

# The Three T's

By Jerry Leake

I tell all my students that a good musician is someone who has control over the three “T’s” of Indian music—tuning, timing, and tala (form). The underlying philosophy of this article can apply to any musician playing any instrument.

## TUNING

The first category—tuning—is not solely restricted to properly tuning an instrument. Once the instrument is finely tuned the player must achieve the proper sound and resonance for the instrument to speak in its fullest voice. If the instrument were to fall slightly out of tune while playing, it would not resonate clearly and the player would become confused. This could distract musicians and detract from the beauty of the music. With a well-tuned instrument and the proper touch and weight of the hand, the player can begin to achieve higher artistic potential and expression. Understanding the difference between producing a good sound and a great sound is the first step toward speaking clearly with any instrument.

## That Singular Sound

“I am still amazed by the sound of Na.” Tabla master Pandit Swapan Chaudhuri once said this to me during a dinner party given on behalf of Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. Listening to Swapan describe his awe for a sound he has played countless times inspired deep respect in me. “There is much more sound to be heard when playing Na,” he went on to say. “It is like the brain. We can tap into some of it, but never attain its full potential.”

In concert the following evening, Swapan accompanied Khansahib with all his love and appreciation for the music clearly visible. His deep love of that singular sound made me realize that my artistic devotion should greatly exceed any forced determination to achieve that sound.

## TIMING

The second category—timing—refers to the musician’s ability to maintain a given tempo regardless of any rhythmic tension that might exist between performers. On tabla, I constantly assess my tempo to avoid rushing phrases or speeding up in ways that the featured artist may not have intended. As an accompanist, I do not decide on changes in tempo; instead, I tap into the mood of the featured artist and reflect his or her energy.

The ability to retain a relaxed yet controlled mood during the most intensive musical moments is what sets musicians apart. In any style, finding the proper pace for development, maintaining regular breath intake, and flowing with the overall mood all support the qualities of great music. During intensive phrases when the adrenaline is pumping and excitement is building, I may find myself pushing the energy level and creating a forced edge/tension to the music. Whenever I sense myself losing control during this energy wave, I remind myself of my teacher’s guiding words: “You need to feel calm with the music.”

In the older days of Indian music, the drummer’s role was that of strict “time keeper” with little or no ornamentation allowed on the specific accompanying structure. Excessive ornamentation introduces complexity and added momentum, which might consciously or subconsciously influence the overall pace, tempo, and shape of the featured artist’s performance.

Over the years, the role of the tabla player

“The concept of tala is present in every style of music.”

has shifted somewhat from that of strict accompanist to being a more active partner in the music process. Yet some drummers, who have forgotten their primary role as accompanist, can tend to develop the music in ways the featured artist may not have intended. When tabla players are given a moment to improvise, some may accelerate the tempo of their improvisations, introducing more rhythmic complexity and density, which heightens the overall energy.

Subtle increases in energy and tempo do not necessarily detract from the music. Following an accelerated improvisation, mature drummers revert back to the original tempo and pace of the music, like a runner slowing his pace slightly to help breathe more deeply and fully. There is a fine line between aesthetically stretching musical time and a loss of control that could ruin a musical performance. A constant balancing of energy in the moment is needed for the artists to become true partners on the stage.

## TALA

The third “T”—tala—refers to a tabla

player’s ability to establish a given rhythm cycle with absolute clarity, without excessive ornaments that might disguise the structure of the accompanying pattern. Tala consciousness involves developing the music within a set time parameter such as a slow 16-beat cycle, or maintaining one’s awareness of a 12-bar blues progression. The player must maintain the integrity of the structural framework.

When first learning to play *tintal*—a cycle of 16 beats divided 4+4+4+4—many tabla students get lost within the time cycle, sometimes adding or subtracting beats. Perhaps because students are also focusing on achieving good sound, hand positioning, and body relaxation, their sense of the cycle is greatly diminished. I have heard performances by professional tabla players who have dropped or added beats from a given cycle. This error usually occurs during very slow rhythm cycles, making it difficult for audience members, or even the featured artist, to be aware of any cyclic alteration.

The concept of tala is present in every style of music—not necessarily as strict rhythmic cycles, but certainly as a time-structure awareness within which music is developed. The 12-bar blues progression is one example of an established time structure with inherent characteristics and harmonic movement throughout the performance. Within the blues progression, musicians explore the vast playground of time while maintaining the integrity of the harmonic progression. During an extended drum solo, mature drummers often sacrifice skillful technique for musicality by improvising over the form of the tune. In these “higher aesthetic” solos, listeners can actually hear the underlying melody and even the harmony of the tune. The three elements of clear sound, consistent timing, and form converge to produce quality music.

## Sound + Time = Groove

This basic formula can help to relieve the burdens of the mind that, during the process of making music, can conflict with one’s creative inspiration. Indeed, the player does not need to possess incredible technique on his or her instrument, or have assimilated volumes of repertoire to groove with feeling and musicality.

With command over the Three T’s it is possible to contribute positively to any musical context. Quarter notes played on an empty Coke bottle with a coin can “swing” on profound musical levels. If the sound of the bottle

projects in consistent and controlled ways, and if the space between each strike is intuitively balanced, then the musicians will be able to find their place, pace, and space within the matrix of sound and time.

**Jerry Leake** recently completed a Master of Music degree from the University of Missouri where he studied with Dr. Julia Gaines. In the fall of 2008 he will begin pursuing a Doctor of Musical Arts degree at The Ohio State University, studying with Dr. Susan Powell. He also holds a Bachelor of Music Education degree from South Dakota State University, where he studied with Stephen Tobin and James McKinney. Materials from this research were presented at the 2007 National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy in Greensboro, North Carolina. PN

## HOW TO SUBMIT MANUSCRIPTS TO THE PAS ON-LINE RESEARCH JOURNAL

1. Submit three hard copies of the full text, including bibliographic entries, musical examples, photographs, illustrations, etc., to: PAS On-Line Research Journal, 32 E. Washington, Suite 1400, Indianapolis, IN 46204.
2. Include a cover letter stating the author's name, position, year of manuscript completion, year of latest revision (if any), phone number, and a brief "author's credits" bio. A photo is optional.
3. If copyrighted musical examples, illustrations, or photographs are included as part of the manuscript, it is the author's responsibility to secure permission for the use of such copyrighted material. A letter documenting permission for use and on-line publication of these materials must be included.
4. Articles will be reviewed quarterly by the PAS Scholarly Research Committee. It will take approximately six weeks to review an article. You will then be notified of the status.

If your manuscript is accepted for the Journal, you will be asked to send an electronic copy of the manuscript, a brief summary of the article for the Journal Table of Contents and a signed release form to the PAS office.



EXTRAORDINARY  
COLLABORATION.

LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY  
APPLETON, WISCONSIN  
WWW.LAWRENCE.EDU | 800-227-0982

2009 Conservatory Auditions | Appleton · Atlanta · Boston · Denver · Houston · Interlochen, Mich. · Los Angeles  
New York · Phoenix · Portland, Ore. · San Francisco · Seattle · Washington, D.C.