

# DRUM NATION

## PART 2

### Peter Lockett concludes his examination of Indian drums with those from the South

To discuss the things that differentiate South and North Indian music and drumming is a complex and controversial matter even for the most scholarly. However, one thing is for sure, and that is that both can boast of complex rhythmic and melodic systems rendered on a wide array of instruments. Having studied both South and North Indian music and percussion, I can honestly say that, in my opinion, neither system is superior to the other, but if you asked someone from either the North or South the same question, I doubt very much whether you would get the same answer. Anyway, in reply to last month's article on North Indian drums, here's a run down on the South Indian camp.

The primary classical drum used in South India is the mridangam, a twin-headed barrel drum, bass on one end, treble on the other, about 25 inches long and approximately nine to ten inches in diameter at its widest point. It really is the *Brahmin* of South Indian drums and performers on the drum are quite often authoritative, priest-like individuals. However, with the tide of the times and the demise of the caste system, a wider class of people have taken up the mridangam.

In many ways the mridangam is a much harder and 'earthier' sound than some of the North Indian drums. The heads are a lot thicker and the sound is far less compromising. It could be directly compared to the North Indian *phakawaj* (as discussed last month). Both are double-ended barrel drums with a fixed resonating patch on the treble end and a temporary dough patch on the bass end. There are also a few unusual strokes which are used on both drums. For example the *cappu* stroke (South Indian terminology), which entails the use of the flesh on the side of the hand to strike the drum and retreat quickly to create a half damped harmonic. I've also come across a similar stroke to this on some of the double-ended Balinese drums found in Gamelan music. It's without doubt a far more cross-fertilised

world than we ever give it credit for.

Both heads of the mridangam are made of several layers of cow, goat and buffalo skin. A hoop of buffalo hide is braided around the edge of the multiple layers of skin to form the drum head. This rim is very strong and inflexible and can cope with the very high tensions needed to keep the drum in tune. Leather thongs are laced in and out of the rims of both heads and over the solid jackwood shell at sixteen different points. These thongs are then pulled extremely tight to force the heads to tension. It is at this point that the skill of the drum maker really comes to light.

A thin piece of metal is inserted between the top two heads and the centre is cut from the top head, creating something rather similar to an Evans Genera head. This hole is carefully shaped and made into a size which reflects the pitch of the drum. Generally speaking, if the drum is slightly shorter then the pitch is higher. With drums of this length the ratio is approximately a whole tone per inch.

The next step is for a rice-based adhesive to be applied to the skin revealed by the hole. This is then allowed to dry in the open air. Soon after this the black resonating spot is applied to the centre of the head, giving the drum a more musical resonance. (This is carried out on the smaller treble head only.) This spot is not only useful as a resonating device but also as a

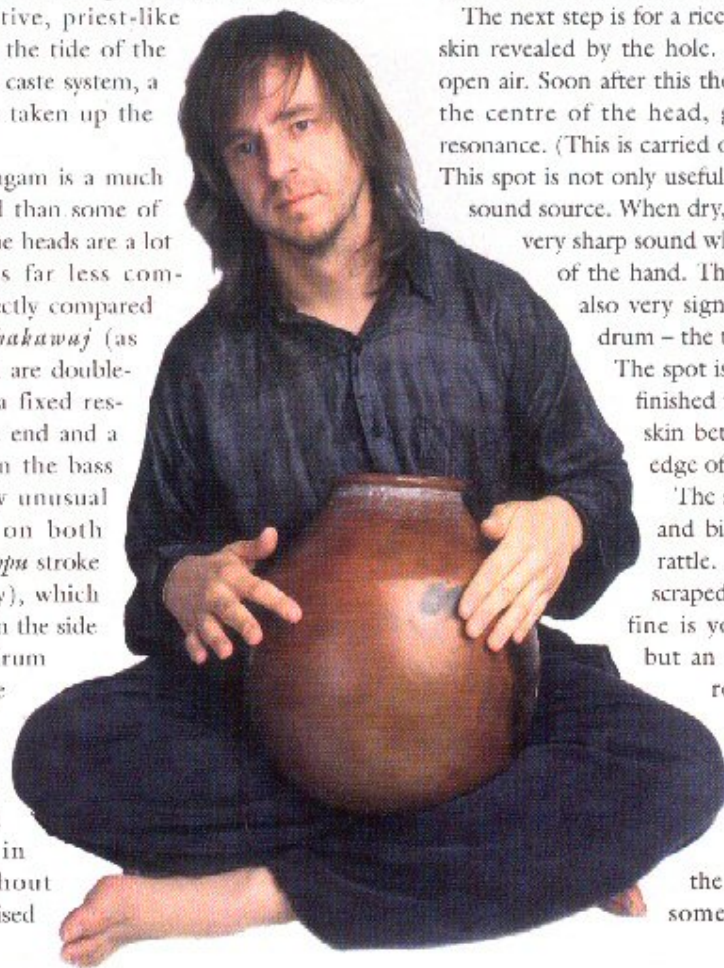
sound source. When dry, it becomes very brittle and makes a very sharp sound when struck with the fingers and palm of the hand. The size and thickness of the spot are also very significant in defining the pitch of the drum – the thicker the spot, the lower the pitch.

