



CREATIVE TAMBOURINE TECHNIQUE

or

*Everything you wanted to know
about tambourine playing,
but were afraid to ask!*

by Neil W. Grover

It is surprising to me that so few percussion students take the practice of percussion accessories seriously. I can honestly say that in over fifteen years as a professional I have been required to play tambourine and triangle more often than marimba. Yet most students fail to devote *any time* to the preparation of accessory playing. Why not spend some time mastering these instruments *as well as* snare drum, marimba and timpani? Don't fool yourself into thinking that once given a demanding tambourine part you can just pick up the nearest tambourine and instantly do a credible job! It has been my experience to see more than a few players fumble over standard tambourine parts.

The purpose of this article is to outline some of the unusual techniques I have acquired, developed, and refined over a number of years. I'm writing with the assumption that most percussionists know how to execute a smooth thumb roll. If not, go back to the practice room and master this technique, or if need be find a good teacher and take a lesson or two. You'll be glad you did.

HOLDING THE TAMBOURINE - ANGLE OF ATTACK

Most players give no thought to the proper way a tambourine is held. Unlike other instruments a tambourine is not

stationary, in fact, its sound quality changes depending on how it is held! Try this, hold a tambourine in a horizontal position (parallel to the floor) and tap the head. Now turn it to a vertical orientation (perpendicular to floor) and tap it again. Notice the great change in tonality! *Rule #1 - A tambourine sounds most articulate when held in a horizontal orientation.* When holding your tambourine don't mindlessly hold it at the same angle of attack for every situation! To demonstrate proper use of this concept let's take the opening of Bizet's *Carmen Suite* (ex. #1). Start this excerpt holding the instrument almost fully perpendicular to the floor. This will start you off with a big, full sound and since it is at *FF* dynamic level articulation is no problem. Use a closed fist in the center of the head. In the 9th bar (where indicated) shift to using your fingertips and as you diminuendo move from the center of the head to the edge. *At the same time* gradually change your angle of attack to a more horizontal position. This should result in a nice articulate sonority all the way down to the softest dynamic level.

CRADLING

Another technique I use is called *cradling* the tambourine. Tchaikovsky's *Arabic Dance* from the *Nutcracker* (ex. #2) is a situation where this technique works well. Hold your hand open, palm face up and extend your fingers as though you were holding a basketball. Then place (cradle) the tambourine on top of your fingertips. Lightly tap the edge of the head (it is OK to play directly on top of the rim). Notice how articulate, dry and clear the resultant sound is. Now try playing the *Arabic Dance*. This

should be practiced so that each and every articulation sounds clean and even. By *cradling* the instrument you help to produce this clear sonority.

THUMB ROLL WITH HEEL RELEASE

While every good percussionist can play a thumb roll, few know how to articulate the end of a roll. Any good roll should have an attack, sustain and release, yet most percussionists neglect the latter. Sometimes an articulated release is called for. This is achieved by snapping the wrist down into the head as an articulated end to the roll (see ex. #3 with diagrams). If it helps, think about learning to play open stroke rolls on snare drum. You want to produce a clear articulated end to the roll. An excerpt from Stravinsky's *Petrushka* is a good example for application of heel release. The opening eighth note rolls should end with an accented articulation produced with the heel. This technique may take some time to develop to the point of being able to execute this passage.

FINGER ROLL

While the thumb roll is an indispensable technique, sometimes a lighter, more delicate roll is required. This is where the finger roll has its place. Using the middle finger, (it can actually be executed with any finger), produce a roll similar in style and execution to the thumb roll (see diagram ex. #4). The middle finger, however, has less weight and carries less hand mass behind it than the thumb, thus producing a lighter sonority. Make sure you *support* the middle finger with the thumb. After practicing this for a while add the heel release and you'll have a technique which makes

the execution of *Danse Boheme* from Bizet's *Carmen* (ex. #4) easier to play. Keep in mind, this whole excerpt should be soft and delicate. Play all rolls with the middle finger, release them with the heel (be careful not to accent these) and play all other notes with the fingertip of the middle finger. Remember, light and delicate!

