

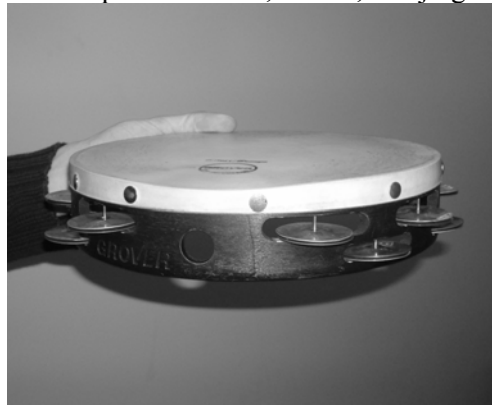
Tambourine Essentials: Basic concepts for superior performance

by Ben Stiers

Let's face it: the tambourine isn't the most glamorous instrument in the percussion family. In a typical educational setting, other "core" instruments such as snare drum, marimba, and timpani tend to dominate most students' practice time. As a result, many percussionists lack a basic understanding of sound production on the tambourine, and approach playing situations with poor technique. This is a shame, because developing a basic set of tambourine skills isn't very difficult at all! It's my hope that the information I've provided here will get you through most of the tambourine parts you'll encounter. AND, for the few situations you'll run into where something else is needed, the list of resources I've included will likely be able to help you out. If not, BE CREATIVE! Problem solving is part of the fun of being a percussionist!

PART 1: GET TO KNOW YOUR INSTRUMENT

Your basic concert tambourine has three basic parts: A head, a shell, and jingles.



- Every concert tambourine has a **head**. If the tambourine you were planning to use doesn't have a head, it's probably meant to be used as a hand-held rock/pop instrument or mounted on a drumset. Find one that has a head instead! Depending on your brand of tambourine, the head will be glued and/or tacked to the shell, so most tambourines can't be tuned easily. While plastic heads are becoming more common, most tambourines still come with calfskin heads. Calfskin sounds great, but is more fragile than plastic and much more vulnerable to weather changes. See the section on "Care and Maintenance" for more information on caring for calfskin heads.
- The **shell** is usually made of wood (though composite shells are becoming more popular) and is most commonly ten inches in diameter. It has two main features. First, you'll find **jingle slots** cut out all around the frame. Most general-purpose tambourines have two rows of jingle slots. Look closely, and you'll see that they come in two different sizes. This will be important in our discussion of shake rolls. In addition to jingle slots, each shell features a **holding area**, which is the place where the jingles aren't. There is a hole in this area, but it's not there to help you hold the tambourine in any way. It's designed to allow you to mount the tambourine on a stand, should you need to do so.
- Finally, the **jingles** are what give the tambourine its characteristic sound. There are three basic metals used to make jingles: silver (high pitch), copper (medium pitch), and bronze (low pitch). In addition, some jingles are offered in combination, and there are options for "dry" tambourine sounds such as heat-treated jingles. Picking the right jingle sounds for your musical situation is an important consideration!

PART 2: MAKING GOOD SOUNDS

The tambourine is related to a lot of other jingle-bearing frame drums from around the world, such as the Brazilian pandeiro and the Egyptian riq. This global connection means that there are a lot of possibilities for sound production on the instrument. Even within the orchestral world there are a lot of different schools of technique! The methods I've outlined below are not the only way to play the tambourine, but I've found them to be the best way to start making good sounds quickly.

To get started, you'll need a trap table or other padded surface, a chair with a fairly low seat, and, of course, your tambourine!

Rest Position:

The tambourine is one of the toughest instruments to keep quiet when not in use. Therefore, a resting position that allows the tambourine to be picked up as quietly as possible is essential. Place the tambourine on a trap table or other padded surface so that the holding area hangs slightly over the edge. This will allow you to pick up the instrument without having to tip it up to get your fingers underneath.



Rest position



Ready position



Use of fingers to dampen head

Ready Position:

When preparing to play, just grasp and lift *silently* with your non-dominant hand with your thumb on top and fingers underneath. The tambourine should be at or just below chest level, so that your holding arm is in a comfortable position. Rotate the instrument in toward your body to a 45-degree angle. You can use your thumb on top and your middle and ring fingers underneath to dampen the head to various degrees.

