INTRODUCTION TO THE SOUTH INDIAN KANJIRA - Part 1

The first steps by Pete Lockett

We're going to look at the basics of the South India drum called kanjira, which is found primarily within the Carnatic classical music system. I perform solos on this drum on my first two albums.

The shell of the kanjira is approximately 2" deep and the diameter of the shell approximately 7" – 8". It is a single headed drum, the skin being a very thin lizard skin (thin lizard skin, rather than skin from a thin lizard…). This skin is stretched out over the shell and is glued on the outside of the shell. In this state the drum is very highly tuned, but in performance it needs to be very bass-heavy. This effect is achieved by lightly spreading water on the inside of the head before and during a show. It is very difficult to maintain the desired pitch for a prolonged period of time, so a good kanjira player will have three, sometimes four kanjiras on stage with him at once. One alternative to this is the new tuneable kanjira, part of Remo's New World percussion range. One other very important characteristic of the drum is the solitary pair of tiny brass jingles fixed into a hole in the shell, which adds a very sharp cut to the sound.

Before going on to the playing of the drum, we must look at the playing position and the role that each hand plays. Kanjira is probably the most difficult Indian drum to be effective on because it is played with only one hand (the right), the role of the other hand (the left) being to support the drum and to bend the pitch with the fingertips. If we look at the holding position we can see how this is achieved (Fig. 1).


Fig. 1

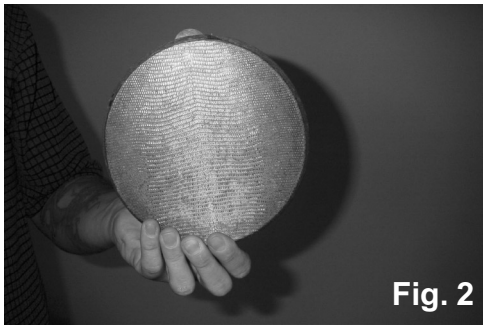


Fig. 2

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 six o'clock, the hands being cupped with the thumb behind and the fingers in front (skin side) of the shell, forming a clamp-like grip. The thumb of the left hand comes along the edge of the shell in line with its circumference and parallel to the floor. It never touches the head or has any involvement in the bending of the skin. (Some people play with the thumb just inside the shell but I prefer the position mentioned)

We can see from Fig. 2 how the fingertips come round underneath the shell and touch the head just at the edge (also at 6 o'clock). It is by pressing here that we achieve the bending of the note, and this is aided by a very steep bearing edge inside the drum.

Next we must look at the basic hand position for the right hand, the striking hand. The way the hand is used is common to almost all Indian hand drums that I've come across. It involves splitting the fingers into two striking units, as in Fig. 3. Unit One is the first finger, whilst Unit Two comprises the second, third and fourth fingers joined together (Fig. 3).

Now, having gone this far, we can begin looking at the basic playing techniques. Our first sound will be ‘TUM’. This is the open bass sound and is played with striking Unit One.

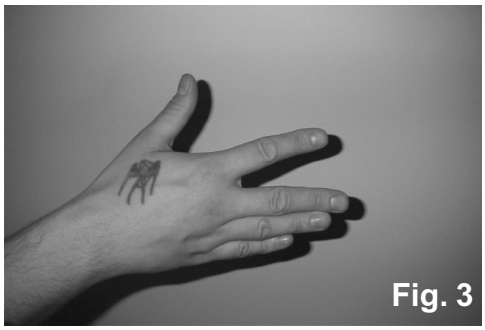


Fig. 3


Fig. 4

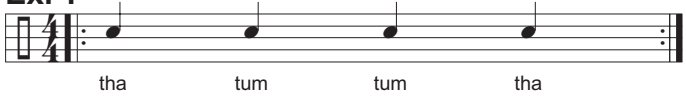
The left-hand fingers should be slightly off the head and not damping the sound, but the drum must continue to be held firmly. The striking fingers should hit the head flat and move away from the head immediately, allowing the drum to ring. Fig. 4 shows the striking position for the ‘TUM’ stroke. Bear in mind that the finger should always travel in a straight line to attack the drum, never at an angle (Fig. 4).

Our second sound will be ‘THA’. This is a closed, non-resonant sound played with striking Unit Two of the right hand. The left hand fingers can rest on the head without pressure for this stroke. The ‘THA’ sound is a sharp slapping type sound which is given a lot more crispness by the effect of the jingles. The three fingers strike together, flat and in the middle of the drum. It should sound like a soft version of a slap stroke on a conga. The striking hand should move in towards the centre of the drum for the ‘THA’ stroke and out towards the edge a little bit for the ‘TUM’. Fig. 5 shows the hand position for the ‘THA’ stroke.