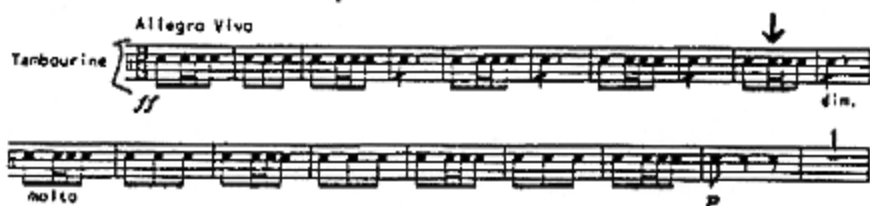
RIGHT HANDED SHAKE ROLL

Sometimes it is very difficult to produce a long, sustained shake roll. Try this, holding your tambourine with one hand try to play a very long shake roll from p to ff to p. If you can execute this without problem, *my hat's off to you!* If you're like me, this is very difficult to execute. One solution to this problem is the execution of a R.H. Shake Roll (L.H. Shake Roll for lefties). To execute this roll hold the tambourine in a vertical orientation with the left hand, place the right hand pointer and middle fingers on the bottom (6 o'clock position) edge of the instrument. Using a very slight, rapid, back and forth motion of the right hand allow the tambourine to vibrate back and forth with the right hand fingers. Gradually increase the right hand shaking pressure, getting louder until the left hand takes over the motion. The point of transfer between hands should be inaudible (this will take a lot of practice). The benefits of this technique are found in the ability to play very long, sustained rolls from piano to forte. When you master this and are starting to feel "cocky", try reversing the motion and going from loud to soft. This should return you to reality!

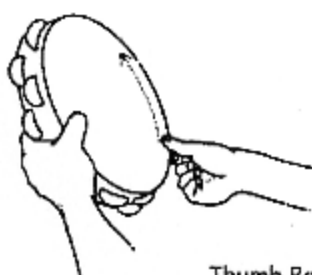
RIGHT HANDED PIVOT ARTICULATION

This technique is useful for execution of very fast, articulated passages. Before getting into execution we must discuss concept for a moment. Imagine two bananas

Example #1 Carmen – Entracte



– Example #2 Nutcracker – Arabic Dance

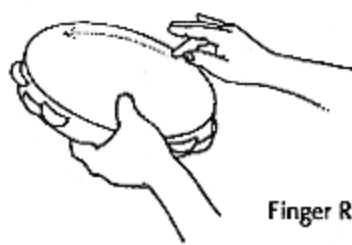
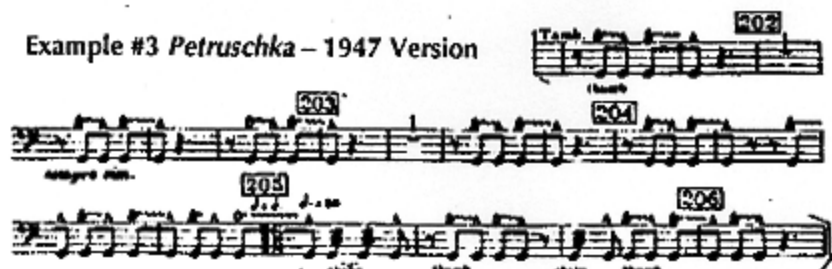