Playing position:

Double-check to make sure that the tambourine is still at 45 degrees. If it's too vertical, the jingles will slide too much when you play and your articulations won't be clear. If it's too flat, the jingles will be free to hop after you play, resulting in the same problem. Now, move your dominant hand into position (For now, just hold it comfortably a few inches above the head. We'll get into the specifics of playing position as we go along).

Great! Now we're all ready to play! And guess what? There are only **SIX** basic techniques you need to know to get started!

Technique #1: Slow-Loud

This technique works well for fairly slow rhythms at *mf* and above.

- For moderately loud playing, bunch your middle three fingers together and play into the center of the head. Relax and let your hand fall into the head—let gravity do most of the work for you! (Try playing example #1 with this technique.)
- For louder volumes, form your hand into a loose fist and play with the flat of your knuckles, as if you were knocking on a door. Remember to stay relaxed! (Try playing example #1 with this technique, a little louder than before.)
- For really loud accents, you can use a flat, open hand. Just don't overplay—a little of this technique goes a long way! (Try playing example #2, using your fist for the unaccented notes and a flat palm for the accents.)



Bunched fingers (*mf-f*)



Fist (*f-ff*)



Flat hand (great for accents)

When playing with this technique in an ensemble, listen and make sure you're not playing too loud. Tambourines tend to cut through ensemble sounds very easily, so always remember to be sensitive!

Technique #2: Slow-Soft

Begin by *silently* placing the heel of your hand in the center of the head. This will eliminate more of the sound of the head, allowing the jingles to be heard more easily. Extend your fingers so that they rest comfortably on the edge of the head, right above the rim, at the highest point of the tambourine.



Slow-Soft playing position

To play, just tap the rim with your fingertips. For louder volumes, play with two or three fingers. For softer volumes, try just one finger. To get a full sound, even at soft dynamic levels, make sure to fall into the head, just like you did earlier. Don't just "flick" it! (Try playing example #1 with this technique, at dynamic levels from *pp* to *mp*.)

Technique #3: Fast-Loud

This technique is also referred to as “hand-knee” or “fist-knee” technique. To begin, put your dominant foot (the foot on the opposite side from your holding hand) up on a chair. Now, flip your tambourine upside down and position it so that the center of the head is about 3 to 6 inches above your knee (make sure to maintain a 45-degree angle, as in the photo below). Next, make a loose fist (as in technique #1) with your dominant hand above the center of the head.



Fast-Loud Playing Position (head down)

To play, alternate between striking the head with your fist (as in technique #1) and moving the tambourine down into your knee with your holding hand. When moving the tambourine, keep your wrist straight and move from the elbow. This will keep the tambourine at an angle, which will help to make the rhythm clear. It's a good idea to start slowly to get an idea of the sounds you're producing. Since we're all built a little differently, you may have to make some adjustments to your playing hand and the part of your knee you're striking to get an even sound between the two. (Try playing example #3 slowly with this in mind.) When executing rhythms, use your hand to play all of the downbeats and your knee for the upbeats, similar to right-hand lead on snare drum. (Try playing example #4 with this “sticking policy” in mind.)

While using this technique with the head facing down is an excellent way to get started, its primary drawback is that you can't flip the tambourine over in a performance without making extraneous noise. It is possible (though a little more difficult) to use fist-knee technique with the head facing up. Simply rotate your holding hand to the side of the tambourine, as in the photo below, and play as before, making sure to move the tambourine from the elbow, not the wrist. This technique will take a little more time to develop, but being able to move to and from the fist-knee position *silently* is well worth the effort.



