

# Creative Tambourine Techniques -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 that a tambourine is held. Unlike other instruments a tambourine is not stationary, in fact, it's 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 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 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 awhile 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 "y", 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 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, and 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!

**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 Gaité 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:** 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 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.

*Neil Grover is a world renowned cymbal, tambourine and triangle specialist. For over 20 years, he has performed with the Boston Symphony and the Boston Pops. In addition, he has played with the Royal Ballet of England, Boston Musica Viva, American Ballet Theatre, Bolshoi Ballet and Boston Symphony Chamber Players. He has been seen in the hit movie Blown Away and in a music video on MTV, with the legendary rock group "Aerosmith". Neil has also recorded with the Boston Symphony, Boston Pops, Philip Glass Ensemble, Empire Brass, and Music from Marlboro, on the Sony, RCA, Telarc, Nonesuch, Phillips and DGG labels. Neil has recorded a special segment of percussion for the hit movie Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. As the founder and president of Grover Pro Percussion, Neil Grover's innovative designs and manufacturing techniques have catapulted the standards of excellence in the percussion industry. Neil was formerly an Adjunct Professor of Music at the Boston Conservatory and the University of Massachusetts. Neil Grover holds the distinction of serving on both the Board of Directors and the Sustaining Members Advisory Council of the Percussive Arts Society.*