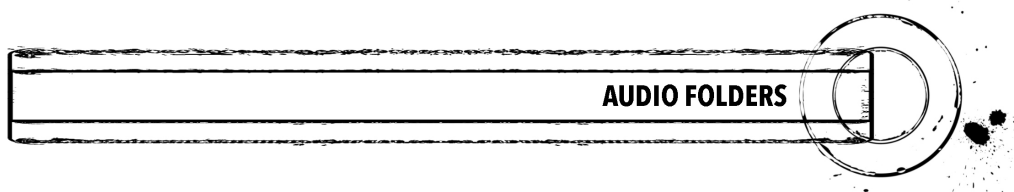




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INTRODUCTION

Kanjira is an instrument that sometimes terrifies as much as it inspires, with its fiery virtuosic technique and complex rhythmic developments. In the hands of a great master the instrument can really become a central feature of any musical setting. Besides all of this, there is a huge untapped potential for the instrument in the hands of contemporary and non-traditional percussionists the world over. I, for one have found so many applications for the instrument in pop, rock classical, jazz, film and avant-garde music. To me, it has the potential to become the new Cajon or Djembe of the modern percussion landscape. It's both compact and portable and doesn't have dozens of complex hand positions, finger motions and strokes as found on instruments such as the Indian Tabla. Once the basic strokes and sound production are set in place and the split-hand technique is fully understood, you can really start to get a lot of basic ideas happening quickly on this drum.



Nowadays, the Kanjira is most commonly found in classical Carnatic music from South India. One of the features of Carnatic music is the intense mathematical variation in the rhythmic structures. To grasp this takes years rather than months and is a complete lifetime's study for anyone. However, to use the instrument outside of the classical environment, one doesn't need to delve too deeply into the mathematical side of all this. For the purpose of our book, it makes sense to separate these two things out a little and analyse the techniques of the drum by using some more straightforward rhythmic structures more suited to someone starting out on the instrument. (For a more detailed introduction into some of these complex rhythms it might be worth referring to my book 'Indian rhythms for the drum set' (Hudson Music). This in itself is a complete introduction to some of the rhythms of North and South India.)

So, this really is 'KANJIIRA 101' and serves the purpose of opening the door and getting familiar with the basics: the playing position, how to hold the drum, how to strike the drum, the different hand positions, basic strokes, beginners'

exercises, playing grooves, embellishments and fills. Everything you need to know to get the drum in hand in the studio, on the stage or just at home alone or with a singer songwriter friend. The approach of this book to use notation instead of the traditional syllables is one that may raise some objections from the purists out there. To be honest, this is of little concern to me. What's much more important is to invite a whole new group of percussionists in the magical world of this drum and open the door for its integration into modern and contemporary music, whatever that may be. I will state here, and at various other points throughout the book that to study the drum within the traditional setting, you will need to get deeply into the phonetics and detailed rhythmic systems found in that music.

This drum has given me infinite pleasure and is always a head turner when you get it out and onto a mic. Hopefully this book will be your doorway into that musical world of one of the most portable percussion instruments out there. We have yet to see this instrument get truly exposed into contemporary music outside the Indian idiom but, when it does, it will make a huge impression. Enhanced low frequencies combined with sharp attack makes it an ideal 'all in one' percussion instrument. It is a drum with an extraordinary tonal range with a big impact, contrary to its diminutive size. I promise, if you spend some time with this instrument, you will not regret it.





1 - THE DRUM AND A LITTLE HISTORY

Kanjira, khanjira, or ganjira, is one of the main percussion instruments of the Carnatic classical music system of South India. Even within this tradition, the drum is quite a recent arrival. It took the mastery and genius of one man to change this. The late great G Harishankar was the musician who elevated this simple folk instrument into one of the mainstays of the Carnatic percussion world. Prior to this, it had been found in various folk forms across the whole of India and was only used for very simple and hypnotic folk grooves. You can still hear this style of playing on the instrument if you explore into the villages and rural areas of the country.

The drum itself is a very simple construction. A basic wooden shell with a solitary small brass jingle and a thin head, normally made from the skin of a monitor lizard. The shell of the kanjira is approximately 2 inches deep and the diameter approximately 7 or 8 inches wide. It is a single-headed drum. The skin is stretched taut over the shell and is glued on the outside surface edges.

