

Preface

This book is an introduction to the tabla as taught by Alla Rakha. It is also Ustad Alla Rakha's introduction to his Punjab Style of solo tabla performance, with its characteristic compositions and manner of striking the drum. Alla Rakha selected the compositions to be included in the book; the finger placement photographs are of Alla Rakha's hands, and the accompanying tape cassette is a recording of Alla Rakha playing, reciting, and teaching these compositions.

For many readers this book will also be an introduction to "tal," the Indian grammar of rhythmic improvisation. If you are someone who appreciates the rhythmic ingenuity of tabla players and would like to learn some of their musical strategies -- even without learning to play the tabla -- then this book was written with you in mind, as well as for the tabla student. The reader who is content to learn the rhythmic solfeggio and theory can safely skip the "Interchapters," which contain details of drumming technique.

Indian music and western musicians

A number of western musicians have incorporated Indian rhythms into their playing, even to the extent of collaborating with Indian musicians. A few examples are Yehudi Menuhin, John McLaughlin, the late Don Ellis, Tom Scott, and Paul Horn. Western percussionists are well aware that drums have musical potential beyond keeping the beat and imitating battle sounds. A few percussionists who have studied and applied Indian rhythm are Emil Richards, Ed Shaughnessy, Collin Walcott, and John Bergamo. A study of tabla compositions develops the sense of "linear" rhythm -- the feeling for long and complex phrases. This Indian approach to rhythm can complement African or Afro-Latin approaches, which emphasize the "vertical," contrapuntal sense of rhythm -- the

coordination of two or more contrastive movements.

The key to Indian rhythm is the "bol." A bol is a one-syllable name for a drumstroke. When the bols are properly recited they take on the same rhythm as the drum composition they represent. When the bols of a composition are memorized, they can serve as a basis of improvisation; bol phrases can be rearranged, much as the phrases of a sentence can be rearranged. This is the essence of Indian rhythmic improvisation; the speech capacity is enlisted in the service of music.

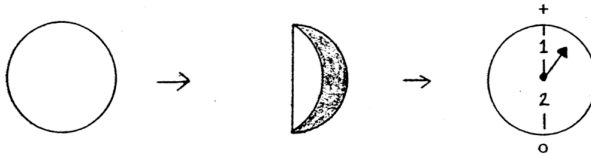
The cardinal rule of Indian rhythmic improvisation is that the musical phrases must fit into a recurring time frame called a "tal," a rhythmic cycle. A tal is a cycle of accented and unaccented beats, similar to the poetic meter underlying a line of verse (such as iambic pentameter). The challenge to the musician comes in improvising without repeating himself or losing track of the tal. To the novice this may seem a hindrance to free improvisation, but to the master musician the tal provides a frame which can be filled in clever and surprising ways. A notable example is the "tihai," a rhythmic device in which a single phrase is played three times, with the very last stroke falling on the first beat of a new cycle. The phrases of the tihai seem to go out of phase with the tal, only to mesh on the final stroke with an air of finality. This sense of resolution makes the tihai indispensable as a coda in Indian music, yet tihais are practically unknown outside of India. Theoretically tihais could be used in any kind of music which uses phrases of fixed length (such as the four-bar phrases of jazz, rock, or marching drum cadences).

Another happy consequence of establishing a rhythmic cycle is that it permits the musician to play at different speeds without affecting the overall pace of the music. A good example is the "tipalli gat," one of the compositions in this book. In the tipalli a phrase is played three times at succes-

CHAPTER ONE

Keeping Tal

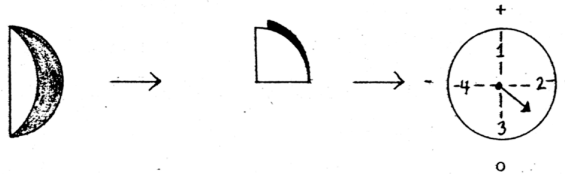
A tal is a repeating pattern of accents. The corresponding English term is "rhythmic cycle." A tal can be visualized as the face of a clock.



Imagine a clock face that has been folded in half. At the top of the clock is sam (pronounced 'sum'), the main accent of the cycle. At the bottom of the clock is khālī, the secondary accent of the rhythmic cycle. One sweep of the hand around the clock, from sam to sam, makes one cycle of the tal. The sam marks both the end of an old cycle and the beginning of a new cycle.

