

# Mind the Ornaments: Setting Your Students Up for Audition Success with Flams, Ruffs and Rolls

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As the new school year begins and we are preoccupied with marching band, we also need to focus on setting our students up for audition success. In many years of judging percussion auditions, I have observed a large variance in how students approach concert style ornaments on the snare drum, and that success with these ornaments has usually correlated with the students' overall success at the audition. The following suggestions may help you in helping your students refine their orchestral snare drum ornaments.

## ***Begin with the End in Mind: Creating an Ideal Aural Image for Orchestral Snare Drum***

As with any instrument in the band, it is important for the teacher to possess a precise aural concept of the concert snare drum. In my opinion, the ideal sound image of the orchestral snare drum is the playing of Elden "Buster" Bailey, who was a long time member of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Encourage your students to listen to the recordings of the New York Philharmonic under the direction of Leonard Bernstein, for example Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* and *Capriccio Espagnol*, and Nielsen's *Clarinet Concerto* to hear particular examples of Bailey's fine snare drumming.

## ***Buzz Rolls: Creating the Illusion of a Long Tone***

The purpose of a buzz roll is to create a sustained sound that is ideally

as smooth and beautiful as a cellist's *arco* legato. The buzz roll actually creates the *illusion* of a long tone, with many strikes of the drum in quick succession causing the heads and snare units to continuously vibrate. Unlike the metered, exact subdivided sound we strive to create with a double stroke roll, a buzz roll should sound like white noise, much like tearing a piece of paper in half. In concert style audition music, a student should employ buzz rolls unless double-stroke rolls are specifically indicated.

There are two main schools of thought when it comes to concert style snare drum rolls. Some players choose to let the sticks bounce more times on pianissimo rolls (i.e. around 6-7 bounces per stroke) than they would on fortissimo rolls (i.e. between 3-4 bounces per stroke). Other players strive for 3 bounces per stroke on every roll they play, regardless of the dynamic. I prefer the aforementioned style in which the density of the roll is variable, depending on the dynamic.

To work on refining the buzz roll, encourage your students to play a few free bounces, in which they strike the drum, relax the hand, and then let

the stick bounce until it runs out of energy. Then, ask them to play some "dead strokes," in which they put a firm squeeze on the fulcrum and push the stick down onto the head without rebounding back off of the head. Next, explain that a good buzz

**A good buzz stroke requires the student to employ their fingers, wrist and arm simultaneously. The fingers help to control the initial squeeze of the fulcrum, the wrist helps to motivate the initial stroke, and the arm provides a follow-through motion.**

feels somewhere between these two extremes. Austin Symphony timpanist Tony Edwards teaches a "squeeze and release" technique. This technique involves squeezing firmly on the fulcrum at the moment of impact with the drum, but then immediately

relaxing in order to let the stick bounce as many times as possible. A good buzz stroke requires the student to employ their fingers, wrist and arm simultaneously. The fingers help to control the initial squeeze of the fulcrum, the wrist helps to motivate the initial stroke, and the arm provides a follow-through motion (continuing to push-downwards towards the head after the fulcrum has been relaxed, in order to extend the length of the buzz).

Encourage your students to practice letting the release of one stick's buzz overlap or dovetail with the initiation of the next stick's onset at a slow tempo. This helps them to understand

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the concept of keeping the snares constantly vibrating. I use the following exercise to teach this concept of overlap (see Fig. 1.)

FIGURE 1:

♩ = 80

*mf*

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L etc.

Try to let the buzzes overlap slightly, especially on the slower subdivisions. Make all of the bounces within each buzz stroke as similar in volume and stick height as possible. Many young players make the first strike of the buzz too loud and high off the drum, which makes it difficult to create an even roll that is free from “bumps” (keep it low).

Another important factor in determining the sound quality of a buzz roll is the speed of the subdivision that forms the base rhythm (or check pattern) of a roll. Take a look at the following example (Fig. 2) at this tempo (quarter note = 100).

FIGURE 2:

♩ = 100

*f*

Many of our students will almost always default to a sixteenth-note subdivision on buzz rolls, but at this tempo this is not preferred (see Fig. 3).

FIGURE 3:

R R L R L R R L R R L R L R

At this tempo (Q=100) and dynamic (forte), a sixteenth-note subdivision works reasonably well, but may not be the best choice. The body of sound in each roll could benefit from adding one more stroke, as seen in the following check pattern (see Fig. 4):

FIGURE 4:

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R

Using the three and five note groups of buzzes seen in the example above will have two benefits. First, the rolls will gain energy and vibrancy with the additional strokes, and the students' buzzes will not have to be quite as long as they would be with two and four note groups. Secondly, the fact that there are an odd number of notes in the subdivision can help to create the illusion of a long tone, due to the fact that one hand is not playing exactly half of the subdivision. Our brains are always searching for patterns, and if one hand is slightly louder than the other in an even-numbered subdivision it may be easier to hear the unevenness due to the fact that it creates a familiar rhythm (such as two eighth notes) compared to the unfamiliar rhythm created by half of an odd-numbered subdivision (such as the 1st, 3rd and 5th notes of a five-let).

