

TABLA MANIA!

In the first of a special three-part series, the renowned percussion ace-face that is **PETER LOCKETT** tells you everything you always wanted to know about the beautiful, yet strangely haunting, Indian drum that is the tabla...

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The tabla originated in North India and consists of a set of two drums, treble and bass. They are distinct from most other drums in the world, in that each drum is played with a different hand. Very seldom do you see both hands playing on

one drum. The drums have a regal history dating back centuries to the time of princes and their domains, where all palaces had their own set of full-time musicians, including tabla players.

The tabla performer sits on the floor with the drums in front of him, which are nestled in two supporting rings called 'adharas'. The high-pitched drum is cylindrical in shape and stands about 10" high. It is made from wood, usually shisham or nim, and is hollowed out from the top like a big cup, remaining sealed at the bottom. The drum has only one skin, and this is generally about 5" in diameter. The shell is wider at the bottom than the top by about 1 1/2".

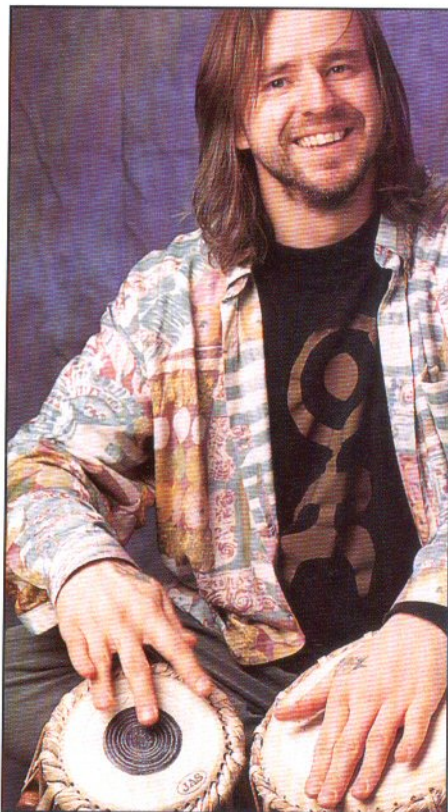
The bass tabla is basically a small single-headed kettle drum made from nickel alloy. It is sometimes possible to find them made from clay.

Both of the drum heads (puri) are made from goatskin and have a complicated hoop (pagri), which is woven around the edge of the skin. The skins are fixed to the drum with a long leather strap called a 'chot'. This strap is then threaded through the hoop and underneath the drum through a small leather ring.

Both inside and outside the skin there is a thin rim about an inch wide running around the edge. This is called the 'kinar' or sometimes the 'kani', and is also made of goatskin.

The long leather strap is pulled tight, bringing the drum skin to tension. The treble drum is pulled a lot tighter and needs small wooden blocks (gatta) inserted between the shell and the straps to get it up to the pitch required. Sometimes you may see smaller wooden blocks used for the bass tabla. In Benares, a completely different system is used for the bass tabla, and this involves using a rope and metal rings to get the correct tension for the drum.

The skins then have paste patches applied to give the skins the resonance required. These patches (shyahi) are made from a paste of iron filings, flour and ground hill stone. In India, a chemical is also added to prevent ants from eating the patches. The treble drum is tuned by knocking the wooden blocks with a small hammer. Finer tuning is then carried out by hitting the leather hoop of the skin either up



or down, depending on the pitch that is required for the performance.

The drum is tuned to the tonic or dominant note in the scale of the piece of music to be played. It is important to bear in mind that Indian music does not change key, and so if you play music that does change key, then you will need more than one high-pitched tabla to hand. The bass tabla is generally not tuned to a particular pitch, largely because of the glissando technique that is used on that drum.

THE PHONETICS

As opposed to a system of written notation, Indian percussionists use a vocabulary – or words – to represent the patterns they play. These words are intended to mimic the sounds that come from the drums. Each stroke and combination of strokes has its own word or set of words.

