

Rethinking the Tabla Solo

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In this paper, I present an analysis of classical tabla solos by three contemporary masters of tabla: Swapan Chaudhury, Zakir Hussain, and Suresh Talwalkar. These analyses explore the decisions made by each artist about structure and presentation, drawing from conventions of lineage as well as personal aesthetic sensibilities. At the macro level, I describe the form of the solos, detailing how compositions are chosen and arranged, and how the performers transition between compositions. At the micro level, I discuss how the performers develop and improvise material within a single composition. I aim to demonstrate how these three solos illustrate performative paradigms that fall outside the boundaries of emic terminology and categorization, but have been tremendously influential within the field of classical tabla at large. I will further suggest that these artists represent three attitudes toward the role of “tradition” or convention in tabla solo performance, yet all three demonstrate exceptional individual creativity in their playing.