

# Indian Hand Drumming on the Global Stage: An Interview with Dr. Rohan Krishnamurthy

By Craig Woodson

**D**r. Rohan Krishnamurthy is a master of the mridangam, a double-headed, pitched hand drum that dates back over 2,000 years in the Carnatic tradition of South India. Described as a “musical ambassador” and “pride of India” by *The Times of India*, and “international mridangam player” by *USA Today*, Rohan has performed hundreds of concerts internationally since the age of nine and has become distinguished as a soloist, composer, and collaborator in a multitude of music and dance ensembles. Rohan recently shared stages with legendary Indian musicians such as M. Balamuralikrishna and L. Subramaniam, and collaborated with such award-winning artists as Glen Velez, Jamey Haddad, and Anoushka Shankar. He also had the “Rohan” concerto written for him by eminent percussionist and composer Dr. Payton MacDonald. Scored for mridangam and Western percussion ensemble, the piece was recently premiered on both coasts at Juilliard and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

I met Rohan at my Roots of Rhythm world

drumming workshop in Cleveland in 2006. Since I had briefly studied the mridangam and was aware of its complexity, and knew the value of the instrument’s music for classroom teachers, I invited him to visit as guest artist at one of my teacher workshops. Based in San Francisco, Rohan focuses on preserving the Indian rhythmic tradition and adapting it to contemporary global contexts. I had the pleasure to talk to him about his unique story and ideas on performance, education, and entrepreneurship.

**CW:** When I met you in 2006, you were pursuing a double major at Kalamazoo College in music and chemistry. How did you come to have this dual interest?

**RK:** I’ve had a passion for the arts and sciences since elementary school, and I pursued several science research projects in high school. I started learning Indian classical music when I was eight and started performing at nine, so music was always a big part of my life, too. A double major was an excellent way to continue both of

my passions, and Kalamazoo College, in my hometown of Kalamazoo, was a perfect place to pursue them. Thanks to the support of my professors, I was able to pursue an interdisciplinary thesis that explored the acoustics of my drum tuning system.

**CW:** You are an expert at playing the mridangam. First, tell us about that instrument. What does it look like, what are the basic techniques, and what is its history?

**RK:** The mridangam is one of the oldest, most complex, and versatile drums in the world. It is a double-sided, barrel-shaped hand drum that is played with the fingers and palms. The drumheads are entirely natural and consist of multiple layers of cow, goat, and buffalo leathers.

The *valanthalai* or tonal side of the instrument consists of three layers of leather with a circular loading in the middle. This loading, or *karani*, is made of 20 to 30 layers of an iron oxide and starch mixture. It’s this ingenious construction that allows us to create resonant pitches on the mridangam.

The *thoppi* or bass head of the mridangam is wetted in performance and uses a dough or, more recently, synthetic loading to achieve a low bass tone. Using the tonal and bass ends of the drum separately or together, there are over a dozen unique pitched, semi-pitched, and unpitched sounds available on the mridangam. It’s like a hand-drumset with such a rich sound palette.

The predecessor to the tabla, it has a history of over 2,000 years and is one of the most popular and sacred drums of India. It employs the advanced split-finger technique, which utilizes every finger like an independent drumstick. Coupled with the mathematically intricate and lightning-fast compositions and improvisations of Indian classical music, the mridangam truly represents one of the great rhythmic traditions, and a limitless source of rhythmic and compositional ideas for all styles of



PHOTO BY JULIE MICHELLE SPARENBURG



PHOTO BY EMILY SEVIN

West Coast premiere of the "Rohan Concerto" at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Bay Area visual artist Rasika Apte (far right) creates a real-time painting of the piece in the background.

music.

**CW:** How did you become interested in this instrument? Who influenced you to begin this study?

**RK:** Having grown up in Kalamazoo, it's very unlikely for someone to become a professional musician specializing in Indian classical music, but that's exactly what happened! My whole family is musical, although no one had the opportunity to pursue music as a profession. I benefited from my parents' huge Indian music collection, and we used to frequently attend concerts in Detroit and Chicago. My mom is a trained Indian classical singer, and my dad had a lifelong passion for the mridangam but never had the chance to study it when he grew up in India. We were extremely lucky to have Damodaran Srinivasan, a graduate student from India, in Kalamazoo in the early '90s. He received training in the mridangam when he grew up in India. My dad bought a custom-made mridangam from India and started learning from Damodaran. Although he stopped lessons after a few months, the circumstances were perfect for me to begin learning. One day when I was eight, I asked my parents if I could start learning the mridangam, and the rest is history! I'm forever thankful for my family's love and support, without which my life story could have ended up very different.

