Get Your Soft Chops Together

by Mark Shelton

What's the big deal with playing the opening snare drum solo in Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*? The rhythm is straightforward and there are no rolls or grace notes in the passage. The challenge lies in performing the opening section at the super-super soft volume level requested by most conductors. Playing the lick at a medium volume would be a piece of cake, but tapping out the two-bar pattern at the subdued dynamic can be tricky. You need soft chops.

Dynamic control across a wide spectrum is an essential part of musical maturity whether you're playing piccolo, pipe organ, or percussion.

Among the reasons a worship percussionist should develop and maintain soft chops:

1. Blending your part into the balance of the ensemble

2. Dynamic shading (including soft volume) is necessary for phrasing both melodies and accompaniments

3. The worship team leadership tells you that you need to play softer

4. The pastor tells you that you need to play softer
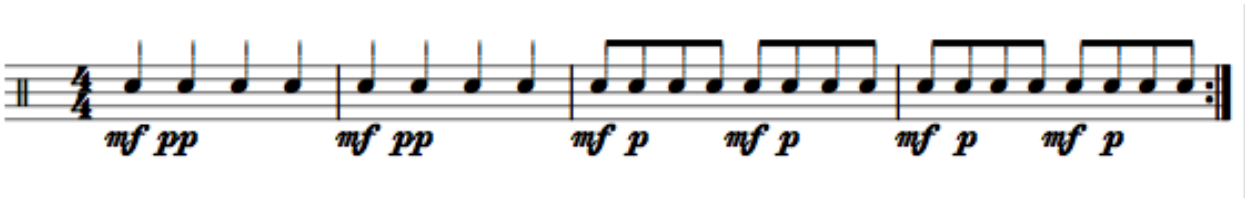
The first two are musical considerations; the others might determine whether you remain on the worship team.

Consider the following information, advice, and exercises as you refine your low-volume technique.

• Most of the percussion instruments produce sound by striking--whether it is a stick striking a drum head, beads striking the maraca's chamber, or a dowel striking the ridge of a guiro. Percussion volume is related to the velocity of the object impacting its target. Volume gets louder as velocity increases. Volume gets softer as velocity decreases. Memorize those last three sentences.

• For both stick and hand drumming, height is your close friend in dynamic control. Keeping your hand or implement close to the playing surface will automatically reduce your volume potential. Practice playing a medium volume stroke followed by a soft tap with the same hand (Exercise 1). Try to control the rebound of the first stroke so that the stick or hand is set up to play the second note from a position close to the playing surface.

Exercise 1



• Find the softest volume that you can produce on an instrument with a proper tone quality. Try for barely audible. Memorize how it feels to achieve that dynamic level. Practice this on all your instruments.

• Play a rhythm pattern on an instrument using the barely audible volume. Be critical. Can you hear every note sounding with the desired tone quality?

• Work on rudiments, scales, and arpeggios at low volumes.
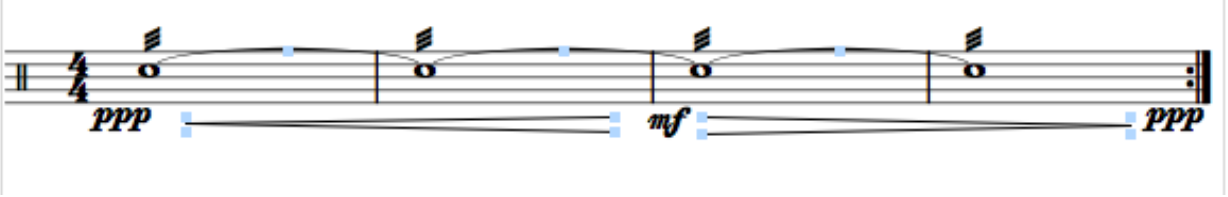
• Starting a roll at a soft volume can be challenging. Focus on soft attacks of single stroke, double stroke, and buzz rolls so that you can begin all of them with confidence.

• Adjust the sensitivity of a snare drum so that the instrument is capable of producing a snare tone at soft volumes. Adjust the tension of the heads and the snares so that that the snares will respond even with a gentle tap. Switching to a thinner head can help.
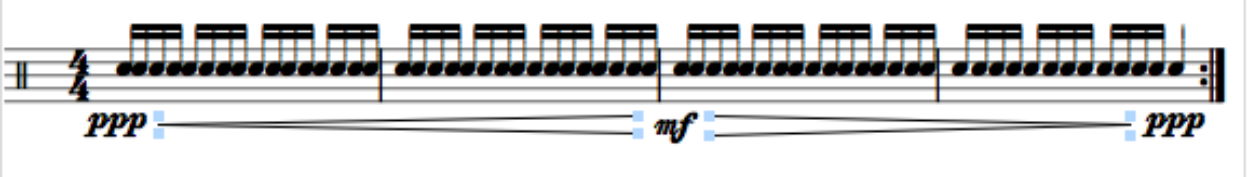
• Although playing on the area of a drum head near the rim can make producing soft volumes easier, it also creates a different timbre than other areas of the head. I prefer to play on the area of the head that will achieve my desired tone and use my "soft chops" for the dynamic level.

• Performing a fade up and or fade out will test your soft-volume control. Pay careful attention to the start of the fade up on Measure 1 and the ending of the fade out on the final bar of each of these exercises. Try to play the opening and closing of each line as softly as possible.

Exercise 2



Exercise 3



• Don’t confuse tone and volume. When selecting sticks and other implements, your primary consideration should be tone. Learn to play at a soft volume with all types of striking utensils. Don’t automatically switch from sticks to bundled rods when you are instructed to lower your volume—unless that’s the tone you desire.

• Playing shake tambourine softly can be especially challenging since it requires a certain amount of movement to send the jingles from side to side in the jingle slots. If you need to chill down the tambourine, try taping several of the jungles to the shell so that they stay motionless and silent. With fewer jingles active, the volume will be reduced.

During your musical journey, somebody’s probably going to ask you to bring down your volume. It could be the conductor, worship leader, your band mates, a neighbor, or the police. Get your soft chops together.

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Mark Shelton
Freelance musician & consultant based in Dallas, TX Performance credits include North Carolina Symphony, Tin Roof Tango, Dallas Wind Symphony, Daystar Singers & Band, TALEA, Strata Big Band, The Metroplex Marimba Band, Harbour, and Gateway Worship
www.marksheltonmusic.com