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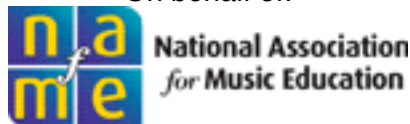
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What is This?

by Brandon Keith Wood

South Indian *Solkattu* and Western Music Pedagogy

Creating New Rhythmic Perspectives

Abstract: Part of the classical music tradition of South India, *solkattu* reinforces the statement "If you can say it, you can play it." This system of percussive syllables can help young musicians approach rhythm training in a way not usually available to students in Western countries. This article offers applications for a music curriculum. The approach can help students be more accurate in both their sense of rhythm and their rhythmic performance.

Keywords: creativity, cross-cultural, curriculum, multicultural, rhythm, performance, *solkattu*, South India, syllable, *tala*, teacher education

ndian *solkattu* embodies the saying "If you can say it, you can play it." It is "a powerful tool for developing a strong sense of well-organized rhythm in nearly any form of music."[1] The specific percussive syllables are designed to allow the performer to voice rhythmic groupings quickly and efficiently.[2] Contrastingly, rhythm counting with numbers and traditional subdivision syllables can be laborious and daunting for students. This article provides background information about Indian solkattu and presents applications for a music curriculum. These applications create an approachability to rhythm training that will help students develop a heightened sense of rhythmic accuracy, phrasing, and musicality.

Karnatak Music

Karnatak music of South India evolved from ancient Hindu traditions and is known as the "classical" music tradition. The music uses cyclical rhythmic periods (measures) called *tala* (Sanskrit for "hand clapping") that have similarities to Western meter. Each tala is made up of a number of steady pulse-beats (*aksara*), which are organized into measures, each containing the same number of pulse-beats. The beginning of each measure is accented and is regarded as the culmination of the previous measure. Therefore, the rhythmic periods are seen as cyclical. The measures are marked by traditional hand patterns—claps, waves, and finger counts—that beat the time.

Indian classical music offers Western music teachers an interesting and accessible approach to rhythm and phrasing.

These clap patterns serve as visible and audible signals, similar to an ostinato, that enable the performer to depart from simple rhythms and create a sense of rhythmic counterpoint, converging from time to time on the first beat of the cycle.[3] The cycle is repeated as many times as necessary to finish the composition and improvisations.[4]

These rhythmic systems function by means of vocal sounds called sol-kattu, meaning "bound together." Each solkattu syllable is a representation of a corresponding drum stroke. With this method, students must first vocalize all rhythms before learning to execute them on a drum. They must do this while keeping the tala clapping pattern. Eventually, one can become fluent in vocalizing fast and intricate patterns. More important, one's sense of rhythm and metric cycle is enhanced to a level of mastery.[5]

Tala cycles create the context for the solkattu syllables. The syllables are bound together into combinations that make up phrases (e.g., *Ta Ka Di Mi*) that articulate the tala in various ways. Any musician, whether drummer or melodic, could use solkattu to work out a rhythmically challenging passage—perhaps the broadest implication of this approach. The act of vocalizing before playing forces the performer to internalize the music. This moves the syllabic language into the world of "general rhythmic analysis and training."[6]

The Basics

The phrase "If you can say it, you can play it" suggests the fact that music is produced from the inside out. To reproduce rhythms, one must first internalize them. The act of vocalization adds a step in this process and confirms an understanding of the rhythm. Additionally, the design of the solkattu syllables creates the potential for singing rhythms with clarity, rapidity, and phrasing. So, the pedagogical applications of solkattu could aid the students in developing a heightened sense of rhythm, phrasing, and musicality.

