

Ustad Manju Khan and the Ajrada Gharana: An Analytical Study of His Tabla Playing Style

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Abstract

Ustad Manju Khan was a pivotal figure of the Ajrada “gharana” of tabla playing and held a distinctive place in the world of the instrument. His performance style blended the traditional elements of the Ajrada gharana with his own unique characteristics. The ability to move forward by preserving tradition while incorporating qualities of modern performance is the hallmark of an accomplished tabla player. This research article attempts to conduct a meticulous study of Ustad Manju Khan’s playing style, examining every intricate aspect of his artistry.

The style of Tabla playing involves a synthesis of various elements. To understand a player's style, a detailed analysis of factors such as sitting posture, hand placement, body language, facial expressions, the balance between the “Bayan” and “Dayan”, the positioning of the instruments, the approach to solo and accompaniment, sound production (“Nikas”), the aesthetic quality of the “Bols” (syllables), and the style of improvisation (“Badhat”) is essential.

Keywords: Hand Position, Sitting Posture and Facial Expressions, Sound Aesthetics and Execution, Sam, khali–Tali, Command over Other Gharanas, Progression Style of Different Compositions

Research Methodology -

1. Descriptive and analytical methods have been employed in this research.
2. Books, research papers, and reliable online sources were utilized for data collection.
3. A comparative study of the collected material was conducted to analyze the key points.
4. Cross-referencing was also carried out during the research process to ensure the veracity of the facts.
5. The entire study has been presented in a logical sequence to allow the conclusions to emerge clearly.
6. An attempt was made to understand the depth of the subject through the systematic classification of the gathered information.
7. Expert opinions and available evidence were also drawn upon as needed during the research.

Hand placement

Hand placement is a crucial aspect of tabla playing. The foundation of this technique is laid the moment a guru first guides a student's hand onto the instrument. Consequently, tabla experts believe that this initial placement has the power to either elevate the student's artistry to a new dimension, render it merely ordinary, or distort it entirely. While hand placement varies according to the style of each “gharana” (school), the ideal technique is one that enables the player to execute and present the “baaj” (playing style) of any “gharana” in its authentic manner.

Manju Khan was introduced to the tabla in his childhood by his uncle, Ustad Azizuddin Khan. Khan Sahib’s right hand would rest on the tabla in a rounded posture; his index finger exerted significant weight, while the middle finger remained mostly lifted off the surface, and the ring

finger stayed in an ideal position—touching the edge of the “syahi” (the black central patch). His little finger remained close to the ring finger.

The thumb plays a crucial role in the balance of the hand. It greatly facilitates the independent movement of the other four fingers. The thumb maintains contact with the “gajra” (the braided rim of the drumhead). Specifically, Khan Sahib’s thumb would touch the “gajra” at a point aligned with the middle section of his index finger.

This specific hand positioning is achieved through a guru's blessings, divine grace, and years of rigorous practice. Such positioning ensures that playing complex compositions at high speeds causes no strain or deformity in the hand.

The positioning of the left hand is vital in “tabla” playing. Factors such as tilting the “bayan” (bass drum) slightly forward or keeping it upright, the orientation of the “syahi” (black central patch), and whether the drum is played at a lower or higher pitch all contribute significantly to the aesthetic quality of the performance. Producing various forms of “gamak” (oscillation) and “meend” (glissando) by applying weight to the “dagga” (bass drum) with the left hand is a significant art form. Ustad Manju Khan Sahib preferred to keep the “bayan” upright rather than tilted. He positioned the “syahi” facing his body, leaving the wider section beyond the “syahi” accessible for playing with his fingers.

Khan Sahib divided the left-hand fingers into two groups: the index finger on one side, and the middle, ring, and little fingers on the other; he would alternate between these two groups while playing the “dagga”.

Techniques on the “bayan”—such as “gamak”, “meend”, and “ghissa” (sliding the hand across the drumhead)—play a key role in evoking “Veer” (heroic), “Shringar” (romantic), and “Raudra” (furious) “rasas” (emotions). Khan Sahib applied weight to the “bayan” using both his shoulder and his palm; the coordination between these two resulted in a remarkably melodious performance. Even a single stroke of “Dha” demonstrated his command over the instrument and the perfect synchronization of both hands. By varying the weight applied during “gamak” and “meend” on the “bayan”, he evoked diverse emotional moods. Khan Sahib created extraordinary sweetness in his music by modulating the pressure on the “bayan” and precisely controlling the “bols” (syllables).

Posture and Facial Expression

For tabla performance, two postures are generally considered appropriate:

1. Padmasana – sitting cross-legged.
2. Virasana – sitting on the knees.

“The correct sitting posture for tabla playing is closely related to the placement of the instrument, the maintenance of posture, and the positioning of the hands. Neglecting any one of these aspects affects the quality of performance. This becomes evident when a performer is unable to play bols at high speed and soon becomes fatigued.

