



#251: Rhythm of the beat: The culture, meaning and meter of the tabla

VOICEOVER

Welcome to Up Close, the research, opinion and analysis podcast from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

JENNIFER MARTIN

I'm Jennifer Martin, thanks for joining us. As far as musical instruments go, the tabla looks rather humble. It's similar to the bongos. This membranophone percussion instrument consists of two smallish sized drums and they're usually made from teak or rosewood that have been hollowed out to half its depth. Now, images of the tabla or double hand drums of similar appearance have been found in Hindu temple carvings going back as far as 500 BCE but, as we're going to discover in this special musical episode of Up Close, the tabla is not only an essential part of Indian music, it's influence has been felt in cultures around the globe. Devotees speak of its complexity and its subtlety with reverence and indeed, mastering the complex rhythms and techniques takes years of practice. So who else better to unravel the mysteries of this ancient instrument and introduce us to its charms than a tabla veteran? We need look no further than our own University of Melbourne campus, where development studies scholar Dr Nadeem Malik lectures in the School of Social and Political Sciences. Not only is Nadeem an accomplished tabla player but he's also an artist who graduated with Honours from the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan. And by the way, that was Nadeem you heard on the tabla at the start of the program. We'll be hearing more of his playing later in the show. Nadeem, thank you so much for joining us.

NADEEM MALIK

Thanks a lot, thanks for inviting me.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Now, if I could ask you first of all to describe these instruments to us.

NADEEM MALIK

Well, as you have already indicated, tabla is a pair of tuned drums played with both hands and the principle percussion instrument used in South Asia, especially Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, even Nepal and some other countries. The pair of

drums consist of high pitched, precisely tuned right hand drum, which is in Hindu and Urdu called as dahina - dahina means right - and a low-pitched, less precisely tuned left hand drum the bayan, which means - in Hindi and Urdu it means left hand drum. The dahina is responsible for many of the resonant ringing and clicking sounds, which are known as bol or syllable. In Hindi and Urdu we call it bol, b-o-l. The bayan provides the bass, which and is recognisable for its soothing bass sounds. The combination of bol drums lends itself to a vast repertoire of bol combinations and permutations. Now, as you've already mentioned, mastery of this is simple yet complex, requires remarkable dexterity, knowledge and years of disciplined practice.

JENNIFER MARTIN

So, Nadeem, could you tell us about the history of the tabla?

NADEEM MALIK

Yeah, the name tabla probably derived from the Arabic word for the drum called tabl, which is spelled as t-a-b-l and possibly to some extent the Turkish word daval, which is spelled as d-a-w-a-l. another popular notion is that Amir Khusuro, a great Sufi poet in the middle ages in India, invented tabla by splitting the pakawaj into two drums. Pakawaj is another Indian instrument much older than tabla but there is hardly any written evidence available of this. One thing is definitely for sure, is that the tabla develop as a hybrid drum influenced by all other drum instruments that existed prior to tabla. In particular, the mridangam and the pushkara and of course, pakawaj also has a lot of influence on tabla, especially on Punjab Gharana or Punjab school of tabla. So one really can't be too sure of the exact origin of this instrument, when it was created, how it was created. Some also have argued that during excavations of Mohenjodaro, the ancient Indian civilisation, there were some reliefs, which were found and in one of the relief a man is shown playing a set of drums, which resembles tabla. So there are different stories about it, you know. But most of gharana, or tabla schools, emerged probably in 18th century.

JENNIFER MARTIN

What does it mean to a culture to have this drumming music through it? How has it informed culture?

NADEEM MALIK

Well, this instrument is considered to be the heart of Indian folk and especially classical music and film music as well as Bollywood music. Indian music today is inconceivable without the rhythmic cycle provided by tabla. Also it has become an important instrument for Indian classical dance as well. The rhythmic cycles that it has - I will quote a modern Indian Punjabi poet here, who defines the rhythmic tradition in Punjab as something which is permanent like society, which stays there, you know, and which provides a kind of platform to the singer to perform or provides a certain meter, the way time provides you a certain platform to enjoy that player instinct, to master life and perfect life in such a way that life becomes a kind of instinct for you. But for that, there has to be some fixed platform, some meter, which sort of defines the very boundaries in which we can play. So different meters and different rhythm cycles of tabla, which have sort of incorporated rhythm cycles from

other instruments like *dol* and *pakawaj* also, acts as something, which is permanently there within Indian music and within Indian musical culture.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Nadeem, how long - if you can answer this question - to master - to truly master - the tabla?

