

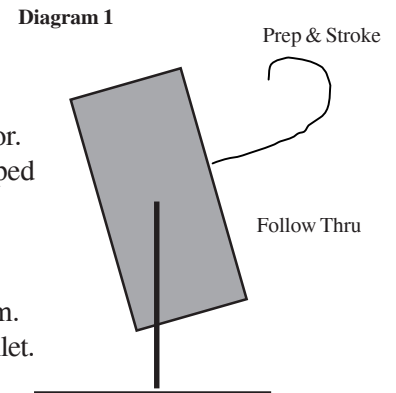
## Fundamentals of the Bass Drum

by David L. Collier, Illinois State University

Bass Drum, also known as *die grosse trammel* in German, *la grosse caisse* in French and *la grancassa* or *gran cassa* in Italian is a fantastic instrument once you get involved with it. It is one of the most important instruments in the band or orchestra because of the power it possesses to direct the entire ensemble. Everyone listens to the bass drum and follows it. This means you have incredible power over the music and you have an incredible responsibility. Bass drum players must have impeccable time, must always watch the conductor and must always listen to the ensemble. In addition, the percussionist on bass drum needs a large pallet of sound colors to use in various situations. How is this done? Through changes in technique, stroke, mallet selection and where the head is struck.

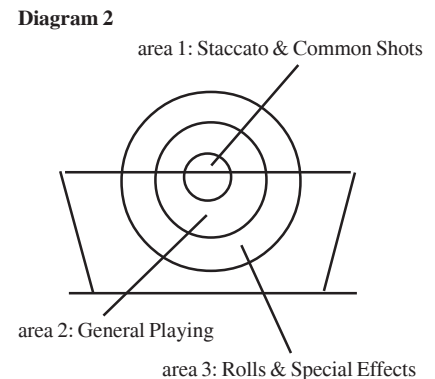
### Techniques

- The basic grip is the same as the French Grip that is used when playing timpani.
  - The thumb is facing toward the ceiling; back of the hand is perpendicular to the floor.
  - Grip firmly between the thumb and first fingers with the remaining fingers wrapped around the handle of the mallet.
  - The grip should be firm but not tense.
  - The Basic stroke should be from the wrist and not from the arm.
  - Draw a backwards C or a bass clef sign in the air and contact the head at the bottom.
  - This motion should have a moderate degree of snap to increase the velocity of the mallet.
- After striking the head, be sure to follow-through away from the head (See Diagram 1)



### Where to Strike

- Divide the head into three circles for our various types of playing. (See Diagram 2)
- The center circle (area 1) surrounds the node of the bass drum and is the point of least vibration on the head and therefore produces the driest, most articulate sound. Use this area when you want a very short sound with excellent articulation. The center is also where one should play the powerful “cannon shot” blows that are sometimes required.
- The second circle (area 2) is the area for most of our general-purpose sounds. This portion of the head which is about 4-6 inches off center has a moderate amount of resonance with just enough articulation for the majority of our strokes.
- The third circle is used primarily for rolls (area 3). This area, which is very close to the rim, produces a light airy tone with very little articulation.
- By using all three of these areas the sensitive percussionist can produce an incredible number of sounds on the bass drum.



### Mallet Choice

- For general playing, you will need a mallet with a moderately large head and with a fair amount of head weight.
- For extremely articulate passages, a pair of hard felt beaters (i.e. small marching bass drum mallets) will be useful.
- For rolls use a matched pair of mallets that have heads slightly smaller than the general-purpose mallet.
- A well-stocked percussionist will have a pair of general mallets, a pair of hard mallets and a pair of rolling mallets.

## Muffling Techniques

- Never put anything inside a concert bass drum
- The most effective techniques for muffling involve the hands and knees. The best method for muffling the bass drum is to use the non-playing hand.
- On the playing head, gently place the fingers of your left hand near the rim of the bass drum while striking the head with the right hand.
- If a dryer sound is needed, move the left hand toward the center of the drum.
- Increased control of the sound may be obtained by also using the knee against the playing head. Elevate the right knee on a small stool and gently press it into the playing head. This can be used alone or with the hand muffling.

This technique is very easy to use on any type of bass drum by performers of any size. It also enables the player to easily see the music and the conductor. Practice, experimentation and keen listening will guide you in developing this technique.

## Musicality

Another factor a performer must consider is the length of the notes. Often what we see printed is not exactly what the composer may have “intended.” At times the note values we see are too short in relation to other wind parts, as if only the attack of the drum was written. I recommend a careful analysis of the score to compare the bass drum part with other wind parts. If everyone else has a half note and the bass drum has an eighth, perhaps we should allow the drum to resonate for an entire half note before muffling.

Next time you get a bass drum part, listen to the rest of the ensemble and determine what the role of the bass drum is at every moment. Is it providing the ostinato pulse? Is it a low rumbling effect? Is it a very rhythmic, syncopated solo? Is it the tremendous climax at the end? By deciding what your musical role is, you can choose what mallet to use, where to play, how to strike the drum and how to muffle. The combination of these aspects advances the art of bass drum performance into the realm of music and out of the pit of noise.

## Tuning

In addition to the correct technique, proper heads and tuning will radically affect the quality of the bass drum sound in your ensemble. The best sound possible for a bass drum is found with quality calfskin heads. Colleges and professionals should invest in this type of head. In most high school situations, I recommend the Remo FibreSkyn 3TM or RenaissanceTM heads for all concert bass drums. These heads are a synthetic imitation of calfskin. They have a warm, rich sound with very little “ring” yet are very durable and not effected by climate.

When tuning a concert bass drum, tune the playing side a minor 2nd to minor 3rd higher than the resonating side. This will produce the greatest number of overtones and avoid a sense of pitch in the drum. Tune the playing head tight enough that it produces a rich, low tone, one that is felt more than heard, which does not have a clear pitch.

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