



YAMAHA

Educator Series

PERCUSSION



John H. Beck

John H. Beck is the professor of percussion at the Eastman School of Music and retired timpanist of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. He is active throughout the United States, Europe and South America as a performer, composer, clinician and conductor. Beck is a past president of the Percussive Arts Society and has published numerous articles in professional journals. He was inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame in 1999.

The Snare Drum Roll Analyzed

By John H. Beck

The snare drum roll is the one technique that takes years of practice. In fact, as long as you play snare drum, you will be working on perfecting the roll. All beats on a snare drum are short sounds. The only long tone is the roll; therefore, it must have a full round sound and be smooth and even. Would you like to hear a long tone on trumpet that is shaky and uneven, or for that matter any shaky long tone on any instrument?

Snare drummers are judged by their ability to perform a roll that has a good quality sound. Consider the snare drum roll at the start of the Star Spangled Banner. It must have a sound that captures your attention in a positive way; not have you wondering what is making that awful noise.

The five basic rolls of snare drumming are: 5 stroke, 9 stroke, 13 stroke, 17 stroke and the long roll. One or more of these are usually found in music for band and orchestra. The execution of these rolls is most easily understood through the open-rudimental style of two beats per stick. The closed orchestral-style roll on the other hand is not as easily understood because of the various concepts as to what comprises a closed roll. There are enthusiasts who use the multiple-bounce roll, the press-roll, or the three-taps-per-stick roll. After years of performing, teaching and experimenting – often with the help of a tape recorder – I have concluded that the best closed roll is produced by using three taps per stick. Using this concept enables one to move from open to closed rolls by the addition of only one extra tap per stick. This additional tap does not affect hand motion, but does change the sound of the roll.

The following materials are necessary to do the analysis of your roll: 1. a tape recorder with two speeds 2. a plastic tunable drum pad 3. a rubber drum pad, and 4. a pair of snare drum sticks. Align the drum pads (next to each other) with at least two feet between them. Place the microphone above the plastic pad and rather close to the pad surface. Place the right hand snare drum stick on the plastic pad and the left snare drum stick on the rubber pad. Record a long roll for approximately five seconds. Play back the recorded roll at a slow speed. The rubber pad or left hand is practically inaudible, while the right hand is clear and precise. What you hear is the roll you recorded slowed to half speed. You will be able to hear the following: 1. the number of beats per stick 2. the evenness of the beats, and 3. the volume of each beat. You will get a clear understanding of what is happening when you play a roll. To check on the left hand simply reverse the procedure.

I have found that a good rudimental roll (open roll) is comprised of two even beats per stick, and that a good orchestral roll is comprised of three even beats per stick. If more beats are used per stick, (multiple bounce or pressed roll) the tendency is to choke the sound or sometimes produce a nervous sound.

Now that you know the snare drum roll must have a full, round, smooth and even sound, and that there is a way of analyzing the roll, your job is to study with a teacher and practice, practice, practice. Tension in the hands and arms is the main barrier to producing a quality roll. When practicing, always make sure to warm-up, and at the first sign of stress or tension, slow down or take a break from your playing.