NADEEM MALIK

There is no formula: it depends on talent as well. It can take three, four, five years easily, not to master; to master and get that maturity of sound and balance and tone, speed and the understanding of the complexity of beats, compositions, and then improvisation, the complexity that you create through improvisation, that takes many years. I can't sort of quantify this. I still do not call myself a master; I'm still a student and I'm still learning from some big gurus in the world of tabla but it takes many years.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Could you talk to us a little bit about the relationship between the student and the teacher?

NADEEM MALIK

Yeah, Indian music, until very recently, was not institutionalised. In Pakistan, still, there are hardly any formal institutions where music training is provided. Usually it has to be an individual initiative and you have to go to some individual guru to learn it, especially in Pakistan, although India has developed a lot of institutions now. Tabla and Indian music generally also was restricted to certain families. Gurus who were masters or maestros usually used to train their own sons - in some cases daughters as well - and they won't sort of pass on the tradition or that knowledge to people outside the family. These *gharanas* or families then developed certain styles, which are known as schools of tabla but *gharana* literally means 'family' and these were very much family oriented traditions. So it was very difficult for outsiders to learn from the guru what his own son or his close relative could learn.

JENNIFER MARTIN

You're listening to *Up Close*. I'm Jennifer Martin and we're learning about the history and the significance of the deceptively complicated musical instrument, the tabla. And guiding us on this journey is tabla player Dr Nadeem Malik. Nadeem, what is it that you love about the instrument? I mean people can't see you but you light up when you talk about it and they'll be able to hear how much you love it your playing.

NADEEM MALIK

Yes, first of all the sound fascinates me. You know, when I hear the sound, something happens to me. Secondly, when I started learning the complexity of the whole rhythm system it has been very, very fascinating and somehow resonates with your heartbeat, with your blood circulation, with the rhythm of life, I think. It resonates so well with the rhythm of life and the complexity of the rhythm of life and it's fascinating. It's one of the most complicated rhythm systems, that tabla contains, in

the world. I think it's one of the most complex rhythmic instruments.

JENNIFER MARTIN

So, Nadeem, could you talk us through the different schools of tabla or the different traditions?

NADEEM MALIK

Yeah, sure. There are six schools of tabla. The very first one was Delhi gharana, or school, then Lucknow, Ajarada, Farukhabad, Benares and then Punjab. Today the top two tabla players, Zakir Hussain and Ustad Tari Khan are from this Punjab gharana. The oldest is Delhi gharana and the style is famous for its vast and rich repertoire of kaidas. Now, kaida is a certain thematic composition, rhythmic composition within the tabla system. It is divided into what we call khali and bari. Hali means closed, peri means open. Open or closed is system of rhythm. For example if there are eight beats, the very first beat and the fifth beat is closed. So this is a beat system, which can be defined as based on open and closed kind of beats or absent and present. Then there is peshkar. Peshkar can be defined as introduction, when you perform solo tabla. You introduce the rhythm cycle through beshkar. So it's a kind of intro to a certain kaida and whatever you have to perform later on.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Nadeem, what's the role of the tabla in contemporary music? I'm thinking of Bollywood and pop culture.

NADEEM MALIK

You know, Bollywood and film music in fact has contributed significantly in terms of sustaining Indian classical traditions as well as other forms of Indian music, even folk music but increasingly, the film music or Bollywood music had been taking elements of what is known as Western harmony, whereas Indian classical music is based on melody not harmony, which precisely meant that there were a lot of instruments, new instruments, which were introduced in film music, Bollywood music, or for that matter, Lollywood music, which Pakistan film industry. And drum, for example, Western drum also became part of, nor fusion exactly but this very introduction of Western harmony within film music had given way to Western rhythmic systems as well, or rhythmic beat, but still tabla carries a very, very prominent position. And it's the heart of Bollywood music.

JENNIFER MARTIN

I'm Jennifer Martin and on Up Close this episode we're speaking with veteran tabla player and academic, Dr Nadeem Malik, about the fascinating instrument, the tabla. Now, Nadeem, we've sat you down at your tablas and after all the talk we're ready to actually hear you play. So let's take it away.

