



**Dolls of  
India**  
ART STORE

**Newsletter Archives**  
[www.dollsofindia.com](http://www.dollsofindia.com)

## Veena and Other Ancient Musical Instruments of India

Copyright © 2016, DollsofIndia



### Music of Life

India, one of the oldest civilizations of the world, is also one of the most populated and most diverse countries on the planet. Indian culture; which the Western world often perceives as somewhat mystic and mysterious; is an amalgamation of various religions and rituals, diverse spiritual and tantric practices and different schools of philosophical thought as well. The above-mentioned factors have always had a heavy influence on Indian art, dance and music and have verily shaped the very fabric of this culture.

The deeply spiritual nature of India reflects in the dance and music of this country. While the rich variety of folk dance and music adds color and vibrancy, the traditional classical art forms; which is personally passed on from acharya (preceptor) to shishya (pupil) and spanning across several years of training; brings with it a sort of dignity and royal feel to the art itself.

What sets apart Indian dance and music from that of the rest of world, is that they actually mirror the land's religious and spiritual heritage - most of them even have close links to Indian mythology.



### Musical Instruments of India

This time on Dolls of India, we bring you a post on some of the most ancient musical instruments of India - many of which hold a high degree of spiritual significance and feature in tales of Indian mythology as well. Owing to the sheer number of such musical instruments, we will be splitting the article into two parts; also listing only the most popular instruments.

This section deals with stringed instruments.

## Ektara

Ektara, which literally means, "one string", is a one-stringed instrument, which is typically used in traditional music across India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Egypt. It is alternatively called iktar, ektar, gopichand, gopichant, tun tuna and yaktaro. This is essentially a drone lute, comprising a gourd resonator, covered with skin. A neck of bamboo is attached to this and on it is attached just one string. This instrument was originally used by wandering bards and mendicants - they used to sing songs, plucking their ektara with one finger, as musical accompaniment.

The musician could either hold the ektara with his hands or even hang it around his neck. Pressing the two halves of the neck loosens the string, thereby reducing its pitch. Further, it can be modulated by flexing its neck a little. This drone-type instrument, which has a distinctive sound, has no markings on it. Hence, it has to be played by the ear. A variant of the ektara, which is more bass and has 2 strings, is called dotara (literally meaning "two strings").



Baul with Ektara

The Ektara is most commonly used by Baul singers from Bengal, in Sufi music and during Bhajan and Kirtan (religious song and dance) sessions as well. Mirabai, one of the greatest ever devotees of Lord Krishna, is often depicted holding the ektara; while singing and dancing the praises of her Lord.

A smaller version of this instrument, called Tumbi, is associated with Punjab's Bhangra style of song and dance. In some parts of Orissa, it is referred to as Dudumah and Dung-Dungi. Today, some music bands have begun to incorporate the instrument into their music, in a more contemporary fashion.

## Tanpura (Tambura)

The tanpura or the tambura (in South India), a long-necked stringed instrument, is used as a drone. It forms an essential part of Indian classical music - though it does not play melodies, it supports the musician or instrumentalist with its constant harmonic bourdon. The name tanpura is derived from the roots, "tana" and "pura". Tana refers to a musical phrase, while Pura means "full" or "complete". The constant and regular motion of plucking its four strings, going on in a continuous loop, produces a continuous harmonic sound, soothing and silencing the musician's mind to the exclusion of everything else.

If plucked in the prescribed manner, the tanpura emanates a sound similar to the "AUM", the primordial sound of nature itself. It helps the musician get into a meditative state and focus on his or her music. Regular practice of music with the tanpura not only helps them sustain their shruti (pitch) while singing or playing an instrument, but also keeps their minds from wandering while in practice or performance.

The first clear reference to the tanpura can be found in the Sangit Parijat (1620), a treatise on ancient Indian music. It cannot be found in earlier texts or sculptures, but has been extensively used after that era. By the end of the 16th Century, the tanpura had developed

fully and was included in most Moghul paintings.

## Construction

The tanpura has no frets and, usually 4 strings. Rarely, one can find 5 or 6 stringed tanpuras. The strings pass over a curved-top bridge, the front of which gently slopes away from the surface of the strings. Its rich, overtone-type sound is achieved by means of the jivari or jiva (literally meaning "soul"), which results in its highly resonant and "buzzing" sound.

