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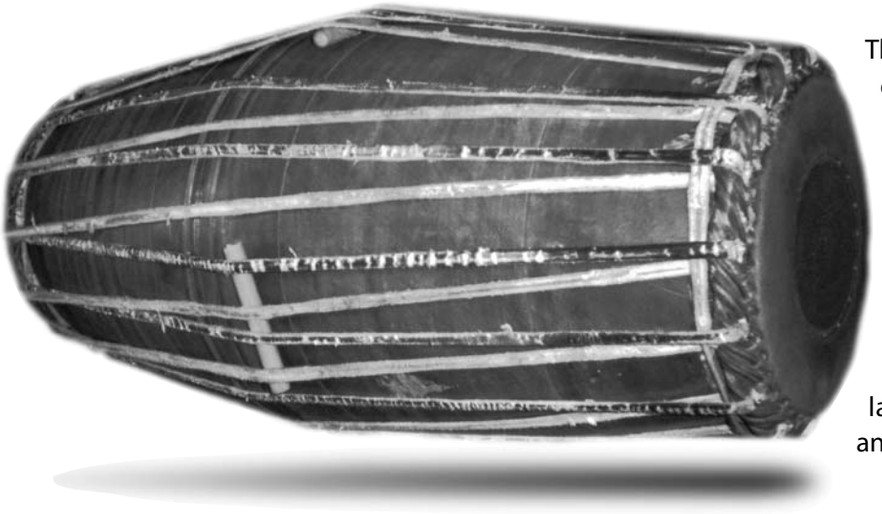
South Indian Percussion Instruments

MRIDANGAM

The mridangam is the lead percussion instrument of South India. It's a double-ended drum that's played with both hands. This drum is treble on one side and bass on the other. Rarely do both hands play on one side of the drum.

The body of the mridangam is often made from the dense wood of the jackfruit tree. The drum comes in two sizes: a large drum often used to accompany male vocalists, and a smaller high-pitched version often used with female vocalists and other instrumental music. Mridangams are usually between 22" and 25" long, with head sizes ranging between 7¼" and 7½". The treble head is tuned to a specific pitch, which falls within a range of a few semitones. The tuning of this drum is adjusted by tapping a small stick along the rim of the heads with a large stone.



The heads of the mridangam are a complex design consisting of three layers of skin. Those layers are laced together with animal gut to form a rim. Circles are cut from the top and bottom layer, which leaves the middle skin to act as the batter head (think of it like an ancient Pinstripe). The treble and bass heads are interlaced with long strands of animal gut.

The playing surface of the bass head is usually goatskin, while the outer portion is often made from buffalo skin. The skins form a 1½" ring around the edge of the head, leaving about 4" of playing surface. The head is tuned very high in pitch. The bass sound is produced by applying semolina dough to the head, which makes the head vibrate slower. Throughout the performance, the dough is dampened to keep the pitch low. At the conclusion of each show, the dough is removed. (Sometimes modern-day performers use blue tac, etc.)

The treble head also features a triple-layered skin, but the construction is slightly different. On the underside of the head, there's a ring of thin cow skin that's about ½" thick. This allows the main goatskin head to float on the bearing edge of the drum. The outer head is made of cow skin. It covers half the diameter of the head, leaving a goatskin circle in the middle.

There's also a permanent black patch made up of thin layers of rice paste and iron fillings on the "batter" head. The patch has hairline cracks in it, which allows it to move with the vibrating skin as it's played. When the spot wears out, it starts to buzz. At that point, it has to be removed and replaced.

To enhance the resonance of the treble mridangam head, thin strips of special grass are placed between the top two skins. This creates the famous buzzing sound of the Kutchi mridangam.

Some mridangams feature a less buzzy substance, either string or a crushed powder instead of grass. These substances create the sweeter-toned Kappi mridangam.

Solo Development in South India

The following section and transcriptions regarding the formalities of South- and North-Indian solo construction is mainly for demonstrative purposes with the practical drumset application material beginning from Chapter 2 onwards.

In the notated example that follows, the basis of the underlying groove is a quarter-note pulse playing "ta dim dim ta." I have written the phrases on two lines, with the sharp staccato notes being the higher note and open bass tones on the bottom to indicate a rough voicing of the material.

A typical solo would begin with this groove or another simple pattern and would be broken up by gradually introducing solo phrases. These solo phrases are introduced at shorter and shorter intervals as they lead to a larger rhythmic composition derived from the solo phrases that have been introduced. The latter fixed section might be four or eight bars long and will generate a more intense rhythmic structure. Then the whole process starts over.

