

Styles of Lute Playing in South India

Research >
South Asia

As a musical instrument, the traditional South Indian lute, called *sarasvatī-vīṇā*, is a curious hybrid. In its present form it combines the elements of a bar-cither and a lute. Until the seventeenth century, the North Indian *rudra-vīṇā* and the South Indian *sarasvatī-vīṇā* were practically the same instruments, i.e. large bar-cithers played by traditional musicians. While in North India the instrument gradually fell into disuse, in South India the *vīṇā* could to a certain extent maintain its position in modern concert practice.

By Emmie te Nijenhuis

This development is most probably due to the fact that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the South Indian musicians cultivated the *vīṇā* as a concert instrument in royal courts as well as religious centres, and took great pains to improve its sound. When the South Indian instrument makers replaced the lower gourd resonator of the bar-cither by a large wooden lute body that was directly attached to the hollow bar, the volume of the instrument increased considerably. The South Indian *vīṇā* may have assumed its final shape in Tanjore.

After Muslims destroyed Vijayanagara, the capital of the great Hindu empire, in 1565 many Hindu scholars and artists fled southwards and found a safe haven in Tanjore, the last independent Hindu kingdom. During the seventeenth century the Tanjore court became an important centre of art and learning, where many musicians stayed as temporary or permanent guests.

The Nāyaka and Marātha kings of Tanjore were not only protectors of the performing arts, but also promoted musicology. During the reign of king Raghunātha Nāyaka (1600-1634) the learned minister Govinda Dīkṣitar wrote on behalf of this king his musical treatise *Sanḡītasudhā* in 1614, and named one of the *vīṇā* mentioned in this work after his king: *Raghunāthamelavīṇā*. On this instrument the chromatic fret system that had been described earlier by the Vijayanagara minister and scholar Rāmāmātya in the *Svaramelakalānidhi* (1550) was extended over two octaves. The *Sanḡītasārāmṛta*, a later musical treatise written by the Tanjore king Tulaja the First (1728-1736), contains the description of an instrument named *tulajendra-vīṇā*, which may be regarded as the prototype of the modern Tanjore lute or *sarasvatī-vīṇā*. This eighteenth-century lute had twenty-three long frets passing under the four main strings.

After the eighteenth century, the South Indian *vīṇā* did not change much. Instruments that were built in the South Indian districts Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nādu, Karṇāṭaka, and Kerala differed only in the measurements and materials used in manufacturing. However, remarkable differences in the styles of playing developed in the various South Indian musical centres. Generally, three traditional styles of *vīṇā* playing are recognized.

The Andhra Style

Musicians in Andhra Pradesh, working at the courts of Bobbili and Vizianagaram, used to hold the *vīṇā* in a vertical position. With the full weight of the instrument resting on the lap, the musician could freely move his left hand up and down along the neck of the *vīṇā* and thus produce fast passages. In this way, Vīṇā Venkaṭaramanadās (1866-1948), court musician at Vizianagaram in Andhra Pradesh (see Plate 1), could play *tānam* - the section following the introductory melodic development (*rāga-ālāpana*) - in six degrees of speed. The Andhra playing position, which recalls the position in which the North Indian musicians play the bar-cither (*bīn* or *rudra-vīṇā*) - its top gourd reaching above the left shoulder - did not become very popular in South India. Most South Indian musicians preferred the diagonal position, in which the body of the instrument is resting on the floor, while the gourd is supported by the left knee of the player.

The Mysore Style

Musicians of the Mysore tradition developed a style of *vīṇā* playing that can be best described as instrumental. In this style purity and clarity of the melody prevail. The individual notes are not obscured by complex musical ornaments, but are only incidentally embellished with small grace notes that are rendered on the frets, such as the *apoggiatura* (*janta svara*) and the turn (*ravai*), while heavy vibratos (*kampita*) are avoided. The *tānam*, a favourite item of the Mysore *vīṇā* players, is performed with a very differentiated plucking technique.

The schools of the legendary court musicians Vīṇā Śēṣanna (1852-1926) and Vīṇā Subbanna (1854-1939) are still represented in modern times. The famous *vīṇā* player Mysore V. Doreswamy Iyengar, who studied with Śēṣanna's disciple Venkaṭagiriya (1857-1951), passed the tradition on to his son, D. Balakṣṇa. Subbanna's disciple R. S. Keśavamūrti (1903-1982) had eleven children, of whom R. K. Sūryanārāyaṇa, R. K. Śrīnivāsamūrti, R. K. Rāghavan, and R. K. Padmanābha all became *vīṇā* players.

The Tanjore Style

In Tanjore the technique and repertoire of the *vīṇā* was strongly influenced by the vocal culture. In this centre of music and learning, the elegant Telugu language was cultivated in the large repertoire of court and devotional



Andhra *vīṇā*. Vīṇā Venkaṭaramanadās (1866-1948), court musician in Vizianagaram (Andhra Pradesh).

singers. This great voice culture left its mark on the instrumental music. The traditional *vīṇā* players of Tanjore adjusted their right hand technique to the phrase structure of the song texts and tried to imitate every vibrato and deflection of the voice by special left hand techniques, such as sideward pulling of the string (*nokku*, *odukkal*, and *kampita*) and glissando (*jāru*). On account of its intimate connection with vocal music, the Tanjore style of *vīṇā* playing is called the vocal (*gāyaki*) style.

