Tambourine: Tone, Technique, and Tips

by Mark Shelton

Chapter 1 Headed Hints

“And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dances” (Exodus 15:20, *AKJV*).

Had Moses only thought to snap a quick photo of Miriam as she played and sang, we would not have to speculate about the percussion instrument being played by his celebrating sibling.

At least half a dozen English versions of the Bible use “tambourine” in that passage, but was it really a tambourine?

Miriam’s instrument was probably some type of frame drum, a single-headed membranophone with a shell depth measuring less than the diameter of the head. Frame drums have existed for thousands of years in the Middle East. Present-day examples from that region include the tar, bendir, and riq. The headed tambourine is a common frame drum in Western culture and a handy approximation for a number of English-language Bible translators.

With that historical background in mind, it seems appropriate that our modern-day version of Miriam’s frame drum is heard in many types of Christian music including cantatas, hymn arrangements, choir anthem orchestrations, and modern worship songs.

In the hands of a skilled percussionist, the headed tambourine can produce a variety of tone colors and a substantial amount of volume. The jangling sound of a single “tambour de Basque” can soar through the mix of winds and strings in a symphony orchestra. That kind of power should be handled with knowledge and skill, so grab your favorite “schellentrommel” and check out a few techniques.

Grip and Playing Positions

With the head facing the ceiling, grip the tambourine in the shell area where there are no jingles. Place your thumb on top of the head and curl the remaining fingers under the bottom rim.

The position of the headed tambourine plays a role in the sustain of the jingles. Holding the tambourine perpendicular to the floor allows the jingles to ring for a moment after a strike. For general playing, position the instrument at approximately 45 degrees to the floor. This will shorten the after-strike ring of the jingles, producing a drier sound.

Single Strikes

Striking the head with the middle section of the curled fingers, similar to knocking on a door, will bring out a punchy pop from the head along with the sound of the jingles.

For less of the head sound, bring the fingers and thumb of your playing hand into a cluster and strike the head with the fingertips.



Experiment with striking different areas of the head to discover the variety of timbres and how the jingles respond.

Rolls

The tambourine sound is sustained with either the shake roll or the thumb roll. Both of these techniques should be in your arsenal.

The **shake roll** is probably the easiest and most obvious method of producing a long tone on the tambourine. With the instrument perpendicular to the floor, use a fast back and forth wrist/hand rotation to move the jingles. The movement is similar to a twitch.

Although a shake roll can be started with the twitching motion, often the music requires a more definite attack. This can be produced by first striking the tambourine and immediately starting the shaking motion.

Stop the roll by shifting the tambourine flat (parallel to the floor) and ceasing the rolling motion. With a bit of practice, you can drop to the flat position very accurately to produce precise endings. If the music requires an articulated note upon the release of the roll, strike the head as you cease the rolling motion.

A more delicate sound than the shake version, the **thumb roll** is produced by skipping the thumb against the head so that the head and shell produce vibrations that in turn vibrate the jingles.

- Curl the fingers of your playing hand in and leave the thumb extended.
- Moisten the thumb. (Okay, I lick my thumb.)
- Touch the thumb near the rim of the tambourine head at the 7:00 area.
- With slight pressure, move the thumb up the tambourine head toward 12:00 following the curve of the rim.
- Experiment with the pressure until you feel and hear the appropriate skipping.
- If a landing note is needed, simply drop the heel of your palm onto the head.

A light coat of beeswax applied to the head (near the rim) may help you achieve the friction necessary to produce the roll.

Another option to aid in the execution of the thumb roll is The Roll Ring (TM) from Grover Pro Percussion. The textured strip has a special non-permanent adhesive backing that makes it easy to apply or remove.

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Chapter 2 The Basic Ins and Outs of Shake Tambourine

Turn up the volume the next time you hear “Reach Out (I’ll Be There)” on the oldies station and enjoy some quintessential shake tambourine. The sixteenth note pattern gives a certain drive and sparkle to the song. You can hear that chicka-chicka shake tambourine sound in hundreds of hit records from rock, country, and Motown, as well as CCM, gospel, and worship genres.

The shake style of tambourine playing can be performed on either a headed or headless instrument. With no head to catch air and a lightweight shell, the headless variety (also known as a rock tambourine) is designed for speedy oscillation.

