

Tabla and Tombak, The Instrument and its Playing Techniques

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ABSTRACT

The paper you are reading is written for the purpose of highlighting the similarities in playing technique and organology between tabla and tombak. It begins with outlining some of the common important aspects and concepts within both India and Persian classical music and then focuses on the rhythmic aspect of the music and the instruments tabla and tombak.

I have begun with the importance of tabla and tombak as accompanying instruments and continued with their solo repertoire. A section is about the material used for making the instruments and also different segments that the membrane of tabla and tombak are divided into, such as kinar, meiydan and siahi on the dayan.

I have also spoken about the playing techniques of both tabla and tombak. I have done this by dividing the techniques of tabla in two groups of bayan techniques and dayan techniques. For tombak this division is techniques of lower hand and upper hand. There are other ways to classify the techniques of the instruments, for example James Kippen in his book *The Tabla of Lucknow* divides the techniques to two categories and two sub-categories:

- Dayan Techniques
 - dayan resonating strokes
 - dayan non-resonating strokes
- Bayan Techniques
 - bayan resonating strokes
 - bayan non-resonating strokes

But since I am dealing with tombak and tala both, I found it more appropriate to divided the techniques in two bayan and dayan for tabla and lower and upper hand for tombak, because this makes the most sense for a comparative study of the techniques.

I must mention that, for both the instruments, I have only dealt with basic techniques and have not delved into finer techniques such as gaseet and meend (on the bayan) and other intricate techniques which are used for embellishment and nikaas in compositions. For a better

understanding of the similarities in the nature of the individual techniques of tabla and tombak and the utilization of the strokes/bols in combination for rhythmic phrases and compositional forms, I have provided a transcription of a similar tabla and tombak phrase in notation at the end of the paper.

KEYWORDS

Tabla, Tombak, Accompaniment, Gharana, Technique

Indian and Iranian music are two of the oldest and most sophisticated art forms in the global music scenario. Through out many centuries both Indian and Iranian music have evolved and developed into their current shape and form, this development still continues in performance, pedagogy and also instruments making. Because of the close geographical proximity of India and Iran, they also share a vast amount of similarities in concept, philosophy and performance of music.

Both Indian and Iranian music are vocal oriented music, which means that the essence of the music is best presented with human voice but, through time instrumental music of both these two countries have developed to a very high level in presenting the refinements of the music. Development of instrumental music through ages in different segments of the music such as Dhrupad and Khayal in Indian music and Mugham and Dastgah in Iranian music have gained the instrumental music some qualities that sets it apart from vocal music. These qualities can collectively be called "tantrakari ang".

Besides the melodic aspects, the rhythmic aspects of these two musical cultures are as rich and as important. The nature of the music is such that without rhythm and percussion instruments a huge part of the melodic presentations cannot be achieved and this applies to both classical and folk forms of Iran and India. This highlights the importance of rhythm and rhythmic cycles and how crucial is the accompaniment of percussion instrument. Principal percussion instruments of Indian and Iranian classical music are tabla and tombak. By maintaining a rhythmic cycle via repeating its main theme known as "theke", these percussion instruments lay the foundation for the creation of melodic compositions and provide a suitable environment for a healthy and organic growth of improvisation within the melodic forms, which is the essence of performance in these cultures.

Apart from the role of accompaniment, tombak and tabla have an extensive solo repertoire which forms the rhythmic body of Indian and Iranian classical music. These rhythmic repertoires have formed gradually over many decades of hard work of past stalwarts of these instruments. The development of the repertoire has happened as a result of development in the playing technique of both the instruments. Development and evolution

in the playing technique has also led to the creation of different playing styles known as *baaj* in India and *sabk* in Iran. It must be however mentioned that some of the compositional forms of tabla and tombak are inspired by rhythmic patterns in melodic forms, some have their root in other percussion instruments such as *pakhavaj* in India and *daf* in Iran, some have been inspired by exchange between dance art forms such as *kathak* and *vis a versa* and finally, some of these compositions are inspired by the elements of nature such as thunder, lightning, sounds of animals and so on. Other sources of rhythmic patterns in both tabla and tombak is driven from the rhythms which exist in both Indian and Persian poetry. These similarities in the origins of rhythmic patterns, phrases, compositions and cycles show the depth of similarities in both these musical cultures.

