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Veena as an experimental tool for Carnatic Music

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Abstract: Veena is a fretted string instrument with Indian origin whose derivation could be traced from Rig Vedic age. Since being a fretted instrument it is used in explaining various intricate musical concepts like swaras, swarasthanas, the concept of 22 sruthis etc. In Natyasastra, Bharata has used Dhruva Veena and Chala Veena to explain the sruthi intervals. The gamakas are also explained due to presence of frets and the movements are visible on Veena. The 72 mela scheme could be easily understood due to the fret position. It is also a key instrument used in music therapy.

Keywords : Sruthi, Swara, Swarasthana, Gamaka, Music therapy.

Introduction

Yajnavalkya siksha says,

‘Vina vadana tatvajnah sruthi jati visaradah

Talajnascha aprayasena moksha margam sa gaccjati’

The one, who knows the mysteries of playing the Veena with sruthi and a sound knowledge of the tala, effortlessly finds oneself the way to the moksha.

Among the innumerable musical instruments of India Veena stands as an instrument with a hoary past, right from the Rig Vedic age (3500-2500 B.C). It is one of the oldest fretted stringed instrument that cover over three and a half octaves.

Veena, ‘The Queen of Instruments’ holds the first place in the Vadyatraya instruments namely the Veena, Venu and Mridangam. Veena is a perfect and a complete instrument, capable of producing all the gamaka nuances of carnatic music almost equal to that of vocal rendering with the components of music - the sruthi and laya.

Veena is an instrument embodied by all the Gods and Goddesses. Goddess Saraswathi holds the Veena and is called as ‘Kachhapi’. This is an instrument which helps for meditation and Nadayoga. Veena is a symbol of perfect knowledge. As a venerated instrument with longest tradition, through ages it has held the highest and the most exalted place in the rich treasure-house of Indian music.

Veena, an ancient South Indian fretted stringed instrument having a span of over three and a half octaves play as an important tool for explaining various musical concepts and theories. Several musicologists have used Veena to explain different concepts in music.

Sruthi experiment:

The concept of sruthi is the fundamental in the theory of Indian classical music. Sruthi is the smallest audible sound which could be distinctly heard. It is generally agreed that an octave



consists of twenty two sruthis. These are the sruthis which actually occur in ragas and which bear a concordant relationship with each other.

The existence of twenty two sruthis was demonstrated by Bharatha, Matanga, Sarangadeva and Govinda Dikshitar. Bharatha used the two Veenas namely the Dhruva Veena and Chala Veena to explain the twenty two sruthis.

Two Veenas with the dandi and seven strings of similar measurement were taken. They were tuned to the scale of the sadja grama. The pitches of the strings of one of the two Veena is kept constant. The Veena with the constant sruthi serves as the standard for reference and is called Dhruva Veena. The other Veena which is subjected to the reduction in pitches is called the Chala Veena.

This sruthi experiment of Bharatha demonstrates that gandhara and nishadha have two sruthis each, rishaba and daivata has three sruthis each and sadja, madhyama and panchamahave four sruthis each. The total number of sruthis in an octave is therefore

$$2 + 2 + 3 + 3 + 4 + 4 + 4 = 22$$

Mathanga and Sarangadeva used the same method for explaining the concept of twenty two sruthis.

Thus it is evident that the scholars and musicologists used the Veena as an experimental tool for explaining the sruthi concept.

Demonstration of 22 sruthis:

Apart from the theoretical values or the frequencies of the swaras in an octave the twenty two sruthis could be demonstrated on the Veena using deflection. The ragas having the swaras of these sruthi values could be played on the Veena and could be viewed visually. The relationships of these swaras could also be easily understood.

1. Sadja – The swara sadja is present in all the ragas and is played by plucking the first playing string.
2. Ekasruthi rishaba – This rishaba is very close to the swara sadja therefore it is played in the Veena by deflecting the swara sadja in the second string. This rishaba is present in the raga Gaula and in Saurashtram.
3. Dvisruthi rishaba – This is played in the first fret of the Veena board. This rishaba is present in the raga Mayamalavagaula.
4. Trisruthi rishaba – This rishaba is played on the second fret of the Veena finger board. This rishaba occurs in the raga Bhairavi and Sri ragam.
5. Chatusruthi rishaba – This rishaba is played by deflecting the second fret . Chatusruthi rishaba occurs in the raga Sankarabaranam and Kalyani.



Similarly the varieties of gandara, madyama, daivata and nishada with four sruthis each and one variety of sadja and panchama could be demonstrated in the following ragas.