Thumb Roll



Heel Release

Example #3 Petruschka – 1947 Version

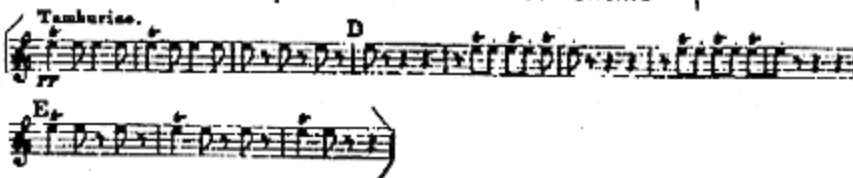


Finger Roll



Heel Release

Example #4 Carmen – Danse Boheme



held together, curved inward toward each other (). This should be used as a mental image for proper execution of this technique. Keeping this image in your mind hold the tambourine in the left hand at a 45 degree (or less) angle to perpendicular. Resting the bottom, fleshy part of your right fist on the bottom edge (6 o'clock position) of the instrument, slowly pivot both hands in an arcing motion (think of the bananas), until the top of the fist meets the top of the tambourine (see diagram ex. #5). Now slowly pivot back to the starting position. Practice this pivoting motion using a metronome set at quarter note = 60. Practice playing quarter, then eighth, then eighth triplet, then sixteenth notes. Once this is mastered go on to the *Roman Carnival Overture* (ex. #5). Play the first six notes with the right hand fist in the middle of the head, then play the last three notes using *Right Hand Pivot Articulation*.



Right Hand
Pivot
Articulation



Example #5 *Roman Carnival Overture*



Example #6 *Gaite Parisienne*



EXECUTION OF GRACE NOTES

While not common, grace notes are most difficult to execute accurately on tambourine. The technique I use is a permutation of the technique used by Brazilian pandeiro players. Holding the tambourine stiffly (no wrist motion) in the left hand, snap the left arm (and tambourine) up about 1-2 inches. Using a sharp motion, snap it back down to the original position. This should create two equal sounding notes. Practice this motion, getting quicker, so that the two notes sound close together. Then end the phrase with a sharp right hand articulation. While the technique I use is a modification of this, it is based on this motion. Try executing *Offenbach's Gaite Parisienne* excerpt (ex. #6). The two grace notes are executed by just the up/down motion of the tambourine, while the main note is played with the right hand.

Fist/Knee
Articulation



Example #7 *Nutcracker – Trepak*



FIST / KNEE ARTICULATION

This is a standard technique used by most percussionists to rapidly play articulated passages. Holding the instrument inverted (upside down), alternate strokes between the knee and fist (see diagram ex.#7). It helps to hold the tambourine in a stiff, horizontal manner. Use a chair to elevate your knee (I don't recommend trying this poised on one leg looking like an ostrich)! Once you're feeling confident, try the excerpt from Tchaikovsky's *Trepak* from the *Nutcracker*. All notes not marked should be played with the right hand fist. Those notes marked with a "K" are played by striking the tambourine against the knee in the aforementioned manner.

TWO HAND ARTICULATION

The last technique I want to mention is useful for playing repetitive passages that need to be clearly articulated. Tchaikovsky's *Capriccio Italien* (ex. #8) is a good example of passages that are suited for the *Two Hand Articulation*. Before trying this excerpt try this exercise. Place the tambourine inverted on your knee (use a chair to elevate your knee). Make sure the tambourine does not extend beyond the end of your knee. Using the fingertips from both hands try playing the first two measures of this excerpt. You should be able to produce a nice soft, articulate sonority. Now, try playing the same measures at a forte dynamic. Not so good, is it? To accommodate increased dynamics move the tambourine so that half of it is sticking out beyond the end of your knee. You must support the instrument by pushing your forearms down on the back rim. Now play the same measures at forte. You should be able to produce a much bigger sound. Now, the trick is moving the tambourine back and forth on your leg so that you can get from soft to loud to

Two Hand
Articulation
(knee support)



Example #8 *Capriccio*



soft again. Once again, use your forearms to push the tambourine forward and if you play all eighth notes with your right hand you can use the left hand to pull it back. Remember, the moving forward (getting louder) is gradual, only a little at a time. This will require practice and patience!

While it is difficult to explain musical concepts and techniques via the written word I hope this attempt has not been in vain. By no means are these ideas proposed as unique solutions, they are merely concepts that work for me. I encourage you to absorb this information, process it and utilize that which works for you. Many of you will go on to discover alternate techniques which extend beyond the scope of this article, and I look forward to learning from you.