As mentioned earlier the most important key in development of compositional forms and playing styles in tabla and tombak is the development and advancement in the playing techniques. One may say that development of compositional forms in tabla and tombak are intertwined and go hand in hand with the playing techniques. As an example when tabla travelled from Delhi to Lucknow, in order for the tabla players to be able to accompany the *kathak* dance existing in Lucknow Nawab courts and cope with the *pakhavaj*, they had to develop new techniques in which they could use the full palm "tapi" as oppose to the two finger style prevalent in Delhi. This not only gave the tabla players of Lucknow the ability to -for a lack of better word- compete with *pakhavaj* players, but it also provided the tabla players with a tool which widened the spectrum of the tabla as an instrument, having the ability to create many new compositions utilizing *bols*¹ from *pakhavaj*, hence going in the direction of developing a new style.



Ustad Allah Rakha (1919-2000) and Ustad Zakir Hussain

Similar process has happened in Iran with tombak where a bol from another instrument has been picked up by the players and it has been incorporated in the compositions of tombak. As an example in many folk traditions of Iran such as the music of Lorestan and Kurdistan the tombak is played differently, not using much of the refined finger movements but more of full palm movements which tends to be very strong and powerful in sound but lacks the refinement of classical tombak playing. Some of these techniques have been taken from instruments such as the daf, the Kurdish frame drum. The transition of techniques from one instrument to another has led to evolvement of new playing styles in classical tombak².

Tombak and Tabla are both percussion instruments, belong to the membranophone category, however there are many differences between them in terms of the physics and shape of the instrument. Tombak is a single body percussion whereas tabla is a double-percussion, comprising two drums, the bayan and the dayan. Similarities in the physics of the instruments are very narrow and can be the following points:

1. Both instruments are membranophones, which means they both produce sound via the vibration of a membrane. Tabla uses goat skin and sometimes buffalo and in Tombak, calf, goat, and Camel skin is used.
2. Dayan of the Tabla and the Tombak are both carved out of wood. For Tabla woods such as vijaysar, teak wood, Indian rose wood (sheesham) and Ebony wood (kala sheesham) is used. Tombak is mainly made of mulberry (toot) or walnut (gerdoo) wood.
3. If we compare Tombak with Bayan in material, we can conclude that the only similarity is the transition of build material. Tombak used to be made of clay and metal before and still in folk versions it can be found in those materials but classical tombak is made only of wood. Bayan also used to be made of clay and in some cases even made of wood but now it is only made of metals such as brass or copper. This transition in material can be seen in both, bayan starting from clay and wood and finally ending up being made only from metal and Tombak being made of metal or clay before and now made only of wood.

The above mentioned three points sums up the physical similarities of tabla and tombak and all three are related to the build material.

Another aspect which could be used to draw a parallel between tabla and tombak is between different segments dividing the pudi of the dayan and also the bayan with that of the tombak skin. On the pudi of the dayan we have three segments viz; kinar, maydan, and siahi, each of these segments are designated their own set of bols which are different in resonance and tonal quality. The bayan pudi, could be also divided into three segments like

that of the dayan as the pudis are made in the exact same process but have different diameters. However it is not divided and it only accommodates two bols, of Ge and Ke.

We can say that overall tabla can have four segments, one segment for the entire bayan pudi³ and 3 segments (kinar, maydan, siahi) for the dayan pudi. The tombak skin is also divided into three segments. The first one is the center, called vasat or markaz which accommodates bols that are of bass and low frequency in nature such as the bol tom, which is similar to ge on the bayan. The second segment on the tombak skin is the middle section which is the area between the edge of the skin and the center of the skin, it is called meiyaneh and it is very similar in tonal nature and position to the meydan on the dayan pudi. The last skin segment on the tombak is the edge of the skin which is called kenareh and as the name suggests it is similar in tonal quality to the kinar of the dayan⁴. The final segment for Tombak is not on the skin but on the body of the instrument, around the rim of the Tombak, called roo-ye-choob meaning over the wood. We can possibly compare this playing segment in terms of pitch and timbre to the center of the siahi of the dayan and also some certain bols of the kinar, in that, it produces very sharp sounds but it is not used as often as the skin segments.

