

Sandeep Das - Indian Tabla Maestro



The Fastest Fingers in India

“Sandeep, leave and stand outside the classroom!” This was the umpteenth time that I had been punished for either tapping the floor with my feet or tapping my hands on anything that I could find.

Luckily, when I was 8, my father realized that I had interest in rhythm and took me to a local Tabla Guru (teacher). I was living in Patna, India at the time. A year later, my school entered in the All-Patna Music Competition, and I won the Gold medal!

It was then that I started learning the drums from a famous maestro of the Tabla named *Pandit* Kishan Maharaj (a *pandit* is an accomplished maestro, or skilled musician, in India). Two years later, I represented my state, Bihar, in the All-India Music Competition. At the age of 10, I won the first prize again and was awarded the honor of Best Percussion Player in all age categories. The next day one of the leading newspapers of India had my picture on the front page. I was so excited!

For the next 3 years I won championships playing the Tabla, but then I stopped for a few years. When I returned to competitions, I was 15. Again, I won a Gold medal!

My *debut*, or my first big concert, was with one of the best known Indian musicians in the world, Pandit Ravi Shankar.

Even though I played the Tabla all the time, I didn't neglect my studies. Instead, I found I was doing better and better in both music and school. Then, I didn't know what I know now: if you concentrate on one thing, it helps your focus and sincerity in other fields too. By working hard at the Tabla, I also learned to work hard in other areas!

Very soon it was time for me to decide on a career. On one hand, I was good in academics, which meant I could take up higher studies and look for a secure job. On the other hand, I could take up the uncertain prospect of pursuing music as a career. I chose happiness over security and became a professional musician.

Nineteen years ago, I met and played with the famous cellist, Yo-Yo Ma, who invited me to play with his group called the Silk Road Ensemble. I have been playing with them ever since, and two years ago we even won the GRAMMY for Best World Music Album! Growing up in India, I had always seen the award ceremonies on TV, but had never imagined one day I would be on that stage to receive the trophy.

All these years, my music has taken me on many incredible journeys. It has helped me travel the world from Africa to the Middle East (countries like Oman, Qatar, and the U.A.E.), all over Europe (Czech Republic, Romania, Spain, Norway, Italy, Portugal, Germany, Holland, the U.K., and more), and through many countries in Asia including Japan, Korea, China, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Hong-Kong. I have even played for the Queen of England, the Queen of Thailand, and the Pope!

I have made friends all over the world who are like family to me now, even if we grew up in different cultures on opposite sides of the globe. I have played at the Carnegie Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, the BBC Proms, at the 150th anniversary of the United Nations, and at the opening ceremony of the Special Olympics in China. You can find my music on CDs, iTunes, television, and the radio. One of my original compositions is even on display at a museum in Washington D.C!

Aside from music, I also love playing golf, swimming, playing table-tennis, and playing soccer! I am your new friend, and I look forward to meeting you soon and learning more about you!

—Sandeep Das