As you read further in the article, you will discover that much of shake tambourine technique is based on understanding the “ins and outs.”

Shake Technique for Even Subdivisions

Hold the headed tambourine in the area of the shell where there are no jingles. Curl your fingers around the bottom and your thumb over the top of the shell. I generally hold the tambourine in my dominant hand so that I can make use of its superior strength and coordination. Imagine a line extending from the middle of your chest. Position the instrument chest high on your dominant side and several inches to the side of the imaginary line. With the tambourine at a 45 degree angle to the floor, gravity will insure that the jingles are back in the ready position (see photo). Using the wrist and arm, begin movement that will bring the instrument to a perpendicular position on a course traveling toward the imaginary line. Use enough speed to send the jingles sliding to the opposite side of the slots. Stop the motion as the jingles strike the shell (the IN motion). Immediately move the tambourine in the opposite direction (away from the imaginary line) and allow the jingles to slap against the opposite side of the slot (the OUT motion). As you repeat these steps, you should quickly learn the short distance that the tambourine travels back and forth to accomplish the two sounds. The velocity and movement should be such that the jingles give a firm attack with the tambourine traveling in a fluid motion. Allow your ear-brain-hand connections to guide you in learning how fast and far to move the instrument for tempos and rhythms.



Try these exercises paying close attention to observing the IN (I) and OUT (O) motions.

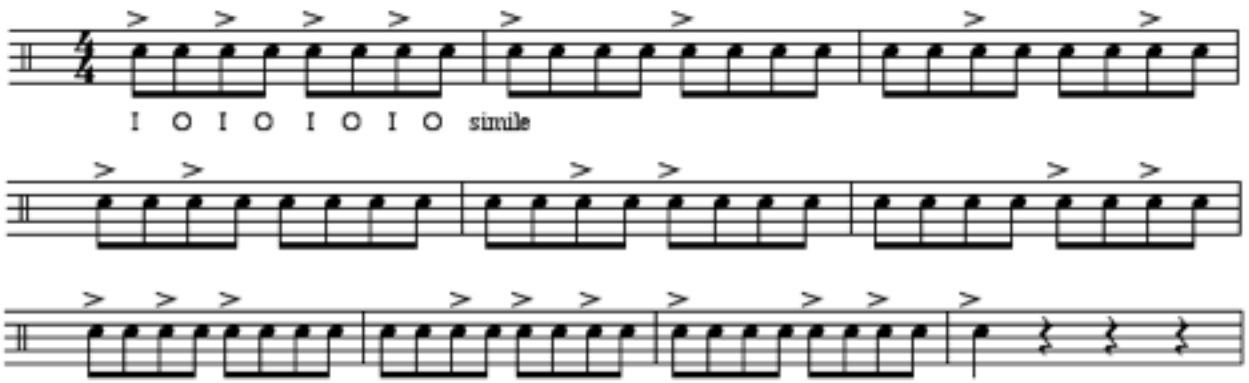
Make sure that the eighths and sixteenths are even (No swing/shuffle rhythm). As you play the final note of the exercise, give the tambourine a slight drop to 45 degrees so that the jingles settle quickly to give a tight release.



Duple Rhythm Strong Subdivision Accents

The free hand can be used to play accents within a shake tambourine rhythm. In duple-based rhythms, the stronger rhythmic subdivisions usually occur on the IN motion and the weaker subdivisions occur on the OUT motion (downbeats in a series of eighths and downbeats and upbeats in a series of sixteenths). The strong subdivision accents are played by striking the inside edge of the shell against the heel of the palm at the conclusion of the IN motion.

As you practice these exercises, think about the tambourine striking your free hand to make the accent (NOT striking the tambourine with the free hand). The free hand remains stationary as it receives the impact of the instrument.



After playing the exercise in 4/4, go back and learn it in cut-time.

Once you have control of the basic shake tambourine technique along with the ability to play strong subdivision accents, learn and memorize the following common tambourine patterns.

