Chapter 3

Getting started

3.1 Acquiring a *mridang*

Buying a *mridang* from India is the first thing that most people think of. This is the preferred course if someone is actually going to India. It is important not to go to the shop by oneself unless the craftsman or the shop owner is well known. The chances of getting a good drum at a reasonable price are unlikely if one goes without someone who knows the instruments and the shopkeeper very well.

If one is not actually going to India, things are more difficult. It is not practical to do retail business by correspondence. Therefore, one should think about purchasing such an instrument in his or her country or continent (in the case of North America or Europe). Transportation times in the West are typically only a few days as opposed to Indian weeks or months. Chances for damage are tremendously reduced. Should there be damage, it is easier to exchange or obtain compensation. There is really one disadvantage when dealing with western firms: cost. A *mridang* in America or Europe costs many times what comparable merchandise costs in India. In any case, all things considered, it is usually better to deal with western firms: the difference in cost is worth the headhache of trying to do business overseas. There is a list of suppliers in the Appendix C of this volume.

Familiarizing with the parts of the drum makes many things easier. It allows to communicate with importers and musicians. It also gives necessary background to get started. Major parts of the *mridang* are shown in fig. 3.1. These parts are: (i) the heads (*pudi*), (ii)

the wooden shell (*lakadi*), (iii) the bolts.

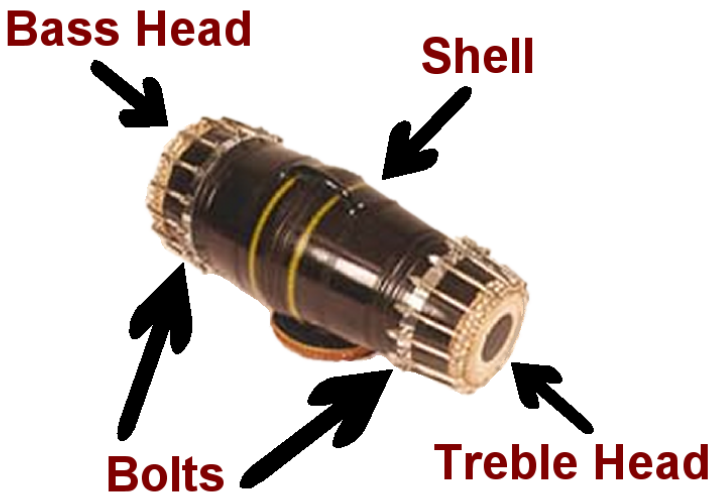

Figure 3.1: Main parts of a *mridang*

Let us make a closer look at the *pudi*, fig. 3.2. The four parts that one has to be concerned with are: (i) the black spot (*syahi*), (ii) the main membrane (*sur* or *maidan*), (iii) the anular membrane (*kinar* or *chat*), and (iv) the leather braid (*gajara* or *pagri*).

Figure 3.2: Parts of the drumhead

There are many decisions which must be made during the time of purchase. It would be impossible to predict all of the options, but here are a few common ones.

There are various types of lacing and tightening arrangements. Not all of them are of the same quality. One may find rawhide, leather, rope and turnbuckles.

In traditional *pakhāwaj* method of lacing the rawhide is used, fig. 3.3. As the name implies, rawhide is a skin that has a minimal chemical treatment after it was removed from the animal: usually only the addition of salt as a preservative. It is readily available in India and relatively inexpensive. It has the the disadvantage of being sensitive to changes in humidity and temperature and it is sometimes difficult to work with.

Figure 3.3: Traditional *pakhāwaj* lacing

The case of metal turnbuckles, or bolts, is the preferred option in Siddha Yoga drums. They have the advantage, among the others recalled in chapter 2, of making the drum less susceptible to changes in humidity and temperature, hence the drumheads are more stable in their tuning.

The best *mridangs* usually come from the two Indian states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. This area has a ready supply of *shisham* (Indian rosewood, *Dalbergia sisu*), which is tight grained and very heavy. There is also a good supply of the special powder used to make the *syahi*. The rawhide of traditional *pakhāwaj*s also tends to be much heavier in this area. The availability of good materials and skilled craftsmen give these two states a very high proportion of excellent drums.

3.2 Basic care and tuning

One of the first things that musicians have to learn is how to take care of their instruments. The *mridang* requires some special consideration. This instrument is used in such a sacred

and uplifting praactice as chanting that one has to take good care of him and pay him great respect. It is said that *Saraswatī*, the goddess of speech, arts and learning resides in each and every musical instrument. As a sign of respect, many musicians in India will salute their instrument, or touch their hands to the instrument and then to their hearts, before picking it up to play. Great care is taken to avoid stepping over any musical instrument. The following points can be made about the care for the drum.

The most important thing is to keep the black spot (*syhai*) dry. It is very sensitive to moisture. This is one of the reasons why *mridang* players use talcum powder when they play. Even a small amount of sweat on the player's hands is enough to damage the drumhead. Using covers to protect the skin of each drumhead is a good idea when the instrument is not being played. A dust cover is also good.

The *mridang* should not be exposed to extreme variations of temperature. Excessive heat may split the skins. Sudden exposure to cold may cause moisture to condense in the *syahi* and cause damage.

The drum should be stored out of traffic's way to avoid accidental damage. It can be stored standing upright on the big end only. A cradle, i.e. a very low wooden stand that the drum can lie across, is a very good way as well, particularly if the ends are covered. Cradles also help position the drum at a comfortable height for playing.