Except the playing segment of the tombak on the wood, it is interesting to know that the rest of the playing segments which have been compared to different segments of the dayan and bayan pudis, also produce bols that are of similar nature in tonal quality and also in their use in compositions to the tabla bols. These playing techniques are classified into two main categories. For tabla we have the bayan and the dayan techniques and for tombak we have the upper hand and the lower hand techniques.

As mentioned earlier the playing techniques of both the drums have evolved and developed vastly in the last century and a half, leading to the creation of different playing styles. Each of these playing styles utilizes these techniques differently according to the inner intricacies of their compositions and also their approach to rhythm and execution of compositions and kaydas. Today in Tabla we have 6 gharanas⁵:

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|------------|------------|---------------|
| 1. Delhi | 2. Ajrada | 3. Farukhabad |
| 4. Lucknow | 5. Benaras | 6. Punjab |

In Tombak, different styles of playing are named after the person who created the style. Following are the main styles of Tombak:

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|---------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1. Hossein Tehrani | 2. Naser Eftetah | 3. Bahman Rajabi |
| 4. Naser Farhangfar | | |

There are other styles of tombak such as that of Pedram Khavarzamani and Navid Afghah but those are offshoots of the four main styles, mentioned above. In tabla also Ajrada

is an offshoot of Delhi and one could say that, Benaras is an offshoot of Lucknow style.

Both tabla and tombak have a basic vocabulary which is used by all the different styles of playing and these basic strokes or bols are taught to the students⁶ at the beginning of their journey into these instruments. However, each school has its own intricacies and approach to certain bols, and their way of execution known as nikaas which come into teaching later on once the student has passed the beginner level.

As mentioned earlier, tabla and tombak divide the skin surface into different segments and each segment accommodates certain bols. Now we shall list the bols of bayan and dayan. Bayan being the bass drum has only two techniques or bols on it. Sometimes these bols may have different names depending on what is before and after them in a rhythmic phrase but, basically there are only two bols which are:

1. Ge (played by the index finger/and ring and middle finger together in an open manner)
2. Ke - ka (played by the full palm and fingers in a close manner)

On the dayan the number of bols are more than the bayan. Similarly, some of those bols can have two different names for different situations. The following are the main bols of the dayan:

1. Na - Ta (played on the kinar)
2. Tin - Ta (Played on the meydan)
3. Tun - Tin (Played on the siahi but in an open manner so that the resonance of the sound can continue)
4. Ti (Played on the siahi with the middle finger, such as DhaTi Dhage Nadha Terekita⁷, and also such as DhaDha TiTa)
5. Ta - Re (played on the siahi with the index finger in a closed manner, such as DhaDha TiTa and in the phrase TeRe Kita)



Otsad Hossein Tehrani (1911-1974)

6. Ne (Played by the ring finger on the meydan but in an open manner, such as the phrase TinNe GeNe)

As you can see the first three bols have two names. Some bols of tabla are a combination of two bols, one on the bayan and one on the dayan played at the same time, following are the main bols:

1. Dha (Ta/Na + Ge)
2. Dhin (Tin + Ge) and (Tun + Ge)⁸
3. Dhit (Te + Ge)
4. Dhere (Te + Ge, followed by Re) this bol is played by the full palm on the entire pudi of the dayan and the Re section of it is also different than Re of teReketa)

From all the above mentioned bols, endless number of phrases and compositions are created which can be in the form of peshkar, kayda, kayda-rela, rela, rau, gat, gat paran, thukda, mohra, tihai, chakardar and many more forms. The entirety of all these movements and compositions creates the body of the tabla repertoire. Some of this form such as kayda, peshkar and rela have space for improvisation and extemporal approach and some are fixed such as Gats and Gat Parans.

As the tombak is a single drum and not a two-piece drum like tabla, the techniques are spread between the two hands and in different segments of the skin.

The lower hand techniques:

1. Tom (played using the tip of all the fingers except the thumb, in the center or markaz segment of the skin)
2. Bak - Kenareh (played using the tip of the ring finger on the edge or the kenareh segment of the skin)
3. Miyaneh (played using the first two digits of the ring finger on the middle or miyaneh segment of the skin)
4. Rast⁹ (played using the tip of all the fingers in a successive manner, starting from the thumb, then pinky, ring, middle and finally index finger. This is five strokes in one, so they sound like one stroke but in reality, it is a total of five strokes played fast one after the other in succession.)