At present, K. P. Śivanandam (b. 1917) is a living representative of the Tanjore tradition in Chennai (Madras). He is a direct descendant of Śivanandam, one of four brothers - called the Tanjore quartette - who acquired great fame as composers, singers, instrumentalists, and dancers at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Until recently K. P. Śivanandam always played in duet with his wife Śaradā.

The legendary Vīṇā Dhanammāl (1868-1938), born in a family of court dancers and musicians, who started her career as a child prodigy, developed the Tanjore style into a personal style. Drawing on her large repertoire of songs, she sang with a very sweet voice, accompanying herself on the *vīṇā* with a soft and gentle touch. Although most of her descendants - Balasarasvatī, Brindā, Mukṭā, Viśvanāthan, and Raṅganāthan - became famous musicians and dancers, no one continued her style of playing. Sāvitrī Rajan, her only *vīṇā* student, did not pursue a musical career, although she played like a professional. The singer R. Raṅgarāmānuja Ayyaṅgār, who learnt vocal music from Dhanammāl, notated many songs from her repertoire in his voluminous work *Kruti Maṇi Mālai*. Mr. K. G. Vijayakrishnan, a modern *vīṇā* player from Hyderabad, whose mother and teacher Karpakambal studied with Raṅgarāmānuja Ayyaṅgār, is able to understand the music notations from these books and perform the notated compositions in the original style. Raṅgarāmānuja Ayyaṅgār's daughter Padmā Varadan, who inherited the Dhanammāl repertoire through her father, became a *vīṇā* player of merit.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the famous Karaikudi brothers Subbarāma Ayyar (1883-1936) and Sāmbaśiva Ayyar (1888-1958) changed

the Tanjore style into a brilliant concert style. Having received their musical training by their father Subbayya, a court musician from Pudukottai (fifty kilometres South-West of Tanjore), the brothers started giving concerts at a young age. After the death of their father they finally settled down at Karaikudi. Although they had acquired different playing techniques - Subbarāma held the instrument in a vertical position like the *vīṇā* players in Andhra Pradesh, while Sāmbaśiva used the more common South Indian diagonal position - their duet playing resulted in a perfect unisono. In their concerts they concentrated on a carefully selected and limited number of compositions from their large repertoire, giving ample scope to improvisation. They used to perform long sequences of *rāga* (*rāgamālikā*) in the *tānam* section and rendered the *pallavi* theme with complex rhythmic patterns. The individual notes of the melody, excepting *sa* and *pa*, were often embellished with vibrato resulting from a deflection of the string by the left hand. For reasons of clarity of sound, a tremolo by the right hand (*kartari mittu*) was avoided. In order to increase the volume - they always refused any kind of artificial or electronic amplification during their concerts - they used plectra on their right hand fingers.

When Subbarāma, the elder brother, died, Sāmbaśiva started playing with his female student, Raṅganāyākī Rājagopālan, a child prodigy who later became a famous solo player. Today, she is the grand old lady of the Karaikudi tradition who always remained faithful to the style of her teacher. Rājeśvarī Padmanābhan, Subbarāma's granddaughter, studied for many years with her grand-uncle Sāmbaśiva. She succeeded him as a music teacher in the art centre Kalakṣetra (Chennai) and became a famous *vīṇā* player. Now she often plays in duet with her daughter Śrīvidyā Candramouli.

In 1957, one year before he died, Sāmbaśiva adopted his brother's grandson Subramanian as a son. Karaikudi S. Subramanian not only inherited the master's *vīṇā*, but also fulfilled his duty to continue the Karaikudi tradition. He proved to be an excellent *vīṇā* player, teacher, and musicologist. At present, Bṛhaddhvani, his private institute at Chennai, offers a varied educational program to Indian as well as foreign students.

In the twentieth century, as a result of the development of the mass media and the audiovisual industry, the regional, traditional styles disappeared and gave way to more individual styles, since students could listen to and study with different masters. Autodidacts such as S. Balachander from Chennai and R. Viśveśvaran from Mysore, who created their own styles without the help of any teacher, acquired great fame. In the large modern concert halls the *vīṇā* players use contact microphones attached to body of the instrument and placed near the bridge. Currently, R. S. Jayalakṣmī (see plate 2), student of the versatile musician Pichumani and professor of music at the Madras University, is trying to re-introduce the *vīṇā* as an accompanying instrument of vocal music on the concert platform. She often accompanies the gifted singer Suguṇā Varadacāri, who also teaches music at the Madras University. Hopefully, the two will bring back some of Dhanammāl's grace, peace, and repose to the hectic modern concert life. <

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Plate 2: Tanjore *vīṇā*. R. S. Jayalakṣmī, professor of music at Madras University.

More info >

Sarasvati Bhavan, Music Consultants, is a private research institute founded in 1991 by Dr Emmie te Nijenhuis to promote the study of the traditional music of India in the Netherlands through musicological research, audio-visual, lectures, demonstrations, and the publication of musicological works and music books with accompanying CDs.