

Mridangam

Mridangam known as the double headed drum, is believed to be amongst the most ancient of drums.

A divine instrument, Mridangam is said to have been played by Lord Shiva and Nandhi Devar. It is the main percussion instrument used in Carnatic concerts and is known as the “King of percussion” instruments. It is used as an accompaniment, as the lead instrument in tala vadya ensembles and is also played as a solo instrument in Thani Avarthanam concerts.

In Sanskrit, the word Mridangam literally means “clay body”. This may indicate that the instrument was originally made out of clay.

Mridangam is a “Sruthi” percussion instrument, in that it can be tuned. The right head is tuned to match the tonic pitch of the vocalist or instrumentalist being accompanied. A small rock and a wooden dowel (Kallu & Pullu) are used to tune this instrument. The methodology of tuning works by tightening or loosening the leather straps that hold the sides (Valanthalai and Idanthalai) together to adjust the pitch.

Traditionally, semolina is mixed with water to form a paste, which is applied to the centre of the left head to provide a base sound.

Regarded as the king of percussion instruments, the mridangam occupies an exalted position in Carnatic music today. It is the main percussion instrument in Carnatic concerts (except in Nadaswaram concerts). The word *mridangam* literally means 'clay body', which indicates that it was originally made of clay.

Construction: The mridangam that is used today is made of a single block of wood that has been hollowed out. The wood used is either jack wood or redwood. It is a double-headed drum, shaped like a barrel. The two heads are

connected by means of leather straps that run along the sides of the body. There are small cylindrical pieces of wood called *pullu*, placed between the wooden shell and the leather straps. By moving the *pullu*, the pitch can be changed. The right head, which is smaller than the left head, is made up of three concentric layers of skin. The innermost layer is not visible. The outer layer, usually made up of calf hide, is called the *meettu tol* and the inner ring, made up of sheepskin, is called the *chapu tol*. At the centre of the right head is a black spot, called the *choru*. This is a permanent spot made of a mixture of cooked rice, manganese and iron filings. This is what gives the mridangam its special tone.

The left head, known as the *toppi*, is made up of only two layers of skin. The inner layer is made of sheepskin while the outer is made of buffalo hide. Before playing, the performer applies a thick paste of semolina or cream of wheat to the centre of the left head. This is done to lower the pitch and give the mridangam a bass sound.

Tuning: The right head is tuned to the main artiste's pitch. Both the heads tuned are with the aid of a small wooden piece (usually the *pullu* itself) and a smooth stone. Striking the rim from the outside with downward strokes raises the pitch and striking the underside with upward strokes lowers the pitch. The left head is tuned to the tonic, an octave lower.

Posture: The larger the mridangam, the lower the pitch and vice-versa. The lower-pitched mridangams are known as *taggu sruti* mridangam (usually range from C to E) and the higher-pitched mridangams are known as *hecchu sruti* mridangam (usually between F and G sharp) in Tamil.

