

Zakir Hussain and Masters of Percussion offer a lesson in rhythm at the Kennedy Center

By Mark Jenkins
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In Indian classical music, the best a percussionist can place is a strong second; the lead performer is usually a vocalist or a stringed-instrument player who sets the piece's tone before the drummer enters. But Zakir Hussain, the world's most celebrated tabla maestro, does not have to follow standard procedure. He and the other five Masters of Percussion, who performed Sunday afternoon at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall, put the rhythm first.

The concert began in darkness, with a vocal chant. That was soon joined by the beat the singer struck on a ghatam, a South Indian instrument that is simply a clay pot. It was as if Selvaganesh Vinayakram were illustrating the invention of drumming.

A longtime Californian raised in the city then called Bombay, the 63-year-old Hussain tends to slip lessons into his act. At one point, he demonstrated how his two-headed instrument can conjure the booms of cannon or the gaits of leaping deer and running horses. The tabla is known for its wealth of rubbery and metallic timbres, but Hussain's tonal range seemed almost unlimited.

Other moments suggested, without explicit commentary, that drumming derives from dancing or marching. Antonia Minnecola, Hussain's wife, whirled about the stage, and her motion activated chiming bangles. The second part of the two-hour concert began with the entrance of Deepak Bhatt, who marched through the audience thumping a dhol, a two-headed drum used in bhangra, the traditional Punjabi dance that's more recently turned electronic.

The group included two nondrummers, sitarist Niladri Kumar and sarangi player Dilshad Khan. Both performed expertly in duets that they, in the customary manner, began. But Hussain soon overpowered Khan's violin-like sarangi, and multiple drummers did much the same to the sitar, although not before Kumar briefly dazzled listeners with his swift fingering.

The finale assembled Vijay Chavan (on dholki, a small dhol) and the other Indian-bred musicians with the one American in the troupe, Steve Smith. (Smith is the former drummer of Journey, but his career is more interesting than that lowlight suggests.) When the focus was on one or two performers, this summit session worked well. But when each proceeded at the same intensity, the result was just louder, not more complex.

The musicians were more masterly in simpler settings. Vinayakram flung his ghatam into the air, catching and hitting it at the same time; he also used his kanjira, a frame drum, to provide bass-like lines. Smith had a full Western drum kit, but he was most entertaining when he attacked a single cymbal set — and its stand — with sticks that were juggled and swapped in mid-rhythm and then became instruments. One of the reasons drumming was invented, this concert demonstrated, was as a form of play.

Jenkins is a freelance writer.

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