It is possible to look at these words as an alphabet of phrases, out of which longer and longer patterns are composed. The words have no semantic meaning apart from the patterns they represent. Generally these words are the first thing

a student learns when studying a new composition. Once they get familiar with the words of a composition, they go on to playing it on the drums. It splits the difficulty of learning a new piece into two: first learning the rhythm of it and then the fingering and note articulation.

The vocabulary that you find in North Indian, Hindustani percussion is notably different from that of South Indian, Carnatic percussion – and this is true both in the words they use and in the general construction of the rhythmic compositional system.

BASIC STROKE ARTICULATION

Having got this far, we can now begin looking at the basic playing technique of the instrument. It should be mentioned at this stage that there are a number of different classical playing techniques for the tabla. These different styles are generally noted as coming from different districts in India. The one player who defies this label is Zakir Hussain, who has studied with the top players in many different districts, or gharanas (literally 'family' or 'household'). The predominant playing style for this series is the Calcutta style, otherwise called the Farukabad Gharana.

We will begin with the bass tabla, called the 'byha' or the 'duggi'. This should be played with your weaker hand.

We first need to analyse our position at the drums and the position of our arms. If you look at **Figure 1**, you will see that the drums should be perfectly central to your body. The arms come down from the shoulder, out to the elbow and down to the drums, forming a scorpion-like position. It is important not to lift the shoulders up, particularly when playing the byha.

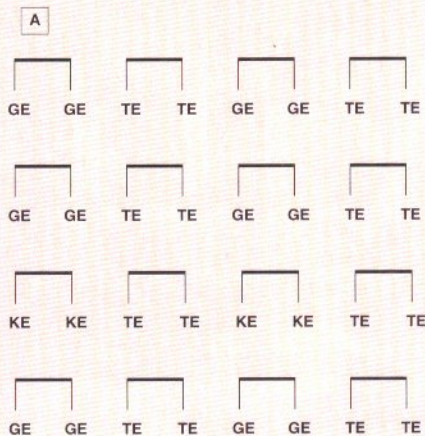
To begin with, place both hands palm down on the drums and sit comfortably. Refer to the pics of the playing position, checking your position against it, using a mirror if possible. Try to sit as straight as you can.

We can now look at the first basic stroke played on the bass drum: 'GE' alias GA/GHE/GHIN.

The drum is angled away from you towards the smaller drum. The black spot should be nearest the smaller drum and, if you look at the drum as if it were a clock face, your arm should enter from approximately seven o'clock (five o'clock for left-handed players). The arm is resting on the drum, palm down. Be careful not to drop your elbow, because this will cause the wrist to lift off the skin. The underside of the wrist rests on the skin, but not too heavily. Be careful not to 'dig in'. At the end of the day, the more subtle byha playing comes

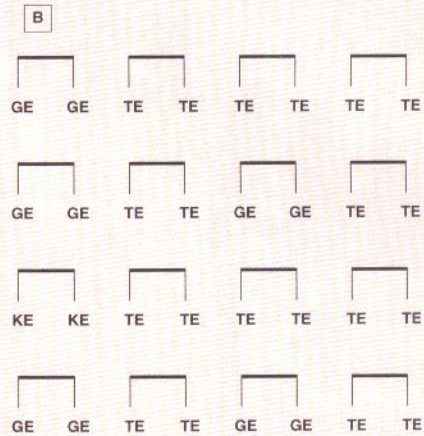


Figure 1 Playing position.



► when the wrist glides like a hovercraft, only pressing when necessary.

Next, cup the hand as if you were holding a snooker ball. Relax the thumb and do not point it outwards as if it were erect. The fingers are bent and the stroke is played by striking the fingertips on the drumhead in a hammer-like striking motion. It is important to see that the bottom portion of the fingers are at right angles to the drum skin when they strike (see Figure 2). Long fingernails will



hinder this. The fingers are divided into two striking units: Unit 1, the index finger; and Unit 2, the second, third and fourth fingers.

Figure 2 demonstrates the three-finger striking unit. All 'paired' GE strokes in the musical examples should be fingered 3-1. Because of the length of our fingers, the little finger does not reach the head, but it is important to involve it in the motion, because you will then be using its muscles in the back of your hand to add strength to the striking unit. ►



Figure 2 'GE' with three fingers.



