

CONTRIBUTION OF USTAD MUNIR KHAN TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF TABLA SOLO

AZAMALI KALAVANT¹, DR. KEDAR MUKADAM²

¹Researcher, Department of Tabla, Faculty of Performing Arts, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda,

²Assistant Professor, Department of Tabla, Faculty of Performing Arts, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda,

Abstract

Hindustani classical music is a tapestry filled with a vast variety of traditions and cultures. In each field of music one can find much nuance in the history and much variety of material. This is true for all, Vocal traditions, Instrumental traditions, and Dance Traditions. Each of these have its own history as to how they evolved, but one instrument which is especially unique is the Tabla. The tabla is a drum with a rich complex history and playing style. It is a drum which is played with the hands and fingers and the techniques involve unique strokes and grip on the drum. Throughout the history of the instrument there came about development of different styles of playing. In these styles of playing, we have a few concepts which can be used to understand the nuances of the history and playing style. The first concept is the idea of the Gharana. A Gharana is a formally established school of thought in music. Within the gharana there are notable exponents of music and there are general musical principles that all followers of the gharana follow. The next concept is the concept of Parampara, which is a tradition which is passed down from generations. While Parampara means tradition there are many families and groups of people who have Parampara but that is not itself a distinct gharana. In exact terms it can be understood that in modern musical lexicon a Gharana is a formally established Parampara. A Gharana must be recognized by the general consensus of musicians in the field. There are great artists in every gharana whose contribution in the promotion of that gharana is incomparable, and due to the thinking style of that artist, there is a change in the basic playing style of the gharana. In this article, a humble attempt has been made to discuss the changes made in the traditional method in the world of tabla by Ustad Munir Khan, an artist of the Farrukhabad gharana.

Key-Words: Munir Khan, Laliyana, Gharana

INTRODUCTION TO TABLA BAAJ AND GHARANA

Indian Music is an ancient tradition. Many prominent skills within this tradition are observed today. Here, we will exclude all other skills except those concerned with percussion instruments. Indian percussion instruments comprise several different musical instruments made using leather. The tabla however is considered the most prominent among Indian percussion instruments. It holds a position of the highest merit among percussion instruments made from leather. The styles of playing tabla can be categorized into two distinct groups; The Bandh Baaj and the Khula Baaj. Baaj is simply the style of playing. These two styles are very different from each other and they approach key aspects of playing tabla with each of their own unique viewpoints. It can also be understood that they are the opposites of each other in a way, but that is also part due to the way that they are described. Bandh is the Hindi word for closed, and in contrast to that khula is the Hindi word for open. This description of the styles of playing can be seen in many different stages while delving into the depth of each playing style. The tabla world also now recognized formally established gharanas; Delhi, Ajrada, Lucknow, Farrukhabad, Banaras, and Punjab.

The word gharana is known in the music world since time immemorial. All music is based on these different gharanas and regions of India, thought, and style of playing. It can be safely assumed that the gharanas were founded on the basis of different kinds of styles of playing. It is difficult to tell when exactly the gharanas came to exist. In the modern age, the books available only on the gharanas, speak of the tradition of gharanas as being 300-400 years old. The Bandh Baaj can be described by the closed resonance of the instrument hence the name Bandh meaning closed. The Delhi and Ajrada gharanas are the two that adhere to the "Band Baaj" style. Delhi was a large cosmopolitan city even and when the gharanas were being formed it was a very important place. The Delhi Gharana is the first gharana in the history of tabla. It is founded by Ustad Sidhar Khan.

The Delhi gharana makes a point to keep the original Bandh baaj in its original form. It is a representation of the oldest style of playing tabla in the classical form. The Delhi baaj does not have any elements of the palm-striking, or open loh sounds played with the use of the maidan that stem from its predecessor the pakhawaj. It is inherently clear that the use of tabla as a solo instrument is starkly different to the solo sound and structure of the Pakhawaj. It was a unique solo instrument in its inception and the purity of the original sound of tabla solo is kept alive with the exponents of the Delhi gharana to this day.

The Ajrada Gharana is said to be founded by Ustads Meeru Khan and Kallu Khan. Both were the disciples of Ustad Sitaab Khan, who was the son of Ustad Sidhar Khan. Ajrada was a village outside of Meerut and was the home of the family of Ustads Meeru and Kallu Khan. From their lineage came about the Ajrada gharana. The Ajrada gharana while being students of Delhi and playing Bandh Baaj would develop pieces with the use of the sliding motion in the bayan. They also focused on layakari, particularly composing tabla compositions in triplets as opposed to divisions of twos which was common in Delhi gharana compositions.