Straight out of the factory, the drum is extremely high pitched, with the skin stretched very tight. When you hear the instrument in performance though, it actually has a very powerful low tone. This is achieved by the performer sprinkling water inside the drum on the head before and during the show. This moistens the head and reduces the pitch of the drum. However, it is very difficult to maintain the desired pitch for a prolonged period of time, so a kanjira player will need to have any number of kanjiras on stage with them. Each drum would be at varying degrees of 'wetness' and are switched when required, if the pitch of the drum in hand starts to get too high. Of course, if too much water is applied then the drum would lose all its tone and become equally useless, until it starts to dry out. This can take ten minutes or more depending on how waterlogged the head is. Managing these drums in performance is quite a task in its own right.

Thankfully there are alternatives to this dilemma. Companies such as Latin Percussion and Remo have drums with Mylar heads (a polyester film made from stretched polyethylene terephthalate) which stay at the perfect pitch. Many of these modern drums are also tuneable with a hex key, so the tuning can really be dealt with in detail. This also solves the current great difficulty in acquiring traditional Kanjira drums, even in India. The monitor lizard creature that is used for the skin of the drum is actually an endangered species so the Indian government has outlawed the use of these animals for this purpose. Altogether, the new Mylar head solution seems to be the way forward.

One other very important characteristic of the drum is the solitary pair of tiny brass jingles fixed into a hole in the shell. This adds a very sharp cut to the sound. The exact type of brass in the jingle is very specific to create the exact sound that suits the drum so well. By chance, one solution that works perfectly for this are the small Japanese coins that have a hole in the middle. They make the perfect Kanjira jingle and are used by a lot of top performers on the instrument.

2 - APPLICATIONS OF THE DRUM OUTSIDE OF INDIA

Kanjira has yet to really emerge as a popular drum amongst western percussionists. Personally, I think part of the reason for that is that people can often be overwhelmed by the complexity and extreme virtuosity of India's classical percussionists. They may not realise the folk roots of the instrument and the often very simple, yet very effective rhythms and techniques used on similar drums in rural Indian settings. To me, I see the huge potential of the drum as a perfect addition to any percussionist's instrument list. Beside myself, there have been a handful of western percussionists who have also felt this way. The late great John Bergamo was one of them and was the first person I ever saw playing Kanjira, even before I had seen an Indian player. John was an inspired musical explorer and had included many lesser-known drums in his world of rhythm. He was the first player to get a major drum company to manufacture a Kanjira with a synthetic head. The 'JB' Remo Kanjira was a massive breakthrough in making this drum a practical addition to the western percussionist's arsenal. It also made it widely available for the very first time in music stores across the world, from New York to Tokyo and Portsmouth to Vancouver. This instrument was also tuneable and therefore meant that the performer could pick it up in the middle of a piece without having to carry out the traditional tuning process on the instrument.

John introduced this instrument into his contemporary classical world and also as a solo world percussionist. He loosely referred to traditional rhythmic compositions on the instrument but was better known for his 'free style' and contemporary approach. This enabled him to easily employ it outside of the Indian idiom. Following in his footsteps, renowned 'non-Indian' percussionists Jamey Haddad and Randy Gloss utilised the Kanjira outside of its traditional setting to great effect. Other than that, it's a sadly infrequently trodden path outside of traditional music. This is a great shame for many reasons. Obviously, the rhythmic repertoire and solo development ideas within the musical system are two that come to mind but, more than that, the immense power of this tiny instrument is enough to make it a 'must pack' item of percussion equipment for any serious player. It is small, easily portable, packs a punch and suits players of every level, from the most basic to the most advanced. Beyond all this, some of the techniques transfer so well to a variety of other percussion instruments, from frame drums and headed tambourines, to Cajon, Doumbek and much more. Proper exposure within the general world of percussion is long overdue and hopefully, now is that time.



The Remo Kanjira, customised with Japanese coins as Jingles.



3 - PHONETICS

Phonetic recitation of syllables is central to the study of any Indian percussion. Over many centuries, this has been condensed into a quite perfect system where the strokes on the drums are represented by syllables and words that are then crafted into sentences, chapters, verses and whole paragraphs of rhythm. It is an incredible system that makes the learning of rhythms and phrases altogether poetic. Drums such as the Tabla from the North or the Mridangam from the South have a wide variety of strokes that are represented by specific syllables.

