

## PLUCKING TECHNIQUE IN VEENA – An overview

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**Abstract :** Carnatic music has two genres namely the vocal and instrumental. Saraswathi Veena holds a very important and inevitable place. It was the accompanying instrument for vocal and dance music before the advent of violin to Carnatic music. It holds a very important place as an experimental tool to explain and understand different complex concepts of Carnatic music. In the classification of musical instruments Veena is placed as the plucked string instrument with frets. Like voice culture, very important area for vocal music, the understanding of proper right hand plucking technique is very important of the sound production in Veena. With the varied style of plucking techniques Veena developed different banis. The physics involved in the vibration of the string is important to understand the proper plucking techniques. The method of plucking is with the index middle finger that are plucked downwards and the little finger that is plucked upwards. The tone of the pluck differs with the use of plucktrums, finger nails and finger tips. Various types of right hand techniques are explained in Tamil and Sanskrit treatises. These plucks are used to play different musical compositions and to play the manodharma forms such as alapana, niraval, tanam and kalpanaswaram. Tanam is a manodharma musical form that is integral to Veena playing. The effect of tanam in Veena playing is enhanced by the presence and proper use of tala strings. Different types of tanam are played in Veena. The proper right hand technique is responsible for the perfect tonal quality in Veena playing.

Carnatic music, a music commonly associated with South India has two main subgenres namely the vocal and instrumental that evolved from ancient Santana Dharma sciences and traditions. Among the musical instruments of South India Veena holds a very important and inevitable place in the history of Carnatic music. It has a remarkable role not only as a solo melodic instrument but before the advent of Violin to Carnatic music it was the instrument used as accompaniment for vocal and dance performances. Its manipulation was not restricted to its playing but also employed in finding, explaining and understanding several complex concepts of Carnatic music from time to time.

The word Veena in ancient and medieval period is a generic term for plucked string instruments whose name has been mentioned in Vedic text like Rig Veda and Sama Veda. Later in the development of the musical instruments in its classification Veena is placed as the plucked string instrument with frets. From its grouping one could understand that the identity of the Veena lies in its plucking nature and the techniques involved in the plucking of instrument.

### **Importance of plucking in Veena :**

In vocal music the term voice culture is often been heard. To elucidate voice culture is a branch of knowledge that explains the methods or techniques for correct voice production. Thus to improve the voice quality of a singer it is done by the combined action of basic and natural function of vocal organs with the correct usage of scientific and systematic training and practice.

In the same way for any plucked instrument the sound production is through the plucks. So it is very important for a beginner or a professional to adapt the correct plucking or right hand techniques to play the different intricate aspects such as compositions or manodarma forms such as alapana, niraval, tanam and kalpanaswaram.

As in different Gharanas in Hindustani music the Veena playing has been interpreted by the vainikas in different styles or banis in last 300 years. One of the major factors that contribute or is attributed to a style is its sound production and its tonal quality. Thus it could be said that the role of the plucking technique play a major part in determining a style or bani. In this context this research paper is intended to study in detail the various aspects, techniques and types of plucking or right hand playing in Veena.

### **Physics of vibrating strings :**

Before the actual study of the plucking techniques in Veena it is important to first understand the nature and the physics involved in the vibration of a string.

Vibration in a string is a wave. The resonance causes a vibrating string to produce a sound with a constant frequency. If the length or tension of a string is correctly adjusted, the sound produced is musical. Vibrating strings are the fundamental of string instruments. In Veena the sound is produced by the stretched strings between the bridge and the tuning pegs. It is not just a sound but we call it as the nada because of its richness which is acquired by not only from the strings but from the whole body of the instrument that vibrates. The presence of two resonators makes the nada so unique and characteristic for the instrument.

### **Plucking technique in Veena :**

Veena playing involves the right hand plucking and left hand pulling techniques. Veena player should acquire the practice of involving both the hands with coordination and control. The correct usage of the proper left and right hand playing techniques make an artist professional.

In the initial training the basic lessons are designed in Carnatic music which is common for both the vocalist and instrumentalists in such a way that it helps the student to learn the correct tonal quality for music. In instrumental music the practice of these varisais in different tempo helps in acquiring the speed in plucking strings.

