

Teaching Rudiments
Eric Chandler
Vol 10, #1, p. 43 (Aug-Sept. 1994)
[Complete article from BANDWORLD Magazine]

During the past few years there seems to have been a noticeable decline in the “rudimental knowledge” of young percussionists. Lack of instructional time and understaffed music programs are two frequent contributors to percussion inadequacies. Although there is no short cut to learning the rudiments, the following suggestions may prove to be helpful in teaching young percussionists within a limited time period. It is suggested that a list of drum rudiments be available when reading these suggestions.

Percussion rudiments are as common in notation as scale patterns and other basic elements of music used by non-percussionists. Whether a student is playing timpani, mallets, snare drum or drum set, rudiments are continuously utilized in performance practices. The use and knowledge of the prescribed sticking vocabulary of rudiments will aid the student in performance throughout his entire musical career.

The first step will require the student to understand three of the most basic strokes of drumming:

1. The grace note, which is played no more than one to two inches off the drum head and always quite softly.
2. The tap, which is the normal stroke played six to eight inches off the drum head.
3. The full-stroke, which is an accented stroke, performed by fully extending the wrist up and then back down without using any arm motion.

Once the student is comfortable with these three strokes, it is possible to proceed to work on individual rudiments.

Most commonly, drum rudiments fall under one of four different categories; rolls, diddles, flams, and drags. The rolls, whether or not they use a measured number of strokes, should be practiced slowly at first. The long roll (or open roll) uses two equal strokes with each hand starting slowly and gradually speeding up to where the student can play comfortably before slowing back down. However, never allow the student to sacrifice technique for speed when playing the rolls. At some point, the student will need to let the sticks bounce or “rebound” in order to play rolls at a faster pace. The rebound (or second stroke) is played at the same volume as the first stroke throughout the rudiment.

A measured number of strokes (such as the five, seven, or nine stroke rolls) are also very common in drumming notation. Each of the subsequent rolls are played with the same sticking every time with a slight accent on the last stroke. Allowing a pause between each subsequent roll will separate the rudiment into the desired number of strokes. (For further information on teaching the rolls, see: “Teaching the Rolls: A Three Step Process,” October 1991, Percussive Notes.)

The diddle rudiments are important for students to learn because they aid in an “alternate sticking” fashion. This concept is not unlike those used for alternate fingerings on wind instruments. For example, a 4/4 measure of sixteen sixteenth notes might normally use the straight sticking pattern of R-L-R-L etc. However, if this figure is to be performed on multiple surfaces such as quad toms, the sticking for the single paradiddle (R-L-R-R-L-R-L-L) is much easier for the player to execute. The same concept holds true for many 6/8 time signature patterns. In this case, the sticking for a series of sixteenth notes might use the double paradiddle sticking of R-L-R-L-R-R followed by L-R-L-R-L-L. Diddle rudiments are normally easier than others for beginning students to grasp.

The flam rudiments generally seem to give young players more trouble. A flam, which consists of a grace note followed by an immediate tap, is meant to “ornament” a note and give it some “flavor.” In order to execute a flam properly, the grace note must at all times be played close to the drum head. Once the grace note gets too high, both sticks tend to hit the drum simultaneously causing a “popping” sound. Insist that the student maintain proper stick heights when playing any of the flam rudiments (i.e. grace note 1" to 2" and tap 6" to 8" from the head). Also, have the student periodically refer back to the three basic strokes when practicing.

It sometimes helps the student to think of the flam as a “one-motion” movement rather than as two separate strokes. The object is for both hands to proceed downward simultaneously. The difference, of course, is that the grace note has less distance to travel than the tap before striking the drum head. Have the student set his hands in the correct position with the proper stick heights and then execute one flam. Repeat this process using the same sticking until the student becomes comfortable with it. Next, try the same procedure using the opposite sticking. After the student can play numerous flams cleanly, using like sticking, it is possible to begin alternate sticking.

Much of the same information pertaining to flams also applies to the drag rudiments. Stick heights and concepts of execution are very similar in these two families of rudiments. It is suggested that the student feel comfortable with the first few roll rudiments before attempting the drag rudiments at a fast pace. In teaching the proper execution of the drag (or ruff), have the student play two grace notes with the same hand and follow it with a tap in the opposite hand. Once the student feels comfortable with this, have him gradually speed up, moving all three notes closer together. At this point, the student can start over, using the opposite sticking, and then move to alternate sticking.

The rudiments involving grace notes (flams and drags) become quite complex when additional notes are added. For example, the flam accent has two alternating taps that follow the initial execution of the flam. Some students want to learn all of the rudiments that use grace notes before they understand the concept of playing them. Insist that they be able to perform the flam and drag before attempting any of the additional, more complicated rudiments involving grace notes.

The key to success in playing drum rudiments is to understand the basic strokes used to perform them and to practice very slowly at first. Equally important as scales and arpeggios are to wind and string players, the drum rudiments are important in providing young percussionists with the capability to perform all types of music.

Source: 10•1•43