With Tabla for example, the sound on the rim of the smaller high pitched drum is 'NA'. The sound on the inner rim 'TIN' and the sound on the black spot 'TE'. Then, on the bass Tabla, the open tone is 'GE' and the closed tone 'KE'. Beyond this there are compound syllables where, for example, 'GE' + 'NA' = DHA or 'GE' + 'TE' = 'DHE'. It is very specifically mapped out and the strokes are clearly identified by the syllables. (There are some ambiguities and exceptions to this, which we will not go into here.)

Similarly the double ended Mridangam from the South has a complex set of syllables. Depending on the style of music the Mridangist specialises in, these can have differing degrees of elaboration and 'poetic licence'. A specialist in dance music for example may well have a much more poetic vocabulary whilst someone who accompanies vocal would recite in slightly plainer language. The rhythmic material would be mostly the same. Just the syllables would be slightly more decorated and expanded.

This said, it is obvious that the Kanjira does not have all these various tones. We really have two main tones played by three main strokes to create all our patterns. Even though this is the case, the Kanjira player would still use the full set of syllables imported from the Mridangam, though these syllables would be rendered just on two tones.



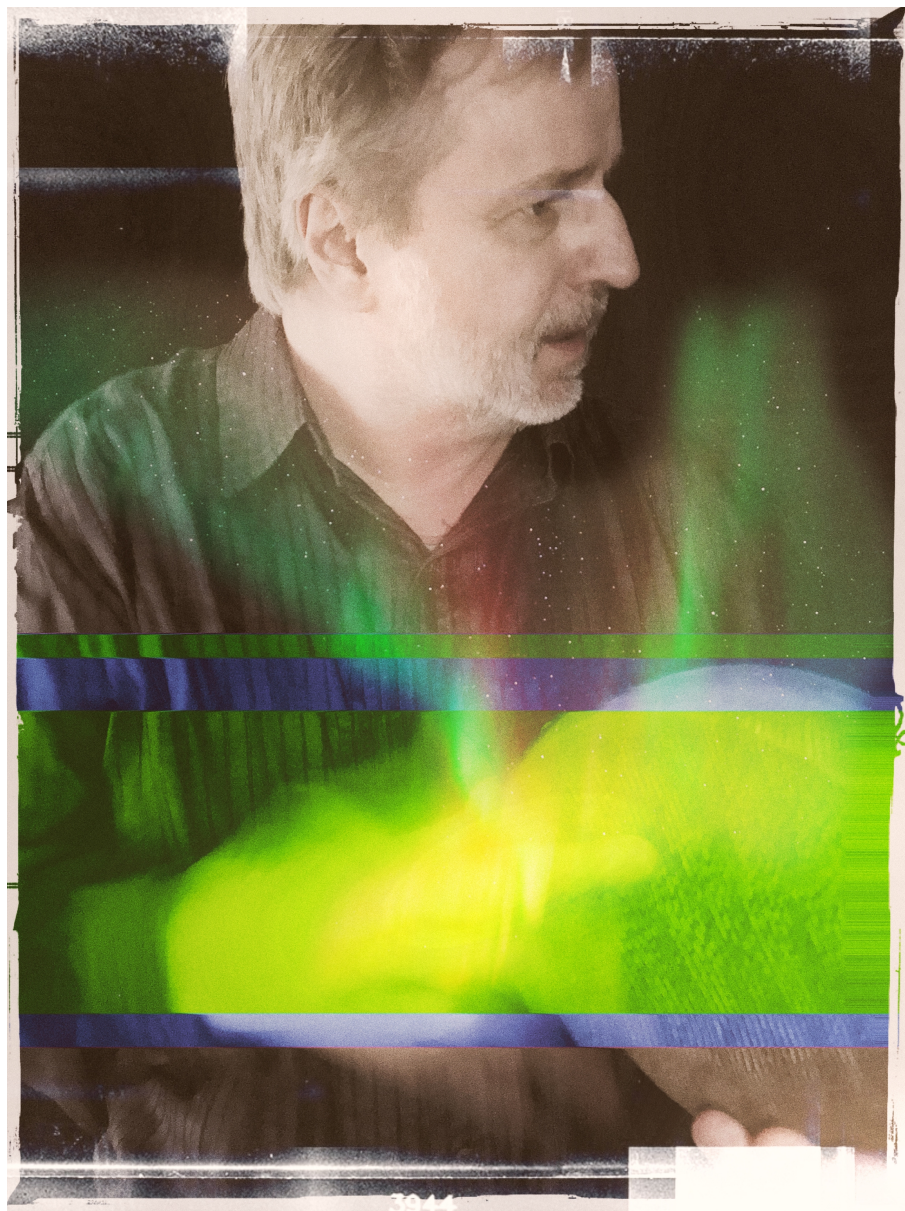
4 - TIME CYCLES AND RHYTHM PLAY

People often ask me, "Why is the Indian rhythmic system so developed mathematically and intellectually?" This is a very good question but one that is fairly easy to answer. The system found in classical North and South Indian rhythm can be traced back to centuries BC. This is when there was the first record of rhythmic recitation accompanied by the clapping of elaborate time cycles. This key point is one of the important factors that differentiates Indian classical rhythm from folk and popular rhythm, not just in India but worldwide.

The primary difference, as I see it, is that the Indian classical rhythm work is developed theoretically over set length time cycles. This is entirely different from say, a folk music where the continuity of a regular 'groove' is the main framework of the rhythmic intent. When there is a regular groove continuing, it's not always either possible or pleasurable to the ear to hear rhythm work go contrary to this, shifting over the bar lines and in contrast to the regular groove. It's almost against the primary intent of that type of folk or pop rhythm. However, when there is a theoretical framework, this type of rhythmic development is possible. It is similar to the Indian concept of microtones. Indian classical melody is linear and has no concept of 'harmony' as we understand it in the West. The use of the microtones in between the notes becomes one of the primary functions of the melody work and this of course makes harmony largely impossible as it would clash against the microtones. It is very important to see these integral building blocks of the music when one tries to understand the underlying concepts. Just as you cannot describe the taste of an apple by

using an onion as a reference, so it is impossible to understand Indian rhythm merely through the concept of 'music from a different culture'. (For instance, trying to understand African rhythm through the lens of Western classical music to decipher the constructs.)