For the past fifteen years, Neil Grover has performed with the Boston Symphony and Boston Pops Orchestras. He is also presently Percussionist/Assistant Timpanist with the acclaimed Boston Ballet. Neil has recorded with the Boston Symphony, Boston Pops, Philip Glass Ensemble, Empire Brass, Music from Marlboro, and as soloist with the Greek Radio Orchestra. Most recently, he recorded a music video with the legendary rock group "Aerosmith" for MTV. As founder and president of Grover Pro Percussion, Inc., Neil Grover's innovative designs and manufacturing techniques have contributed immensely towards raising the standards of excellence in the percussion industry. ■

TRIANGLE - THE GOOD SOUND

- by Dr. Stuart Marrs -

What is the "good sound"? When lecturing on the highly underrated idiophone known as the triangle, I start with a survey of opinions regarding preferences of sound production on the instrument. First I produce a sound that is very pure in nature (fig. 1) - few tones sounding at the same time.

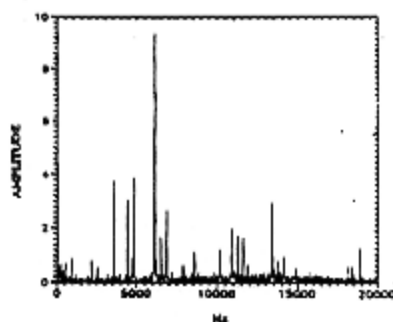


Figure 1 - Graph shows fewer numbers of tones when triangle is struck at 90° to its plane when compared with fig. 2. Note the predominant spike at 6000 Hz.

Then I play a sound that is thick and rich with many dissonant tones (fig. 2). Invariably, most listeners in the audience prefer the pure sound. This is understandable. In an isolated environment, why would someone prefer a dissonance to a consonance? The audience always reacts with bewilderment when I reveal that it is the second one, the one that is flush with harmonics, that is the accepted norm among professional players. It is preferred in part because the instrument is usually used in an ensemble context. As part of an ensemble, the humble triangle becomes integrally involved in an aspect of acoustics known as "summation of amplitudes." This means that the volume of pitches that are in phase (in tune) with other sounding frequencies add their volume on top of the others while the volume of the notes that are "out of tune" remains soft. If a triangle sound has few pitches, it has less chance of being "in tune" with the prevailing harmonic structure. A triangle sound more abundant in pitches will always cut through and sound as if it is in tune with the prevailing harmony. Imagine an instrument that

automatically plays in tune! A triangle played with the "good sound" accompanying a series of harmonic changes sounds as if it is changing pitches with the chords.

HOW TO PRODUCE THE "GOOD SOUND"

For this issue, we are discussing two modes of vibration. The first, the one that produced the purer tone can be thought of as existing in a two dimensional plane. The legs of the triangle that form the open end vibrate back and forth, while the opposite side bows in the middle with the two closed corners being nodal points of no vibration (fig. 3). One creates this mode of vibration by striking the triangle at 90 degrees to its plane, on any of its sides. The second sound breaks out of the two dimensional mold into the third dimension. Here the open legs and closed side not only vibrate back and forth as in the first mode but also vibrate laterally, side to side (fig. 4). Scientifically, this is called "torque" or twisting. To make the triangle enter this twisting mode, we simply strike it at a 45 degree angle (or less) to its plane. This causes the instrument to torque and produce the lush desirable sound.

Now that you know how to produce the different sounds try a little experiment. Have a friend play a series of chord progressions on the piano while you play the triangle (the good sound) in the same rhythm. Listen to the triangle seemingly change its pitches to match the chords! The technique of striking the triangle at an acute angle to its plane extends to roll technique.

