



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Arts

TRADITION AND APPLICATION OF TABLA : AN ANALYSIS

KEY WORDS: Hindustani system, drummer, percussion, theka

Chakradhar Satapathy

Guest Faculty, Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

ABSTRACT

The basic axiom in Indian classical music is srutih maata, layah pita, which means that sruti or melodic singing in tune with the tonic note (adharasa) is the mother while laya (rhythm) is the father. The melodic aspect gives liberty to the singer to improvise and create and indulges the musical fancy like a mother. Laya is strict especially when laya is expressed in tala and accuracy of calculation is mandatory. During raga alapa, there is a subtlelaya, an asymmetric rhythm that cannot be codified or calculated. The musician learns the rhythm of each gamaka and each single phrase and punctuation by listening and by absorption. The laya in raga alapa is intuitive, picked up by experience and through a feel for each phrase and swara of a particular raga. This is like the use of colour, proportion and balance by an artist while painting.

While accompanying the musician, the percussionist guides him and makes the khali (sound that indicates the beginning of the pause or empty stroke) distinctly heard. When the musician hears the khali sound he is able to keep track of the progress of the tala and is able to arrive at the sum at the same time. The sum is the center of gravity in all compositions. One of the syllables in the opening text of the song falls on the sum through the emphasis given to this point by the musician and by the forceful beat on percussion to highlight this point. The same sound or syllable of the opening line is repeated at this point. The musician elaborates and expands the words of the opening line (called mukhda or face) over several cycles of the tala. When he decides to give a finale, he approaches the Sum with a rhythmic cadential phrase and along with the drummer, he arrives at the Sum with resounding effect. Great accuracy is expected from the musician and the drummer in arriving precisely at the Sum. The drummer facilitates this by projecting the khaali sound which acts as a warning to the musician that the Sum is approaching.

The Hindustani classical performer does not reckon the tala with his palm and fingers like his Karnatak colleague. In the Hindustani system, the musician learns the signature sound phrases (called Theka) for various talas and practices along with the drummer so that he gets very familiar with the bols and the Thekas.

Tabla is the most important percussion today and is used for khyal singing and also for Thumri, Tarana etc. Dhrupad singers use the Pakhawaj but dhrupad singing is not as popular as khayal now. The word tabla could be a derivation from the Arabic word 'tabal' meaning drum. There is an interesting legend about the origin of this two-piece percussion called Tabla. Two Pakhawaj experts in King Akbar's court played in a contest in the court. One of them, Sudhar Khan lost in his contest and in a fit of anger dashed his drum into the floor breaking it into two. The percussionists found this two in one drum more convenient with the playing and fingering on top instead of the sides. The Tabla thus evolved into its present form.

The tabla has two components that are played simultaneously with the right and left palm and fingers. The right hand drum is called Dayaan (Right side) and it has a narrower circumference. In the center on the top there is a round black circle which is called syahi (lit. meaning "ink"). The right side is used for the right hand of the drummer. The Dayaan is made of wood with a hole out on the top which is the playing side. The hole is covered with two layers of goat skin which are stretched on top and tied to the sides of the drum with leather thongs. These thongs are laced to the pagri which is a leather hoop around the edge of the top circle. To adjust the pitch and tune the tabla small cylindrical blocks of wood are inserted between the thongs on the sides. By moving these wooden blocks one gets higher or lower pitch. The percussion pitch has to match the pitch of the musician accurately. The

drummer uses a small hammer to tap the pagri on top and also to adjust the wooden blocks. The black paste is made out of iron fillings, wheat flour and glue. The syahi or black paste is applied after the top layer of the goat skin is cut out. The blackened area and the circle around it made of goat skin give out sounds of different swaras.

The left hand drum is wider with a bigger circumference and was made out of baked clay but is now made out of a metal alloy. The left hand drum is called Bayaan (meaning left hand) or Dagga. The top portion is cut out and prepared with goat skin and black paste similar to the top of the Dayaan. Instead of leather thongs, the Bayaan has strong cords laced to the top circular band around the edge. These cords pass through brass rings and are then fastened to the bottom and by adjusting these rings, the drummer gets the desired pitch. The Dayaan is tuned to match the tonic note sa or the pa of the performer. The left drum is tuned to a pitch lower by an octave.