### **Plucking of melodic strings :**

Veena has four playing strings that are played to produce melody and three tala strings that are used as drone, as special effect for tanam playing and to keep-up the tala.

The melodic strings are plucked with the index and middle finger of the right hand. They are plucked in the following way depending on the bani or style to which one belongs.

1. Use of plucktrum made of iron wire
2. Use of one's own nails
3. With the tip of the finger

When a plucktrum is used it gives the most powerful sound since the sound of the pluck is loud it enables the player to sustain the sound and play longer phrases. This way of

plucking is used in the school or bani that follow gayaki style of playing. The use of pluckrum also gives a sharp sound when kalpana swaras, tanam and chittaswaras are played. On the other hand the draw back in the use of pluckrum is that due to the contact of two metals (ie., the pluckrum made of wire and the metal playing string) will give a metallic sound that may be unpleasant to the ears when plucked with force. So the artist or the student should have tremendous practice or training to pluck the string for a pleasant and appropriate tone.

Playing with nail is lighter than that of using the pluckrum. It is suitable for the styles that use several quick and successive plucking. Thus the sound produced is more even without strong strokes. This type of plucking is widely used in Mysore bani of Veena playing. The tone produced by the finger nail is less sharp than that of the use of pluckrum.

The sound produced by the fingertip is the sweetest and softer than the others. The volume of the pluck heard is less than that of the nail or the pluckrum. Due to the advent of several sophisticated amplifiers and pickups the use of fingertip to pluck the Veena is now seldom used. Veena Dhanamal School employed the fingertip to pluck the strings to produce a unique timber for their style.

### **Evolution and development of playing techniques :**

Yazh is the most primitive string instrument which is also believed to be the pioneer of Veena, while describing its playing method – Silapadikaram a Tamil text written by Ilangovaligale explains the playing techniques of Yazh as follows:

- a. Varthal – Plucking with the index finger
- b. Vadithal – Plucking using both index and middle finger inwards and ourwards
- c. Undal – Plucking the strings to produce different tones
- d. Urazhdal – Alternative plucks with one or two strokes
- e. Uruttal – Playing with sustained sound
- f. Theruttal – Playing with different dynamics
- g. Allal
- h. Pattadai

Sangita Sara Sangarahamu a Telugu work written in 18<sup>th</sup> century by TiruvenkataKavi mentions about ten types of plucks.

The different kinds of plucks mentioned in the texts are as follows:

1. Tarjari – Plucking with index finger downwards.
2. Madhyama – Plucking with middle finger downwards.
3. Kanistika – Striking the tala strings upwards using the little finger.
4. Lowor keezh – Striking the playing string using index finger.
5. Melor veli – Striking the playing string upwards using index finger.
6. Pattu or Sahitya – Plucking the string with the forefinger and then gently stopping the vibration with the middle finger so as to produce a staccato sound. Used in playing the compositions with sahitya.
7. Viduppu – Letting the string vibrate after the sahitya pluck to sustain the sound.
8. Periya – Plucking with force to produce a loud tone.
9. Sanna – Plucking with little force to produce a soft tone.
10. Laya or Pakka – Striking the tala strings with the little finger.
11. Gothu – A compound plucking involving both the playing string and the tala strings with the index and little finger respectively
12. Kodi – An effect produced by placing the finger lightly on the playing string and then lifting it.
13. Kutra – Plucking alternatively with the index and middle finger.
14. Kuttu – Plucking all the four playing strings from anumandram to sarani with the index, middle and ring finger at one stretch for a melodic effect. Usually done at the end of tanam or a composition.
15. Vidi – Occasional plucking of mandram, panchamam and sarani strings individually to produce an effect.
16. Sruti – Plucking all the four playing strings by the index finger at one stretch.
17. Kattiri – Plucking with index finger and the middle finger sharply one after the other to produce a tremulous effect. Used to play the sahitya like ‘pra’ ‘dri’ ‘tra’ etc.,
18. Tadaï – A pluck, next swara silent and pluck for the third swara. This is used in playing triplets i.e., three swaras.
19. Idai – This is used in playing janta or dual swaras. A low pluck followed by stopping the string with the middle finger and the silenced note being reproduced by plucking

the string with the middle finger. When playing janta swaras two notes are produced by first pluck with index finger stop the vibration with the middle finger after a silence the next note is plucked with the middle finger.