Periodic wiping of the outside will help keep the instrument looking nice. Wax polishes and the like are not necessary and best avoided.

Great care has to be taken when transporting any instrument. Completely covering the *mridang*, when it does not hinder carrying it, will help avoid accidental scratches and scrapes.

The drum heads, especially the treble head, should be kept always in tune. There is a common misconception that a drum like this should be loosened whenever it is not going to be played. This is true when dealing with the poorest quality *mridangs*. Doing this for any good quality drum will make it unreliable while performing.

The treble head of a *mridang* has a stringent requirement for pitch. In table 3.1 is reported a list of treble head diameters and recommended tunings. There are three things

that one should keep in mind about this table. The first is that the diameter is measured from the rim, as shown in fig. 3.4, not from the braid of the drumhead. The second is that the drum shell is sufficiently flexible to go a step in either directions, in terms of tuning: for instance, a 6 inches head could be tuned in A *flat* or in F *sharp* instead of G. The final point is that table 3.1 has not taken thickness of the skin into consideration. Therefore the table is only a rough guide.

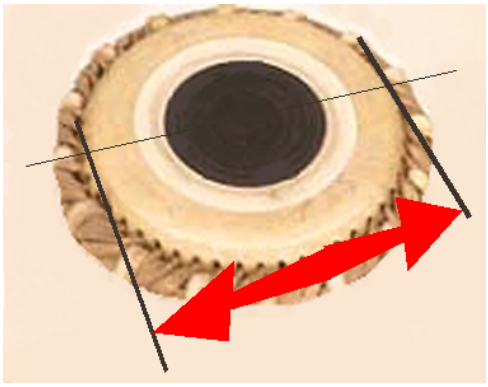

Figure 3.4: The correct way of determining the *pudi* size

One uses the *Nā* or the *Tin* strokes (see chapter 4 for more details on the drum strokes) to determine the pitch. The use of these strokes has the advantage of showing what the tension is under a very small area of the rim.

Size (in)	Pitch
5 1/4	C
5 1/2	B
5 3/4	A
6	G
6 1/4	F
6 1/2	F sharp

Table 3.1: Recommended tunings for *mridang* treble heads

Tuning is performed on the braid. One raises the pitch by slightly tightening the skin. This is accomplished by acting on the bolts. Conversely, one lowers the pitch by slightly

loosening the skin, again acting on the bolts in the reverse way. At times, for precise tuning, a hammer can be used, striking the braid. It is very important that one strikes only the *gajara* with the hammer. An accidental strike against the wooden lip will irreparably damage the head.

It is important that the tension around the drum be uniform. A drum which is out of tune has a cross pattern of pitches. As shown in fig. 3.5, there are two opposed areas of relatively high pitch and two areas of relatively low pitch. Between them are zones where the pitch is poorly defined. If one is having a hard time hearing the pitch it may be because one is acting on the bolts in an area of undefined pitch.

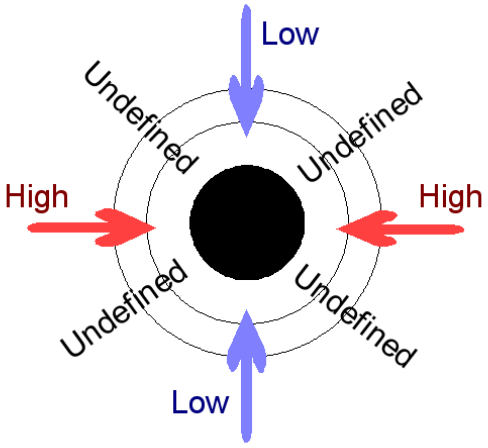

Figure 3.5: Cross tension pattern of an off–tune *pudi*

The main difficulty in tuning the *mridang* is due to the difficulty in hearing the pitch. Actually, complex physical and psychoacoustic phenomena occurr during the tuning process. In the end it is just a matter of experience.

3.3 Sitting position

Correct posture is very important for studying and playing *mridang*. The posture will determine the ease and difficulty that the player will have in controlling the instrument.

By far the most important thing to remember with the posture when playing the drum is to relax. The drum should be kept as close as possible so that no excessive stretching and straining of the arms and back are required. A cradle or a cushion for the drum is a good thing, as it raises the drum heads so that the forearms can be more or less horizontal.

When one sits to play the drum, he or she can sit as if for meditation. Whatever floor–sitting position that is comfortable is good, so that position will not be changed frequently, as that can be difficult while playing. Half–lotus and easy–posture are very good for getting hands at the right height.

The back should be relaxed and upright. The neck, the shoulders and upper arms are also relaxed. Any tension in the wrists, arms or shoulders will eventually lead to strain.

3.4 Powder

It is very important to use a small amount of powder when playing. There are different kinds and they do not all work the same. The powder should protect the *syhai* against water: even a small amount of sweat may cause major damage. Moreover, for the ease of playing, the powder should act as a lubrificant to allow free movement of the hands while in contact with the skin. Last, the powder used should show a resistance to caking up on the drum. A build up will choke the sound and must be removed with care.

Talcum powder is a common powder used for *mridang* playing. Curiously, talcum powder is not at all hygroscopic yet it still affords protection against moisture. It is moderately resistant to caking and is the best product able to mantain its lubrificating action.

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