Savvy With The Shaker

by Mark Shelton

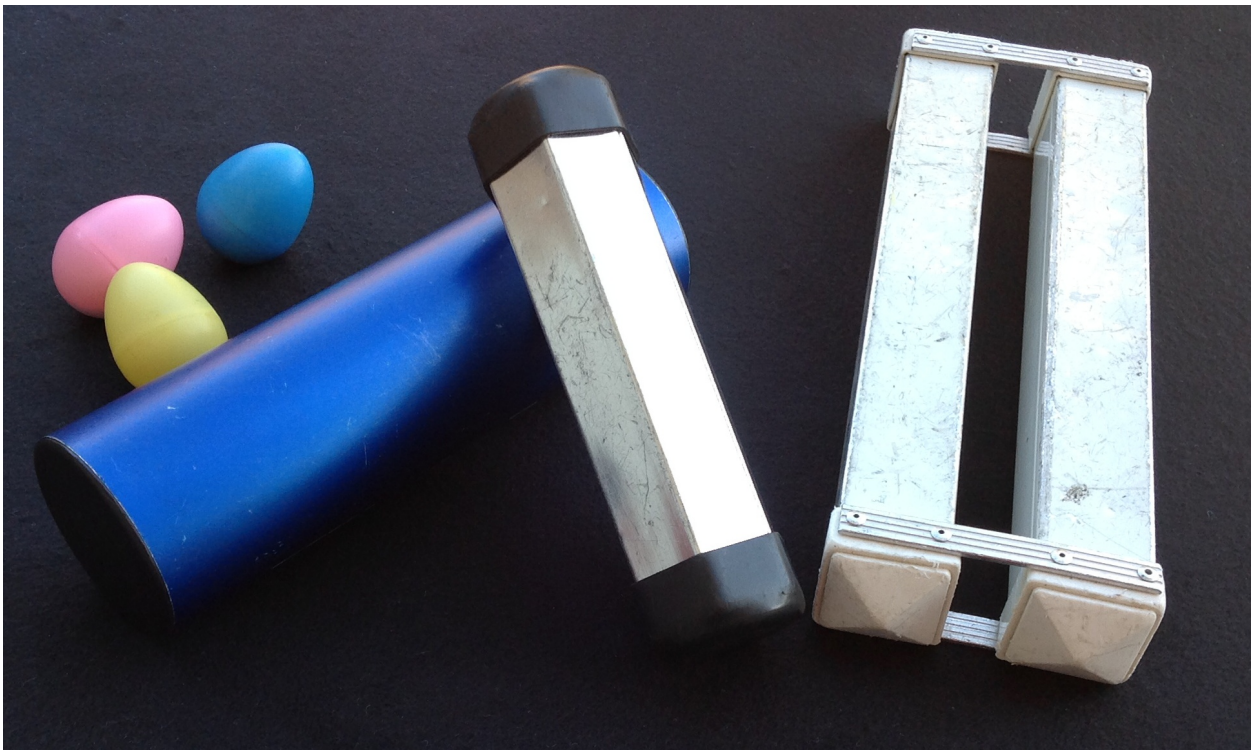
“Mark, play the shaker.” Those words from the music director (accompanied by the “air shaker” motion) were my cue to abandon the tasty percussive gems pouring forth from my hands, grab the requested instrument, and commence shaking! This particular leader really liked to hear a steady stream of shaken sixteenths. I was happy to comply and keep my job. Over the years, I have played shakers for many music directors, conductors, and producers in both live settings and recording sessions. Along the way, I have picked up a fair amount of shaker knowledge worth sharing.

You Have Some Choices

Most shakers can be grouped into two major categories: Prism and Rounded. Some shakers, such as the caxixi and kayamba, do not fit neatly into those categories.

A Prism shaker with its flat sides provides a more crisp, precise articulation than its rounded cousin. When a shaker is called for in uptempo rhythmic music, I often reach for the clear attack of a prism shaker.

The Rounded group includes cylindrical, spherical, and ovoid (egg-shaped) forms. These tend toward a more subdued attack. This is usually my choice for a smooth (legato) sound to accompany ballads and slow tempo worship songs.



Shaker tone is influenced by the shell and the fill (the shaking material inside). Metal, wood, and plastic are the most common shell materials, with metal producing the brighter tone. Fill materials include seeds, plastic balls, metal shot, shells, rice, and wooden beads. Not only does the fill material influence the tone but also the size and amount of shaking material. With all the combinations of shapes, shell, and fill materials, the possible shaker timbres are seemingly endless.

Which Shaker And When?

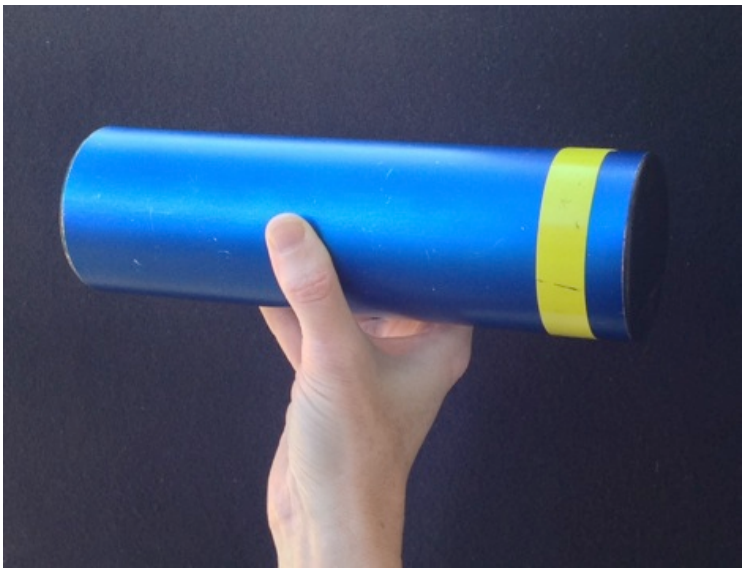
How do you know which shaker to use in a musical situation? Sometimes you have to audition a few candidates.