The first step is assigning basic rhythm cells with appropriate syllables. These
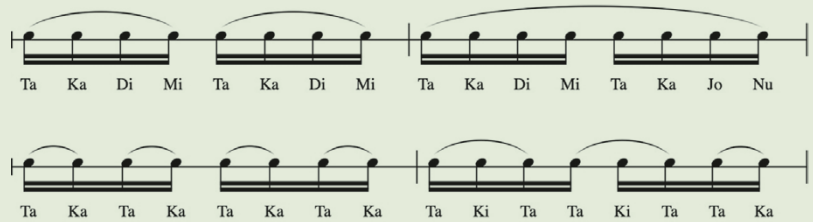
FIGURE 1

A Sixteenth-Note Phrasing

FIGURE 2A

A 5/8 Phrasing

FIGURE 2B

A 5/8 Phrasing

options serve as alternatives to traditional counting (e.g., "one and two-*e*-and-*ah*") and can be used by music students at any level. Following is a beginning list of traditional solkattu syllables.

Punctuation Guidelines

Ta Ki Ta is pronounced "Tah Kee Tah."

Ta Ka Di Mi is pronounced "Tah Kah Dee Mee."

Ta Di Gi Na Tom: The G is hard.[7]

Syllable Cells

One note: *Ta*

Two notes: *Ta Ka*

Three notes: *Ta Ki Ta*

Four notes: *Ta Ka Di Mi*

Five notes: *Ta Di Gi Na Tom*

Rhythmic Phrasing

A further adaptation of solkattu to Western music is found in rhythmic phrasing. The syllable groups lend themselves to certain articulations and/or rhythmic groupings. For example, two groups of four sixteenth notes could warrant the solkattu shown in Figure 1.

Students should practice looping each individual measure, getting a feel for each way of phrasing the same rhythm. Then, students can try these 5/8 measures of eighth notes the same way (Figures 2A and 2B).

There are limitless applications for phrasing, which can be applied at the discretion of the teacher and student. These adaptations of common Western rhythms will lead the student to a deeper understanding of the music in context. This creates the possibilities of clearer

rhythmic interpretation, articulation, and expression.

Metric Concepts

A similar concept is to apply these syllables when introducing hemiolas, mixed meters, and metric modulation. The syllables help students feel the consistent pulse while phrasing appropriately within the meter. The examples in Figures 3, 4, and 5 represent the use of solkattu for various metric concepts.

Students should practice by looping each line individually. Then, students can come up with other combinations to reinforce mastery of these concepts.

Rhythm Doubling and Polyrhythms

Trikala, meaning "three speeds," is a useful rhythm exercise that is a fundamental rhythmic process to Karnatak music.[8] In this exercise, the solkattu speed doubles and then redoubles in relation to the beat. In Western terms, the student begins by vocalizing quarter notes. After a cycle, they progress to eighth notes. Finally, the last cycle utilizes sixteenth notes. The exercise accommodates the keeping of the tala (or meter) with traditional hand gestures (*kriya*). There are four basic gestures typically done by the right hand while the left hand is held in place with palm facing up: clap with the right palm down onto the left palm (C), clap with the back of right hand down onto the left palm (Cu), turn the right hand up vertically in a wave position (W), and individual finger taps. If seated, the right hand may also perform these gestures on the right thigh. The hand motions always remain in the first "speed," which helps the student express the larger pulse while performing the subdivisions. Figure 6 shows an example of this exercise within the Adi tala, which is an eight-beat cycle grouped as 4 + 2 + 2.

Some alternatives to the hand gestures would be to use a conducting pattern (e.g., two measures of 4/4), to tap the beat, or to clap. Additionally, this exercise could be applied to any
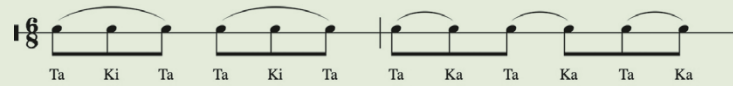
FIGURE 3