A cotton thread can be used and shifted between the string and the bridge of the tanpura, in order to manipulate its harmonic content. Every string produces its own resonance and cascading range of harmonics as well. Musicians often use this unique feature to fine-tune their tanpuras to present a particular "raga swaroop"; to portray exclusive characteristics of that particular raga or melody.

Tanpuras vary in size and shape. "Male" tanpuras are larger than "female" ones and are more bass as well.

## Variants

Tanpuras are of 3 different styles:

- The Miraj style tanpura, usually used in Hindustani music, is about 3 to 5 feet long, with a carved resonator and a hollow straight neck. Its base is slightly flat, which helps it sit upright without support.
- The Tanjavur style tambura, which is usually used in Carnatic music, looks somewhat different from its North Indian counterpart. It uses no gourd and the spherical part is gouged out from a piece of seasoned wood. The neck is somewhat smaller and the base is usually more rounded, necessitating the musician to give it support at all times.
- Tanpuris are small-scale tanpuras, which are used to accompany instrumental soloists. Normally about 2-3 feet long, they look slightly flatter and can have 4-6 strings.
- Today, electronic tanpuras are very popular among musicians and students alike. They are light, box-shaped and extremely portable; and most importantly, closely imitate the sound of the actual tanpura. Needless to say, most purists scoff at electronic tanpuras, accusing them of having no artistic or acoustic value whatsoever.

## Yazh

The Yazh, a harp used in ancient Tamil music, is the earliest predecessor of the modern-day Veena. It was given this name, because the tip of its stem was carved into the head of the mythological animal Yali. The Yazh was an open-stringed polyphonous instrument, which used a stem made out of ebony; a wooden, boat-shaped, skin-covered resonator; and gut strings.

Thiruvalluvar, the Tamil poet from 200 BC, makes clear mention of the Yazh in his work, the

Thirukkural. Tamil classic works of literature, dating back to the Sangam period, have mentioned the Yazh as well. Silappadikaaram, penned by Tamil king Ilango Adigal, speaks about 4 kinds of Yazhs, namely, Periyazh (21 strings), Makarayazh (19 strings), Cakotayazh (14 strings) and Cenkottiyazh (7 strings). There are 2 more types, including the Mayil Yazh (resembling a peacock) and the Vil Yazh (resembling a bow).

Several other treatises in Tamil literature too feature this instrument. Besides, the Yazh can be seen in the sculptures of the Darasuram and Thirumayam temples as well.



Saraswati with Veena

## Saraswati Veena

The Saraswati Veena is a stringed instrument, named after Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge and the Arts. Incidentally, she is usually depicted holding a Veena. The National Musical Instrument of India, it is also sometimes referred to as the Raghunatha Veena, this is largely used in South Indian Carnatic music. The Veena has several variants, including Chitra Veena, Vichitra Veena, Rudra Veena, Mohan Veena and so on. A practitioner of the Veena is called a Vainika.

The bass resonance of the Veena helps it come closest to the human voice - it can be used to play any music at all, ranging from traditional to contemporary to folk to film music.

## History of the Veena

The Veena is probably one of the most ancient of Indian instruments - it dates back to about 1500 BCE. In earlier times, the tone vibrating from the hunter's bow string, as he shot an arrow, is what inspired the creation of the Vil Yazh (mentioned above, in the Yazh section). This 'twang' sound is even mentioned in the ancient Atharva Veda.

Eventually, twisted bark, some grass strands and root, vegetable fiber and animal gut were

used to create the very first strings. Over the course of time, the Veena went through various stages of evolution, till it started being used in its present form.

The evolution of the Veena is most interesting. First, a harp-like instrument called Akasa was created. This was tied up to the tops of trees and sound would be produced by the strings vibrating in the wind! Then came the Audumbari Veena, which was generally played by wives of Vedic priests, during the course of their Yagnas (sacrificial rituals).

The number of strings too ranged from one string to a hundred; they were made out of different materials as well, such as animal and bird bone, bamboo, wood and even coconut shells. Earlier, the yazh was considered to belong to the Veena family. However, as the Veena started developing more and more and started including frets as well, the yazh faded out into oblivion.

