Pat Your Head, Rub Your Stomach

by Mark Shelton

The rhythm section is cruising right along on a song and the sixteenth note shaker line you're playing with your right hand feels great. Coming up in the song are some syncopated rhythms from the wind section. It would add an extra layer of flavor if there were timbale shots along with those horn licks, but you know the shaker pattern can't be abandoned. No problem. Your other hand is available and you've got the necessary independence chops. Right?

An essential skill for a percussionist, multi-limb independence can range from juggling contrasting rhythms between your hands to synchronizing all four limbs on a complicated drumstick groove. Practiced coordination is required for playing foot tambourine along with cajon, laying down a multi-part pattern on drum set, or tapping downbeats on a woodblock while your other hand plays a 6/8 bell rhythm. An extra layer of complexity is added if there is a combination of striking scraping or shaking motions. It's the childhood challenge of patting your head while rubbing your stomach--taken to a higher level!

Let's look at it a few simple independence exercises (see page 3) that feature two contrasting motions. These little studies will improve your technique and be useful in actual musical applications.

1. A steady stream of shaker sixteenths combines with struck eighths on a mounted tambourine to form a pattern that will fit in many pop/rock settings. Make sure the sixteenths are voiced with even subdivisions.

2. & 3. Keep the shaking pattern moving while bringing in a cymbal swell. Use a two-mallet grip to play the cymbal roll.

4. Coordinate 'shaking shuffle' technique with a few open tones on the conga. Find my tambourine shuffle tutorial video on the WorshipTraining website.

5. Learn this one and try it out when the rhythm section moves into a double-time feel.

6. & 7. These two exercises make use of the son clave played on a woodblock while the other hand shakes steady eighths. Number 6 contains the 3:2 son clave and Number 7 includes the 2:3 pattern.

8. Test your scraping and shaking independence with this guiro-cowbell groove.

9. & 10. Your striking hand will have to move between cajon bass tone and corner slap as you coordinate with the shaker sixteenths.

After you work through all ten, challenge your independence by going back to the top and playing the parts with different hand assignments.

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Independence Exercises