The spot is carefully shaped into a circle and is finished to reveal a tiny portion of the lower skin between the edge of the spot and the edge of the inner ring of the top skin.

The spot tends to wear out quite quickly and bits come loose, causing the head to rattle. When this happens, the old spot is scraped off and a new one applied. This is fine if you live close to the drum maker, but an absolute bore if you don't. I well remember my mridangam teacher

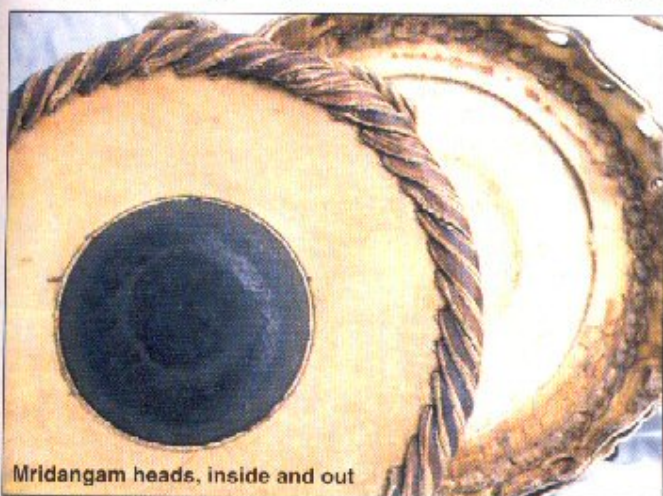
sending special packages of drums to India to get the spots repaired. Even in India it can be difficult to find a craftsman skilled enough.

The final stage of preparation for the treble head is very unusual and not something I've come across with any



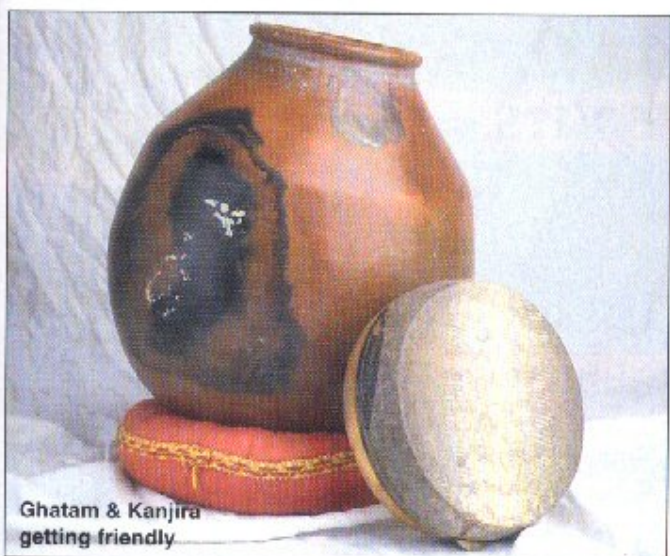
other Indian drum. Tiny pieces of straw are inserted between the top two heads at the sixteen tuning points to stop the two skins vibrating together. The pieces of straw are cut at the edge of the hole in the top head to stop them poking out across the playing surface and the black spot. This straw is paramount in helping to create the characteristic 'buzzing' sound of the drum.