**CW:** You had an interesting experience learning how to play the mridangam when your first teacher moved away. How did your studies continue with him?

**RK:** I learned from Damodaran for a few months until he had to move to Massachusetts after graduating. In the

absence of a mridangam teacher within hundreds of miles of Kalamazoo, my Indian musical studies could have easily come to an end. Damodaran, however, suggested that we continue lessons over the speakerphone! This was before Skype and Google Hangout, so lessons were entirely audio-based with no video! Luckily, by that time, I had already learned the basic techniques on the mridangam and the *konnakol* vocal percussion that goes along with it. Damodaran would recite the lessons and I would recite them back and play them on my mridangam. This was an early example of long-distance music education, and it worked remarkably well thanks to the dedication of my *guru* and unwavering support of my family. I learned over the speakerphone from Damodaran for over a year.

In 1996, I had the chance to meet the mridangam legend Guruvayur Dorai when he came for a concert in Michigan. I met him backstage before the show and things just clicked. He asked me if I wanted to sit with him on stage for the concert, and I said sure, not really knowing what to expect. The concert lasted nearly five hours, and I think he was impressed that I could sit and observe him and the ensemble for that long. He said he'd be happy to teach me the next time I came to India. It was an opportunity of a lifetime, so my family and I made it to Chennai, India, where he's based, the next summer. I continued learning from him during annual visits to India, as well as whenever he visited the U.S. My two *gurus* are exemplary performers, teachers, and human beings, and I am forever grateful to them for their support and guidance.

**CW:** Your very successful college work at

Kalamazoo College gave you a choice of going into chemistry or music for your graduate work. Why did you choose music?

**RK:** As I was completing college, it became apparent that it would be very hard to pursue both music and chemistry at a professional level. By that point, my musical career was going very well and in many exciting new directions. I realized early on that I would be embarking on an international and inter-cultural artistic journey given my background and trajectory, and, and I wanted to learn as much as I could about the music of diverse world cultures—performance, history, theory, and cultural contexts. In an effort to diversify my knowledge, I ended up at Eastman for my doctoral studies in musicology and ethnomusicology. I was lucky to have studied so many musical traditions while I was there, including many styles of Western art music, pop, jazz, Indonesian gamelan, and Zimbabwean mbira, all the while improving and expanding my skills in Carnatic music.

**CW:** You have sought to preserve the tradition of mridangam performance as it exists in India, and you have also branched out to perform in other musical ensembles. You have also composed music. What are some of your motivations in seeking new musical expressions within this ancient tradition?

**RK:** As a second-generation Indian-American, I have always had to balance expressions and expectations of both cultures, in music and otherwise. Cross-musical and cross-genre performance and composition are a powerful way to bridge cultures and people through music, and to appreciate the similarities and differences of the world's great musical traditions. I've had the honor to work on new collaborations with orchestras, jazz ensembles, and amazing musicians from around the World. Recently, I received a grant from the San Francisco Arts Commission to compose a new, three-movement work for solo mridangam that is inspired by the changing rhythms of San Francisco. I'll be premiering the work next April at the San Francisco Community Music Center, and also starting a new Hand Drumming and Indian Rhythm Institute there with support from the grant. The Bay Area was the original home of Indian art in America, so many influential movements sprung from the creative community here. It continues to have such an amazing diversity of artistic communities, and an especially multifaceted South Asian arts scene. It's inspiring to see how the next generation of artists is working together to carry forward tradition and creatively innovate with so many changes at every level. I'm also interested in adaptations of the split-finger technique and Indian rhythmic ideas to



other drums—doubec, djembe, bongos, cajon, drumset, etc.—to organically blend the Indian sound world with other styles and ensembles. A hand or hybrid drumset, for example, can be a versatile way to perform in contemporary jazz and world music bands while drawing from the core content of the tradition. It's encouraging to see artists around the world learning multiple musical languages and having fresh, deep conversations like never before. It really is a process of musical ambassadorship when you are translating between different musical languages and cultural contexts. In our ever-shrinking global village, I believe this intercultural dialogue and understanding will be increasingly important in music and every other field.

