Snare Drum 411: The Quick Guide

by Mark Shelton

Unless you are on a “media fast,” it’s hard to avoid hearing the snare drum. Seemingly ubiquitous, the instrument is at home in symphony orchestras, rock groups, drum lines, jazz combos, worship bands and many other musical ensembles.

With the recent trend for the hand percussionist to include more "stick percussion" in modern worship music, it might be time to consider adding the snare drum to your percussive sound palette.

Perhaps you have years of snare drumming in your background but need some ideas on composing a suitable part, or maybe you have come into the hand percussion world without an abundance of stick experience. My short Snare Drum 411 will provide pointers on tone and technique along with ideas on how to weave the “caisse claire” into the musical fabric of your worship team.

TONE & TUNING

Many years ago, a drummer confessed in an article that he could never achieve the snare drum tone that was in his head. His admission brought me great relief. Despite changing heads, tightening or loosening tension rods, and adjusting the snares, my perfect snare drum sound seems forever confined to my brain. Though we may not totally realize the ultimate tone, it is important to have a great sound in your mental sound file and TRY to tune your way in the direction of snare utopia. I'm thinking that there will be no need for a drum tuning key in heaven--but until then:

• Do not get carried away with bringing all the tension points precisely to the same pitch. Adjust the drum with a tone in mind rather than a formula.

• For my concert snare drumming (which includes worship band), I generally prefer a deep wooden shell with a single ply coated head.

• Having some ring in the basic tone gives you flexibility. Deleting some or all the ring is easy with a muffling device--but you cannot add resonance if you start out using a double ply head with an integrated muffling ring.

• Adjust the snare tension so that the snares respond at all dynamic levels (even with a pianissimo tap).

• The primary striking area for concert playing is between the center of the head and the far rim area.

• If a dry, articulate sound is desired (rudimental/field snare tone), move to the center of the head.

• Position the snare drum so the strainer control is directly in front of you (not to the side). This places both striking areas directly over the snares (and provides easy access to the strainer knob and the throw-off).



TECHNIQUE

Developing proper snare drum technique will be valuable to any percussionist whether playing classical, marching, or even hand percussion. Time invested in developing an ergonomic stroke along with proficiency in dozens of sticking permutations will transfer into your performances on conga, djembe, or glockenspiel.

If you are looking for practice materials, check out *Stick Control* by George Lawrence Stone and the Percussive Arts Society International Drum Rudiments (www.pas.org).

• If your are already well-versed in playing the patterns in *Stick Control*, take a suggestion from noted drum set artist, Ed Soph and play the first few pages with wire brushes using a sliding motion.

• Are you ready to journey beyond the basic rudiments? Expand your repertoire of licks with some hybrid rudiments.

• You can find video tutorials on both standard and hybrid varieties at www.vicfirth.com and www.youtube.com/marksheltonmusic.

CREATING A PART

Since the drum set player is already armed with a robust snare drum, adding an additional one to the musical mix requires some judicious musicianship.

Consider these ideas as you find places to insert the “second snare drum” into an arrangement.

• Instead of a shaker, substitute snare drum with brushes.

• Play a busy rhythmic pattern on the snare drum while the drum set player lays down a simple “snare-less” linear groove.

• Thicken a snare cadence pattern coming from the drum set by playing along in unison.

• Turn off the snares and lay down an “old-school tenor drum” rhythm.

• When a section of a song is building intensity, a crescendoing stream of single stroked thirty-second notes played with bundled rods can provide extra momentum.

• Experiment with the wide range of timbres on the snare drum such as rim shots, stick shots, tapping the rim, and striking with mallets, bundled rods, brushes, or hands.

The snare drum need not be the sole province of the drum set player in a worship band. Another snare drum (used sparingly) can be used to great effect when added at the right spot in a song. Be ready with your tone and technique when you find that proper musical moment.

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