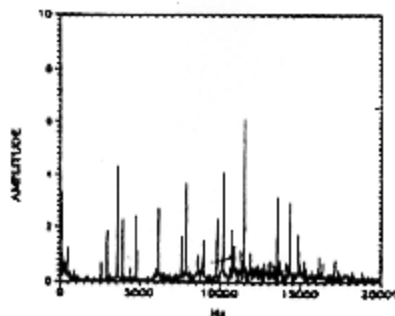
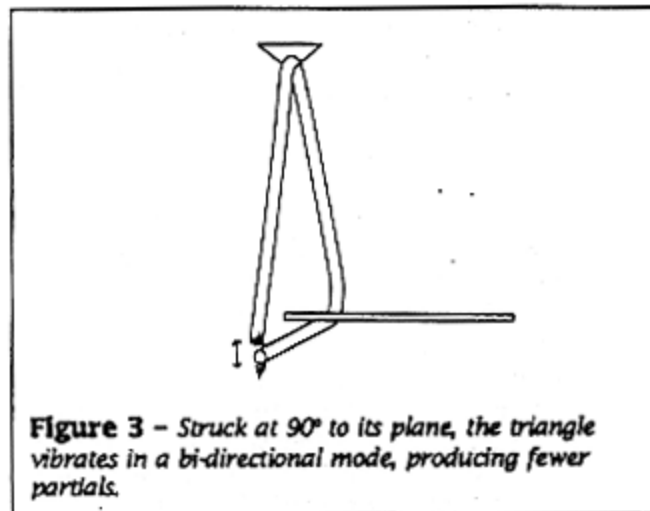


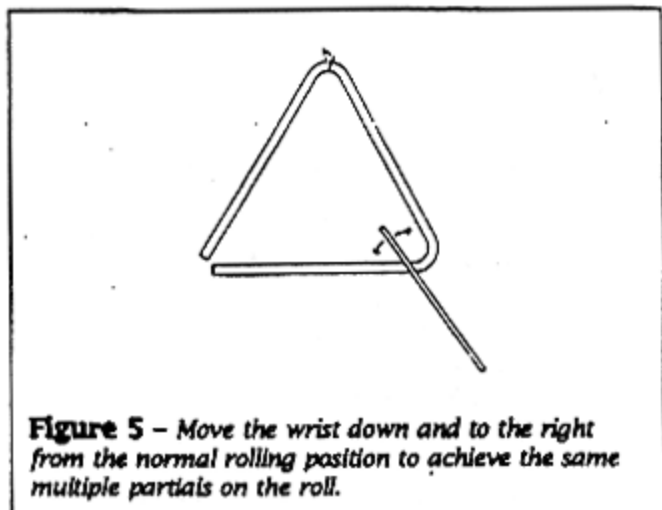
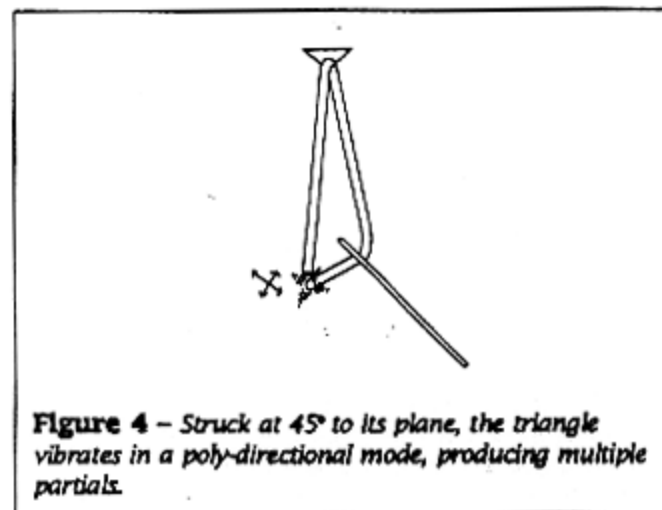
Figure 2 - Graph shows increased number of tones when triangle is struck at 45° to its plane. Note that the amplitudes are more homogenous.