Therefore, for achieving softness, sweetness, lightness, purity of tone, and aesthetic appeal in performance, the first requirement is the selection of the correct posture.”

“While playing the tabla, one should sit either in Padmasana (cross-legged) or Virasana (kneeling), because tabla performance requires the proper application of strength through the hands. Hence, any posture that allows the hands to exert adequate control and power is considered suitable.”

According to Dr. Manohar Bhalchandra Marathe, “One should always practise while sitting upright in a cross-legged posture. This enables greater ease in performance and helps produce

the correct weight and balance in the bols. A performer's sitting posture also leaves an impression on the audience."

Ustad Manju Khan's posture clearly reflected the importance of facial expression during tabla performance. While presenting Sam, Khali, Bhari bols, and the rises and falls of laya (tempo), facial expressions played a significant role. After executing complex rhythmic passages, when he arrived precisely on the Sam, his expressions enhanced the impact of the performance. During difficult rhythmic compositions or technically demanding passages, the coordination of his hands and facial expressions made his playing even more graceful and aesthetically pleasing.

There was perfect coordination between Ustad Manju Khan's hand movements and facial expressions. While performing, a gentle smile always remained on his face.

Since tabla is both an auditory and a visual art form, Khan Sahib often practised while seated before a mirror. Whenever he reached the Sam, he would smile pleasantly and strike the Bayan with emphasis, often lifting his hand slightly backward after the stroke. This natural coordination of expression and gesture added remarkable beauty and charm to his performance.

Tonal Beauty and Clarity of Sound Production

"Music originates from Nāda (sound), and Swar (musical notes) is its very life. Just as a painting is created from colours, a sculpture from clay or stone, and magnificent buildings from bricks and stones, in the same way music is manifested through sound." In tabla, musical sounds are produced through the combination of the sounds generated by the right (Dayan) and left (Bayan) drums. The subtler and more natural these sounds are, the greater will be their ability to evoke aesthetic delight (rasa).

"The proportionate difference in the sounds of closed and open strokes, produced at different playing positions on the Dayan and Bayan, and the balanced distribution of these sounds in performance, is known as weight (Wazan)."

Khan Sahib would practise difficult groups of bols for long durations in Madhya (medium) and Vilambit (slow) tempo. According to him, this was the most effective method of mastering complex bols. He devoted extensive work to the Bayan (left-hand drum), achieving remarkable command over Meend (gliding effect), Gamak (oscillation), and Ghissa (sliding stroke). As a result, his tabla playing possessed exceptional sweetness and musicality.

Although Vīra Rasa (the sentiment of valour) was prominently reflected in his performance, whenever the music demanded softness and delicacy, Khan Sahib would instantly produce a light, graceful, and exquisitely refined style of playing.

Execution of Sam, Taali, and Khaali

In Hindustani classical music, Sam, Taali, and Khaali hold immense significance. In particular, Sam occupies the most important position in tabla performance. The culmination of any composition—whether a Bandish, Qaida, Rela, or Gat—lies on the Sam. If a performer fails to arrive on the Sam, all the effort invested in the performance loses its impact. Conversely, even after traversing complex rhythmic patterns and intricate layakari, arriving precisely on the Sam creates a remarkable sense of satisfaction and aesthetic delight.

Ustad Manju Khan Sahib possessed an extraordinary command over the Sam. He maintained impeccable control over the rhythm and landed on the Sam with absolute precision every single time. Even if the Lehra moved slightly ahead or behind, he would effortlessly regain control and reach the Sam flawlessly. According to Khan Sahib, a tabla player should be capable of

independently managing the fluctuations of tempo, but reaching the Sam accurately is indispensable.

Ustad Manju Khan Sahib also paid meticulous attention to Taali and Khaali while presenting Qaidas and Relas. He believed that the proper execution of Taali and Khaali is what brings beauty and balance to a performance, just as rhyme gives structure and charm to poetry. His strong emphasis on these rhythmic elements enriched the musical depth of his tabla playing and made his performances more refined, aesthetically pleasing, and artistically complete.

The presentation of Kayda and Rela, along with Bandishes (compositions) and Tihai patterns in various talas during a solo tabla recital, constitutes one of the most significant aspects of the art of tabla performance.

Ustad Manju Khan generally commenced his solo recitals with a Peshkar from the Delhi or Ajrada gharana. After a brief Aamad in Adh (1½) laya, he would arrive at Sam and begin the performance in Vilambit Teentaal.

Thereafter, the Peshkar would unfold gradually. During its development, he would incorporate short Tihais and Aamad passages in Adh laya. Following the Peshkar, Ustad Manju Khan would usually present the following Kayda composition of the Ajrada gharana.