**CW:** You have designed and patented a new tuning system for the mridangam's complex drumhead. Why was this a needed change, and what are your plans to bring this to other performers?

**RK:** The mridangam is a notoriously difficult instrument to tune and maintain. With its complex iron oxide and starch loading on the tonal head, drumhead replacement is usually the restricted work of skilled artisans who live in just a few cities in India. My new design was the result of many years of independent research that started with my dad. User-friendly and durable, my new design combines the traditional strapping with a nut-and-bolt system of tuning. Now, the heads are independently tuneable and can be replaced in a matter of minutes by the practitioner; it's no longer artisan-dependent. The pitch range is also much



PHOTO BY JULIE MICHELLE SPARENBERG

Rohan's patented tension system for the Mridangam



PHOTO BY RAMA KRISHNAMURTHY

Teaching Indian hand drumming at Dr. Woodson's Roots of Rhythm Workshop in Cleveland in 2006.

wider, whereas the traditional instrument has a range of barely a whole step. This design can be applied to any drum that needs to be fine-tuned, including tabla, dholak, bongos, djembe, and timpani. I'm happy to partner with the instrument retailer Mid-East in manufacturing and distributing this new line of drums.

**CW:** You have started the RohanRhythm Percussion Studio for teaching Indian music and cross-cultural musicianship, which has attracted dozens of students internationally, both in-person and online. And you are in the process of making the mridangam available to a much wider market. How do you see these two avenues, education and industry, evolving in your work over the next five or ten years?

**RK:** It's amazing how Indian rhythm has globalized and is being incorporated in so many facets of performance, research, and education. Musicians seem to be more interested than ever in seriously learning the tradition and moving beyond superficial fusion. The Internet has made many kinds of information much more accessible. My Ph.D. thesis explores the social, cultural, and musical impact of real-time online music education, especially in the context of Carnatic percussion.

The students in our studio have been inspirational in so many ways. Musicians and non-musicians of all ages and backgrounds have joined to enrich their lives. With the online platform, students across four continents have been able to learn and contribute to our community. While I emphasize traditional methodology, I also introduce notation, audio/video recordings, and online media to complement the learning process. Since students are joining based on their interest, they've been so sincere and dedicated. It's wonderful to see how students apply the creative and critical thinking skills to many other genres and art forms, interdisciplinary projects, community outreach, and other pursuits that they're passionate about.

I've always viewed performing, teaching,

composing, research, and entrepreneurship as different facets of the same musical essence. In spite of the labels that might make them seem distinct or even mutually exclusive, I think they're inextricably intertwined and mutually beneficial. In most generations, being a successful musician meant doing all of these things and living musically. I aspire to live musically now and in the future. How exactly all of my pursuits will unfold is the great unknown that keeps a musical and entrepreneurial career so exciting!

For more information on Dr. Rohan Krishnamurthy visit [www.rohanrhythm.com](http://www.rohanrhythm.com).

**Craig Woodson** earned his doctorate in music from the University of California at Los Angeles, with specializations in music education, ethnomusicology, and ethnic musical instrument technology. He has been a percussion teacher, a performing and recording musician, college lecturer, a teaching artist in schools, and a music consultant for over 45 years. He has written articles and performed in videos on musical instruments, drumming, and the making of simple musical instruments from around the world.

He has performed children's concerts at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Los Angeles Music Center, and the Kennedy Center. Woodson has worked for organizations including Walt Disney Enterprises and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum. He owns 12 patents on instrument technology through his company Ethnomusic, Inc., which he started in 1976. His mridangam studies were with Tanjore Ranganathan at UCLA. He is author of *Roots of Rhythm*, a free online world drumming teacher's guide for K–12 classrooms, sponsored by the Percussion Marketing Council and the NAMM Foundation. For more information, visit [www.ethnomusicinc.com](http://www.ethnomusicinc.com).

**PN**

# PERCUSSIVE ARTS SOCIETY

**Find Your Subscription Level  
and become a part of PAS**



**See what is available and browse through the  
new website at [pas.org](http://pas.org)**