Instead of rolling with the beater perpendicular to the corner of the triangle, try moving the wrist down and away from the corner while you are rolling (Fig. 5). Listen to the dramatic increase in fullness of sound. The beater is striking the triangle at an acute angle to its plane.

Whenever possible the triangle holder should be hand held. This is because energy (sound) is lost when the instrument is hung or clipped to a music stand. Again, a little experiment will show what I am describing. In a quiet environment, clip or hang your



triangle to a stand and play it with a heavy beater. Touch the stand and feel the vibrations that should be emanating from the instrument passing through the stand. Now play it hand held. Can you hear the difference? The reason the energy doesn't dissipate



through the hand as it did through the stand is that the fleshy fingers are poor conductors and allow most of the energy to be released in the form of audible sound waves caused by the vibrating triangle.

Although all triangles obey the same laws of physics, they are not created equal! The particular design and material of each model has a dramatic effect on the final result. The Grover Super-Overtone™ triangle has been designed expressly for a sound rich in partials. It maintains this positive characteristic throughout the dynamic spectrum. Sensitive pianissimos through sparkling fortissimos make this instrument the ideal triangle. Use of proper technique and a superb triangle, like the Grover Super-Overtone™ triangle will place the "good sound" in your hands. □

Dr. Stuart Marrs received his doctorate from the prestigious Indiana University School of Music. As a soloist, conductor, and teacher, Dr. Marrs' professional experience spans 20 years and three continents. His orchestral positions as principle timpanist and/or percussionist include the orchestras of Louisville, Bolivia, and Costa Rica. His freelance experiences include such diverse areas as TV, Ice Capades, symphonic orchestra and experimental groups. Dr. Marrs was director of the San José Chamber Players in Costa Rica, whose mission was to promote the diffusion of contemporary chamber music. Dr. Marrs is founder and president of the Maine chapter of the Percussive Arts Society, a driving force behind the development of percussion in the state of Maine. He has taught at the National University of Costa Rica, Indiana University, and is currently the percussion instructor at the University of Maine. Dr. Marrs has toured the U.S., Europe, and Latin America as a soloist, conductor, clinician, and teacher.

126-0

Tamburino.

Ant. Dvorak, Op. 92.

Allegro

4

Handwritten notes and markings on the score include: "turn over" above the second staff, "1" and "2" above the first staff, "3" above the third staff, "8" above the third staff, and "tr" (trills) above the fourth and fifth staves. Dynamic markings include *f*, *p*, and *ff*.

ROMEO & JULIET

Allegro giusto.

21

Platti

Handwritten notes and markings on the score include: "D" above the first staff, "2" above the second staff, "4" above the third staff, "Gr. Cassa" above the third staff, and "22 G 21 H 38" above the third staff. Dynamic markings include *f*, *p*, and *ff*.

c) DANSE RUSSE TRÉPAK

Tempo di trepak, molto vivace

A Tamb. 16 *ff* *ff* *mf*

f *ff* *ff* *mf*

B 16 **C** 5 (timpani) *ff*

ff *ff*

ff *ff* etc.

stringendo *sempre fff*

Prestissimo 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

The musical score is written for a single melodic line on a treble clef staff in 2/4 time. It consists of seven staves of music. The first staff begins with a box labeled 'A' and 'Tamb.' above a 16-measure rest, followed by eighth-note patterns with dynamics *ff*, *ff*, and *mf*. The second staff continues with eighth-note patterns and dynamics *f*, *ff*, *ff*, and *mf*. The third staff features a 16-measure rest labeled 'B' and a 5-measure rest labeled 'C' with '(timpani)' below it, followed by eighth-note patterns and dynamics *ff*. The fourth and fifth staves contain rapid eighth-note patterns with circled 'K' markings and dynamics *ff*. The sixth staff is marked 'stringendo' and 'sempre fff', featuring increasingly dense eighth-note patterns with circled 'K' markings and 'etc.'. The seventh staff is marked 'Prestissimo' and contains seven numbered eighth-note chords (1-7) followed by a final eighth-note pattern.