Figure 3 The 'KE' stroke.

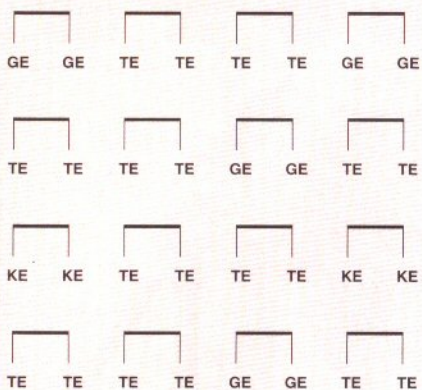


Figure 4 Three-fingered 'TE'.

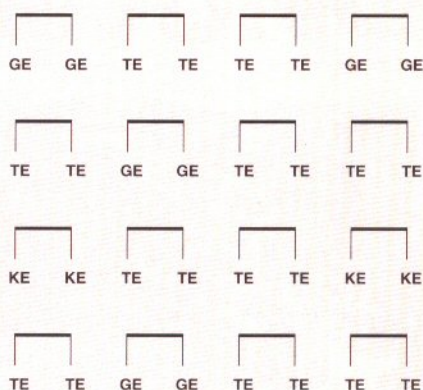


Figure 5 One-fingered 'TE'.

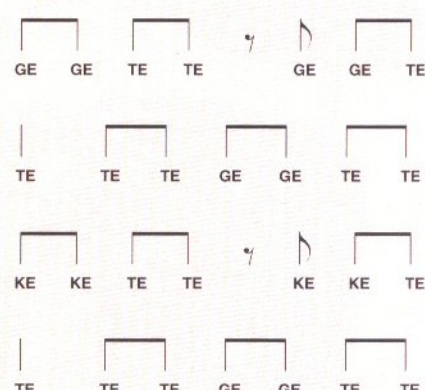
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D



E



The next stroke we will look at is 'KE'.

Sometimes known as 'KA' or 'KO', this is the main non-resonating stroke played on the byha.

The wrist remains on the drumhead, palm down. The hand is held flat, not cupped as in the 'GE' stroke. Lift the fingertips about two to three inches from the drum, leaving the wrist in contact with the drumhead. The fingers should be relaxed and slightly apart. The hand pivots at the wrist joint and the fingers strike the drumhead flat, creating a soft-but-sharp slapping sound. The thumb is relaxed in the same way as before. The fingers are not divided into two striking units as in 'GE' (see **Figure 3**).

We can now begin looking at the high-pitched drum called the 'dynha' – this is sometimes also called the 'tabla'. This drum should be angled away from your body a little bit more than the byha. It's interesting to note that byha and dynha translate literally into 'left' and 'right', even if you play these drums the other way around.

The dynha should be facing away from your body centrally, and the face of the drum should not veer left or right. The first sound we will take a look at for the dynha is 'TE'.

This sound is the main non-resonant sound on the high-pitched drum, and it is the characteristic sound of many fast compositions on tabla. To make the 'TE' stroke, the hand does not rest on the drum

like the other hand, but floats slightly above it. The hand is held above the drum by approximately three inches; this we will call the starting position. The fingers are split into two striking units: Unit 1, the index finger; and Unit 2, the second, third and fourth fingers.

The fingers are held flat, not bent like the 'GE' stroke. The wrist should not drop down below the rim of the drum. With the hand in the starting position above the centre of the drum, strike first with the three fingers, then with the index finger in the very centre of the drum. The fingers should be straight and should hit the drum flat, staying on for a millisecond afterwards to avoid any unwanted

resonance. The sound you are aiming for is a sharp, closed, staccato type of sound.

The thumb should be relaxed and should be quite close to, but not touching the index finger. Most importantly, it should not stick out or dangle down the side of the drum, otherwise you lose some of the power of the striking units (see **Figures 4 and 5**).

Music Examples A-E are a set of patterns to help get you started with these strokes. We will continue our tabla travels next month. Ciao for now. ♦