The Khula Baaj in contrast to the Bandh Baaj can be described by the open resonance of the instrument hence the name Khula meaning open. The striking with multiple fingers together and outwardly positioned wrists are characteristics of the Khula Baaj. In Khula baaj, the sound generated by the baya and daya has an almost constant resonance which is one of the main focuses of Khula Baaj. The Khula Baaj uses the collective of all of the fingers in contrast to Bandh Baaj which uses mainly the first and middle fingers. Powerful, open sounds are used in the khula baaj. Furthermore, it uses the palm in addition to the fingers. The Khula Baaj proponents comprise of the Lucknow, Banaras, and Farrukhabad gharanas. The first gharana to have the use of Khula Baaj was the Lucknow gharana. The Lucknow gharana was started by Ustad Bakshu Khan and his younger brother Modu Khan. Students of them would also go on to start their own gharanas, namely Pandit Ram Sahay who founded the Banaras gharana. The Banaras gharana was also a unique development in tabla which had a large influence on tabla. Players of the Banaras gharana focused on the bayan ghissa and playing loud open sounds. Another student of Lucknow gharana Ustad Haji Vilayat Ali Khan from Farrukhabad who is regarded as the founder of the Farrukhabad gharana. The founder of the Farrukhabad gharana Ustad Haji Vilayat Ali Khan was a legendary figure who is very much revered by all the gharanas.

The Punjab gharana is unique in that it did not evolve from this structure and development but was rather originally considered a Pakhawaj gharana which gradually transitioned to tabla. One of the first tabla players in the Punjab gharana was Miyan Fakir Baksh, following him the majority of percussionists in the Punjab region shifted to tabla.

USTAD MUNIR KHAN

Ustad Munir Khan, also known as Ustad Munir Hussain was born in the village of Laliyana in around the year 1860-63. The Young Munir Khan was born into a family of Choudrys. Ustad Munir Khans father and grandfather were sarangi players and singers. As a part of Munir Khans childhood his grandfather would hold him and sing to him often. At an early age he also learned singing in his house hold.

Ustad Munir Khan learned the basics of tabla starting from the age of 6. When Munir Khan was 8 years old his grandfather told his father to send Munir Khan for further tabla training. In Ajrada the young Munir Khan was left to train with two well known tabla Ustads in Ajrada. They were known as Ustad Arralle Khan and Ustad Parralle Khan. Ustad Munir Khan spent his late childhood and early adolescence studying from these two Ustads. After a number of years of training with Ustads Arralle Khan and Parralle Khan and getting known in the greater Meerut district area as a tabla prodigy, he journeyed to Delhi at the age of around fourteen or fifteen. Ustad Munir Khan spent years learning the nuances of the Delhi Baaj from the Khalifa Ustad Boli Baksh. Ustad Munir Khan had grown into a well mannered and disciplined charming young adult with a captivating personality and this period in his adolescence helped in that development. At this time Ustad Boli

Baksh had a cousin named Ustad Nazar Ali Khan (still unsure of how it is a relation exactly). He was a prominent exponent of the Lukhnow gharana and Ustad Munir Khan spent a few days with him learning the principles of the Lukhnow gharana and vadanashaili. He also during this time spent time with Ustad Tashh Khan of Lukhnow and learned from him as well. Ustad Munir Khan being the avid and quick learner he was picked up the style of Lukhnow and was able to play it with percussion.

After both Ustad Boli Baksh and Ustad Munir Khan returned to Delhi Ustad Munir Khan embarked on his own to Jaipur to study from Ustad Amman Ali Khan the son of Ustad Haji Vilayat Ali Khan. In Hyderabad after taking Taleem from various gurus in tabla and pakhawaj Ustad Munir Khan was a well round versatile musician who was able to play tabla from Delhi, Ajrada, Lukhnow, and Farrukhabad with high levels of competence and skill. He was also a student of Pakhawaj and he would learn pakhawaj and practice it as well. In Hyderabad Ustad Munir Khan took Taleem from Ustad Hussain Ali and Ustad Hyder Baksh, who were the son, and son in law of Ustad Haji Vilayat Ali Khan. Both Ustad Hyder Baksh and Ustad Hussain Ali had a very close relationship together and they both lived in Hyderabad away from their home village of Farrukhabad. They saw the young Ustad Munir Khan and saw that he had learned different baaj and had just come from Jaipur from Ustad Amman Ali Khan and decided to continue his taleem as he was talented and representing the Farrukhabad tradition well. They treated him well and trained him well and by this time Ustad Munir Khan was a young man in his early twenties and was playing in many Dangals and this was an opportunity to perform and learn and hear many traditional compositions. Ustad Munir Khan was a tabla and pakhawaj player and then in South India he encountered Mridangam players. He would also study how the Carnatic music was expressing emotions and was put together in presentation. It is said that Ustad Munir Khan had twenty four gurus but unfortunately a lot of these names are lost to history.

