

THE PART OF PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS IN SOUTH INDIAN MUSIC

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Music in the traditional concept consists of music proper as well as dance. Music proper comprises vocal and instrumental music (*geetha* and *vadya*). The musical instruments are broadly classed into the stringed, wind and percussion varieties. The last is of two types, one in which the sound is produced by striking on a stretched membrane (*avanaddha*, membranophones) and the other in which the sound is produced by striking a piece of metal or wood with another (*ghana*, autophones).

Tala is the principal controlling factor in music and dance. If the latter is conceived as an elephant that runs riot, it is the goad that keeps it under control. So says the Shastra—

तीर्यत्रिकं तु मत्तेभस्तालस्तस्याङ्कशो मतः ।

It is the percussion instruments that are largely used for Tala, the *ghana* being used to indicate the beats and the *avanaddha* for playing the other *angas* also in addition and as a cross accompaniment when used in concerts. But it may be remembered that there are exceptions to this. The stringed *Gettuvadya* resembling a *Tambur*, for example, is used for Tala by striking with rods on the strings. The *Edakka*, because of the potentialities of its tender skin can be used as a *Ganavadya* as was well demonstrated by Sankara Marar or Trichur, who used to play on it kritis of Tyagaraja to the accompaniment of Violin and *Mridanga*.

Music in Indian conception is more sacred than secular. The *Saman* chant is purely Vaidic and the *Marga gitas* with their set phrases and sounds are ritualistic, as in the *Shadjikapala* with its twelve *kalas*—

1. ऋषट्, ऋषट्,
2. खट्वाङ्गधरं

3. दंष्ट्राकरालं
4. तदित्सदृशजित्
5. हो हो हो हो हो हं. हो हो
6. बहुरूपवदनं घनघोरनादं
7. हो हो हो हो हो हो हो हो
8. ऊं ऊं हां रौं हौं हौं हौं
9. नृमुण्डमण्डितं
10. हं हं कह कह हं हं
11. कृतविकटमुखं
12. नमामि देवं भैरवं

We find its association with religious ritual indicated also in Veena music being laid down for ceremonies like the Seemantonnayana and in the names of Suddhatanas being named after sacrifices like Agnisthoma, Jyotisthoma, Vajapeya and Rajasuya in ancient texts. Even music which is erotic and, therefore, apparently secular, is elevated to a superior plane by conceiving it as an expression of divine love and ecstatic mysticism. The musical instruments too are given a divine origin and many assigned a presiding deity.

So far as the percussion instruments are concerned Nandikesvara is the chief deity. In Kerala, in particular, where the percussion instruments have an important part in temple ritual, several rites are laid down in the form of *samskaras* for invoking Nandikesvara in the principal drum called by the generic name Mridanga, be it the Mridanga proper, the Mizhavu, Pani or Timila. These include Punyaha, Homa, Vastradharana and Yajnopavita and all the eight *samskaras* from Garbhadhana to Upanayana. The following sloka gives us some idea in this connection.

पीठेन्यस्य मृदङ्गमिष्टगणपो नान्वादिपुण्याहकृत्
तद्भूतानि विशोध्य नन्दचित्तिमत् स्नानान्तवस्त्रावृतः ।
होमोष्टध्रुवसंस्क्रियो यदि तदा दत्तोपवीतादिकं
प्राच्यर्तितोष्य च राजयेद् गुरुरथ प्रावारको वादयेत् ॥

More details are available in manuals relating to temple Tantra. Just as there are rituals for the consecration in the drum, there are rituals for the ceremonial desecration also when it gets damaged or broken. In fact, these are more elaborate and when the entire process is over and the deity separated from it, it is to be buried if made of wood and molten if made of metal.

The Jatis, what are technically called '*Patas*' in ancient texts, of the percussion instruments represented by Pataha, are stated to have arisen from the five faces of Siva, seven groups from each, as for instance, Ekasara constituted of किट तक किट तक from Sadyojata, Sancharavilikhi constituted

of शों गि ण त क्षा from Vmadeva, Utsara constituted of द न्ध रि कि द न्ध रि कि from Aghora, Utphulla constituted of न न गि न ख रि ख रि from Tatpurusha and Samaskhalita constituted of तर्हे तर्हे ऋ from Isana, to cite but one from each.