Command over other Gharanas

Ustad Manju Khan was a good player of Delhi, Ajrada and Farrukhabad Baaj, he had good authority over these gharanas as well. Khan Sahab used to play the kaydas of Farrukhabad and Lucknow in addition to the prevailing kaydas of Delhi. In Khan Sahib's kaydas there was a lot of use of Dhattrak dhikit Kdadhathi, Dhagetit, Bol groups. The rare kaydas of Ajrada such as 'Ghidanag Dhinedhage Nagedhin Dhaagetite Dhagenadha Trakadhin Dhaegatraka Dhinagina Dhagenage dhinDhage nagedhine dhagetite dhagena Trakadhin Dhagetrak Tinakina' were also played by Khan Saheb with preparation and with a good expansive edge. Another Ajrada kayda is 'dhadha Ghegheng Dhinedheena Ghegheng..' This is also one of the rare and best kayda of Ajrada, this kayda was also presented by Khan Saheb in the programs and taught to the students. Farrukhabad's Rela Qaeda Dhaagetir Kitgege Tirkit Dhingin Dhaage Tir Kitdheghe Nanagin Tinkin Khan Saheb used to play this Rela Qaeda clearly and in preparation.

The prevailing kayda of Delhi, "Dhati Tedha tite Dhadha tite Dhaage Tina Gina", was made with a clear edge and two finger tips. To play this kayda, it takes softness in the hand, which Khan Saheb used to do very well. Khan Sahab used to say that Delhi is not just 'Dhati Dhaage, Nadha Tirkit' is over, there are many other good kaydas of Delhi. He had more than one composition, Khan Saheb used to add charm to the beauty of the lyrics of the Delhi Gharana.

The presentation of Kayda and Rela, along with Bandishes (compositions) and Tihai patterns in various talas during a solo tabla recital, constitutes one of the most significant aspects of the art of tabla performance. A solo tabla recital is a composite presentation of Peshkar, Kayda, Rela, Rau, Gat, Paran, and Tukra. For a comprehensive study of an artist's solo performance style, it is essential to analyze each of these components individually.

Ustad Manju Khan Sahab had knowledge of the prevalent kayda of every gharana. Khan Saheb used to play the Qaeda first in single speed one and a half times and then in a quadruple. They would end it with a small third after a succession of leads. Khan Saheb used to make reflexes on the basis of double, force, tactics, twists.

Rela: The word 'rela' is derived from 'rail' or 'flow', which is also an expansive structure. Consistency and fast speed are the main attributes of the train. Mainly, the relas are composed in three vocal groups. Tirkit, Dhirdhir and Dhingin are the three bols that require hard work because they are played at a fast pace with consistency. Ustad Manju Khan had practiced all

the three bol groups well and had a good grasp of them, so such reels of his Tirkit Dhiradhar and Dhingin were heard clear and melodious.

Ustad Manju Khan's Style of Tabla Accompaniment

Compared to tabla solo performance, tabla accompaniment is entirely different. In a tabla solo or independent performance, the tabla player enjoys complete freedom and can present any composition within the established framework. In accompaniment, however, the tabla player performs entirely according to the requirements of the principal artist. During vocal accompaniment, the role of the tabla remains more restrained than in instrumental accompaniment. In vocal music, the tabla player generally presents only brief uthans, one- or two-cycle compositions, or other short compositions in between the performance.

Khan Sahib mainly performed and taught classical tabla. He had mastered the art of accompanying both Hindustani classical vocalists and instrumentalists. Besides classical music, he was also an excellent accompanist in light-classical and semi-classical genres. His Keharwa and Dadra thekās were exceptionally rich and expressive, and in fast tempos they would often bring life and excitement to musical gatherings. Ustad Manju Khan accompanied many renowned musicians throughout his career.

Conclusion

A thorough examination of Khan Sahab's company shows that he was not only a skilled solo tabla player but also an excellent accompanist. His tabla accompaniment used to add charm to the program. So that fellow performers should not feel uncomfortable and sing or play in a comfortable manner. Ustad Manju Khan accompanied big artists like Hariprasad Chaurasia, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, besides Khan Sahab also accompanied famous Kathak dancer Shobhana Narayan.

Ustad Manju Khan accompanied all genres of singing. Apart from classical singing, Jasraj also accompanied Ahmed Mohammad Hussain and Ghulam Ali in ghazals and Wadali Brothers in qawwali. This quality of Khan Sahab is a testimony to his versatility. Because most of the classical tabla accompaniments accompany only in classical music and the accompaniment artists of light music accompany only in light music, but Khan Sahab established himself as a good artist in the accompaniment of every genre.

In this way, Khan Sahib sang with all three forms of music: singing, playing and dancing. This quality of his confirms his being an all-round artist.

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