During a rehearsal or recording session, play along with the music for a few measures with one shaker and then switch to a different one. You will probably hear the sound of one of the instruments fit better into the overall texture of the surrounding music. Sometimes a timbre that blends into the music works best, while at other times a tone that cuts through the mix is more desirable. Experimentation and your ear will guide you through your shaker arsenal until you find a suitable tone.

Hold On

Although a shaker can be played with both hands holding the instrument, I usually grasp a shaker with one hand. It is easy to move into a roll with a one hand grip and I have my other paw free to play another instrument (or hoist an apple fritter to my mouth).

Using your fingers and thumb, hold the shaker above the palm. The back of the thumb is toward your body and the remaining four fingers are on the far “side” of the shaker (see photo). Supporting the instrument in this manner allows the shell to vibrate more freely and allows the use of the fingers to control the shaker movement. The shaker should be held at approximately chin level.

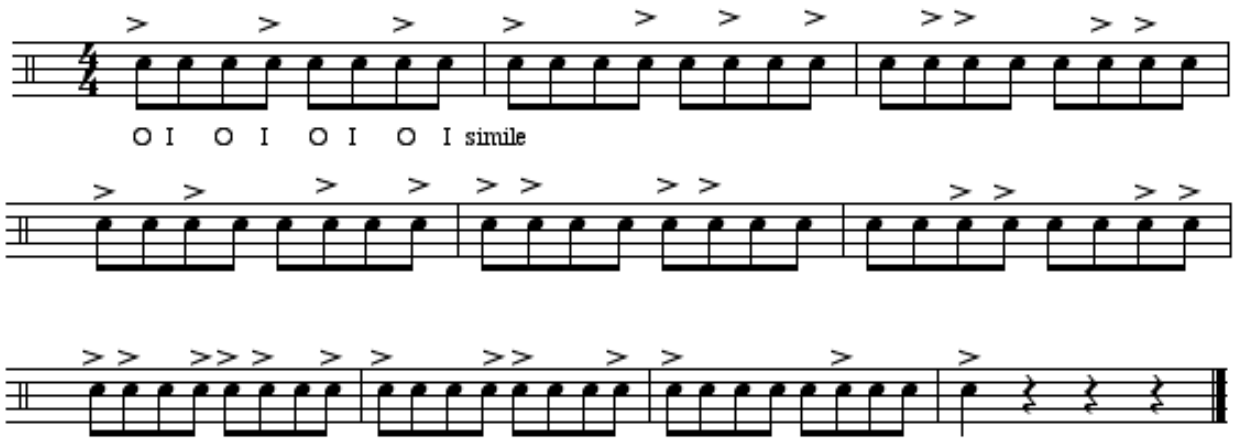


Get It Straight
Many of the basic shaker patterns consist of steady streams of straight eighth or sixteenth notes.

With your elbow bent and your hand holding the shaker approximately six inches from your chin, use a combination of forearm, wrist, and fingers to move the instrument away from your body along an imaginary line parallel to the floor. Stop the motion as you hear (and feel) the fill slap the far “side” of the shell (the OUT motion). Immediately move the shaker toward your body along the parallel line to bring the fill back to strike the near “side” (the IN motion). Listen carefully to make certain that the rhythm is straight and not swung.

Strive for a smooth and flowing movement. Your ear-brain-arm-hand connection will guide you to learn how fast and how far to move the shaker for tempos and rhythms as well as how much motion should come from the forearm, wrist, and fingers.

Bring Out The Accents
A little extra flick will send the fill into the shell with the extra velocity to create an accent. You can play accents in either direction. Work this exercise below slowly at first, observing the O (OUT) and I (IN) markings and bringing out the accents.



After you feel comfortable with these ten bars, try playing the exercise in cut time. After that, you will be well on your way to developing some serious shaker chops.

Real Life Grooves
Put the straight subdivision techniques together with your accent skills and learn these common groove elements:

Basic 4/4 Eighth Note Pattern



Basic 4/4 Sixteenth Note Pattern



Basic 12/8 Sixteenth Note Pattern



Shuffle Shakin'

To play a shuffle or swing feel, the shaker travels along an imaginary diagonal line that is approximately 35 degrees to the floor. Think of the motion as more down and up rather than out and in. Play the strong subdivisions with a DOWN (D) motion and the weaker subdivisions with an UP (U) motion. You will notice how gravity assists this technique.

Play the shuffle patterns below with a relaxed swing feel:





Sustaining Shake

It is necessary to develop a shaker roll for ornamentation and phrasing (and just plain making a long tone). Using the one-hand grip, simply rotate the wrist back and forth rapidly so that the fill produces a sustained unmetered sound. Practice this exercise to gain the ability to move into and out of a roll.



Shaker Playlist

Attention to the tonal and technical aspects of the shaker are important but be sure to invest time in studying recordings (and live performances) for ideas and inspiration. Get started by checking out the shaking action in these songs:
“How Great Is Our God” Chris Tomlin
“No Sweeter Name” Christ For The Nations Music
“Forever Reign” Hillsong
“Heart of Worship” Michael W. Smith
“O The Blood” Gateway Worship
“I Give You Glory” Christ For The Nations Music

The shaker is one of those percussion instruments that seems small and simple, yet it provides a unique texture that can help to glue a groove together. Develop your repertoire of rhythms and tones and be ready when you hear the worship leader call out your name along with the words, “Play the shaker!”

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