As with the North Indian *phakawaj* drum, a temporary tuning paste of dough is applied to the bass end of the drum



Mridangam heads, inside and out

for performance. The amount used is much less than on the *phakawaj*, amounting to no more than two Maltesers' worth. The head and dough are kept moist during performance and are scraped clean afterwards. This is about as far as a mridangist would go in maintaining his drum, leaving all the heavy and complicated work to the drum maker. This is partly because of the old caste system in India which designates the handling of dead animal material to persons of a lower caste. Strange when you consider that the mridangist is handling the animal skin during every second of performance. And speaking of dead animal skin, a very rare lizard from areas of dense vegetation in



Ghatam & Kanjira getting friendly

India has been employed in the drum making business for centuries. This happy little fellow helps make up one of the most powerful hand drums in the world, the *kanjira*.

**T**he *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 two inches deep and the diameter of the shell approximately seven to eight inches. It is a single headed drum with a very thin lizard skin head. The

skin is stretched taut over the shell and glued to the outside. In this state the drum is very highly tuned, but in performance it needs to be very bass heavy. This is achieved by spreading water on the inside of the shell before and during a performance. It is very difficult to maintain the desired pitch for any prolonged period of time, so many kanjirists have two, sometimes three with them on stage during performance. The main problem is that if you apply too much water too quickly, the head goes too soggy. You then have to wait for it to dry out, which can take quite a while. Some players dry the skin out with a cigarette lighter, but this can prove very dangerous because the head is so thin that you can easily burn a hole in it. On the other side of the coin, if you don't apply enough water then the drum is obviously going to be too highly tuned. Tuning the kanjira really is an art in itself and anyone who has mastered it demands great respect. Having been given such a praiseworthy status, the poor sod is then expected to play everything a mridangist plays with two hands with one hand! Anyway, it does not change the fact that, with the aid of one solitary set of tiny brass jingles, a cup of water, a lizard and a tree, the kanjirist steals the show in many a *tala vadya kacceri* (drum ensemble performance).

The kanjira is played by holding the drum with left hand and striking with the right. The drum is held up vertically with the head pointing outwards. The striking hand comes round the front of the drum and articulates complex stroking patterns with the four fingers divided into two striking units. Meanwhile the fingers of the hand supporting the drum come round the front to bend the pitch, creating the glissando bass effect so often heard in Indian music. It really is a complex technique

and makes the kanjira certainly one of the most difficult hand drums in the world to master.

There are two other percussion instruments usually found in a *tala vadya kacceri* ensemble, and they are the *morsing* (jaws harp – nauseating, irritating and not altogether worth a mention at all) and the *ghatam*, one of the most superior clay pots in the world.

The ghatam is a spherical clay pot with one hole at the top and no drum head at all. We could describe this pot as 'big bellied' and with a large playing area. The bottom half of the pot is completely spherical with the top half having slightly straighter sides. It is on all these different playing surfaces that the player can create all the different tones of the

instrument by striking with his inside wrist, his finger tips, his palms and anything else close at hand. This involves some self restraint because the drum is played resting in the lap. One specialist sound on the pot is created by submerging the drum to change the pitch when it is struck. For this purpose, the, shall we say, weightier ghatam player usually performs without a shirt on.

Of all the drums I've ever learnt, the ghatam has to be the most painful, so much so that it is actually not always an attractive proposition to sit down and play. I've witnessed many performers with seriously ripped fingers after a show, and reports of aches that defy the imagination. It really is an instrument for the most determined of percussionists.

The sound of the ghatam is very sharp and cutting, partly because of the attack of the strokes and partly because the clay of the instrument contains a high proportion of iron filings. Two sorts of ghatam are available, one from the Madras region of India and the other from the Maddai region. The Madras version is much thinner, lighter and easier to play for the beginner, while the Maddai version is extremely heavy, thick, uncompromising and difficult to play. Professionals usually use the latter because the Madras version is very susceptible to breaking under a player's hand. This was not such a problem in times gone by when it was customary for the ghatam player to throw the pot into the air at the end of a gig so it would land on the floor and break on the very last beat of the tune after a complex rhythmic passage. However, this particular act is far less common nowadays.

There we have it, the three main drums of the South Indian classical music tradition. I've run out of space in this article to discuss the differences between the Northern and Southern rhythmic systems, so I'll save it for another time. Happy thalam. ♦