Fig. 5

Now let’s put together some simple rhythms:

Ex. 1



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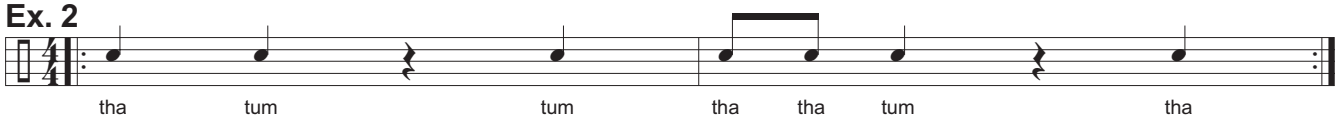

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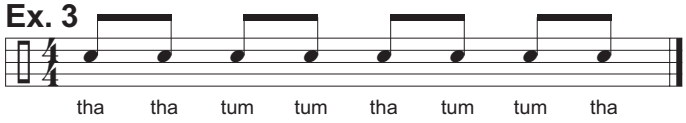

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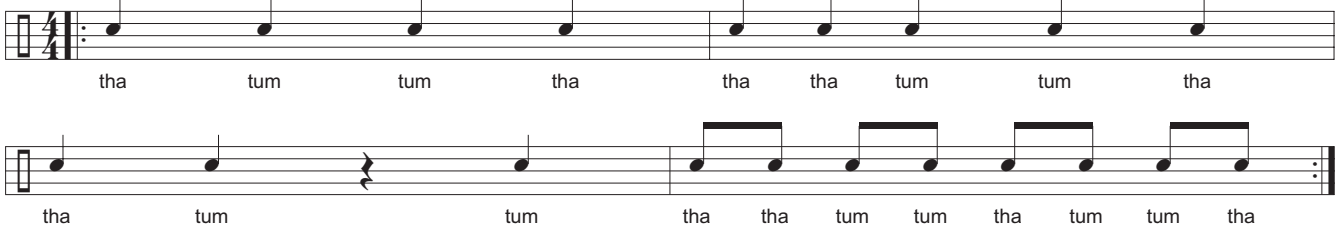

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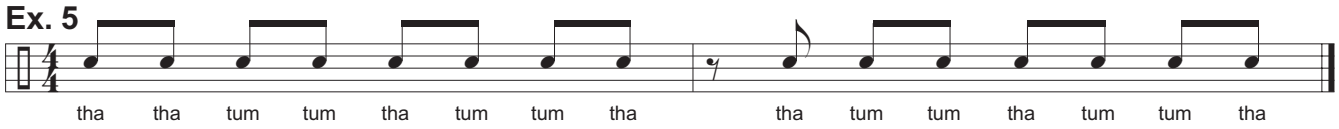

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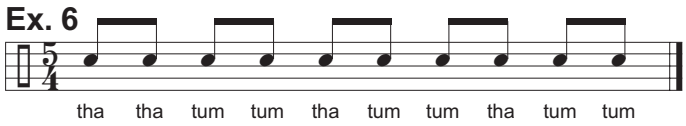

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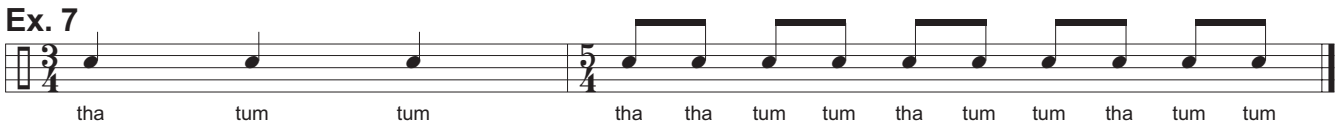

To conclude, I'll briefly talk about the possible ambiguities of some of the phonetics. The main drum in Carnatic music is the mridangam, a double-headed barrel drum. It is from this drum that the phonetics are taken. There are dozens of sounds, each of which mean something different on the drum. Drums such as the kanjira are more recent to the tradition and are of completely different construction but have employed the same phonetic language. This means that because there are fewer sounds available, the strokes on kanjira are often represented by different phonetics. For example, the third of our examples below could be written like this:

THA THA COO KU THA KA DHI NA

It is therefore up to the kanjira player's knowledge of how the phrases would sound on the mridangam, and his intuition in interpreting them for the kanjira