Basic 4/4 Pop/Rock Eighth Note Pattern



Basic 4/4 Pop/Rock Sixteenth Note Pattern



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Chapter 3 Advanced Shake Tambourine

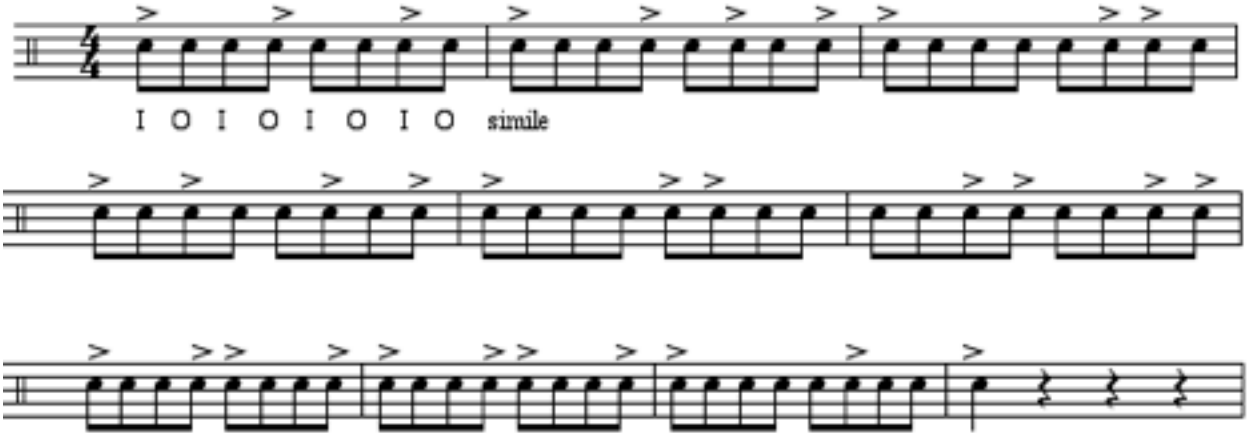
After gaining proficiency in the basic shake tambourine methods and grooves covered in the previous chapter, you should be ready to expand your skills. Bring your “shake chops” up a notch with these techniques and exercises.

Duple Rhythm Weak Subdivision Accents

Playing accents on the strong subdivisions in duple rhythms as the tambourine travels with the IN motion was covered in the earlier article, but what about the weak subdivisions? Those notes being voiced with the OUT motion can also be accented. Get ready. This is extra-cool.

As the tambourine travels in the OUT motion, reach around with the free hand and allow the shell to strike the fingers. The reach should be made using a small motion with slightly curved fingers to receive the impact of the tambourine. Resist any urge to slap at the shell. Simply allow the shell to make contact with the curved fingers and you will create the accent.





I = IN motion
O = OUT motion

Mastering this technique allows for playing more interesting accent patterns in grooves and comes in handy when playing unison rhythmic figures with an ensemble. The tambourine can continue the basic rhythmic pulse AND play the “hits” with the band.

Do you have all these exercises cookin’? Great! Go back and play them all in cut time.

This technique can also be applied to triple based rhythms (triplets, 12/8, 6/8, etc.)



Wrist Rotation Technique

The sound using the wrist rotation method is less articulate, but the “slushy” timbre can be effective in certain styles or for the sake of variety.

Hold the tambourine with the shell perpendicular to the floor and imagine a line extending from the center of your chest. If you are holding the instrument in your right hand, rotate the wrist counterclockwise so that the upper portion of the instrument moves DOWNWARD toward the imaginary line (and toward the floor). When the jingles contact the opposite side of the jingle slot, turn the wrist clockwise to send the jingles

back in the other direction. The lower part of the shell will travel UPWARD. (Reverse this if you are holding the tambourine in your left hand.) With a little practice, you can refine the rotation so that you can play a steady stream of eighth notes or sixteenth notes in either 4/4 or 12/8.

For accents, position the open free hand parallel to the instrument and allow the tambourine to strike the free hand as the upper half of the shell travels DOWNWARD or as the lower half moves UPWARD.



Experiment with this technique using the preceding exercises substituting DOWNWARD for the IN motion and UPWARD for the OUT motion.

Careful With The Accents

Although it is common for shake tambourine patterns to contain accents, I will often play the rhythm without the accents. Perhaps the accents would be doubling the drummer's snare drum backbeat and I prefer to save that doubling texture for another section of the song or maybe there is a great deal of rhythmic activity in the music and the tambourine accent would compete with (and clutter) the already dense texture.

