

Rivers: A Rhythmic Journey to Varanasi!

By Shawn Mativetsky

Many people think of the tabla primarily as an accompaniment instrument. While it is true that the tabla plays a vital role as *taal*-keeper for vocalists and instrumentalists, and is prominently featured in the accompaniment of *kathak* dance, it also has a rich solo tradition. Dating back to the late 18th century, the Benares *gharana* of tabla, founded by legendary musician Pandit Ram Sahai (1780–1826), has a long history of tabla artists who excel at solo tabla performance. Pandit Ram Sahai himself is said to have performed tabla solo for seven consecutive nights, in the court of Nawab Wazir Ali Khan in Lucknow. After this magnificent solo performance, Pandit Ram Sahai then returned to Varanasi (while musicians continue to use the name Benares, the city is now officially known as Varanasi), where he went into seclusion, making changes to the techniques, creating new forms, and composing new repertoire; these innovations resulted in what we now know as the Benares *gharana* of tabla.

Of course, tabla solos are not relegated to performers of the Benares style alone; there are six distinct lineages, or *gharanas*, of tabla playing, each with its own variation on technique, repertoire, and interpretation. The first tabla *gharana* to have developed is that of Delhi, followed by offshoots Ajrada and Lucknow. The Farukhabad and Benares *gharanas* connect back to the Lucknow *gharana*. The Punjab *gharana* is said to have developed independently, and was until relatively recently a *pakhawaj gharana*.

My Guru, Pandit Sharda Sahai (1935–2011), was renowned for his solo performances. He was the torchbearer of the Benares *gharana*, a direct descendant of Pandit Ram Sahai. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to learn from him, not just about the tabla and Indian music, but so much more. His tabla solos are still referred to as THE authoritative example of the Benares style of tabla playing, and he was highly respected by musicians both in and outside of the Indian music tradition.

The art of the tabla solo in the Benares *gharana* is highly developed and complex. A full-length tabla solo typically lasts upwards of one hour and demonstrates the full breadth of the repertoire. In a solo performance, the sonic nuances of the tabla are explored, showcasing the spontaneous creativity and virtuosic technique of the artist. The solo itself is made up of numerous compositions, strung together in a specific way, according to the performance practices of the tradition. Some compositions are fixed and are to be played as they have been passed down through the generations, while others form seeds for theme-and-variation improvisation. Some compositions are cyclical, fitting comfortably into the *taal*, while others are cadential, causing friction with the underlying rhythmic cycle, creating an effect of tension and release. One can view the tabla solo form like any good story, with an introduction, development, and conclusion. Whether the solo lasts five minutes or five hours, it should follow this overall structure in some way.

A tabla solo can be set to any rhythmic cycle, but the principal *taal* for tabla solos is most definitely *Teentaal*, a 16-beat cycle. This is because most repertoire for tabla has been initially composed (and taught) in *Teentaal*, and so a solo in this cycle will showcase the compositions in their original form. Additionally, the cycle's subdivision into four *vibhags* (subdivisions of the *taal*) of four *matras* (beats) each is intuitive and easy for the audience to follow. Of course, other *taals* are sometimes used, such as *Rupaktaal* (seven beats) or *Jhaptaal* (ten beats),

in addition to some less commonly used *taals*. However, these tend to require modification of the original materials in order to fit the structure of the given *taal*. This is why most tabla soloists tend to prefer *Teentaal* for their longer solo performances.

Like any *taal*, *Teentaal* is counted by a system of claps and waves (essentially, an upside-down clap), called *tali* and *khali*. It receives a clap on beats 1, 5, and 13, and a wave on beat 9. Beats in between the claps and waves are counted by touching the palm with the pinky, ring finger, and middle finger. So, we would keep time for *Teentaal* as follows:

Figure 1. Keeping Time in *Teentaal*

1 Clap	2 pinky	3 ring finger	4 middle finger
5 Clap	6 pinky	7 ring finger	8 middle finger
9 Wave	10 pinky	11 ring finger	12 middle finger
13 Clap	14 pinky	15 ring finger	16 middle finger

When keeping time on the tabla itself, we play what is called the *theka*. Each *taal* has a single *theka* associated with it. This helps listeners hear the structure of the *taal*, essentially making the structure of claps and waves apparent through sound.

