jathiswara, chittaswara, and mukthayi swara in varnams, while playing chittaswara or madhyama kala sahitya in a krithi and sahitya meetu is used for playing the sahitya in a composition.

Left hand or playing techniques:

Various texts talk about the dasavidha or 10 types of gamakas and panchadasa or 15 types of gamakas. In present day's music most of the gamakas that are mentioned in Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini are used. Some of the gamakas that are frequently used in the Tanjore style of Veena playing are as follows:

1. Spuritham: This is used while playing janta swaras. The second note in a janta swara is hit with the middle finger where a tone of the previous note is heard. E.g., when 'p p' is played it is played like 'p' 'm p'.
2. Nokku: When a note is played with a stress or force. Eg., 's g m p' in danyasi. The note



- 'g' is played from 's' with force.
3. Ahata: This has two varieties.
 - a. Ravai: The lower note is played with the touch of the higher note eg., d p p m m ,ss here the note 'm' is played from 'p' to give the touch of the higher note to the lower note.
 - b. Kandippu: Using a note or a swara which is not pronounced or do not occur in the notation. Eg., in the phrase 'p n s d , p' in danyasi the note 'd , p' is played as 'n d , p' but the swara 'n' is not written or pronounced.
 4. Ullasitam: This has two types namely the ettrajaru the ascending glide or irakkajaru or a decending glide.
 5. Kurulam: It has two varieties.
 - a. Orrikkai: The spring like movement that occurs only in the aravohanam . The swaras decends from the higher note. Eg., 'n d m g r' in kalyani it is played as 'sn nd dm mg gr'.
 - b. Odukkal: Pulling the next higher note in the previous or lower note. In the phrase 's r s' in saveri rishaba is pulled in sadja.
 6. Vali: This is a gamaka where the higher swaras are played in lower note. Eg., In Anandhabhairavi the phrases 'p m g r s' is played as 'p m g r r g , g r s'. 'r g , g r s' is played in the chatursruthi rishaba fret.
 7. Kampita: This is one of the very important gamaka where two or three swaras are pulled or deflected. Veena Balachandar used this gamaka very effectively. He used to play even five to six swaras in one fret or swara.
 8. Pratyahatam: The index finger is kept in one fret and the next higher note is plucked with the middle finger. Eg., 'm , p m g , m g' etc.,

Noted Vainikas of Tanjore bani:

Several vainikas with their stenous practice and dedication had not only brought name and fame to themselves but also played an important role in upholding the Tanjore style or bani. Some of the stalwarts belonging to this style are:

- Veena Dhanamal (1867-1938):

Her playing was very pleasing and vocalized style involving elaborate left hand technique to produce exact vocal gamakas. She normally sang along while playing on the Veena. She had proficiency in playing padams and javalis.

- Veena K.P. Sivanandam and Sarada Sivanandam(1917-2003):

He belonged to the lineage of the Tanjore Quartet family. His playing was very classical and authentic with no extra elements other than gayaki bani. As husband and wife , Sri K.P. Sivanandam and Smt. Sarada Sivanandam had travelled far and wide and had given performances in all the prominent sabhas.

- Veena Pichumani Iyer(1920-2015):



Hailing from a prominent musical family his music journey started when he was just 10. He revolutionized the Veena playing making it more accessible and taught to several students. He has also composed a few jathiswarams.

Conclusion:

The incredible patronage extended by the rulers of the Tanjore region especially Maharaja Raghunatha Nayak has helped to preserve and flourish this ancient instrument Veena. It was during his rule the present day's Veena with seven playing strings was designed. Even though several changes had taken place in the structure and playing technique, till now the tradition of Tanjore bani is still deeply rooted in our state. Due to the modern age several concepts like the influence of other genres of music like western, light or Hindustani touches have gradually entered into our music, still the tradition of Tanjore bani of Veena playing is followed by vainikas in India and abroad. It is the responsibility of today's vainikas to hand over this art of Veena playing to the coming generations with the same fervor and authenticity.

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