He then around this time in his mid twenties went to Bombay and along with that he went to Baroda. In Baroda he spent time with Ustad Nasser Khan Pakhawaji. Ustad Munir Khan quickly became known in Bombay and established himself as a energetic performer and knowledgeable guru. His early career had a lot of travel but in his late twenties he settled mostly in the city of Bombay. Ustad Munir Khan was especially drawn to Bombay and would comment how it was very modern and developing. Along with his taleem Ustad Munir Khan had done a lot of practice and self development and he began playing tabla which was composed by him as well. Ustad Munir Khan had a revolutionary approach to tabla in a modernizing city and time and this quickly gave rise to his fame and recognition. Ustad Munir Khan is credited by many notable sources of today to be the pioneer of the spread of the tabla tradition in Bombay and the greater Konkan region. Ustad Munir Khan has spent his last time in Hyderabad and finally in Raigadh where he taught the Maharaja's son.

Having mastered the repertoires of Delhi, Ajrada, Lucknow and Farukhabad, he was able to combine in a tabla solo performance, a variety of compositions from several traditions, presenting each of these with their respective playing-techniques and stylistic requirements. These performances were compared to colorful bouquets of flowers. Munir Khan died in 1938, leaving a large number of disciples including his son Hidayat Khan, his nephews Khalifa Amir Hussain Khan (sister's son) and Ghulam Hussain K (brother's son), Ahmedjan Thirakwa, Nazir Khan of Panipat, Azim Khan, Habibuddin Khan, Shamsuddin Khan, Abdul Karim Khan, Subrao Mama Ankolekar of Goa and many others. Munir Khan's most celebrated disciples Amir Hussain Khan and Ahmedjan Thirakwa taught Nikhil Ghosh. Munir Khan's Laliyana gharana is also called 'Munir Khan gharana' or 'Bombay gharana'.

THE BLENDING OF BAAJ PIONEERED BY USTAD MUNIR KHAN

By the mid-19th century, the gharanas had a good one hundred plus years to form and differentiate themselves. Both styles of playing Bandh Baaj and Khula Baaj had much time to evolve and in the one hundred years

leading to the mid-19th century there had been countless compositions composed by the pioneers of the tabla Parampara.

During the time of the 18th century and 19th century the primary method of classical musicians to earn a living was to go under royal court patronage. With this kind of system in place it was considered very important by the gharana players to be very strict with the style they had played and follow that tradition as each tradition had its own unique quality and this was especially respected by the patrons as they would revere the traditional aspect. The early tabla players would stick to their gharana and their style with unquestionable loyalty. This is also something that can be looked at with the understanding that this strict differentiation of gharana and playing style helped develop and maintain the identity of the musicians' part of the tradition. This is something which can be seen even in the modern day as the gharana remains an important part of classical Indian musicians' identity.

During the time from the transition of power from the Indian maharajas to the British raj there had been an increasing industrialization of the Indian subcontinent and this was catapulted going to the late 19th and early 20th century. In the late 19th century, there was a tabla player who brought about a revolution in the world of music. This musician was mostly later associated with the Farrukhabad gharana but did the unique task of learning tabla from the different gharanas which had evolved in his time.

This Ustad is reputed to have learned from twenty-four different gurus. He eventually also became a legendary composer and guru and developed a unique style of playing tabla. Tabla players from all over the Indian subcontinent came to learn from this revolutionary forward-thinking artist. He left a legacy and became the guru of some of the legends that we in the modern-day revere, the generation who was the first tabla players who played tabla on recording. Names of his students include Ustad Ahmedjan Thirkwa, Ustad Amir Hussain Khan, Ustad Shamsuddin Khan, Ustad Habibuddin Khan, Pandit Suberaomama Anokelkar, and many more. These names became some of the most influential tabla gurus who first popularized the tabla to the mass population of India. They all had numerous students who carry forward the style of playing which goes back to the innovations pioneered by the legend, and his name was Ustad Munir Khan.