6. Suddha gandara – Sankarabaranam, Kalyani, Bhairavi and Sri ragam
7. Sadarana gandara – Kharaharapriya
8. Antara gandara – Sankarabaranam
9. Chyutha madyama gandara – Devagandari
10. Suddha madyama – Kundalavarali
11. Tivra sudda madyama – Begada and Gaulipantu
12. Prati madyama – Kalyani
13. Chyutha panchama madyama – Varali
14. Panchama – all ragas where panchama is not varja.
15. Ekasruthi daivata – Saveri
16. Dvisruthi daivata – Mayamalavagaula
17. Trisruthi daivata – Kambhoji
18. Chatusruthi daivata – Kalyani
19. Suddha nishada – Bhairavi
20. Kaisiki nishada – Karaharapriya
21. Kakali nishada – Sankarabaranam
22. Chyutha sadja nishada – Kurinji, Devagandari, Saurashtra and Nilambari

72 Mela raga scheme of carnatic music:

The 72 mela raga scheme of Venkatamakhi could be easily demonstrated and understood when played in Veena. The 72 mela raga scheme was conceived by Venkatamakhi using the modern Saraswathy Veena, as Veena being a fretted instrument the swaras with enharmonic interval in 72 mela schemes could be demonstrated easily.

With the combination or prastara of the varieties of rishaba, gandara, madyama, daivata and nishada the 72 mela scheme was propounded. The combination being,

- Suddha rishaba and suddha gandara
- Suddha rishaba and sadarana gandara
- Suddha rishaba and antara gandara
- Chatusruthi rishaba and sadarana gandara
- Chatusruthi rishaba and antara gandara
- Shatsruthi rishaba and antara gandara

Likewise by the combination of the varieties of daivatha and nishada another six variations are obtained, thus making a total of 36 melas. The first 36 ragas have suddha madyama and the rest of the 36 ragas have prathi madyama.



Music Therapy:

Music therapy is an allied medical profession and a field of scientific research which studies correlation between the process of clinical therapy and bio-musicology, musical acoustics, music theory and psychology. It is a medical process where the music therapist uses music in all its facets e.g. physical, emotional, mental, social, aesthetic and spiritual to help the patients to improve or maintain their health.

Indian classical ragas have been claimed by Vedic science to have healing effects. These classical ragas help in music therapy because sound waves depending on the way they are listened to or pronounced are identified for having an impact in the way neurological (brain and nerve) system work in the human body.

It is proven that music therapy is effective in three key medical areas.

1. Pain, anxiety and depression
2. Mental, emotional and physical handicaps
3. Neurological disorders and mesothelioma.

When some of the classical ragas are played on the instruments such as Veena is said to cure certain ailments.

Hypertension – Ahirbhairav and Thodi

1. To control anger and bring down violence – Pun-nagavarali and Sahana
2. Stomach related disorders – Deepak, Jonpuri and Hindolam
3. Heart ailments – Subhabanduvarali.

Veena as a solo and accompanying instrument:

Veena has been used as the accompaniment to vocal music right from the Vedic times, during the Vedic chants that take place in the yajnas and rituals. The playing of Veena in the 'Seemandam' (a ritual performed during the eighth month of the first pregnancy) ceremony marks the importance of Veena in the social life of the people. Veena was also used as an accompaniment to dance performances.

Before the entry of violin into the arena of carnatic music, Veena was the accompaniment for vocal music. After the advent of violin due to its tonal quality and continuity it replaced the Veena in vocal music concerts.

The recognition of Veena as a solo instrument appears to be from the 18th Century A.D. Nowadays Veena is widely played in South India as a solo instrument and is also used as an accompaniment for dance performances and in fusion music concerts. In Vadyatraya concerts i.e., Veena, flute and violin, Veena plays a key role.

Conclusion:

Veena is the only instrument used in the invention of new musical concepts from time to time. It is also the only instrument used for explaining and understanding these concepts. It is the instrument which could demonstrate all the intricacies that a human voice could produce.



It could be aptly said that Saraswathy Veena is cherished as a divine instrument and credited with sanctity. The instrument itself is the embodiment of all the deities. Sarangadeva attributes Lord Siva in the body of the Veena, Parvathi in the strings, Vishnu in the bridge, Lakshmi in the thin metal piece on the bridge, Brahma in the resonator, Saraswathy in the center part of the chest board where the sound resonates, Vasuki the king of snake in the handles, Moon in the Jeeva (the tread used in between the string and the bridge and Sun god in the frets. No wonder that Veena is held high as “The Queen of instruments” and is marked as our national instrument.

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