



PAKHWAJ

Introduction

The pakhwaj also called mardal, pakuaj, pakhavaj and mardala is an ancient Indian barrel shaped percussion instrument which is similar to the mridangam. It is famous in North India. Traditionally, the pakhwaj has been the favored percussion instrument for performances of the Dhrupad-style, be it vocal, on Rudra-Veena or on Surbahar. It is also used in a classical form from Rajasthan known as Haveli Sangeet. The majority of pakhwaj players today trace their musical ancestry to two teaching lines – that are identified with two prominent figures who were active in the mid-19th century: Kudau Singh and Nana Panse.

Construction

The body of the pakhwaj is made of one piece of tun (Cedrela tuna), or shisham (Dalgergia Sissoo).

Hollow, the body has two apertures of different size, one, small, that will generate high pitched sounds and another, wider, for low pitched sounds. The walls of the instrument are two to three centimeters thick and give it stability in the low frequencies.

The goat skin, coupled to the high pitch aperture or Dayan has a thick black disk made of flour, ferric oxide powder and starch stuck to its centre to allow the emission of harmonics.

The skin coupled to the bass aperture (Bayan, or left) is regularly coated in its middle with plain flour paste to give it a perfect tune. The two skins are stretched together by leather strips.

The amazing musicality of the pakhwaj comes from the expression of bols or specific strikes from one or both hands.



Tuning

Set horizontally on a cushion in front of a crossed-leg pakhwaji, the larger bass-skin is played with the left hand and the treble skin by the right hand. The goatskin membranes are looped with leather thongs around the hollowed barrel, which is widest in the middle. Eight pieces of two inch wooden round stock are pried between thongs and barrel, and are hammered tight. The treble skin is fitted with three concentric rings of dense black hardened paste which helps to create a sound resonant with harmonics. The treble skin is tuned with a tuning-hammer, holding the instrument in a vertical position, striking down along the rim over the barrel to raise the pitch, turning the pakhavaj on its vertical axis as it is tuned all along the circumference of the skin. The sound emitted by a particular stroke should merge completely with that of the accompanying tanpura. The bass skin is tuned not by adjusting the tension but by applying a ball of dough from aatta, whole-fiber wheat. Its fundamental tone will be the lower tonic.

Tone

The pakhavaj has a low, mellow tone. The sound of the Pakhavaj is very rich in harmonics. In traditional pakhavaj-styles a student would learn a number of different strokes which produce a specific sound.