The upper hand techniques:

1. Miyaneh (played using the first two digits of the ring finger on the middle or miyaneh segment of the skin)

2. Kenareh (played using the first digit of the ring finger on the edge or the kenareh segment of the skin)
3. Pelang - Beshkan (played by the first digit of the finger on the edge of the tombak, in the segment called Kenareh. This stroke is played in a snap manner and can be played with all the fingers except the thumb. The designated finger is put on the thumb and then snapped onto the edge of the Tombak very similar to how one would snap their fingers.
4. Chap (Very similar to the Rast movement mentioned above, but the thumb is not used here, and only pinky to index finger are used.)

As we can see, some of the techniques of the upper and lower hand are the same such as kenareh , miyaneh, and chap/rast. The other two techniques viz; pelang is mostly played by the upper hand and the tom is mostly played by lower hand. Tombak is a symmetrical instrument, which means all these techniques can be played with both the hands. The reason why they are divided into two hands is for the purpose of compositional forms¹⁰ and in order to have one hand (the lower hand) as an anchor.

It is now possible to look at a phrase from tabla which is used in many compositions with its corresponding phrase in tombak which is also very popular and used often in the repertoire.

*T = Tom	R= Rast	C= Chap	B= Bak
Divisions (6+6+4=16)	6	6	4
Tabla	dha terekita taka terekita	dha terekita taka terekita	dha terekita taka
Tombak ¹¹	TC RC RC	BC RC RC	TC RC

Conclusion:

As we can see, the intricacies of playing techniques and sound production in tombak and tabla are very vast, and refined and one can observe similarities in the evolvement of these techniques and styles as well as in their organology. This paper is written for the purpose of highlighting these similarities. If we were to delve into the grammar of compositional forms, improvisational approach and phraseology in both solo and accompaniment scenario we shall observe a vast amount of similarities between tabla and tombak. This requires a deep research and it has been dealt with in one of the chapters of my Ph.D. thesis.

Recourses:

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8. Tin and Tun both signify the same bol which is played by the index finger on or at the edge of the sihai section, such as in the case of Dha Dha Tete – Dha Dha **Tin** Na or in the phrase Dage **Tin**Na Kena. There is however another Tin (also called ta) which is played on the *lau* or *sur* of the dayan which is on the meydan segment of the pudi. This bol brings out the tone and key to which the tabla is tuned, hence called sur. It is used in many Thekas such as Teen Taal , cycle of sixteen beats – 4 + 4 + 4 + 4 - (Dha **Dhin Dhin** Dha, Dha **Dhin Dhin** Dha, Dha **Tin Tin** Ta, Ta **Dhin Dhin** Dha), Roopak Taal, cycle of seven – 3 + 4- (**Tin Tin** Na, **Dhin** Na **Dhin** Na) and Jhap Taal, cycle of ten beats – 2+3+2+3 - (**Dhin** Na, **Dhin Dhin** Na , **Tin** Na , **Dhin Dhin** Na). Sometimes to accentuate the arrival of the khali part of the Theka the bol **Tin** is replaced by the bol *tun*.
9. In Tombak if the player is right-handed then his lower hand will be his right hand and his upper and will be the left hand and if the player is left-handed then the opposite. The word *rast* means right in Persian, so in the case of a left-handed player this stroke will be called chap, meaning left, because the lower hand will be the left

- hand of the player. The information in this paper is written for a right-handed player.
10. Nowadays many Tombak players are breaking this boundary and utilizing all the techniques in both the hands equally, essentially being able to play any composition as a left-handed and right-handed person. This ability opens up a huge spectrum in creativity and bringing about new compositions, one such piece is “*goft-o-goye-e chap-o-rast*” by Bahman Rajabi. In some cases however, these new approaches do not necessarily carry with them the essence of classical art of Tombak playing.
 11. Here I have used letters T, C, R and B to denote Tom, Chap, Rst and Bak strokes respectively. This not a representation of tombak notation which uses single-line and three-line staff notation with different symbols for different strokes.