Figure 2 *Teentaal Theka*

1 Dha	2 Dhin	3 Dhin	4 Dha
5 Dha	6 Dhin	7 Dhin	8 Dha
9 Dha	10 Tin	11 Tin	12 Na
13 Na	14 Dhin	15 Dhin	16 Dha

To get yourself acquainted with *Teentaal*, try counting the beats out loud while keeping time with claps, waves, and finger counts, as described in Figure 1. Next, try speaking the *theka* in Figure 2, while keeping *taal* with your hands. After you are comfortable with this, as an additional challenge, try speaking the *theka* at different speeds, while your hands keep *taal* at a constant speed. For example, after warming up by speaking the *theka* as quarter notes, try speaking it as eighth



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notes (two cycles of *theka* will fit into one cycle of the *taal*), and then as sixteenth notes (four cycles of the *theka* will fit into one cycle of the *taal*). If you want to take this even further, try speaking the *theka* at quarter note triplets (three cycles of the *theka* will fit into two cycles of the *taal*) and eighth-note triplets (three cycles of the *theka* will fit into one cycle of the *taal*).

A tabla solo is typically accompanied by a repeating melody, called *lehra*, which provides an aural outline of the underlying cycle. This melody loops throughout the entire solo, providing the performer and audience with a constant reference point. For my PASIC showcase concert, the *lehra* will be performed on harmonium by my good friend and Ensemble Duniya colleague Neeraj Mehta.

A typical Benares-style tabla solo will open with *bhumika*, which literally translates as “introduction.” This allows the audience to settle in to the *taal*, while also allowing the soloist to warm up. During the *bhumika*, which is fully improvised, the *taal* is not alluded to in any obvious fashion, with phrases floating over the barline, so to speak. One will hear resonant sounds of the *dahina*, but no resonant sounds of the *baya*.

Once we hear the bass tones of the *baya*, this signifies the transition to the *uthaan*, which translates as “rising up.” The *uthaan*, which is also improvised, allows the tabla player to explore various subdivisions of the beat, starting slowly, and moving up through several subdivisions. The *uthaan* ends with a *tihai*, a rhythmic cadence made up of a phrase repeated three times, where the last note of the last phrase lands on *sam* (beat one of the cycle). Beat one is vitally important, as it is the anticipation of “one” that allows the tabla player to play with expectations and to create tension and release through rhythmic dissonance. The repeated *tihai* phrase moves around within the cycle, creating tension, which eventually is resolved when it finally lands on beat one.

Try reciting a couple of cycles of *Teentaal theka* while keeping *taal* with your hands, and then continue to keep *taal* while reciting either of the *tihais* in Figures 3 and 4. You will certainly feel some tension between your efforts to keep *taal*, while speaking a *tihai* at the same time. In fact, if one doesn’t keep *taal* in some way, the effect of the *tihai* is greatly lessened. The more that one is aware of the *taal*, the more the rhythmic nuances and interplay of the tabla solo become apparent. One will often see audience members keeping *taal* at performances of Indian classical music, and reacting audibly to *tihais* and other enjoyable musical moments, either with applause or vocal exclamations such as “*kya baat hai*” or “*Wah! Wah!*” This audience interaction is important, as this positive feedback lets

the performers know that the audience is understanding the musical language and enjoying the performance. Just like at a jazz performance, you don’t have to wait to the end to applaud.

Figure 3 *Tihai* 1

DhaDha	TeTe	DhaDha	TinNa
Dha-	--	DhaDha	TeTe
DhaDha	TinNa	Dha-	--
DhaDha	TeTe	DhaDha	TinNa
Dha			

Figure 4 *Tihai* 2 (*Chakradar*)

DhaDha	TeTe	DhaDha	TinNa
Dha-	DhaDha	TinNa	Dha-
DhaDha	TinNa	Dha-	DhaDha
TeTe	DhaDha	TinNa	Dha-
DhaDha	TinNa	Dha-	DhaDha
TinNa	Dha-	DhaDha	TeTe
DhaDha	TinNa	Dha-	DhaDha
TinNa	Dha-	DhaDha	TinNa
Dha			

The next phase of the solo, the development section, features improvisation of variations on fixed themes. These themes, and the rules and strategies for improvisation, are passed down through the generations. The principal theme-and-variation form is called *kaida*, which literally translates as “rule.” In *kaida* improvisation, the tabla player must maintain the structure of the *kaida*, which is akin to poetry: drum poetry! The improvised variations can use only the thematic material found within the source *kaida*, and the improvisations must follow in a gradual sequence. The second variation is based on the first; the third is based on the second, and so on. This highlights the spontaneous creativity of the performer.

