

No Compromise: A Peek into the Making of a Maestro

By Jim Feist

I have been traveling to India since 1992 to study the art of tabla. For the past eight years, I have been going frequently to spend time with my guru, Pandit Yogesh Samsi. I recently returned from seeing him again and have brought back with me a revelation of sorts.

Each time I sit to learn from him after coming from the U.S., I am very confident in my playing due to the rigorous practice schedule I maintain while away from my guru. But each time I am astonished and a little disheartened at the small corrections he has to make in my playing.

Skipping ahead, I am sitting and watching *him* do his practice. My head gets blown off by what I hear. I literally become emotional inside and almost jump out of my skin. I think to myself, “Why? What is he really doing that is grabbing me like this?” Out of nowhere the answer comes like a laser beam. *He compromises nothing* in his practice or performance. It is that simple.

In tabla playing, a multitude of corners can be cut regarding speed, note combinations, clarity, etc. I know because I have fudged some things to save time—things I thought were small and no big deal. He does not fudge *anything*, period. To illustrate my point, here are 10 aspects of tabla playing as exemplified through the work of Pandit Yogesh Samsi:

Power

He never sacrifices power for speed. To properly play all notes on tabla, one has to play with force. When you sacrifice this force, sound quality is lost.

Clarity

His note separation is as noticeable at fast speeds as it is in slow speeds.

Awareness of micro-beat placement and length

He never rushes or delays these micro-beat divisions, no matter the speed of the full composition in which it lies or the math that is involved.

Concentration

There is never a blip in his stream of consciousness. That is, he never lets himself get distracted from what he is trying to create.

Tone production

The beauty of all tones is retained at any speed.

The art

He never compromises his art and the method in which he is creating within a particular composition. That is, you won't hear unrelated musical ideas (though they may be musical unto themselves) brought into a composition for any reason.

Attention to detail

No accent or aesthetic that is being conveyed is trifled with for the sake of anything.

Time division

When moving from three beats to four beats to five beats, etc., within the same time cycle, there is never even a little fudge or blip to correct the speed.

Observing compositional rules

While playing in odd time *taals*, he retains the beauty of the *kbali-bhari* (wave-clap) relationships and the inner structure of the cycle, making all of his improvisations according to the *structure* of the *taal*. (It is very easy to “not” do this just by adding or subtracting beats from a 16-beat composition.) This is referred to by Pandit Dinkar Kaikini as “creating the limitless within the limited.”

Pushing the limits

He never plays to the lowest common denominator. He is always pushing his ideas, musical thoughts, and limits of what he can do, never resorting to playing the “safer” easy compositions. This makes for an exhilarating listening experience.

Never compromise. This is a very simple philosophy indeed, but its execution can be extremely difficult. For example, there are certain phrases and notes I can execute nicely at high speeds, but when playing compositions that have other notes that I can't execute as well at this speed, I might choose to play the piece anyway. In doing this, the overall composition goes down two notches in effectiveness and musicality. The difference between the notes I can play well and the ones that are sub-par might be miniscule, but this is still a compromise. My practice routine has a new life now. I am attempting to compromise nothing as I have observed from my teacher.

My guru and the few people like him in the field of music are not gods or other-worldly, even if the music they create make it sound so. They have realized that to play music at an extremely high level, one cannot compromise on any aspect of the learning process. There are no shortcuts in this art. I have now raised the bar in my practice after having this epiphany. I am eternally grateful to my guru for this. What's intriguing is that my guru never mentioned this concept to me; his hands forced me to realize it.

Jim Feist has been studying tabla since 1990 and has learned from Ustad Allah Rakha and Pandit Yogesh Samsi. In 2006 he was awarded the American Institute of Indian Studies Senior Performing Artist grant to continue his study in India. He teaches tabla as an adjunct at the Cincinnati College Conservatory of music. He has lectured and performed at the Ohio State University, Washington University, Marshall University, and the University of Toledo among others. He has recorded and performed in a wide spectrum of styles from a wide range of artists. Visit his website at www.classicaltabla.com. PN