Fast-Loud playing position (head up)

Technique #4: Fast-Soft

Our final method of executing rhythms on the tambourine uses concepts from both Technique #2 and Technique #3. To get started, place your dominant foot on the chair again. Rest the tambourine on your leg, angled inward at 45 degrees. The holding area of the tambourine should be at the lowest point. Use the heels of your hands to pin the instrument lightly in place, so that your fingertips rest comfortably on the rim. Make sure that your hands are positioned symmetrically for an even sound. As with Slow-Soft playing, you can vary your dynamics by adding or subtracting the number of fingers used by each hand. (Try playing example #5 with this technique, at dynamic levels from *pp* to *mp*.)



Fast-Soft playing position

Technique #5: Shake Rolls

The shake roll is the most commonly misplayed tambourine technique. Mistakes usually relate to the two following concepts:

- The purpose of a roll on a percussion instrument is to create a sustained **sound**, not a sustained **rhythm**.
- Tambourine rolls are usually notated with a clear beginning and a clear ending.

To follow the first concept, we need a shake roll that creates a smooth sound with as little “shooka-shooka” as possible. Luckily, tambourine makers have helped us out a lot with this. Remember the two different sizes of jingle slots mentioned earlier? These are designed to create overlapping rhythms in shake rolls, making the “shooka-shooka” sound less noticeable. Start by holding the tambourine vertically with the head facing toward you. From here, there are two motions we can use to create shake sounds. The first is a rotational motion that uses the forearm as its axis. The second is a back-and-forth motion from the elbow that is similar to the motion used when playing a shaker. When sped up, each of these motions can produce a convincing shake roll, but our best bet is going to be to combine them both. To practice finding that combination, begin with the rotational motion and slowly try to morph into the back-and-forth motion. In the middle of the process, there will be a “sweet spot” where you’re doing a combination of the two. This will take some practice, but the result is a beautiful shake roll. Remember to stay relaxed—it’s very easy to tense up with this technique.

In order to follow the second concept above, we need to make sure our rolls begin and end cleanly. The easiest way to do this is to begin and end each roll with an attack. Since our general playing position is a 45-degree angle, but our shake roll position is vertical, an easy way to think of this is to start the roll by “pushing” the tambourine into a vertical position (from the lowest point on the head) with our starting attack, and end the roll by “pushing” the tambourine back to a 45-degree angle (from the highest position on the head) to end it. As you do this, be sensitive to the balance between your attacks and your roll—don’t accent the beginning or end of the roll unless you mean to! (Try playing example #6 with shake rolls.)

Technique #6: Finger/Thumb Rolls

Shake rolls are great for loud dynamics, but what about softer rolls? For these, we'll use a technique that involves skipping a thumb or finger around the perimeter of the head. In order to do this, it may be necessary to apply some sort of substance to the head to create more friction. **Beeswax** is a great choice because it works well and is readily available at most craft stores. Just rub a small amount around the outside of the head and you're good to go.

Finger rolls are a good place to start because they produce the most delicate sound. Begin with the tambourine at a 45-degree angle, with the middle finger of your dominant hand on the edge of the tambourine close to your holding hand. For some extra leverage, place your index finger on top of your middle finger. Now, rub your middle finger around the outside of the head, adjusting the pressure as you go until you've got a nice sustained sound going. When you've found the ideal pressure, try to repeat the results. Be patient! This will take some time to develop. Once you can produce a reliable finger roll, all that's left to do is create a clear end to the roll. For a soft release, simply drop your thumb into the head as you lift your finger away from it (see photo below). For an accented release, you can drop the heel of your hand down instead of your thumb. (Try playing example #7 with finger rolls at dynamics from *pp* to *mp*.)



Finger roll

Finger roll release (with thumb)

Finger rolls work well for very soft dynamics. For slightly louder rolls, you can repeat the above process using your thumb. The only major difference is that your rolls will end with an attack by the pad at the base of your thumb (see photo below). Thumb rolls are also great for crescendos! (Try playing example #8.)



Thumb roll

Thumb roll release (heel of hand)

There you have it! Those are the six basic techniques that will get you through most of the playing situations you'll encounter. There are, of course, many other techniques for the tambourine, but these are a combination of the most frequently used and easiest to learn. For more information on extended tambourine techniques, consult any of the materials in the "Other Resources" section.

