

A BRIEF INTRO TO THE INSTRUMENTS OF SOUTH INDIAN CLASSICAL (CARNATIC / KARNATAK) PERCUSSION

Adapted from *Rhythmic Principles and Practice of South Indian Drumming*
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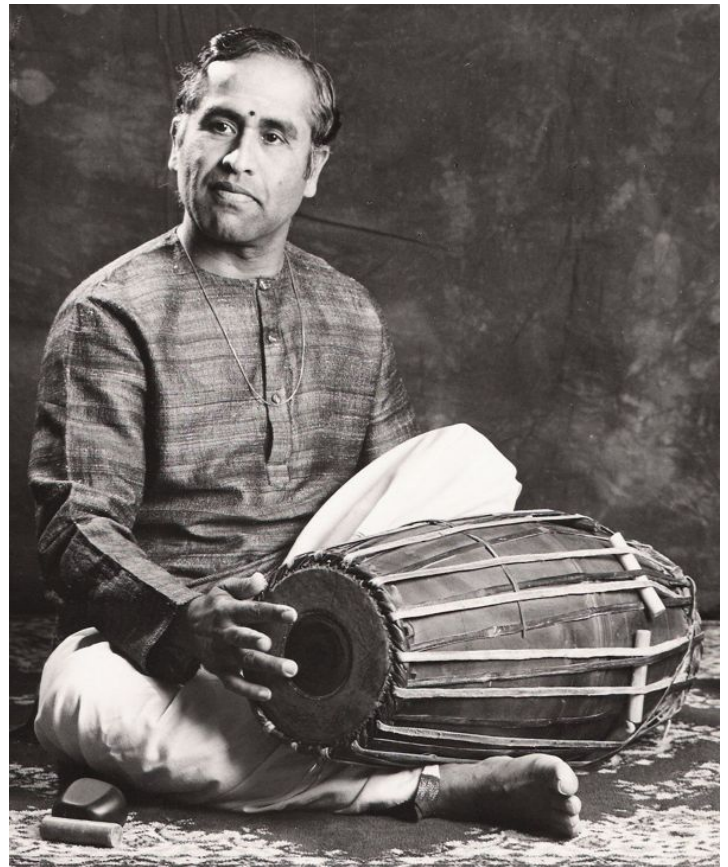
The Mrdangam

The *mrdangam* is a highly developed classical drum of South India, employing precise tuning, a variety of tones, and subtle finger techniques. In comparison to other barrel-shaped drums its range of tonal qualities and intricacy of technique are far more sophisticated. It is the most important percussion instrument in any *Carnatic* music ensemble, performing both accompanying and solo roles. Throughout its long playing tradition the *mrdangam* has been used in a variety of ensembles, gradually evolving from the accompaniment of theatre music to more elaborate styles of temple, dance and concert musics. At present it is used most notably in Carnatic concerts and *Talavadya Kaccheris* (percussion ensembles), in *Bharata Natyam* (South Indian classical dance), in *Bhajans* (congregational devotional songs), and *Harikathakalakshepam* (religious discourse with musical accompaniment).

For centuries now, hand-carved jackwood has been used for constructing the hollow shell of the drum. Both ends of the drum are covered with heads made from cow and buffalo hides which are fastened to hoops and kept tight by leather thongs laced from one end of the drum to the other.

The right head, *valantalai*, is tuned to the tonic or fundamental pitch of the singer or the instrumentalist who is being accompanied, and the left head provides the bass. Note that this is for right handed drummers; the heads will be switched by left handed players. The right head is made up of three layers, two of cow-hide with a layer of goat skin in between. At its centre is a black spot called *karanai*, made from *kittam*, a powder of manganese and iron oxide which is mixed with cooked rice paste. This load of black material at the centre of the middle membrane of the head determines the characteristic tone and pitch of the drum.

The left head, *idantalai* or *toppi*, also consists of three layers; the skin proper made of goat skin, and two layers of rim made from buffalo hide. On both the right and left heads goat skin is used as it is highly



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preferred for its durability and tonal quality. The same principle of central loading is also followed with regard to the left head. A sticky dough is prepared in the right consistency by mixing *ravai* (cream of wheat) with water and is then applied to the centre of the left head. The central portion of the head is moistened before application. The *ravai* is applied fresh at the beginning of each performance and scraped off carefully at the end of the concert. The *ravai* is applied at the center in the form of a small circle and the amount is adjusted so as to get a rich bass tone. The performer should be frequently moistening the edges and the centre of the *ravai*-ring slightly with dabs of water during the performance. The size of the shell and the circumference of the heads are also important factors in determining the pitch of the drum.

The Kanjira

The *kanjira*, a South Indian frame drum, is an instrument of the tambourine family. It is used primarily in concerts of South Indian classical music as a supporting instrument for the *mrdangam*.

The *kanjira* consists of a circular frame made of the wood of the jackfruit tree, between 7 and 9 inches in diameter and 2 to 4 inches in depth. It is covered on one side with a drumhead made of monitor lizard skin, while the other side is left open. The frame has a single slit which contains three to four small metal discs that jingle when the *kanjira* is played.

The *kanjira* is normally played with the palm and fingers of the right hand, while the left hand supports the drum. The fingertips of the left hand can be used to bend the pitch by applying pressure near the outer rim. It is not tuned to any particular pitch, unlike the *mrdangam* or the *ghatam* (clay pot drum).



Normally, without tuning, it has a very high pitched sound. To get a good bass sound, the performer reduces the tension of the drumhead by moistening the skin with water.

Konnakkol

In the music of India, rhythms are structured and arranged in a highly complex and comprehensive manner. All the patterns played on the *mrdangam* or any percussion instrument can be recited vocally using a special vocabulary of phonetic syllables known as *solkattu* (*sol* = syllable, *kattu* = bunch, group). *Konnakkol*, the art of reciting and performing *solkattu*, is believed by many music scholars to be the most comprehensive and most highly developed approach to learning and mastering rhythm.

Professor Sankaran has published a book with CD, ***The Art of Konnakkol*** which is a complete guide to this dynamic spoken art form. Please visit www.trichysankaran.com to order the book.