Fundamentals Of The Flam

by Mark Shelton

The flam entered my life in elementary school band. Whether using sticks, brushes, mallets, bare hands, or dulcimer hammers, this percussion rudiment has been an important element in my musical vocabulary ever since. The flam can be used in a variety of musical situations on many members of the percussion family and a few simple steps can move you toward more consistent flam tone and technique.

The flam consists of two separate sounds, a grace note and a main (primary) note. Although any instrument capable of producing two distinct levels of volume (including the human voice) can execute a grace note to a main note, the term flam is generally restricted to the percussion family. The grace note is played at a significantly softer dynamic level than the main note. This softer note does not receive a strict rhythmic value; it strikes shortly before the main note. Part of the flam art is being able to place the grace note very close to the main note (closed) or allowing more space (open) between the two sounds.
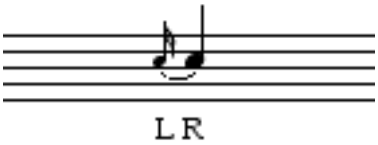
In drumming, the grace note of the flam can function as an accent aid, an ornamental stroke, or a broadening element. Since many drums have a short sustain, the inclusion of a grace note can give a lengthening effect (broadening) to the main note. When used on a definite pitched percussion instrument (such as the marimba), the grace note can be used to provide harmony to the main note.

The standard flam only comes in two flavors: the right flam and the left flam. With the right flam, the grace note is produced by the left hand and the right hand plays the main note. The left flam contains a main note in the left hand preceded by the right hand grace note. (Remember: The flam name comes from the main note hand.)

One of the key elements in playing the flam is positioning.
Positioning refers to the height of the strikers (hands, sticks, hammers) to the striking surface (drumhead, cymbal, xylophone bars, etc.). Much of my knowledge of flam positioning comes from the teaching of Gray Barrier and Marty Hurley during my college years. Once I incorporated these simple methods, my flam technique improved greatly.

Let us begin with the positioning and playing of a right flam.

Here is the basic flam notation:



Notice that the grace note is represented by a much smaller note than the main note. You can probably imagine the flam sound by looking at the notation. However, the notation is also a graphic depiction of the hammer positioning.



Position your grace note stick (or mallet) (L) very close to the striking surface (drum head, marimba bar, etc.) since the grace note volume is significantly softer that the main note. The other stick (R) should be positioned higher to produce the velocity for the louder main note. You can now see how the positioning relates to the notation. Your sticks look like a flam is about to happen. You are set up for success. Wait...before you bring those sticks down for the flam, let's focus on the grace note.

Practice dropping the stick onto the surface and returning to the original position (producing only one sound, no multiple bounces). Notice that I used the word, dropping.
Do not think about using force to move the grace note stick but merely drop it onto the surface and immediately bring it to its original position. The sound should be soft but audible. There is a tendency to wonder if there is significant volume produced by dropping. Trust that there will be plenty to achieve the desired grace note effect.

Now that you have control of the grace note, return to the flam positioning and get ready for both sticks to move. Think about the sound that you want to achieve; the grace note
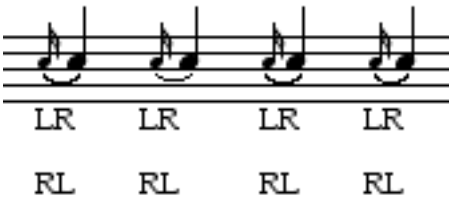
sounding softly just before the main note. With that sound in mind, bring the sticks down to the drum head.

With correct positioning, the sticks can begin moving at the same time with the grace note arriving at the course first because of the shorter traveling distance. As each one strikes, bring it back to the starting position. There is usually a tendency to pick up the grace note stick higher than needed. This wastes motion and contributes to inefficient technique. Form a habit of bringing the grace note hammer only as high as needed for the required volume. Think: Grace note stays low.
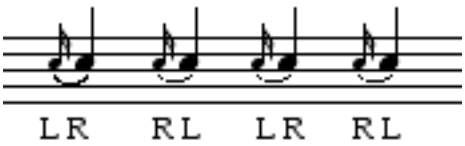
After achieving a consistent right flam, move on to the left flam. The positioning will be reversed with the right hand playing the grace note and the main note handled by the left. As with the right flam, make sure that the implements travel back to their starting position after each flam to prepare for the next.



Along with successive flams using the same positioning,



there is also a need to use positioning for alternating flams.



Start with the sticks in the right flam position. Play a right flam but instead of returning the sticks to their original positions, bring the grace note stick up to the main note position and hold the main note stick down after striking so that it is in the grace note position. Check your positioning and when correct, play a left flam and bring the implements into position to set up a right flam. Continue to alternate and think ahead about where the sticks will be repositioned after each flam. Practice this slowly and precisely (while listening for a good flam tone). Use a direct up and down stick path when practicing the alternating flams. Avoid the tendency to use a sweeping sideways motion. With enough practice, muscle memory will make this process less robotic and your hands will begin to travel to these positions with a more natural flow.
Trust me, I've been on the flam train for a while.

Once you are comfortable with the flam positioning, begin to incorporate flams into your playing. Find places in the music where a grace note seems appropriate and experiment. Try noodling around with flams; it might inspire your creative juices for a composition.

Learning the correct positioning for flams allows you to move into other flam rudiments. The Percussive Arts Society International Drum Rudiments chart contains a section of flam based rudiments and there are many hybrid rudiments that contain the flam. The flam is the first cousin to another rudiment, the drag, which uses two grace notes. The flam positioning method can also be applied to the drag giving you extra bang for your practicing buck. All of these rudiments can be applied to your percussion playing to further enrich your musical vocabulary.

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