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Veena

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Veena

The veena is a large plucked string instrument from India. It is one of the oldest instruments in the country. Four kinds matter for exams: the Saraswati veena of the South, the rudra and vichitra veenas of the North, and the modern Mohan veena.

1 What is the veena, and how old is it?

The word veena is a general Sanskrit term. It names plucked string instruments. In North India the instrument is also called the been.

How old is the veena?

- The veena is mentioned in the Rigveda, the Samaveda and other Vedic texts.
- The Natya Shastra also discusses it. This is the oldest Hindu text on classical music, by Bharata Muni.
- It is one of the oldest instruments of India.
- It is still a leading solo instrument of Carnatic music in the South.

What are the two strands of the veena?

- A lute is an instrument with a body and a neck. One strand of veenas grew from simple early lutes.
- A zither is an instrument with strings stretched along its body. The other strand is thought to come from zither-style instruments.
- The Saraswati veena of the South comes from the lute strand.
- The rudra and vichitra veenas of the North are, technically, related to zithers.

Think it through. Why can one word cover so many different instruments?

Veena only means a plucked string instrument. So lutes and zithers of many shapes can all carry the name.

What is the memory hook?

Think “veena = plucked strings, three old types”. The three types are Saraswati, rudra and vichitra.

> **Quick check 1.** The word veena names only one single instrument. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: darbar.org; indianclassicalmusic.com

2 How is the Saraswati veena built and played?

The Saraswati veena is the leading solo instrument of Carnatic music in South India. It is named after Saraswati, the goddess of art, music and learning. She is usually shown holding or playing it.

How is it built?



A Saraswati veena, the South Indian Carnatic instrument. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

- It is about four feet long.
- The large resonator is carved from a single log of jack wood. A resonator is the hollow body that makes the sound louder.
- The neck is hollow and has twenty-four brass or bell-metal frets. Frets are raised bars that mark the notes.

- The tuning box ends in a curved slope with an ornamental dragon's head.
- It has four main playing strings and three drone strings, all of metal.

Why does it have twenty-four frets?

- The frets were once movable.
- They became fixed at twenty-four during the reign of Ragunath Nayak of Thanjavur, in the 17th century.
- That is why it is also called the Ragunatha veena.

How is it played?

- The player sits cross-legged with the veena held at an angle.
- The small gourd on the left rests on the left thigh. The big resonator rests on the floor near the right thigh.
- The right hand plucks the strings with the index and middle fingers. The little finger plays the drone strings.
- The left hand presses the strings on the frets to make higher notes and slides.

Think it through. How do the resonators of the Saraswati veena differ from the rudra veena?

The Saraswati veena has two resonators of different sizes, a large body and a small gourd. The rudra veena has two of equal size.

What is the memory hook?

Think "Saraswati holds it, 24 frets, Thanjavur". The goddess, the frets and the place go together.

> **Quick check 2.** The Saraswati veena has twenty-four frets. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: darbar.org; indianclassicalmusic.com

3 What are the rudra veena and the vichitra veena?

These are the two main veenas of North India. Both are rarely heard today. Their names tell their story.

What do the names mean?

- Rudra veena means “roaring veena”.
- Vichitra veena means “curious veena”.

How do the two differ?

Point	Rudra veena	Vichitra veena
Frets	Has frets	Has no frets
Playing position	Across the lap, one gourd over the shoulder, like the sitar	On the floor in front of the player
How it is sounded	Plucked	Slid with a small glass ball while two plectrums are worn on the fingers

- Otherwise they look alike. Both have a stem of about three feet and two gourds of the same size.

Why did the northern veena nearly disappear?

- The been was the main string instrument of the later Mughal period. It was the chief partner of dhrupad, the oldest classical vocal style.

- Khayal singing grew popular in the 19th century. Dhrupad declined, and the veena declined with it.
- The early 20th century brought a revival. The veena became a solo instrument.
- Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar was the great rudra veena player of the 20th century. His family founded the Dagarvani dhrupad style.
- He made the instrument softer and deeper, with larger gourds and a thicker stem.

Who revived the vichitra veena?

- Prof. Lalmani Misra of Banaras Hindu University rescued it in the 1960s and 1970s.
- He created a new playing technique and the Misrabani compositions.
- Abdul Aziz Khan, a former sarangi player of Patiala, is credited with its present shape and style.

Think it through. What does the vichitra veena use in place of frets?

A small glass ball. The player slides it along the strings.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Rudra roars with frets, Vichitra is curious without”. Fret or no fret is the main test.

> **Quick check 3.** The vichitra veena has frets, like the rudra veena. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: darbar.org; organiser.org; indianclassicalmusic.com

4 What is the Mohan veena, and who made it?

The Mohan veena is a modern instrument. Pandit Vishwa Mohan Bhatt designed it, and it is named after him. It is a Hawaiian guitar changed into a slide guitar with twenty strings, to play Indian classical music.

How did Bhatt make it?