Ustad Munir Khan is a name which not many people who are students of tabla quickly recognize but he is responsible for drastically changing the course of the history in Indian Classical music. Ustad Munir Khan learned from various Parampara and gharana, travelling the vast expanse of the Indian subcontinent. He was the first recorded person in tabla history to attempt such an arduous task which was also initially regarded as out of the norm and by some musicians quite controversial. However, Ustad Munir Khan would shock the tabla world with his nature, his dedication to music, his philosophy, and his revolutionary tabla.

Ustad Munir Khan came from a village close to Delhi and Ajrada which is known as Laliyana and he spent a large portion of his career centered in what was then known as Bombay. His playing style was also referred to by members of the musician community as Bombay Baaj and even the name Laliyana tradition was mentioned in some situations. However, he is formally now recognized to be associated with the Farrukhabad gharana as are his students. Ustad Munir Khan's connection to the Farrukhabad gharana is that learned from the sons and the son in law of the legendary Ustad Haji Vilayat Ali Khan. Ustad Amir Hussain Khan, his nephew, Ustad Munir Khans sister's son, is referred to by many as the Doyen of Farrukhabad.

Munir Khan's playing style combined all of his expertise with his personal experimentation. A variety of tabla players from various regions participated in his training, each with their own distinct style. He studied both pakhawaj and tabla, and his playing incorporated both components as well. Because he had studied under experts in each of the gharanas of the era, he possessed their strictness. Additionally, he learned many regional styles from various courts and locales.

Ustad Munir Khan style of playing is unique in the way that it blends both Bandh Baaj and Khula Baaj and uses them interchangeably while playing. The blend of both Bandh and Khula Baaj was very purposeful and thought out. In the pieces composed by Ustad Munir Khan in which he blended both of the Baaj, which bol used which style of playing was deliberately set out for the desired effect. There are countless pieces which follow this, in which in the middle of the piece it will shift back and forth from Bandh Baaj and Khula Baaj, adding more depth and nuance to the compositions.

Ustad Munir Khan was reputed to have a highly expressive voice. This had a very notable impact on his compositions and playing. As we can see from the way the tabla sounds that Ustad Munir Khan developed and taught are sometimes very sharp, sometimes sweet, and sometimes heavy and forceful, this expressive way of speaking tabla bols was something that helped him develop pieces more uniquely. Ustad Munir Khan was also very particular when teaching with the way compositions were spoken. According to him the speech patterns were the guiding factor to how the composition would be played. Along with the blending of Bandh and Khula baaj Ustad Munir Khan was also a pioneer in layakari and he composed a number of pieces which would have very unique used of layakari. There were pieces where he would not just do triplets but he would do layakari in 5 beats in one, 7 beats in one, and even some cases 9 beats. This can also be understood in the system of jaatis which is used in Carnatic music, the 5, 7, 9, respectively being Khand, Mishra, and Sankirna Jaatis. Along with this there were also instances where he would use gaps and also use what can be called vacuum laya, in which there would be instances of phrases stretching in laya or being compacted.

CONTRIBUTION OF USTAD MUNIR KHAN IN THE FIELD OF TABLA

Ustad Munir Khan was the trendsetter to people learning knowledge from various gharanas. Many legendary tabla players followed suit in this but Ustad Munir Khan was the first or if not the actual first one of the first and the first we know of given historical records. If not the first he is undoubtedly the tabla player who took this pursuit of learning a vast expanse of knowledge to its extreme as he is said to have twenty-four gurus. Many people largely credit him to the initial popularization of the tabla solo. Ustad Munir Khan is considered to be the cause of the popularization of tabla in the state of Maharashtra. Ustad Munir Khan is a name which has been to many lost in history but he was one of the most influential tabla players of his time.

From a time before auditory media and in a developing industrializing India rose a unique personality who took the tabla world by storm and caused a revolution. His blend of tabla and unique style of playing and openness to learn and teach changed the course of tabla history. His legacy lives on today with a large amount of tabla players today being linked to Ustad Munir Khan and his movement. Ustad Munir Khan was quoted by many of his students to have famously said that "tabla should be like a bouquet of flowers" and this has led to the beauty that we can see in the tabla world today. When we can hear a whole new dimension of compositions mixing both Bandh baaj and Khula Baaj and when we can as students of tabla conceive of taking on the task of learning material from different gharanas that is gratitude to Ustad Munir Khan. These contributions have had a large part in how the tabla has evolved into what it is in the modern day.

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