The Veena's fret system and the usage of strings passing over a bridge, made it easy for vainikas to play ragas (melodies), with the subtle gamakas (semitones and quartertones), which are a vital part of Indian classical music.

In olden times, Veenas used to be played vertically. Temple sculptures and books are proof of this. However, after the advent of great vainikas such as Muthuswamy Dikshitar (one of the Trinity of Carnatic Music), they began to be played horizontally.

The current form of the Saraswati Veena includes 24 fixed frets, sitting on a long wooden fingerboard. This form evolved in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, during the reign of Raghunatha Nayak. This is why it is called Raghunatha Veena or the Thanjavur Veena as well. In some of its earlier avatars, the Veena used to have far less frets - in some cases, the entire fingerboard was movable, much like the Harmonium.



Veena

The present form of the Veena was developed from the Kinnari Veena, which was again made in Thanjavur. Besides this, the purest natural sound is given by the grand Mysore Veena, the Bobbili Veena of Vijayanagaram and so on.

While the Saraswati Veena is generally considered to belong to the lute family, other Veenas such as the Rudra Veena and the Vichitra Veena were technically considered to be zithers. Out of respect for the instrument, Tansen and his descendants reserved the Rudra Veena only for family, also calling it Saraswati Veena.

## Construction

The Veena is usually about 4 feet in length. The design comprises a kudam (large resonator), which is carved and hollowed from a log of seasoned wood; a dandi (tapering hollow neck) and a long fingerboard, on which 24 brass or bell-metal frets are fixed with the help of a concoction made out of beeswax and certain other substances. At the other end of the wooden fingerboard is an ornamental yali (inverted dragon head). This can sometimes be a peacock head as well. A wooden bridge, referred to as the kudurai, is topped by a convex brass plate and is held in place with resin. Two rosettes, made of either ivory or animal horn, adorn either side of the top board of the resonator (palakai). Currently, ivory, animal horn and bone are substituted with plastic. The dandi also features 3 large tuning pegs or beradais and the yali piece (in case it is a different piece) consists of 4 more pegs. Totally, the Veena has 7 strings - 4 main steel ones for playing and 3 steel sympathetic strings. Interestingly, the 4 main playing strings are often considered to be the 4 Vedas. These strings pass over the bridge and are held in place with lungers, which are long hook-like "holders" for the strings. The lungers are attached to the Veena with the help of a Nagapasham, which is a horseshoe-style addition, fixed onto the extreme end of the main kudam.

The Veena is usually made of 3 parts, which are firmly stuck together. The front part consists of the kudam, the second is the fretboard and the third part has the yali. However, some Veenas feature only 2 parts, with only the kudam being different. Yet others, which are made of a single log of wood, are called Ekanda Veenas. Due to that nature, their vibration is the highest and they emit the most resonance. Ramji Veenas are yet another type, which usually feature a large hole (with a removable lid) in the kudam. This helps the instrument release much more resonance.

Nobel Prize awardee, Sir C.V.Raman, was one a great lover of the Veena. He was always fascinated by the instrument for its unique construction. The string terminations are not sharp - they curve gently. Besides, the frets are also deeply curved over the fretboard and the beeswax acts as a sort of sound filter. Hence, there is no rattling sound while playing - only pure naadam or resonance is generated while playing this instrument.

## Method of Playing

The Saraswati Veena is played sitting cross-legged, with the practitioner holding it slightly tilted, away from the body. A smaller kudam (meant to give balance and stability to the instrument) rests on the vainika's left lap. This kudam could be made of gourd, fiber glass or metal. The left arm moves from under the neck and over the fretboard, with the left index and middle fingers coming in contact with the strings. The resonator is placed on the ground, near the right thigh. While the index and middle fingers of the right hand pluck the main playing strings, the little finger is used to play the sympathetic strings as and when required. Subtle positioning and flicking of fingers on the frets helps manipulate the sound, producing the right type of gamakas for the concerned melodies.

## Religious and Mythological Tales Associated with Veena

- The Veena enjoys much significance in Hinduism; in religious, mythological and spiritual terms as well. Goddess Saraswati is almost always depicted holding the Veena. Incidentally, the instrument that she plays is referred to as the Kacchapi Veena.
- All the major Gods are believed to have their particular Veenas. Lord Shiva, who was a lover of the Veena, is depicted as holding a Veena, in his manifestation as Dakshinamoorthy. For this reason, he is also known as "Veena Gana Priya".