PART 3: MUSICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The techniques outlined above work very well for the playing examples we've been using, but in order to truly make music with the tambourine, you'll need to keep a couple of things in mind.

First, it will be necessary from time to time to switch between the above techniques very quickly. Practicing these transitions is just as important as practicing the techniques themselves. Once you can get good sounds playing through the above examples, try playing them back-to-back with different techniques in order to get a feel for these transitions.

Second, transitioning from technique to technique will create a difference in your sound. In order to maintain consistency in a passage of music, you may have to widen your dynamic and tempo spectrum. How fast can you play with slow-loud technique? How quietly can you play fast-loud technique? How loudly can you play a finger roll? By taking each of the above techniques and working through the widest possible variety of tempos and dynamics, you'll give yourself plenty of options in playing situations. And options are always a good thing!

PART 4: CARE AND MAINTENANCE

High-quality concert tambourines must be cared for properly. It's important to take precautions to make sure that they're always in good working order. Most care and maintenance issues are common sense, such as storing your tambourine in a protective case and not stacking heavy items on top of it. Here are some not-so-obvious tips for caring for your tambourine:

Head maintenance:

Natural skin heads are vulnerable to weather changes. A sudden increase in humidity may cause your head to go slack, which can cause an undesirable tone and an increased risk of breaking the head. Changing a tambourine head is a very involved undertaking that is best avoided if possible. To minimize the effects of humidity, you can place your tambourine on a heating pad set to low, head side up, just prior to playing. The increase in heat will help to tighten the head. Just make sure that the head is up on your tambourine, especially if you're using beeswax! Some percussionists even weatherproof their tambourine heads by coating them in shellac and baking them, but this is a complicated process and is not recommended unless you know what you're doing.

On the other side of the coin, natural skin tambourine heads that are exposed to extremely hot, dry weather for long periods of time can actually stretch until they snap. If you plan to take your tambourine to the desert, store it in its case with a *slightly* damp paper towel inside. Too much moisture will cause mold, but the right amount will keep your head safe.

Shell Maintenance:

It's a good idea to check from time to time for cracks in the shell. These cracks tend to form around and in between the jingle slots, allowing the pins to fall out. If you spot one, simply glue and clamp gently.

OTHER RESOURCES

Here are a few of my favorite resources for tambourine. Enjoy!

The Complete Percussionist (DVD)

The US Army Field Band

-This DVD is an excellent instructional resource. The tambourine section, presented by MSG Bill Elliott, is an excellent demonstration of basic and advanced tambourine techniques.

Techniques of Playing Bass Drum, Cymbals, and Accessories

Al Payson

-Payson's text is an excellent source of etudes and orchestral excerpts for tambourine. The techniques he outlines are different from the ones I have outlined above, and offer some interesting sound possibilities.

The Art of Percussion Playing

by Anthony J. Cirone, Neil Grover, and Garwood Whaley

-This book is an outstanding resource for all accessory percussion instruments. Its coverage of both basic and advanced techniques includes plenty of high-quality playing examples. I highly recommend it!

Also, try playing etudes from any snare drum method book on tambourine. In addition to working on the above techniques, it's a great way to sharpen your problem-solving skills!

Finally, remember that there are many different approaches to playing the tambourine. While I feel the method I've outlined here is an excellent one for most situations, there are many tips, tricks, and "specialized" techniques out there that can help with those difficult or awkward passages we often have to play. Ask your teachers and colleagues for advice—you may be surprised how many different solutions there are to the same problem!



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Ben has performed with the Peoria (IL) Symphony Orchestra, the Illinois Symphony Orchestra, the Las Vegas Philharmonic, and the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra, and has done extensive freelance

work in the Las Vegas area. As an educator, he has worked on the staff of both the concert and marching percussion tracks for the Music for All Summer Symposium, and has been a writer, arranger, and instructor for several high school marching programs in Illinois, Nevada, and Kentucky. From 2010-2011, he also served as the vice-president of the Kentucky chapter of the Percussive Arts Society.