We can see from all this that the use of spoken rhythms is very important to the traditional Indian rhythmic method. However, because we are looking to open up this instrument into contemporary and popular western genres, for the most part of this book, we will not be using many syllables. Only later, when we get to some of the phrases and common building blocks will we start to employ this concept. Neither will we delve too deeply into complex rhythmic structures. The purpose here is to get a basic approach together on the Kanjira, whereby we acquire the basic building blocks of technique. Holding the drum, striking the drum, combining the basic strokes into a wide range of introductory exercises that will be presented in a format more closely aligned to a western drum book. We can move on to complex rhythms and detailed syllables in Volume Two. Let's proceed by starting to look at the holding position.



5 - HOLDING AND STRIKING THE DRUM

The Kanjira has the slight challenge in that all of the playing on the drumhead is only done only with one hand. The other hand merely holds the drum underneath and subtly bends the pitch with the fingertips on the very bottom outside edge of the drumhead. The thumb is inside the shell but neither touches nor strikes the inside of the head. When you hear a master percussionist on the instrument, it is a marvel realising that all that rhythmic technique is being executed with only one hand. Let's look at the holding positions and see how this is achieved.

If we look at the drum as if it were a clock face, we can see that the left hand is supporting the drum at 6 o'clock with the finger tips in front of the drum in a vice-like grip. The thumb comes around inside the shell. I prefer to extend my thumb fully away from me, but other players prefer to bend the thumb inwards from the last joint, back towards their body. Either method is acceptable but the yardstick for this is how stable the drum feels in your grip. Experiment with both of these options to find out what's best for you. Stability of the drum is vitally important.



Holding the drum at 6 o'clock position



Thumb inside the drum



Here we can see the arm parallel to the floor, NOT resting on leg



Alternative thumb position inside the drum

We can see how the fingertips come around underneath the shell and touch the head just at the edge. It's by gently squeezing here that we achieve the pitch bend. The depth of the pitch bend is aided by a very steep bearing edge inside the drum that angles inwards, down away from the outer edge. Therefore, you are pushing the head down into the gap between the angled bearing edge and the inside of the skin. The bending technique is really something that develops the more you hear the instrument being played. It is something I normally recommend that students avoid in the early stages of learning the instrument, tempting as it is. Bad habits are sometimes very hard to undo. We touch upon this later, but for now, try to avoid the temptation! Also notice in these pictures the position of the jingle. I personally always have the jingle nearest me and, underneath where I strike the drum. This gets a crisp jingle sound.