

The Elusive “Closed” Snare Drum Roll

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Centuries ago, my ancestors were the official bagel makers to the Czar. That should qualify me to say something about rolls! [*rims*shot] Seriously though, percussionists and drummers alike often have difficulty executing a silky smooth, consistent closed (aka: “buzz,” “press,” and “orchestral”) roll.

INGREDIENTS:

A pair of good quality snare drum sticks
 A drum pad or snare drum
 A metronome
 Patience
 Time (not thyme)
 A relaxed attitude

SERVES:

Concert percussionists, drummers, music educators.

I started out learning the open stroke rolls: 5-stroke, 7-stroke, and 9-stroke. My teacher was insistent that I develop strong hands with the ability to clearly articulate every double stroke. Like many young drummers, I spent hours practicing my open rolls, striving for the clarity of a machine gun! It was only after I mastered open rolls that I started my work on the closed roll, which I found far more difficult.

Unlike the open roll, the closed roll should sound legato and smooth with no discernable articulation. Imagine the sound of a fine concert violinist drawing the bow across a string, or an orchestral trombonist playing a long, sustained note. That uninterrupted body of sound is exactly the quality of sound that the closed snare drum roll emulates. The key qualities are sound that is consistent, smooth, and sustained. Sounds easy, but successfully executing this is quite another matter.

The first step in learning to play a quality closed roll is to relax. This is so important I’ll say it again, *relax*! Some players call this roll a “press” roll, which actually is a misnomer. Pressing into the head is the last thing you want to do! Instead, you want to let gravity work for you and allow the sticks to fall into a “controlled bounce.”

Here’s how to combine the ingredients:

Step 1: Grip the sticks in a controlled, but relaxed manner, making sure your fulcrum is between the thumb and pointer finger.

Step 2: Working one hand at a time, allow each stick to strike the pad (or drum) and bounce as many times as possible until it naturally stops.

Step 3: Try Step 2 again, but this time experiment with releasing and adding pressure at the fulcrum. You should notice a change in the stick's rebound. Keep working at this, one hand at a time, until you achieve a consistent, even rebound with no less than four rebounds per stroke (the more the better).

Step 4: Using this “rebound” technique, play quarter notes, using alternate sticking at a slow tempo. Allow the sticks to “bounce” on the pad or drum. Keep working on this and try to keep one stick bouncing at all times (admittedly, very hard to do).

Step 5: At the same tempo, and being sure to allow the sticks to fully rebound, play, in sequence, four alternate-sticking quarter notes, eight eighth notes, twelve eighth-note triplets, and sixteen sixteenth notes. Repeat this pattern without stopping.

Step 6: Work on this exercise at increasing speeds with the goal of making every measure sound even and consistent. Ideally, at the optimum tempo, you should not hear the change of hands and the roll will sound continuous throughout the exercise (this could take many years to achieve). I strongly suggest practicing this exercise ten times without stopping.

After you have mastered the seven steps, I suggest this helpful visualization. Place the tips of both sticks down on the drum at the same time, imagining that the drum is a swimming pool filled with water. Lift up one stick at a time, imagining you are lifting your head out of the water for a breath of air. Alternating hands, allow each stick to drop down “into the water” letting it rebound many times. The concept is to envision the sticks in a state of constant “bouncing” motion, only lifting to “breathe.” This is difficult and strange to do at first, but after some practice it provides an effective visualization for the successful execution of a closed roll.

Whatever you do remember: *be relaxed!* Tension has no place in the playing of a well-played closed roll. Some of the best orchestral snare drummers are the most relaxed when they play.

Now, who has those onion rolls? ➔