- Sage Narada, who was known to be a maestro of the Veena, always carried around his own Veena, known as Mahati.



- Besides, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Vedas and the Puranas, all speak of the greatness of the Veena. This instrument features in several works of early Tamil literature as well. In the Sangita Ratnakara, Sarangadeva says that this instrument eradicates all evil and bestows purity and good on the vainika. It is additionally believed to bestow great good on people just listening or touching the Veena.
- Legend has it that sages such as Agastya and, more recently, Sri Raghavendra Swami of Mantralaya and Paramacharya Jagadguru Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati of the



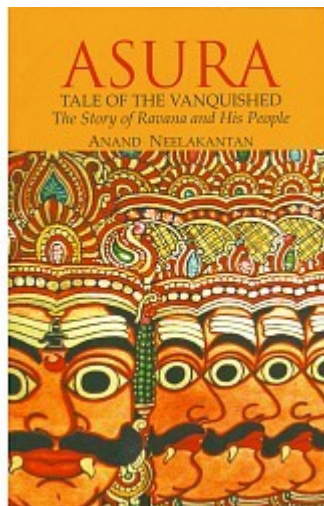
Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, were adept at playing the Veena.

•Various Gods and Goddesses are said to be residing in the different parts of the Veena. Lord Shiva resides in the body, while Parvati is in the strings. Vishnu lives in the bridge, while his consort, Lakshmi, resides in the main resonator. Brahma resides within the secondary kudam, Saraswati in the nabhi (center of the board which gives out maximum sound), Vasuki in the pegs and Surya (Sun God) in the Jeevala. Thus, playing this instrument is believed to invoke all these Devas and Devis.

•Sage Yagnavalkya states, "One who is adept at playing the Veena, with proper control of Sruti (pitch) and Jaati (melody) and has good knowledge of Sound and Rhythm, attains Moksha (liberation) without effort.

Hence, the Veena is no ordinary lute. It verily symbolizes all knowledge, spirituality and divinity. When an expert vainika plays the instrument, one can feel the notes echoing around, radiating around all directions.

## Ravana and the Veena



Asura - Tale of the Vanquished (The Story of Ravana and His People)

Ravana, the terrible ten-headed King of Lanka, was an expert on the Veena. A staunch devotee of Shiva, he was also a wise man, who had complete knowledge of the Vedas, Shastras and all the arts. However, he was also extremely arrogant.

Once, Ravana decided to show off his strength to Shiva, by lifting mount Kailash, with the Lord still residing in it. He reached down and effortlessly lifted the huge mountain, with Shiva and Parvati still sitting on its peak. Feeling a sudden quake and realizing that this was all the arrogant Ravana's doing, Shiva decided to teach him a lesson. The Lord lightly pressed down the big toe of his left foot. Immediately, the mountain started coming down on the Asura King, threatening to crush him under it.

Ravana thought fast. Knowing how much fond Shiva was of music and the Veena, he immediately tore open his chest with his fingernails, pulled out his own nerves and wound them around his toes, so as to form a veena of sorts. Then, sitting in the same uncomfortable position, he started playing on his own jeeva veena - literally playing with his heart and soul. Moved by the melodious music, Shiva, for a moment, swayed in bliss. Without realizing it, he had lifted his toe off the ground. This eased the pressure, letting Ravana scramble out hurriedly. The mighty King of Lanka realized his folly - he approached Shiva and fell at his feet, apologizing profusely.

## Spiritual Connection with Gross and Subtle Human Body

Veena is considered as one of the highest ever forms of Yoga. In fact, some sources indicate that it used to be referred to as "Gupta Yoga" or "Secret Yoga" in the past. It is believed by some that, in the earlier days, vainikas used to play the instrument, sitting in pitch darkness. This used to help them blend with the music and thus, attain bliss. In many of his musical compositions; especially in his Navavaranam (special compositions on the three Devis, Saraswati, Lakshi and Parvati), Muthuswamy Dikshitar refers to the Sacred Feminine as the Gupta Yogini.