Shuffle

When playing a shuffle or swing feel, hold the tambourine shell parallel to the floor with the palm facing up. The motion of the tambourine will be up and down rather than side to side. Play the strong subdivisions with a DOWN motion (D) and the weak subdivisions with the UP motion (U). You will notice how easily the shuffle happens due to this position (and good old gravity).





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Chapter 4 Tambourine Tips: Random and Useful

The tambourine, like the triangle, is one of those percussion instruments that can really cut through the mix. I like the way that the tambourine gives a lift and sparkle to the music. The crisp shimmering sound is at home in modern worship music, traditional hymn arrangements, and choir anthem orchestrations. Tambourines come in three basic flavors: the headed tambourine, the headless “shake” tambourine (a.k.a the rock tambourine), and the mounted tambourine.

While playing the “tambour de Basque” in concert halls and churches (jingling my way through tunes by both Tchaikovsky and Tomlin), I have collected some ideas and techniques that might give your tambourine performance some new life.

How’s My Tone?

Should I use a plastic shell with nickel jingles or brass? How about a wooden shell with German silver jingles? Sometimes I bring three or four tambourines to a rehearsal so that I can fit the tone of the instrument to the texture of the music. Different shell materials influence the sound as well as the makeup of the jingles. Brass jingles tend toward a darker sound and seem to give off more of the “rock” sound while nickel jingles are brighter and might be a good choice to give some sparkle and drive to a ballad. Steel jingles can cut through a dense texture. I have even set up a tambourine with a combination of jingles and washers to get a “dry” sound. During a rehearsal, play along with the music for a few measures with one tambourine 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.

One of my tricks is to switch tambourines as a song modulates. Moving from a darker to a brighter sounding instrument gives the impression that the tambourine is changing key along with the band.

Similarly, changing to a brighter sounding instrument on the last chorus can give a boost to the ending.

Just A Few Might Do

In many pop styles, the tambourine plays an active stream of eighth or sixteenth notes, but keep in mind that less is often more. While simply playing the backbeat has worked in many a hit record (more in the next section), you can also play some single strikes on other parts of a measure for great effect. Try these one-bar rhythms on the tambourine while the drum set player lays down a standard rock beat. You will quickly hear how each of these patterns can change the overall groove.



Which backbeat…2 or 4?

Doubling the snare drum back beat with a single strike on the tambourine is quite common and can give some variety to the groove. I usually choose one backbeat or the other; seldom do I play both 2 and 4. Less tedium and greater variety occurs when the snare drum is heard alone on one of the beats and the doubled sound on the other.

Sometimes my choice is arbitrary, but often I make a studied decision based on the lyrics of the song. Listen to the phrasing of the lyrics and you will often find less vocal activity around either beat 2 or beat 4. Playing on that back beat allows the tambourine's tone color to do its job without competing with the vocals. Both lyric and tambourine get their space.

Another Kind of Grace

The grace note technique should be in your tambourine arsenal so that you can add flams and drags (similar to snare drum rudiments).

To play two grace notes moving into a main note (on either headless or shake tambourine), start with the tambourine tilted at 45 degrees to the floor. Move the lower side down using a slight wrist rotation followed by the higher side with an opposite wrist motion. Each motion should produce sound from the jingles. Immediately after the two grace notes are produced by the jingles, strike the head with your free hand to sound the main note. I try to think of the three separate motions as one quick movement.



Leave out the second hand movement for a single grace note to a main note.



With the mounted tambourine, the grace notes can be easily performed with two alternating strikes from the hands or sticks.

Grace notes give a broadening effect to the sound. If the song moves to a half-time feel, I will sometimes double the drummer's snare part on tambourine with grace notes. It seems to heighten the half-time "aural illusion" as the tempo seems to shift and broaden.

Great is often separated from good by attention to subtle details whether it is the pipe organ, electric guitar, or the tambourine. Use the ideas and techniques from this article along with your own creativity to elevate your tambourine playing toward greatness in both tonal and rhythmic elements.

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An active freelance musician, Mark's percussion work can be heard live and on recordings with Gateway Worship. A member of the Texas Commission on the Arts Touring Roster, Mark performs frequently as a percussion soloist. Mark's compositions are published by Per-Mus Publications, HoneyRock, & Heritage Music Press. Check out more of Mark's educational materials at www.percussionforworship.blogspot.com.