The temple music has its own ensemble of percussion instruments among which the Edakka, Timila and Maddalam of the *ayanaddha* variety and Chengila and Kaimani of the *ghana* variety are particularly important for ritualistic service. On what is called *kriyanga* or daily routine service like Sribhutabali, the ensemble consists of Timila, Veekkuchenda, Chengila, Kaimani and Sankha. The Sankha is blown at the commencement, the Timila is the principal instrument and is used for playing the jatis, the Veekkuchenda and Chengila are for indicating the talangas and the Kaimani, which is sometimes dispensed with, is for the beats. It is interesting to note that in Kerala there are special Talas like Mudakkutala, Anchamtala, Munamtala, Skatutala, Sambhutala, Kondanachitala etc., for different deities propitiated. Details about these are available in works like *Talavadya-vidhana*. We also find the Tala-oriented *Panchavadya* in the temple music of Kerala consisting of Timila and Maddala as the principals, Edakka and Elattalam as subsidiaries and Sankhu, Kombu and Kuzhal as accessories. There is another percussion orchestra the *Chendamela* with Chenda as the principal, Elattala and Chengila as the subsidiaries, sometimes with the addition of Kombu and Kuzhal as the accessories, in which the Panchari, Adanta, Chempata and Champa melas are played within the temple Prakara, and Pandimela which is like Adanta but with changing jatis with change of Kala, outside. There is again the *Tayambaka* in which the Tala is elaborately ramified on the Chenda in a set pattern and in a prescribed order. We also find in certain temples, service with Chenda to the accompaniment of Maddala and Elattala during specified times in the day. In temples of Tamil Nadu we find service with Suddhamaddala or Mridanga alone after the last puja in the night. It is significant that in the processions of the deity during festivals in the Padmanabhaswami temple in Trivandrum, the Mullamoodu Bhagavatars of the Palace troupe sing songs in praise of Padmanabha in the concert fashion with niraval and svaram, while moving along with the procession, but the singing is preceded by Mridanga for a while to the accompaniment of Kuzhittalam, generally in Jhampa tala.

Leaving temple music and turning to concert music in South India, we find Mridanga to be the chief percussion instrument with Ghatom, Kinjira and Morsing as its non-essential supporters and rarely the Gettuvadya also, for vocal, Veena and Flute, and Taval for Nagaswaram. The Mridanga with its sweet and resonant tone has a unique place. It serves not only to indicate the Talangas but as a crossaccompaniment displaying its own jatis. The Mridangadhvani is auspicious in itself and in combination. The Mridanga plays the Tala in its entirety and contributes to the maintenance of time and tempo in the concert. The loudness and reverberation of

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its sound cannot be claimed by the Ghatom or the Kinjira. It is, therefore, very appropriate that the Mridanga has a hallowed place in the concert.

The qualities of a Mridanga player are laid down in the sloka

धीरो वाद्यविशारदः प्रवचनः पाटाक्षरव्यसक-
स्तालाभ्यासरतः समस्तगमकप्रौढप्रकाशक्षमः ।
नानावाद्यविवर्तनर्तनपटुः स्वभ्यस्तगीतक्रमः
सन्तुष्टो मुखवादको द्रुतकरो मार्दङ्गिकः कीर्तितः ॥

It means: The man who plays on the Mridanga should be bold and not nervous. He should have fully mastered the instrument. He should be able to anticipate the musician. He should be able to produce the jatis distinctly. He should correctly play the tala. He should have ability to produce in his instruments all the gamakas. He should have knowledge of the nature of all instruments and also dance and should have learnt vocal music. He should have contentment and a happy face. He should apply his hands deftly to the instrument.

Some of the qualities mentioned here are particularly noteworthy. One is that the Mridangist should have knowledge of vocal music and also (preferably) of other instruments and dance. This is because Mridanga is an accompaniment and its player can do justice to the concert only if he knows well about what he accompanies, whether it is vocal music, an instrument like Veena or flute, or dance. The knowledge of the specialities of these makes him respond well to the particular needs. Another is the ability to bring out prominently the gamakas in consonance with the rendering of the artiste. It should be borne in mind that every gamaka has its significance whether it is in song or dance and this will be evident when the drummer also presents it correctly. The third is the capacity to anticipate so as to have full synchronisation with the main artist, to be abreast with him and not to have even slight discord or fall short of or overstep even by the fraction of a syllable.