A practitioner, who plays the Veena with a spiritual intent in mind, handles the instrument through the sheer force of his prana shakti (life-breath). Such a vainika is in perfect control of his thoughts and breathing, thus attaining a meditative, trance-like state while playing. Regular practice, maintaining this very attitude, ultimately leads to the rising of the kundalini shakti, thus helping him or her attain salvation through the practice of naada yoga.

We can draw a parallel to the Veena and the human body as well.

Just as there are 24 vertebrae in the spinal column, there are 24 frets on the Veena. The frets are well spaced out at the upper portion, but the distance shrinks as the pitch goes up.

The division of the vertebrae found near the foot is larger than those near the brain.

The lower end of the veena is called the simha-mukha or lion-face. Incidentally, the lower stand of the vertebrae is shaped much like the veena's simha-mukha.

Spirituality says that, within our gross human bodies lie the unseen naadis, namely, Ida, Pingala and Sushumna. These 3 naadis are responsible for our spiritual evolution and growth, without us being aware of the same. Activating these and the 7 chakras by means of the right spiritual practices leads to the rising of the kundalini shakti within us. Similarly, while we can physically see the strings, frets and dot indicators on the veena, we can hope to do full justice to our playing only if we focus on going inward and playing with our heart and soul. A merely academic approach to the veena cannot help the practitioner in any way; be it spiritual or

worldly.

## **My Own Experience with the Veena**

Some of you, my esteemed readers, may wonder regarding the extra focus I have given on the Veena. The reason is very simple - I am a vainika myself! I am a practitioner of the Saraswati Veena since the past two-and-half decades or so.

My tryst with the veena started in a very ordinary way. I had always been fascinated with the veena and had wanted to try playing it. So I enrolled myself in a music school, under Smt. Mangalam Muthuswamy.

What started playfully developed into a serious pursuit, within just a few months and I realized I was getting really serious about it. I used to spend hours playing on it - eventually, the weakest student in class (me!) started improving at the art. I went on to receive focused, one-on-one training from my Guru, over the next decade or so. After letting me perform in groups, my teacher finally decided to send me solo.

Today, my wonderful Guru is no more. However, the knowledge she had imparted to me during my 18 years of training under her; sustains me and helps me perform different genres of music, including classical Carnatic and Hindustani music, light music, folk music and fusion as well. All that I have written here, about the spiritual nature of the Veena, is something I have personally experienced. One of the most difficult instruments to play, it is also one that bestows the greatest joy on the vainika.

Notable Vainikas

Some of the earliest pioneers of Veena were Muthuswamy Dikshitar, Veenai Dhanammal, Veena Sheshanna, Veena Subbanna, Shatkala Chakravarthi Veena Venkataramana Das, Karaikudi Sambasiva Iyer, Karaikudi Subbarama Iyer, Doraiswamy Iyengar, Emani Sankara Sastry, Chitti Babu, K.S. Narayanaswamy, Veena S.Balachander and Smt. Veena Visalakshi (my Paramacharya - Guru's Guru)

Some well-known artists of the present time include Smt. Ranganayaki Rajagopalan, Smt. Rajeshwari Padmanabhan, Smt. Mangalam Muthuswamy (my own Guru), Smt. Padmavathi Ananthagopalan, Smt. E.Gayathri, Smt. Jayanthi Kumaresh, Sri Anantha Padmanabhan, Sri Rajhesh Vaidhya, Smt. Punya Srinivasan, Smt. Revathy Krishna, Smt. Revathi Sadasivam, Smt. Saraswati Rajagopalan, Prince Rama Varma, Sri B. Kannan and Sri Narayan Mani.

## **Santoor**

The Santoor is basically a trapezoid-shaped stringed instrument, which is made out of walnut. The National Musical Instrument of Iran, it is native to the beautiful State of Jammu and Kashmir, also dating back to ancient history. In the ancient days, this instrument was called the

Shathatantri Veena, or the 100-stringed Veena. Incidentally, a similar type of instrument was found in Mesopotamia too, from around 1600-911 BC.

This instrument enjoys an important place in Indian music even in the present day. In the past, it was used as accompaniment for the folk music of Kashmir. It is also played in a genre of music referred to as Sufiana Mausiqi. The Sufis used it as musical accompaniment to their hymns.