20. Swara – This pluck is used to play swaras where all the swara syllables are plucked alternatively using the index and the middle finger.

21. Ranjaka – Plucking the string appropriately on and off for the sake of harmonious effect.

The above mentioned plucks are given in the texts and are employed in the right hand plucking on Veena.

### **Plucking technique for tanam playing :**

Tanam is the most attractive and characteristic manodharma form especially for Veena. Tanam playing in Veena implies specific pattern of plucking or right hand technique. The presence and the correct usage of the tala strings give that unique timber to the tanam repertoire in Veena.

Alternative plucking technique is used in the playing of tanam. For example in the word ‘Rama’ the first ‘R’ and the last ‘ma’ is pronounced and the middle letter ‘a’ is the vowel extension of ‘R’. Similarly in Veena for example S R G , R G M etc., the first and the last swara in the triplets are plucked using the index and the middle finger and the second or the middle swara is left silent without a pluck and putting the tala string to fill the gap or silence and also for a melodious effect.

Therefore this manipulation of the pluck and silence along with the sruthi or tala strings gives a rich tonal quality and effect thus making it synonymous or characteristic for Veena playing.

### **Types of tanam and its plucking technique :**

(P denotes pluck, T denotes plucking Tala strings without pluck)

1. Swara patterns for tanam playing :

a. Tisra – S R G      R G M      G M P      M P D  
                   (P) (T) (P)    (P) (T) (P)    (P) (T) (P)    (P) (T) (P)

b. Kanda – S R S R G R G R G M

(P) (T) (P) (T) (P) (P) (T) (P) (T) (P)

c. Misra – S , R , S R G or S R S R S R G

(P) (T) (P) (T) (P) (T) (P) (P) (T) (P) (T) (P) (T) (P)

d. Sankeerna – S , R , S R S R G

(P) (T) (P) (T) (P) (T) (P) (T) (P)

2. Vakratanam– Swaras in zigzag

S M G R P M G D P

(P) (T) (P) (P) (T) (P) (P) (T) (P)

3. Gambiratanam– This type is played in the lower octave. As the name suggests the plucking should be with force.
4. Mandukatanam – Patterns that sounds like the jump of the frog
5. Kukatatanam – like the sound of a cock.
6. Bhramaratanam – Sound of a beetle
7. Mayuratanam – Sound of peacock
8. Sarpatanam–Sound of snake
9. Gajagamanatanam – Gait of an elephant
10. Hamsatanam – Sound of swan

### **Influence of electronic gadgets :**

In olden days the acoustics of the place where the concerts (for e.g., Palaces, Temples etc.) were held was built in such a way that the vibration of Veena was heard to many listeners without amplification. The artist also had a freedom to use their right hand to produce various types of desired plucks. But in present days the advent of amplifiers and pick-ups though gives the volume and sustenance to Veena playing but with certain limitations and restrictions in terms of plucking the strings. The volume of the pluck has to be adjusted according to the amplification given. Also the playing differs when it comes to open air concert or a sabha concert or a recording. It becomes a challenge for a performer to adapt him/her to the situation and use the right hand techniques appropriately.

## **Conclusion :**

A musician spends almost his life term to learn and master this divine Carnatic art form. Likewise the instrumentalists, especially the vainikas pay utmost care in learning all the nuances of music such as ragas, gamakas etc., for several years. But in order to produce proper gamakas i.e., proper left hand playing and the right hand technique of plucking should also be given importance during learning level.

Since instrumental music is a melodic and doesn't have words a proper right hand plucking technique is required to play various compositions thus differentiating the sahitya and swara syllables. Only a proper right hand technique combined with left hand playing can bring out the full potential of a performer with laya or tala control.

During the initial stage of Veena playing it is very important to learn the proper right hand plucking, the volume of each pluck, duration of the pluck etc., has to be learnt first before learning the left hand playing.

Hence it is very appropriate to say one who is adept at playing the Veena and is well versed in sruti,jati and tala will attain salvation without difficulty – Yajnavalkyasmriti.

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