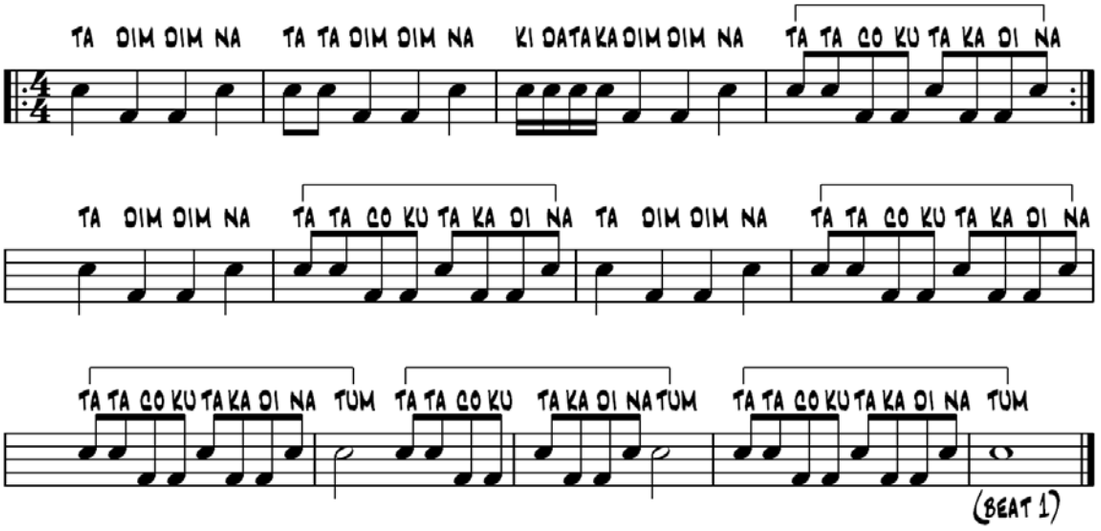
GROOVE AND SOLO PHRASES: INTRODUCTION AND LARGER COMPOSITION

This method is a great way to develop thematic material.

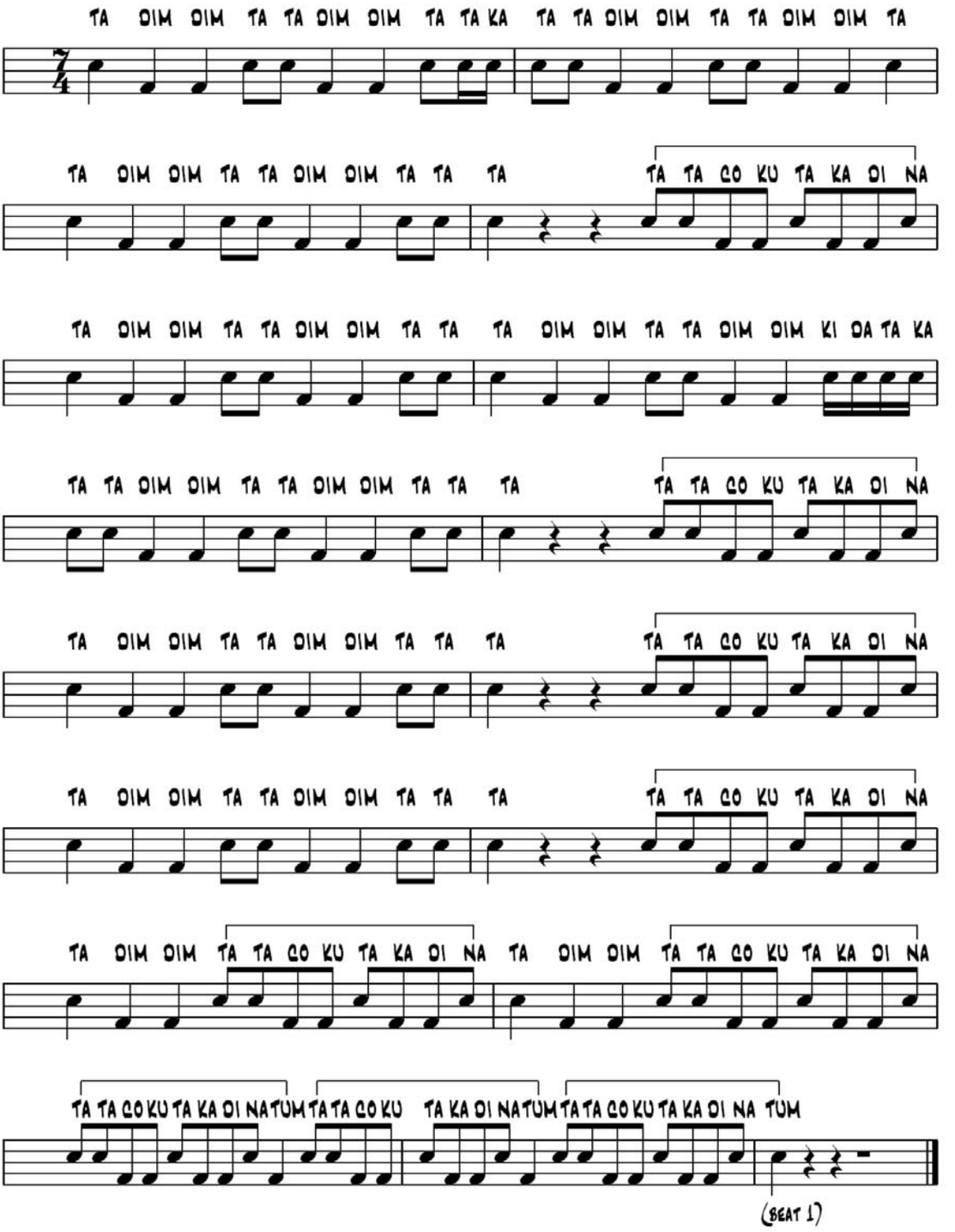
The solo phrase in the following example is in bar four, "ta ta co ku ta ka di na." These syllables are commonly used for mridangam, but we won't be using them in the examples later in the book.

However, for the purpose of these examples, they'll help illustrate their integration within the time.

This solo phrase is introduced every fourth bar, then every second bar until the phrase is formed into a rhythmic cadence of notes repeated three times to conclude. (*tihai* in North-Indian terms or *arudie* in South-Indian terms). This method of introducing a solo phrase into the rhythm is very common in South India, but not so much in the North.



The repertoire of Carnatic music employs similar phrases and rhythms in various time cycles. In the next example, we have a similar approach to the groove and solo phrase. But this time it's in seven. The feel of this time cycle is 3 + 4. Look for the introduction of the same solo phrase as in the previous example.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