## Construction

Typically, a Santoor has a flat trapezoid frame, which is made either of walnut or maple wood. The boards at the top and bottom are made either of plywood or veneer. The top board, known as the sound board, is what houses 2 wooden bridges, which provide the complete range of 3 octaves. The metal strings are stretched across these bridges. On the right side of the instrument are steel tuning pegs, which help in tuning each string as per the musician's preferences.

The Indian santoor is more rectangular as compared to its Persian counterpart and sometimes has more strings as well. The Indian santoor also includes specially shaped lightweight mezzab or mallets, which are held between the index and middle fingers of both hands. These, when struck on the strings, produce sweet, bright musical notes.

## Method of Playing

The santoor is played, sitting in a special position, known as the ardha-padmasana. The musician holds it on the top of his or her lap. During the course of playing, the broader side of the instrument is held closer to the waist and the narrower side is held away.

The instrument, being very delicate, is extremely sensitive to the lightest touch, strikes and glides. Sometimes, strokes are played with one hand, placing the other over it, so as to muffle the sound; thereby creating a variation in the melodic pattern.

## Notable Players

Some of the most noteworthy players of the Santoor include Pt. Shivkumar Sharma, Pt. Tarun Bhattacharya, Bhajan Sopori, R. Visweswaran, Ulhas Bapat and Rahul Sharma.

## Sitar

The Sitar is a stringed instrument, which is used mostly in Hindustani music. Believed to have evolved from the Veena and then modified by a Moghul court musician, it was named after a Persian instrument called the Setar or Sehtar (literally meaning, 'three strings').

Some others believe that the instrument has derived its name from the Sanskrit words,

'Saptatantri Veena', which means 'seven-stringed veena'. It was then later called sat-tar (7 strings in Hindi), which eventually became Sitar.

Emerging as a very popular instrument in the 16th and 17th Centuries, this started being used widely all over the Indian subcontinent, from the 18th Century onward. Pt. Ravi Shankar was responsible for further propagating the sitar around the world. In fact, this created a transient trend of using the instrument to accompany even Western music. In the 1960s, popular bands such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and The Doors tried incorporating this versatile instrument in their music.

## Construction

A sitar usually has 18, 19, 20 or 21 strings. Six or seven of these are the main playing strings and run over curved, raised frets. The rest are sympathetic strings, which are used to sustain the resonance. These sympathetic strings, also known as tarb, taarif or tarafdaar, run underneath the frets and resonate while the main strings are being played on. While the main strings are fixed to tuning pegs, the other strings pass through smaller holes and attach themselves to smaller tuning pegs, which run along the entire length of the fretboard. The frets are movable, thereby aiding in fine tuning.

The Sitar has 2 bridges. The badaa goraa or the larger bridge is for playing the drone strings and the chota goraa or the smaller bridge is for the sympathetic strings. The bridges are fixed to a large resonator, called kaddu. Some sitars have a secondary resonator, called the tumba, near the top of the instrument's neck. The interaction between the main and the sympathetic strings results in the distinctive, sharp and resonant sound of the sitar. It closely resembles the tanpura, except that the latter has no frets and can only be played as a drone instrument.

The materials used in the construction of the Sitar include teak wood, a variation of mahogany for the neck and gourds for the resonator. The bridges are made of ebony, deer horn, sometimes camel bone and in the present day, synthetic material.

## Sitar Decoration Styles

Sitars are usually decorated in one of 3 styles, namely, two gayaki styles and one instrumental style. The gayaki style of decoration, also known as Vilayat Khan style sitars, are usually made of seasoned toon wood. They are stately and comprise very few decorations. They often have a dark polish and the inlay work is mostly done out of mother or pearl. The number of sympathetic strings ranges from 11-13.

The instrumental style sitar, popularized by Pt. Ravi Shankar, is made of either toon wood or of Burma teak. Often featuring the second smaller resonator, this type of sitar is usually fully decorated with elaborate carvings, patterns and colored celluloid inlay work. This sitar usually has 13 sympathetic strings.

## Surbahar

Surbahar, literally meaning, "Spring Melody", is another ancient Indian stringed instrument, which is also sometimes referred to as bass sitar. Mostly used in North Indian Hindustani classical music, it is similar to the sitar, but has a lower tone.