NADEEM MALIK

All right, so I'll play a kaida of teen taal, 16 beat, which I will turn into a [rela]. So there will be a certain improvisation. A rela literally means flood or rush and it's a fast beat rhythm cycle. The kaida that I'm now performing is [vocalization of rhythm

pattern].

JENNIFER MARTIN

Nadeem that was wonderful. Can you play us something else?

NADEEM MALIK

All right, another kaida. So the bol is [vocalization of rhythm pattern].

JENNIFER MARTIN

Thank you, Nadeem. We're still all ears if you'd like to play something else.

NADEEM MALIK

All right. [vocalization of rhythm pattern] because of shortage of time I'll just play this kaida but with double beat.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Nadeem I notice you'll sometimes vocalise the beat before you play it, so what's the role of vocalising in that way?

NADEEM MALIK

Well this is the whole Indian tabla beat system. The bols or the syllables and the combination of syllables and themes like notations, you know, you can write and you learn it by heart and then you try to produce the same sound that you vocalise on tabla. This is how you also can create new compositions, new themes and you can count also. This is a necessary part of learning but when you're accompanying some other artist, whether it's instrumentalist or vocalist, then you don't vocalise it. All right, another kaida: [vocalization of rhythm pattern]. These were 16 beat kaidas and then I will now play some seven beats. It's a lot slower but it's a seven beat rupak taal, which is odd. These were even. All right, this is the seven beat: [vocalization of rhythm pattern]. This is the kaida [vocalization of rhythm pattern]. This is the beat.

JENNIFER MARTIN

We're listening to Dr Nadeem Malik on the tablas here in the studio at Up Close. I'm Jennifer Martin. Nadeem, can you give us an example of the different playing styles of the tabla schools, or gharanas?

NADEEM MALIK

Yes, sure. I'll demonstrate a few examples, although there are a lot of subtle differences between gharanas and the way they perform tabla, although the grammar and the beats cycles and the rhythm system is the same. For example, Delhi gharana uses two fingers mostly. It's known as two-finger tabla, where they use the index finger and the ring finger most, whereas other schools, for example, Lucknow they use three fingers while playing, for example, rela. Punjab gharana performs it with the full hand. So this is for example, it's the same bol and the same syllable, same beat cycle, for example. [vocalization of rhythm pattern]. So if the Delhi gharana players with two fingers, like this. The same bols if played by Lucknow, they use three fingers and the sound is rather bolder but maybe less

subtle, for example. The same, for example, bols [when] are performed by Punjab gharana, or Benares, they use the whole hand and the sound is rather bolder but maybe less subtle than Delhi gharana, for example. So there are many other very subtle differences, which distinguish different gharanas.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Nadeem, there are various different folk styles, aren't there, found in different regions of South Asia. Could you demonstrate some of them for us?

NADEEM MALIK

So [I'll] perform folk beats of all provinces in Pakistan. This is Punjab folk beat. This then, when it's played faster. This was Punjab. Now the same four beat or eight beat cycle when it is performed in the province of Sindh it has a different flow. This is. This was Sindh. Next one is Northern Pakistan, which borders Afghanistan. Now, Balochistan, which borders Iran.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Can you give us an example of how tabla players use improvisation?

NADEEM MALIK

Yeah sure, so this is a six beat tala. I'll improvise you know, the way it is improvised in ghazal singing, where we start from simple beat cycle and make it goes towards complexity and improvise. This is six beat tala, which is counted like one, two, three, four, five, six, one - four, five, six, one, two, three, four, five, six, one, two, three, four, five six. And it's the same like when I improvise; this beat remains the same, for example. Right? So I'll start it again now.

JENNIFER MARTIN

Nadeem, that was so good, I want more. What else do you have?

NADEEM MALIK

All right, another kaida teen taal, 16 beat. [vocalization of rhythm pattern].

JENNIFER MARTIN

Nadeem, thank you so much for sharing your music with us today in the studio here at Up Close. It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you.

NADEEM MALIK

Thanks a lot, thanks for inviting me.

JENNIFER MARTIN

We've been speaking today with Dr Nadeem Malik, a tabla veteran, who is also a Development Studies scholar and lectures in the school of Social and Political Sciences here at Melbourne University. Relevant links, a full transcript and more info on this episode can be found at our website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia. This episode was recorded on Friday, May 24, 2013. Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric Van Bommel. Audio

engineering by Gavin Nebauer. Up Close was created by Eric Van Bommel and Kelvin Param. I'm Jennifer Martin. Until next time, goodbye.

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