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Experiment with different subdivisions to help your students to find the base rhythm (or check pattern) that will help them to sound the best. This may yield different results for different players. You can help your students to strive for a continuous vibration of the batter head, the resonant head, and the snare units by making sure that your school's equipment is well-tuned and maintained.

### Flams and Ruffs: "Adding ornaments to the tree"

I was recently discussing concert snare drum ornamentation with Jeremy Branson, who is the associate principal percussionist in the Pittsburgh Symphony. He tells his students that grace notes in flams or ruffs are like the ornaments on a Christmas tree, simply decorating and adding to the overall big picture, with

the tree itself being the primary note that the grace notes lead to. This imagery may help your students to understand that first and foremost, the primary note needs to be played with great sound quality and solid timing.


When teaching students to play concert style flams, point out that they may have to play a more open style of flam than they are used to playing in marching band. Keep the flam as open as possible without letting it sound like two separate notes. Imagine a flam as merely a "thicker" sounding stroke. A common problem that young players may have with their flams is that they lift their grace note up from the resting position before they let it fall. This will often create a flam that is far too open. Another challenging issue is when students "force" the primary note down towards the drum, rather than letting the stick fall naturally. This may create a flam that "pops," with the grace note striking at the same time as the primary note.

The following exercise is useful when refining flam technique (see Fig. 5):

FIGURE 5:



The player should start with the grace note low to the drum (about 1 cm off the head) and the primary note at a higher height (around 9 inches). The player then should drop straight down from the resting position with the grace note hand and play 4 taps (being sure not to lift the stick up before it drops down to strike). To create the flam, the player merely lets the primary stroke fall towards the drum *at precisely the same moment* that the grace note begins to fall. The flam is simply created by the disparity of distance between the drum and the right and left hand respectively.



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We can further “ornament our tree” by playing two or three grace notes that lead to a primary note, producing a *three-stroke ruff* or a *four-stroke ruff* (see Fig. 6).

FIGURE 6:



Encourage your students to try to crescendo the grace notes into the primary note, rather than simply playing two or three soft grace notes into a louder primary note. These grace notes should be played as quickly as possible without losing their clarity of articulation. There are many

different possible stickings for a four-stroke ruff. When playing at very loud dynamic levels, it can be useful to use a single-stroked sticking (lrlR or rlrL), but in my opinion a good “default” sticking should contain a double stroke, such as rllR or rllR. The following exercise meters out the 4 stroke ruff in various subdivisions that gradually compress the ruff, and could help your students to create clear, even grace notes that have musical direction. (See Fig. 7 below.)

This year in both the TMEA and ATSSB études, the ornaments that I have discussed figure quite prominently in the music. Take the time to work on these ornaments both within the context of the audition music and in various exercises to help your students to have a successful, happy audition.

FIGURE 7: Open to compressed rhythmic ruff exercise



Jordan Stern is a lecturer on the faculty of the Texas State University School of Music and currently serves as the Marching Percussion Coordinator for the Bobcat Marching Band. He also teaches music education courses at Texas State. Jordan previously worked as an Associate Band Director at Claudia Taylor Johnson and William Brennan High Schools. During his tenure at Johnson, the marching band distinguished itself with such honors as 1st place at the Bands of America San Antonio Super Regional, 3rd place at the U.I.L. 6A State Marching Contest, and was a recipient of the John Philip Sousa Foundation Sudler Shield. As a concert band director, his ensembles at Brennan and Johnson consistently received first division ratings at UIL Concert and Sight Reading contest. Jordan also has been on the percussion staff at Winston Churchill High School and the Crossmen Drum and Bugle Corps. As a private teacher, Jordan has enjoyed helping many students develop into successful performers over the years. Since 2006, 13 of his students have been placed into the TMEA All-State ensembles, with his students winning the first chair at All-State auditions in 2014, 2015 and 2016. In addition, 4 of his students have won first place at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention Solo Marimba Competition. His students have also been finalists at the Great Plains Marimba Festival and Northwestern International Percussion Competition. Mr. Stern is an active arranger and composer, writing for both percussion and wind band. While at William Brennan High School, Jordan composed the School Song and Fight Song, and arranged for the marching winds and percussion. Jordan has also arranged for the marching bands of Texas State University, Claudia Taylor Johnson, Ronald Reagan, Winston Churchill, Cedar Park, Mustang (OK), Plano, Foster, and Gregory Portland High School, among others. He is on the design staff for 5 Points Percussion Ensemble, who was a WGI Independent Open Finalist in 2016. Jordan Stern received Bachelors degrees from Texas State University in Percussion Performance and Music Studies with Teacher Certification, as well as a Masters Degree in Music Education. His percussion teachers have included Genaro Gonzalez, Tony Edwards, Matt Strauss, and Thomas Burritt. Jordan has performed as a member of the Concord Blue Devils Drum and Bugle Corps, and spent several summers at orchestral festivals, including the Round Top Festival Institute and the Texas Music Festival. He has also performed with the Texas Mozart Festival Orchestra, Austin Symphony Orchestra, National Repertory Orchestra, and Midland-Odessa Symphony Orchestra.