The symbol for sam is the plus (+): the symbol for khali is the circle (o).

Folding the clock in half a second time gives two minor accents,

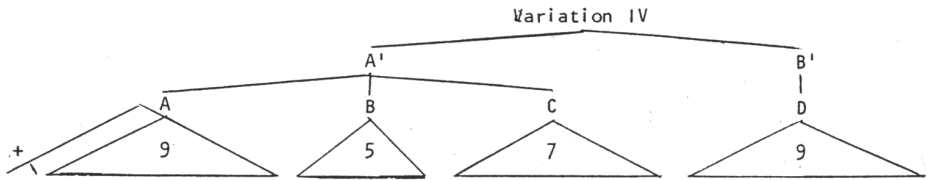


each of which is called tālī. Tali means "handclap."

The symbol for tali is the dash (-).

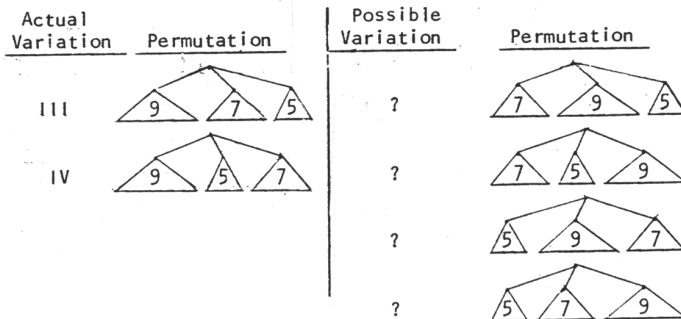
Lesson 4.4 Second kaida: Variation IV

+ gi na ti ta ti ta ti ta | Dha ge na, ti ta Dha ge na,
 o ti ta ti ta Dha ge na, Dha | ti Dha ge na tin na gi na
 + ki na ti ta ti ta ti ta | Ta ke na, ti ta Ta ke na,
 o dhi ta dhi ta Dha ge na, Dha | ti Dha ge na dhinna gi na
 Practice sequence: as the previous variations



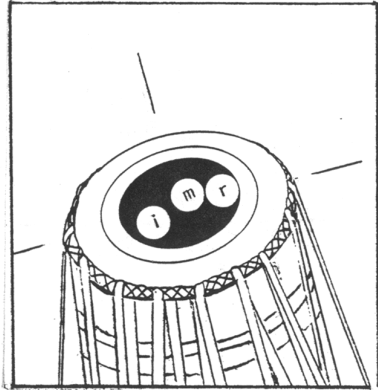
+ ginatita titatita Dhagena,ti taDhagena, titatita Dhagena,Dha tiDhagena tinnagina
 o kinatita titatita Takena,ti taTakena, dhitadhita Dhagena,Dha tiDhagena dhinnagina

Did you notice that this variation is a re-ordering of the groups in the A¹-phrase of the previous variation? Since 9 strokes plus 7 strokes plus 5 strokes will always equal 21 strokes not matter in what order they are played, then every possible reordering of these phrases will be a permissible variation on the kaida theme for tintal. A re-ordering of phrases within a kaida variation is usually called a "permutation." There are six permutations of the phrases:

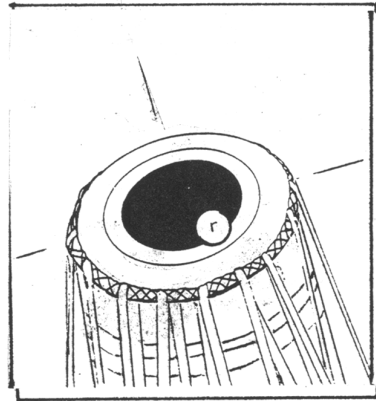


Tipalli Gat

tr kr^1 is a special way of playing tirikit.



tr is played with all three playing fingers of the right hand. First the ring and middle fingers strike as grace notes, followed by the index finger.



kr begins with the stroke ki on the bayan (Interchapter B) played as a grace note, followed by the stroke t played with the ring finger.

1. tr and kr are each pronounced as two taps of a trill, rather than as the corresponding sounds in "truck" and "crumb" in American English.