The Bayaan is important for giving the khaali – the dampened sound indicating the silent pause. These sounds are called Bandh or closed sounds and indicated in the Theka notation with a zero. The left hand drum can produce only 4 sounds, two of them with open resonance called khula and the dull thuds called bandh. In the bandh sound the palm is laid flat on the top of the Bayaan after striking in order to damp the sound.

The Dayaan can give six types of sound. The tonic note of the musician the middle sa – is produced by striking the edge of the Tabla with the index finger. The other sounds are produced by using the index, middle and third fingers striking various points on the surface. Tak is a dampened sound produced by three fingers striking and pressing down on the syahi. By pressing with the palm in a circular manner a meend (slide) effect is produced.

Dha and Dhin are forceful sounds combining the fingering of both the Tabla halves and indicate the sum in the tala. The Hindustani musician practices along with the table and is thus quite familiar with the different Thekas and can locate the Khaali and the Sum sounds in each Tala. Ta or Tin is usually the bol to indicate the Khaali.

Solo recital on table

While improvising, the table player can play a variety of patterns as long as he sticks to the calculation or count of the tala and highlights the sum and the khali portions. There are standard precomposed pieces for solo playing. Solo recitals of table have the lehera which is a melodic accompaniment. The sarangi or harmonium keep repeating one line of melody set in a particular tala while the table improvises various rhythms and comes together with the melody at the sum.

In a solo recital, certain specific tabla compositions are played. The beginning is with Uthaaan, which means "to rise".

The Uthaaan is an improvised opening piece which begins with slow rhythmic patterns using muted strokes on the right side drum alone. Then the tempo increases and the Bayaan strokes add to the volume, while complex bits are added on. Uthaaan concludes with a tihayi which is a cadential phrase repeated thrice ending on the Sum.

Peshkar is a pre composed Tabla item that is slow and dignified and uses one of the Tala Thekas as its base. In the Benares Tabla baj (style of playing) creative improvisation is done in Peshkar (which means 'to show').

Kayada means 'to discipline' and is an important form where the tabla player shows his creativity. It starts with a fixed composed rhythmic piece in a medium pace on which additional patterns like paltas are built up. In a palta the same rhythmic phrase is handled in reverse formation or by changing the starting bol etc, so that the original rhythmic phrase is always in the background.

The Rela is a fast ascending pattern of bols that is precomposed. Rela literally means 'torrential' and thus indicates the density and speed of the piece.

The composition called 'gat' is prevalent in Tabla playing groups of the east – Lucknow, Farukhabad and Benaras. It is a long rhythm combination of 4 avartanas. The rhythms are taken from kathak dance steps and have complex phrases which are broken up and repeated to give variety.

The last item in a solo Tabla recital is the Tukda which is a very brief precomposed sequence of phrases. In this item, the tabla player is expected to show his skill in creative patterning of rhythmic bols. When the tukda is repeated 3 times it is called a chakradhar with a final tihai or repetition of a phrase three times that concludes forcefully on the Sum. At times, the tihai is deliberately brought to an end just ahead of the sum and this is a device called anagata. When the tihai ends in an organized manner after the sum it is called anagata. When the tihai ends in an organized manner after the Sum it is called atita.

REFERENCES:

1. The music of India — B. Chaitanya Deva — Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1981, p. 278
2. The cooking of Music and other essays — Sheila Dhar — Permanent Black — 2001, p. 114 not to touch an instrument with feet, p.95
3. Senia Gharana — Its contribution to Indian Classical Music — Sunita Dhar — Reliance Publishing House — 1989, p. 190 Tansen lineage (p. 55), his compositions.
4. The Evolution of Khayal — M. V. Dhond — Sangeet Natak Academy — Rabindra Bhawan, Firoze Shah Road, New Delhi 110001, p. 52
5. Indian Music — Leela Floyd — Oxford University Press — 1980, p. 48
6. The Music of Hindoostan — A. H. Fox Strangways, p. 364
7. Ragas and Raginis — O. C. Gangoly — Nalanda Publications — 1935 (36 copies!), p. 224
8. The Musical Heritage of India — M. R. Gautam — Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd — 1980, 2001 (Enlarged), p. 209
9. The Story of Indian Music — Its growth and synthesis — O. Gosvami — Asia Publishing House — 1957, pp. 80, 332 p
10. The Music of India — Reggy Holroyde — Prager Publishers, New York, p. 290