



“Keeping up with the Beat of the Drum”

Shreyans C. Parekh
University of Pennsylvania

THE HINDU GOD, BRAHMA, SEEING THE plight of a society tainted by envy and greed, presents a boy with a drum that he can only hear, not see. This instrument, which is supposed to bring patience and discipline to humanity, is the foundation of Indian classical music. The boy has yet to discover that musicians use this tool to speak, allowing their minds to transmit messages through the vibrant pulsations of their notes.

My guru told me this story when I began learning the tabla, a North Indian classical drum. Though he never revealed the ending, he offered one clue. “It doesn’t matter how fast your hands can beat the drum if your mind cannot keep up with them.”

A typical American teenager, I had always yearned for raw strength and speed on the tabla. I thought those were the qualities that made the perfect percussionist. During concerts, I saw musicians’ fingers gliding across the head of the drum producing the extraordinary impression of force, immediacy of genius and intensity of passion that left audiences spellbound. I knew that to become the best at tabla, I needed to display my talent in a similar way. I wanted to play equally as fast and forcefully, even if it meant sacrificing precision for power.

I asked my guru to train me to play like the maestros, but he said I lacked mental focus; I didn’t listen to or enjoy my music. He believed the mind and body must be in sync in order to master the instrument. I never fully understood this concept until the imagination of one visually handicapped child attuned my mind to the beat of the drum.

As a summer volunteer at the Braille Institute in Anaheim, I developed the musical talents of blind elementary school children through teaching the tabla. My friends and I bought instruments and music with the money that we made during a summer recycling program in our neighborhood. During our first class, the children jumped into action, thumping erratically on their instruments. I chuckled at the sight of nine jubilant youngsters producing musical mayhem.

Chaandni was different. Shy and reserved, she felt the drum’s smooth texture and stroked the soft middle portion of the drum head. I stood astonished as she performed her ritual. Tap. Listen. Smile. Tap.



Listen. Smile. I could see her contemplating the emerging rhythm and resonance of each successive pulse. Watching a budding musician feel the delicate timbre of each drumbeat is a thrilling sensation.

I learned more from observing than I did through years of erratic practice. Chaandni would eagerly listen to a musical piece, then strike incessantly until she produced a matching pitch. When she stumbled, she would sit patiently pinpointing her mistake. She didn't speak; her insight and emotion glowed through her music. For the first time in my life I felt the depth of the drums. For the first time, I truly comprehended and loved the instrument.

She was indeed a special soul. Her curiosity was insatiable; her regard for the drum was incomparable; her smile was inspiring. Her joyful progress inspired me to perform in London this summer with my guru. Driven by the spirit of a young girl who never let her disability impede her innate talent, I played gracefully in front of hundreds of spectators and cherished the inner triumph.

I am a living example of Brahma's story. The combination of grace and force on the tabla is my channel for communicating emotions. My tale ends with the appreciation that the mind is a beautiful vehicle for the drum.

ANALYSIS

Using the drum story as an introduction, the writer draws in his reader. Shreyans provides just enough detail to pique our curiosity as we strive to understand the message; yet the plot is simple enough that the story doesn't overwhelm us. Many students make the mistake of focusing too much on a related story and not enough on the main purpose of the essay. Shreyans has just the right balance, ensnaring the interest of the reader right from the beginning and then moving quickly to the main body of the essay.

In the next three paragraphs, Shreyans sets up the main conflict in the essay. The clever quote from his guru, "It doesn't matter how fast your hands can beat the drum if your mind cannot keep up with them," foreshadows the importance of thought as a part of musicianship. Shreyans explains that at first, he wanted to just play the tabla with as much force as possible, without regard to the contemplation that should empower the performance. By introducing us to the beginning point of his process, he is able to set up the rest of the essay to show us his growth.