

The Instruments of Pancheri Malam: Understanding their Role

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Abstract: *Panchari Melam, a 500-year-old traditional percussion ensemble from Kerala, India, is integral to temple festivals and cultural events. As the birthplace of this art form, Urakam in Thrissur, Kerala, India celebrated its rich legacy of its 500th anniversary. Characterized by its powerful, rhythmic beats, Panchari Melam relies on a combination of instruments that work in harmony to create a profound auditory experience. This paper explores the various instruments used in Panchari Melam, their individual roles, and the distinct sounds they contribute to this celebrated art form.*

Keywords: Panchari Melam, Kerala Temple festivals, traditional percussion, cultural heritage, rhythmic beats

1. Introduction

According to historical accounts, *Mazhamangalam Narayanan Namboothiri* (1525-1595), the author of *Bhasha Naishadham* — a chambru combining prose and verse — and a devoted follower of Urakam Ammathiruvadi, first envisioned the concept of Panchari Melam. Later, chenda maestro *Pandarathil Rama Marar* organized it into five distinct kalams (temporal stages) and dedicated the arrangement to the deity.

Panchari Melam is an integral part of Kerala's cultural and spiritual heritage, especially within temple festivals and



Instruments in Panchari Melam and Their Roles

The Panchari Melam ensemble traditionally includes four main types of instruments: Chenda, Elathalam, Kombu and Kuzhal. Together, they create a multi-layered texture of sound, rhythm, and melody that defines the performance.

Chenda: The Chenda is the primary percussion instrument in Panchari Melam and is responsible for setting the rhythm and tempo. Known for its loud, resonant sound, the Chenda is a cylindrical drum with a membrane on both the sides. Players use sticks to beat the drum, producing a powerful and pulsating rhythm that leads the ensemble. The Chenda primarily provides the bass and establishes the rhythmic foundation of the performance. It sets the pace for other instruments and creates a powerful and commanding sound that forms the backbone of the melam. There are two main

public celebrations. As a rhythmic percussion ensemble, it features a synchronized arrangement of instruments played by a group of musicians, each contributing to a rich and pulsating auditory experience. The term "Panchari" refers to a particular rhythmic structure, and "Melam" translates to percussion or rhythmic performance. While the essence of Panchari Melam lies in its rhythmic complexity, the ensemble itself comprises various instruments, each with a distinctive role in creating its unique soundscape. Understanding these instruments and the roles they play provides a deeper appreciation of Panchari Melam as a disciplined art form steeped in tradition and reverence.

types of chendas: the Valam Thala Chenda and the Idam Thala Chenda. Both types have distinct roles and are used to produce different sounds that contribute to the unique rhythmic texture of these performances. Together, these two types of chendas create a powerful auditory experience in traditional Kerala temple festivals and celebrations.

Elathalam: The Elathalam is a pair of small cymbals that contribute a metallic, ringing tone to the ensemble. Unlike the Chenda, which produces a loud, sharp sound, the Elathalam produces a softer, more resonant tone. It is typically played in sync with the Chenda, adding a continuous undertone that contrasts the drum's intense beats.

Kombu: The Kombu is a long, curved horn made from brass or copper, producing a deep, haunting tone. It is unique in that it does not play a melody but instead creates a rhythmic drone that adds depth to the soundscape. Kombu players blow into the instrument with circular breathing techniques to sustain notes over extended periods.

Kuzhal: The Kuzhal is a wind instrument that resembles a traditional Indian flute but produces a sharper and more penetrating sound. It is used to add melodic elements to the performance and is typically played in harmony with the Chenda's rhythm. The Kuzhal adds a dynamic contrast to the percussion, creating a lively interplay between melody and rhythm.

The Rhythmic Structure of Panchari Melam

Panchari Melam follows a structured rhythmic pattern known as the "Panchari talam," a time cycle traditionally divided into 96 beats arranged in sets of four, making it highly disciplined and structured. The performance usually progresses through

five stages, each increasing in speed and intensity, showcasing the musicians' skill in maintaining rhythm and synchrony. Each instrument plays a vital role in accentuating these rhythmic stages:

First Stage: The initial tempo is slow, allowing for a steady build-up where each instrument can be distinctly heard.

Middle Stages: As the tempo increases, instruments like the Kuzhal and kombu introduce more complex rhythms, interacting dynamically with the Chenda.

Final Stage: The ensemble reaches a crescendo, with all instruments playing at peak intensity, creating a mesmerizing wall of sound that symbolizes spiritual and communal unity.

Cultural Significance of Panchari Melam Instruments

Each instrument in Panchari Melam holds cultural significance, often symbolizing elements of nature or aspects of spiritual life. The rhythmic complexity of Panchari Melam reflects the disciplined lifestyle and spiritual devotion of Kerala's cultural heritage, with each instrument embodying aspects of community, celebration, and reverence.

In addition to religious and cultural events, Panchari Melam has also gained recognition as an art form, with dedicated performances showcasing the skill and precision of the musicians. The ensemble brings together both religious devotion and musical artistry, making it a revered and celebrated aspect of Kerala's cultural identity.

2. Conclusion

Panchari Melam is a unique and vibrant example of Kerala's traditional music, where each instrument contributes a vital role in creating a harmonious and powerful performance. From the rhythm-setting Chenda to the melodic Kuzhal, each instrument is carefully crafted and strategically played to bring Panchari Melam to life. Understanding these instruments and their individual sounds allows us to appreciate the intricacies and depth of this art form. As Panchari Melam continues to evolve and gain international recognition, the ensemble's traditional instruments will remain central to its powerful and captivating expression of Kerala's musical and cultural heritage.

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