The Benares tabla solo development typically begins with a special theme-and-variation composition called *Benarsi Theka*, which is a three-part improvisation alluding to the *alaap*, *chor*, and *jhala* heard at the opening of a *raga* performance. This will be followed by any number of other theme-and-variation forms, such as *kaida*, *rela*, *bant*, and *angruthana*. The goal is to explore each composition to the fullest, pushing one’s limits, and taking the audience on a rhythmic journey. Each theme-and-variation improvisation is concluded with a *tihai*. *Theka* is played between all items of the solo, as a return to home base, and functioning as a musical palate cleanser, so to speak.

Towards the end of the development section, fixed compositions are introduced. These must be performed as they have been passed down through the generations, with the utmost accuracy. Fixed compositions are typically played in at least two speeds. The composition is introduced slowly, where each sound can be individually appreciated. This is followed by a performance of the exact same composition at double speed, which completely changes the perception of the musical material, as new textures and contours become apparent, and the beauty of the composition is revealed. Any number of these fixed compositions, known as *gat*, *fard*, or *gat-fard*, can be performed.

While the introduction and development sections typically take place at a slow tempo, known as *vilambit laya*, the concluding section is normally at a moderate tempo, called *madhya laya*. Here, fixed compositions are featured, and are often recited before being played. Any number of *tukra*, *chakradar tukra*, *paran*, or *chakradar paran* can be performed, depending on the length of the solo and the mood of the performer. One will usually play *theka*, then speak the composition, followed by a performance of the same, and then return to the *theka*, and so on. Speaking the composition allows one to hear the poetry of the *bols* before the composition is played on the tabla—the same composition, performed both orally and percussively!

Try to speak this short *tukra*, while keeping *taal*:

Figure 5 *Tukra*

DhaDha	DinDin	NaNa	TeTeTeTe
KaTeTeKa	TeTeKaTa	Dha-KaTa	Dha-KaTa
Dha--Ka	TeTeKaTa	Dha-KaTa	Dha-KaTa
Dha--Ka	TeTeKaTa	Dha-KaTa	Dha-KaTa
Dha			

As with any music, the more one knows, the more nuances one can perceive. I hope that this introduction to the tabla solo form will help you to better understand and appreciate the art of the tabla solo as it is performed in the Benares *gharana*. I look forward to seeing you at PASIC, expertly following the structure of my tabla solo, keeping *taal* and feeling the *tihais*!

GLOSSARY

Baya: larger, bass drum of the tabla set, usually played by the left hand

Bhumika: literally, introduction; the improvisation that opens a tabla solo

Bol: From the Hindi verb *bolna*, literally to speak. Vocal syllables, representing the sounds of the tabla

Chakradar: when a *tihai* contains a smaller *tihai* nested within it

Dahina: smaller, treble drum of the tabla set, usually played by the right hand

Gharana: lineage, tradition

Kaida: a theme-and-variation form, with a composed theme, and improvised variations

Khali: literally, empty; a wave gesture (upside-down clap), used to keep *taal*, along with *tali*

Lehra: a repeating melody used to accompany a tabla solo

Matra: a beat

Pakhawaj: barrel shaped drum; the ancestor of tabla

Sam: the first beat of the cycle

Taal: rhythmic cycle

Tali: literally, clap; used to keep *taal* along with *khali*

Teentaal: a 16-beat rhythmic cycle

Tihai: a rhythmic cadence; a phrase repeated three times, so that the last note of the last phrase lands on a pre-determined beat, usually the *sam* (first beat)

Uthaan: literally, rising up; a powerful improvisation that immediately follows the *bhumika*

Vibhag: subdivision of the *taal* into smaller groupings of beats, similar to the bar or measure in Western music

Shawn Mativetsky is considered one of Canada's leading ambassadors of the tabla, and he is a pioneer in bridging the worlds of Western and Indian classical music. Called an "exceptional soloist" by critic Réjean Beaucage, WholeNote's Andrew Timar adds that "as a leading disciple of the renowned Sharda Sahai, he has serious street cred." Mativetsky is highly sought-after as both performer and educator, and is active in the promotion of the tabla and North Indian classical music internationally. For more information, visit www.shawnmativetsky.com
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