Hemiola

FIGURE 4

Mixed Meter

FIGURE 5

Metric Modulation

FIGURE 6

An 8/4 Trikala
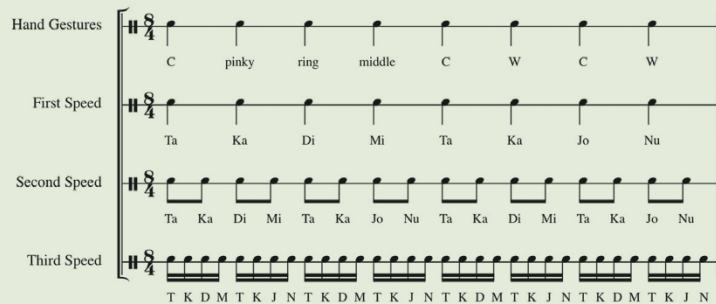
FIGURE 7

A 3/4 Trikala
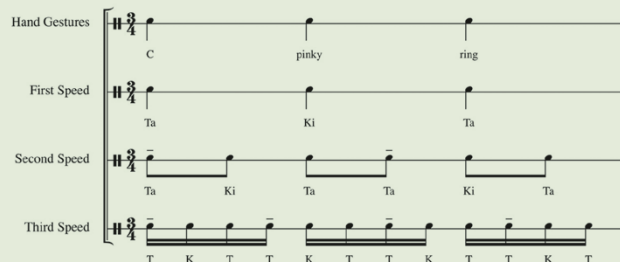
FIGURE 8

A 7/4 Trikala

FIGURE 9A

A 3:2 Polyrhythm

FIGURE 9B

A 4:3 Polyrhythm

FIGURE 9C

A 5:4 Polyrhythm

FIGURE 9D

A 5:4 Polyrhythm

number of beats in a cycle. When using odd-numbered cycles, the vocal part will formulate into a polyrhythmic cross-rhythm against the pulse. The three-beat cycle shown in Figure 7 is a good place to start.

As a student advances, more complex exercises may be introduced using any number of beats. Odd numbers, such as 5 and 7, are more challenging. For example, when using the seven-beat Tisra Triputa tala (3 + 2 + 2), the results shown in Figure 8.

These trikala exercises could be performed by individual students, as a group in unison, or as a group in the style of a canon. The students may develop a deeper understanding of various meters (beat cycles), rhythmic relationships, and subdivision. In addition, it is recommended to practice these exercises in a group setting to further strengthen students' listening and performance skills.

In a similar fashion, solkattu could be used when learning polyrhythms. Since polyrhythms are deciphered through the least common multiple, many can be notated within a common meter. The examples in Figures 9A through 9D give two different interpretations of 3:2 and 4:3 polyrhythms as well as 5:3 and 5:4. The student should keep a quarter-note pulse through hand gestures, tapping the beat, clapping, or conducting. The rhythmic subdivision indicates what should be counted with solkattu, while the tenuto markings produce the polyrhythm over the metric pulse.

Students should practice by looping each measure individually until it is mastered. It is recommended to start slowly and gradually increase the speed.

This polyrhythmic setting of solkattu is one Western representation of the rhythmic tension that can be created by Indian performers in tala. The listener hears the phrasing of the syllables (the melody), set against the pulse of the meter, and arriving together on beat one. Additionally, there are many other polyrhythms that can be learned through solkattu, through the creativity of the teacher and student.