It includes a dried gourd for a resonator and has a neck with wide frets. These frets help the musician play a glissando of up to 6 notes on the very same fret, by pulling the string and staying on that point. The neck is made out of teak or toon wood.

The surbahar has 4 playing strings, 4 rhythmic strings (cikari) and 15-17 sympathetic strings. The instrument features 2 bridges - the main playing strings pass over the larger bridge, which is connected to the table with small legs, firmly adhered to the table with glue. The sympathetic strings pass over the smaller bridge, which is directly glued to the table. The musician plays this instrument with the help of the mizrab, a metallic plectrum, which he or she attaches to the index finger of the right hand.

Some experts believe that the surbahar came into being as early as 1825; and that it was invented by Omrao Khan Beenkar, the grandfather of Wazir Khan of Rampur. There is some difference of opinion regarding this point, though. Many attribute the invention of this instrument to Ustad Sahebdad Khan, while recent research seems to indicate that the actual inventor may have been Lucknow-based sitar player, Ustad Ghulam Mohammed Khan.

## Sarod



### Sarod and Other Instruments

Sarod is a lute-type stringed instrument, which is used mostly in Hindustani classical music. Like the sitar, this is also one of the most popular musical instruments to accompany North Indian music. Unlike the sitar, however, the sarod has a deep, heavy and meditative sound. This is a fretless instrument and hence, can produce beautiful glides and slides, called meend (glissandi) - these form the very basis of Indian music.

## History

The name sarod, in Persian, roughly translates as "beautiful sound". It is believed that the sarod came from the Afghan rubab, a similar instrument. Also this instrument is commonly referred to as the bass rubab, its tonal range is much greater than that of the rubab.

Though the actual origins of the sarod cannot be confirmed, it is said to have been invented by Mohammad Hashmi Khan Bangash, a musician and horse trader; also an ancestor of sarod maestro, Amjad Ali Khan. Khan Bangash came to India with the Afghan rubab in the mid-18th Century. He then became the court musician of the Maharaja of Rewa. Some of his descendants; especially Ghulam Ali Khan Bangash; is said to have changed the rubab to emerge as the sarod in its present form.

The sarod then received its finishing touches in the 20th Century from Allauddin Khan, who was sitarist Ravi Shankar's Guru.

## Construction

A sarod may be any of the following types:

A traditional sarod has 17-25 strings, with 4 or 5 being the main playing strings. One or two are drone strings and 2 are chikaris. The rest are sympathetic strings. These type of instruments are made of teak wood and the soundboard, made of goat skin, is stretched across the resonator. Amjad Ali Khan and his school play on this type of sarod, with minor changes being made in the model. The fingerboard, which is traditionally made of chrome or nickel, is today substituted with stainless steel as well. Some of these sarods also have a secondary resonator.

Another type of sarod is larger and longer than the traditional one. The fingerboard, though, is identical to the original and the instrument has 25 strings in all. Of these, 4 are main playing strings, 4 are jod (harmonic) strings, 2 chikaris and 15 are sympathetic strings.

## Method of Playing

The absence of frets and the tension of the strings make this instrument very difficult to play and master. There are 2 ways one can play the sarod. The first technique involves using the tip of the fingernails to play on the strings. The other employs a combination of the nail and fingertip to control the movement of the strings against the fingerboard. Fingering technique largely depends on the preference of the musician and is not really dictated by any gharana (school) as such.

## Notable Artists

Some of the most noteworthy sarodiyas include Allauddin Khan, Ali Akbar Khan, Aashish Khan, Abanindra Maitra, Amjad Ali Khan, Bahadur Khan, Rajeev Taranath, Buddhadev Das Gupta,

Hafiz Ali Khan, Sakhawat Hussain, Sharan Rani Backliwal, Radhika Mohan Maitra and Vasant Rai.

## Footnote

Look forward to our next section, where we will bring you information on some of the most ancient bowed, reed and percussive instruments of India.

---

**Priya Viswanathan**, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

Our efforts have been directed at making this article informative and refreshing for you. We will truly appreciate all forms of feedback. Please send your feedback to [info@dollsofindia.com](mailto:info@dollsofindia.com).

Copyright © 2016, DollsofIndia Ecommerce Private Limited