

Appreciating Hindustani Music
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Lecture 23

Tabla as Keeper of Tala in Khayal

Tabla is generally spoken of as percussive accompaniment, but its role in Khayal and instrumental music is more than that. The theka played on the tabla is actually the time keeper for the ensemble - for all the musicians on stage and indeed for the audience who follow the music.

That is, the musicians performing as well as the audience have only the theka of the tala performed on the tabla as a reference for time or tala. Let us look at tala very briefly in the historical context that is it.

Tala is extensively discussed in the textual tradition and one description of tala is that it is the tala that provides a common ground for all the performers. So, for instance when there are various instruments and various musicians are playing them, how do they come on the same ground, how do they synchronize? It is tala which does that in this music. Other kinds of music have other devices, but for our music it is tala that brings all of them on the same page as it were, for all musicians who are performing. And in fact, the audience. They all are on the same page, they know, they share that time. And this tala needs to be made available to all musicians and the audience for that matter. That is, if tala is a time cycle how do all the musicians and the audience follow the same time cycle? How does it happen?

So, there is either a visual or an auditory aid that helps them follow the tala cycle, that is, to know the structuring that the music should follow. Now, originally the cymbals, right cymbals, the taala, were the keepers of the tala in the music of the earlier treatises. In fact, they are referred to as tala.

And even today the cymbals that are used in Bharatanatyam and nagaswaram performances in Carnatic music are called talam. The instrument is called talam because its primary function and only function is to keep time or mark the tala. And so, in this case it is an auditory aid. In Carnatic music, some of you might have seen Carnatic performances - musicians perform the tala with their hands. That is the lead musician if she is a vocalist then they perform the tala with their hands constantly. And this is obviously a visual aid.

That is, everybody, all musicians and the audience have only the performance of the tala on the hand as the aid that tells you where the tala is, which part of the tala you are in and so on. Now the tabla offers an auditory aid too. So that, all performers including the audience are able to keep track of the time cycle which is indispensable to music making and appreciating.

What is the implication of this? So, as I said in Carnatic music the singer maintains the tala with her hands throughout the performance and the mridangam which is the percussive accompaniment in Carnatic music, the mridangam player is constantly improvising to actually accompany the music.

In fact, even in Dhrupad the tala is performed by the hand, by the singer and the pakhavaj player is for most part not playing just the theka, but is improvising because the tala is being maintained by the hand gestures.

Now, in Khayal the tala is rarely if ever performed through hand gestures during a performance and we have only the theka of the tabla as reference for tala. And there are two implications of this. First it frees up the vocalist, the singer in a unique way and we will talk more about this in the later lessons. That is one of the very unique features of Khayal. And when we say that Khayal is a freer idiom, this is one of the reasons, this is a very important reason why Khayal offers more freedom for improvisation.

But the other implication of the tabla being the time keeper as it were, the other implication is that the tabla, the tabla player only plays the theka for most part with, of course, mild variations depending on the music, but the tabla player never strays very far from the basic theka of the taal. Except of course, in specified places, the tabla player does, you know, indulge in improvisation when he gets a cue from the lead performer.

And then what happens is that the task of keeping time or the tala is entrusted to the melodic accompanist for those few avartanas. And the time or tala is maintained through the repeated rendition of a line of the Bandish or composition which also will give the tala framework.

Now how is it possible for the theka to stand in as time keeper, as being the reference point for the tala for everyone? That is how can one keep track of tala by listening to the tablas strokes the theka? How is it possible? Right? It cannot be trivial. I mean, how? It is not easy to just listen to the strokes of the tabla and know which part of the tala you are in.

An important factor here is the contrast between the khaali and the bhari. That is, this refers to the soundscape of the theka. Khaali literally means empty and bhari means filled. So, in the bhari portions of the theka the left drum or the dayyan or dagga is played with full resonance using the fingers and the base of the hand or the palm.

While in the khaali parts the left hand is just flat on the surface of the dagga and it is damped. And one cannot, but you know think of the sashadba and nisshadba kriyas that I referred to in the last video. Let us look at a demonstration of the khaali and bhari in the context of teental.

So, then teental which is divided into 4 equal parts of 4 matras each and has a structure of tali, tali, khaali, tali and this contrast between khaali and bhari, right? The tali is the bhari portions of the theka and the khaali is of course, a khaali.

So, this contrast between the khaali and bhari makes possible following the taal by listening to the theka. Then in this case the khaali portion that is the 9th 10th, 11th 12th. In fact, one should actually say 10, 11, 12, and 13th matras - they are khaali. That is, you do not have the dagga resonating there. So, its dha tin tin ta, ta dhin. So, then you the bhari portion follows this khaali portion and that gives a cue about which part of the tala, tala cycle we are in.

Of course tala is often retained in the head. The musicians, especially seasoned performers, simply carry the tala in their heads, but you know that is not easy for everyone. It is not easy for everyone to keep track of the tala just in the head when you know we are improvising in a slow 16 matra teentaal or even slower 12 maatraa ektal. It is not trivial. The soundscape of contrast between bhari and khaali is found in all talas. You might revisit the talas that were demonstrated in the last video and you can see.

So, again jhaptal for instance - dhi dhee na dhi dhi na ti na dhi dhi na. So, dhi na dhi dhi na both of them are bhari thi na is khaali dhi dhi na which is again bhari. So, you have bhari bhari khaali bhari and this when the khaali portion leads into, suddenly erupts into the bhari sound you know, when you are at a particular place in the tala cycle. So, that is how actually it works.

And needless to say being able to discern the tala soundscape and make out what stroke is being played. And you know being able to keep track of the tala cycle with the sound of the tabla strokes and theka while also singing - that is something that comes with considerable practice. But it will come with practice.

Now because Khayal frees up the performer from having to maintain the tala in his hand, transferring the role of time keeper or taal reference to the tabla and the tabla player the art of Khayal is unique.

This is especially stark in the case of the vilambit exploration as we will see soon. Khayal has a unique relation with tala. In the next video we will see how Khayal compositions are structured around tala.