The *Sangitaratnakara* enumerates the requisites of a percussionist as follows:-

हस्तकोणप्रहारज्ञो गीतवादनकोविदः ।
यतिताललयाभिज्ञो पाटञ्जः पञ्चसञ्चवित् ॥
दशहस्तगुणोपेतः पात्राभिप्रेतवादकः ।
आतोद्यच्चनित्वज्ञः समादिग्रहवेदिता ॥
गीतवादननृत्यस्थच्छिद्रछादनपण्डितः ।
ग्रहभोक्षप्रदेशज्ञो गीतनृत्तप्रमाणवित् ॥

वाद्ये समस्तभेदज्ञो रूपरेखान्वितस्तथा ।
 उद्घट्टनपटुः सर्ववाद्यभेदविवेचकः ॥
 नादवृद्धिक्षयापत्तिकोविदो वादको वरः

Briefly stated, the main things mentioned here are the ability to apply properly the hand or the stick as the case may be, capacity to play in consonance with the song and producing the proper jatis with necessary pause and keeping the tempo, Knowledge of the acoustic properties of the instrument handled, correct observance of the grahas like Sama, knowledge of the correspondence between the starting and ending notes, correct comprehension of the duration of a phrase and skill in the modulation of the tone.

Some of these too require special attention. One is the skill in covering up the lapses in the singing or in the instrumental rendering or in dancing. This is very important and marks a concrete step in the cooperation of the percussionist in the success of the performance. Another is the endurance in following the singer and playing according to his desire so that he feels that he is deriving proper support from the drummer. The third is the dexterity in the proper modulation of the tone in keeping with the *sthayi* of the svaras.

Ten requirements for the drummer's hands are also laid down in the lines:-

वाञ्छानुगो दृढो व्यक्तो स्निग्धो दृढनखो लघू ।
 विषेयाङ्गुलिसञ्चारौ स्वेदहीनौ जितश्रमौ ॥
 युक्तप्रहारौ च करौ प्रोक्तौ दशगुणाविति ।

These are the ability to play as wished, firmness (of the sound), clarity (of the jatis), strong nails (to enable the production of certain sounds), ease in playing, agility of fingers, absence of perspiration, freedom from fatigue and skill to strike according to need.

There is no need for us to elaborate on these. Suffice to say that the factors laid down here as conducive to the success of a percussionist hold good to this day and every artist who takes to the instrument will do well to follow them scrupulously.

A word now about the Mridanga in modern concert. Full harmony and understanding between the main musician, be he the vocalist or the instrumentalist, and the Mridangist is quite essential for concord in the concert and consequent success. The Mridangist should be able to follow as well as anticipate every rendering of the musician and be always aware of the fact that his role is not insignificant and he has much to contribute to favourable audience reaction. The musician, on his part, should look

upon the accompanist with sympathy and cheer him whenever he deserves or needs it. The one is the *alter ego* of the other and both should be always conscious of this fact. The Mridangist, again, should have proper rapport with the other percussionists, if any, like those handling Ghatom, Kinjira and Morsing, keeping in mind their specialities and limitations, what the Lakshanakara lays down as *sarvavadyabhedavivechaka*, having full knowledge of the distinctive aspects of different instruments that are played along with his own.

The *Taniyavarttanam*, as is well known, is an item in a concert for the display of the skill of the percussionist independently of the vocalist. At least in certain places this used to be considered as an interval time for the audience to relax over a cup of tea or rejoice with chewing betel, without being aware that this is an indirect insult to the percussionist who then tries to give the best of himself by ramifying the Tala in all its aspects and presenting it in all its colour. This attitude is now fast changing and the Rasikas are attuning themselves to the Mridanga solo. It is, therefore, time for the Mridangist to consider whether the Tani cannot be rendered more frequently than now in Talas like Rupaka and Jhampa and whether it should be confined to the conventional Chaturarajati or Tisrajati Triputa. Of course, an understanding with the vocalist is necessary here too. It is desirable that the Mridangist develops the art of playing for Tana as is done in the Nararatrimandapa in Trivandrum.

A modern innovation that draws our attention is the adoption sometimes of some percussion instruments for Ganavadyas with which they are not usually associated. Such are the adoption of Mridanga in place of Taval for Nagasvara and the adoption of Taval in place of Mridanga for Violin. It may be noted that the conventional allotment is based on the tonal quality of the instrument and the consonance and harmony it will generate with the instrument it accompanies. The Taval, for instance, with its loud timbre suits well the Nagasvara which itself is loud in tone and is played in the open or in large enclosures. It ill suits the gentle Violin. Similar in effect is the Mridanga in Nagasvaram concert although this experiment is not quite new, but started by an eminent artists several decades ago. The choice of the percussion instrument may, therefore, be what will appeal to the aesthetic sense of the connoisseur and not grate on his ears.

While an orchestra or Talavadyakatcheri consisting of a variety of percussion instruments is quite welcome and should be encouraged, too many of them as accompaniments in a musical concert sometimes tilts the emphasis from the Gana to the Tala. So proper balance is desirable between the element of song and the element of Talavadya.