TABLE 1

Syllable Cells

Notes	Example
One note	*Ta*
Two notes	*Ta Ka*
	Di Mi
	Jo Nu
Three notes	*Ta Ki Ta*
Four notes	*Ta Ka–Ta Ka* (2 + 2)
	Ta Ka Di Mi
	Ta Ka Jo Nu
	Ta Ka Din Na
Five notes	*Ta Ka–Ta Ki Ta* (2 + 3)
	Ta Ki Ta–Ta Ka (3 + 2)
	Ta Di Ki Ta Tom
	Ta Di Gi Na Tom
Six notes	*Ta Ki Ta–Ta Ki Ta* (3 + 3)
	Ta Ka–Ta Ka–Ta Ka (2 + 2 + 2)
	Ta Ka Di Mi Ta Ka
Seven notes	*Ta Ki Ta–Ta Ka Di Mi* (3 + 4)
	Ta Ka Di Mi–Ta Ki Ta (4 + 3)
	Ta Ka–Ta Ka–Ta Ki Ta (2 + 2 + 3)
	Ta Ka Ta Di Ki Ta Tom
	Ta Ka Ta Din Gi Na Tom
Eight notes	*Ta Ka–Ta Ka–Ta Ka–Ta Ka* (2 + 2 + 2 + 2)
	Ta Ka Di Mi–Ta Ka Di Mi (4 + 4)
	Ta Ka Di Mi–Ta Ka Jo Nu (4 + 4)
	Ta Ka Din Na–Ta Ka Din Na (4 + 4)
	Ta Ki Ta Ta Di Ki Ta Tom
	Ta Ki Ta Ta Din Gi Na Tom
Nine notes	*Ta Ka Di Mi–Ta Ka Ta Ki Ta* (4 + 5)
	Ta Ki Ta–Ta Ki Ta–Ta Ki Ta (3 + 3 + 3)
	Ta Ka Di Ku Ta Di Ki Ta Tom
	Ta Ka Di Ku Ta Din Gi Na Tom

Source: Malcolm Lim, "South Indian Vocalizations in Snare Drumming Pedagogy," *Percussive Notes* (August 2005): 28–35; and David P. Nelson, *Solkattu Manual* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

Rhythmic Improvisation

In the context of tala, performers can create rhythmic counterpoint through improvisation against the cyclical hand gestures. Similarly, teachers and students can create opportunities for improvisation through various games. One example would be to arrange the students in a circle and establish a rhythmic cycle, such as four beats (e.g., *Ta Ka Di Mi*). Similar to the Trikala exercises, the group maintains the basic quarter-note pulse through one or more means: hand gestures, speaking the solkattu, conducting, tapping the beat, or clapping. Then, the students take turns around the circle improvising via vocalization of solkattu. It may be best to start with one measure per student. Then, as students become more comfortable improvising, expand to two or more measures each. Exercises that allow student improvisation will increase their fluency, creativity, and expression.

Vocalization

When vocalizing rhythmic passages, it is important to strive for a confident musical performance. This directly affects the realization of the passage on the student's instrument. Although solkattu syllables can be thought of internally, students should strive for an external representation of the passage. The more energy and intensity that can be used to address a precise vocal execution, the better. The goal of vocalization is "to bridge the gap between the musical thought and the actual production of sound."[9]

Table 1 represents many of the traditional solkattu syllables, which provide additional options for teachers and students in their practice. In some instances, Western subgroupings are indicated for phrasing.

Say It, Play It!

Indian solkattu is a way of embracing rhythms, making it a powerful and enjoyable tool for rhythm training and mastery.[10] It is easy to see that the use of solkattu can have numerous pedagogical benefits for any music curriculum. If you can say it, you can play it. The specific strategies presented can increase students' abilities, creativity, and confidence. Furthermore, the attractiveness and approachability of solkattu can lead to an attitude that rhythm training is accessible and fun.[11] Finally, the incorporation of syllables opens the door to introduce the fascinating Karnatak music of South India. As with any study, it is always ideal to understand the context and heritage from which the music comes. Using this approach could provide the opportunity to develop an appreciation for the cultural meaning and significance of this music.

NOTES

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2. Tanjore Viswanathan and Matthew Harp Allen, *Music in South India: The Karnatak Concert Tradition and Beyond* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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6. Nelson, *Solkattu Manual*.

7. Malcolm Lim, "South Indian Vocalizations in Snare Drumming Pedagogy," *Percussive Notes* (August 2005): 28–35.

8. Nelson, *Solkattu Manual*.

9. Lim, "South Indian Vocalizations."

10. Lim, "South Indian Vocalizations"; and Nelson, *Solkattu Manual*.

11. Ibid.