- He first saw a western guitar at age 14. It belonged to a German lady who had come to learn Indian music from his father.
- He bought it from her when she left. He removed its six original strings.
- He added new strings to suit Indian classical music.
- He wanted one instrument that carries the sound and technique of the sitar, the sarod and the veena.

Who is Vishwa Mohan Bhatt?

- He is a Hindustani classical musician from Jaipur, Rajasthan.
- He has been performing since 1965.
- He was born into a musical family. His parents were both musicians who trained him early.

What was his Grammy win?

- His album with the American guitarist Ry Cooder is called A Meeting by the River.
- It won a Grammy in 1994.
- He and Cooder met just before the recording. The album was recorded in one night-long session.
- He was the second Indian to win a Grammy, after his guru, the sitar player Pandit Ravi Shankar.

Think it through. Why is the Mohan veena called a veena if it began as a guitar?

Veena is a general word for plucked strings. Bhatt changed the guitar to suit Indian classical music, so it took the name.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Mohan = Bhatt = Grammy 1994”. The man, the instrument and the prize go together.

> **Quick check 4.** The Mohan veena was designed by Pandit Vishwa Mohan Bhatt. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: gulfnews.com; indianclassical.net; tower.jp

5 How has this topic been asked in exams?

Which question has this topic produced?

Which traps repeat?

- The Mohan veena belongs to Vishwa Mohan Bhatt.
- His prize is a Grammy, not an Oscar.
- The Saraswati veena is South Indian and Carnatic.
- The rudra veena has frets. The vichitra veena does not.
- The Mohan veena is a changed guitar, not an ancient instrument.

What is the memory hook?

Think “Saraswati South, Rudra frets, Vichitra slide, Mohan Grammy”. Each word marks one veena.

Quick check 5. Vishwa Mohan Bhatt won an Oscar in 1994. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: gulfnews.com; manafonistas.de

Practice MCQs

1. Mohan Veena player, Pandit Vishwa Mohan Bhatt won the _____ Award in the year 1994.

A. Sangita Kalanidhi

B. Oscar

C. Grammy

D. Sangeet Natak Akademi

See answer ↓

2. Which statement about the Saraswati veena is correct?

A. It has no frets and is played with a glass ball

B. It has twenty-four fixed frets and leads Carnatic music

C. It is a North Indian zither used in dhrupad

D. It was designed from a Hawaiian guitar

See answer ↓

3. Which veena is played with a glass ball and has no frets?

A. Mohan veena

B. Vichitra veena

C. Rudra veena

D. Saraswati veena

See answer ↓

4. Which musician rescued the vichitra veena at Banaras Hindu University in the 1960s and 1970s?

A. Vishwa Mohan Bhatt

B. Abdul Aziz Khan

C. Zia Mohiuddin Dagar

D. Lalmani Misra

See answer ↓

5. What is the Mohan veena, as designed by Vishwa Mohan Bhatt?

A. A clay drum used with the sitar

B. A fretted lute made from jack wood

C. A bowed instrument of Rajasthan

D. A rebuilt Hawaiian guitar with twenty strings for Indian classical music

See answer ↓

6. The rudra veena is best known as the instrument of which North Indian singing style?

A. Thumri

B. Qawwali

C. Ghazal

D. Dhrupad

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** Bhatt won a **Grammy** in 1994 for the album A Meeting by the River, made with Ry Cooder. He is widely called the second Indian Grammy winner, after Ravi Shankar. Memory hook: Mohan = Bhatt = Grammy 1994. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The Saraswati veena has **twenty-four fixed frets** and is a leading solo instrument of Carnatic music. The frets were fixed in the 17th century. Memory hook: Saraswati holds it, 24 frets. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** The **vichitra veena** has no frets. The player slides a glass ball over the strings. The rudra veena has frets. Memory hook: Vichitra is curious without frets. ↑ Q3
4. **D. Prof. Lalmani Misra** revived the instrument and created a new playing technique. Zia Mohiuddin Dagar is known for the rudra veena. Memory hook: Misra saved the Vichitra. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** Bhatt changed a Hawaiian guitar into a **slide guitar with twenty strings**. It carries the sound of the sitar, sarod and veena. Memory hook: Mohan veena = modern guitar-based. ↑ Q5
6. **D.** The North Indian veena, called the been, was the chief partner of **dhrupad**, the oldest classical vocal style. It declined as khayal grew popular. Memory hook: Rudra roars with dhrupad. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** it is false. It is a general word for plucked string instruments of many shapes. ↑ 1
2. **True.** it is true. The frets became fixed at twenty-four in the 17th century. ↑ 2
3. **False.** it is false. The vichitra veena has no frets. It is played with a glass ball. ↑ 3
4. **True.** it is true. He changed a Hawaiian guitar into a twenty-string slide instrument. ↑ 4
5. **False.** it is false. He won a Grammy in 1994, for the album A Meeting by the River. ↑ 5

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