

from hand to drum

HAND DRUM TECHNIQUES FROM AROUND THE WORLD



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Having spent so much time in the *Fabric of Time* column talking about Indian drum phonetics and their application to other percussion, the time has come to get to the root of the matter and see how they are applied traditionally. This new series will do that and focus on the basics of hand drumming from all over the world, covering the playing techniques and meaning of the phonetics which represent the strokes, phrases and compositions.

Phonetics are common to percussion throughout the world, not just India. Brazil, Turkey, Egypt, Africa, Bali and many more places have systematic phonetic vocabularies which represent the drumming.

We're going to start in South India with a drum called *kanjira*, which is found primarily within the Carnatic classical music system.

The *kanjira* is a frame drum, any 'frame drum' being a drum with a shell less deep than the head is wide. The shell of the *kanjira* is approximately 2" deep and the diameter of the shell approximately 7"-8". It is a single headed drum, the skin being a very thin lizard skin (thin lizard skin, rather than skin from a thin lizard). This skin is stretched taut over the shell and is glued on the outside of the shell. In this state the drum is very highly tuned, but in performance it needs to be very bass-heavy. This effect is achieved by lightly spreading water on the inside of the head before and during a show. It is very difficult to maintain the desired pitch for a prolonged period of time, so a good *kanjira* player will have three, sometimes four *kanjiras* on stage with him at once. One alternative to this is the

new tuneable *kanjira*, part of Remo's New World percussion range. One other very important characteristic of the drum is the solitary pair of tiny brass jingles fixed into a hole in the shell, which adds a very sharp cut to the sound.

Before going on to the playing of the

drum, we must look at the playing position and the role that each hand plays. *Kanjira* is probably the most difficult Indian drum to be effective on because it is played with only one hand (the right), the role of the other hand (the left) being to support the drum and to bend the pitch with the fingertips. If we look at the holding position we can

see how this is achieved (Fig. 1).

If we look at the drum as if it were a clock face, we can see that the left hand is supporting the drum at six o'clock, the hands being cupped with the thumb behind and the fingers in front (skin side) of the shell, forming a clamp-like grip. The



Fig. 2

thumb comes along the edge of the shell in line with its circumference and parallel to the floor. It never goes inside the shell, touches the head or has any involvement in the bending of the skin.

What we can see from Fig. 2 is how the fingertips come round underneath the shell and touch the head just at the edge (also at 6 o'clock). It is by pressing here that we achieve the bending

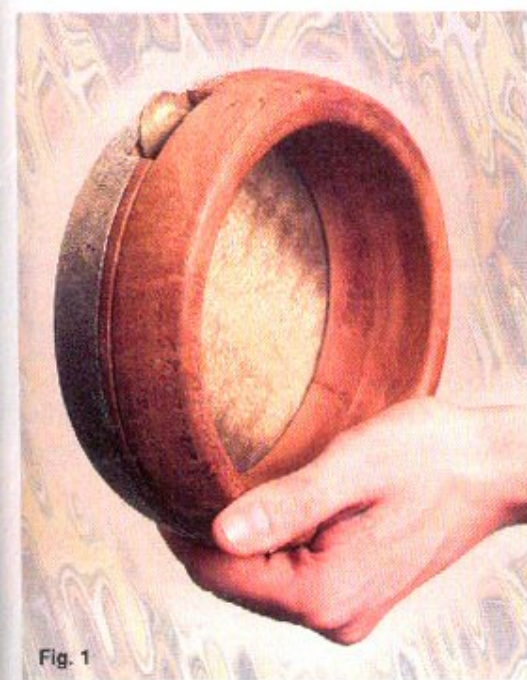


Fig. 1



Fig. 3

of the note, and this is aided by a very steep bearing edge inside the drum.

Next we must look at the basic hand position for the right hand, the striking hand. The way the hand is used is common to almost all Indian hand drums that I've come across. It involves splitting the fingers into two striking units, as in Fig. 3. Unit one is the first finger, whilst unit two is the second, third and fourth fingers joined together (Fig. 3).

Now, having gone this far we can begin looking at the basic playing techniques. Our first sound will be 'TUM'. This is the open bass sound and is played with striking unit one.

The left hand fingers should be slightly off the head and not damping the sound, but the drum must continue to be held firmly. The striking finger should hit the head flat



Fig. 4

and move away from the head immediately, allowing the drum to ring. Fig. 4 shows the striking position for the 'TUM' stroke. Bear in mind that the finger should always travel in a straight line to attack the drum, never at an angle (Fig 4).

Our second sound will be 'THA'. This is a closed, non-resonant sound played with

striking unit two of the right hand. The left hand fingers can rest on the head without pressure for this stroke. The

'THA' sound is a sharp slapping type sound which is given a lot more crispness by the effect of the jingles. The three fingers strike together, flat and in the middle of the drum. It should sound like a soft version of a slap stroke on a conga. The striking hand should move in towards the centre of the drum for the



Fig. 5

'THA' stroke and out towards the edge a little bit for the 'TUM'. Fig. 5 shows the hand position for the 'THA' stroke.

Now let's put together some simple rhythms:

Ex 1

Ex 2

Ex 3

Ex 4

Ex 5

Ex 6

Ex 7

To bring this month's article to closure, I'll briefly talk about the possible ambiguities of some of the phonetics. The main drum in Carnatic music is the mridangam, a double headed barrel drum. It is from this drum that the phonetics are taken. There are dozens of sounds, each of which mean something different on the drum. Drums such as the kanjira are more recent to the tradition and are of completely different construction but have employed the same phonetic language. This means that because there are fewer sounds available, the strokes on kanjira are often represented by different phonetics. For example, the third of our examples above could be written like this:

THA THA COO KU THA KA DHI NA

It is therefore up to the kanjira player's knowledge of how the phrases would sound on the mridangam, and his intuition in interpreting them for the kanjira.

See you next time for some more intricate things on the Kanjira.