Big Six for Sticks

by Mark Shelton

What are the basic elements for stick-played percussion? Percussionists keep trying to boil it down to the bare necessities. You might hear those building blocks referred to as ‘primitives’ or ‘atoms.’ After mere minutes of thought, I have compiled my list of stick-percussion fundamentals. Three of the techniques are types of single strokes while the others contain multiple strokes (and the first five also apply to hand drumming).

In the interest of brevity and simplicity, only elementary methods of execution are included in the descriptions of Mark’s Big Six for Sticks.

1. Full Stroke

Arguably the most basic and easily performed of the techniques, the full stroke starts from an extension* of the wrist. Bring the stick down to strike the playing surface and immediately move the stick off the surface so that the instrument can vibrate. A large portion of stick-percussion contains this very intuitive stroke.

* When using traditional grip, the left-handed full stroke starts from an outward rotation of the wrist.

2. Tap Stroke

Living up to its name, the tap stroke is merely a tap delivered from about half an inch above the playing surface. Little or no upward extension of the wrist is involved. The tap stroke comes in handy for playing soft dynamic levels and grace notes.

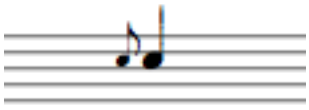
3. Dead Stroke

After striking the playing surface, a percussionist normally brings the implement off the instrument immediately to allow free vibrations. The dead stroke delivers the opposite effect by restraining vibrations.

As the stick makes contact, exert downward pressure so that the implement does not rebound. With the stick maintaining momentary contact, many of the potential vibrations are stopped. The dead stroke can be used to produce a short sound with a slightly different tone color than ‘free-ringing’ strokes.

4. Flam

Take a look at the notation for a flam:



The flam sounds like it looks on paper: a small note followed by a big note. The small note is a grace note and carries no actual rhythmic value. The grace note is played with a tap stroke and occurs right before the primary note (the big note). A full stroke is used for the primary note (with the opposite stick). When learning a flam, work on your ability to increase or decrease the space between the grace note and primary note. In some musical situations, a tight flam is preferred while a more open spacing is desirable in other settings.

Search the Worship Training website for my video tutorial on Flam Positioning.

5. Double Stroke
The ability to produce two sounds in rapid succession with the same stick is fundamental for performing both a double stroke roll and rapid diddle figures. A double stroke can be executed with a controlled rebound or by using the fingers to bring the stick to the playing surface twice. I recommend developing both methods.

6. Buzz Stroke
Using a loose grip, drop the bead of a drumstick onto the playing surface and allow the stick to bounce freely. That is the most basic form of the buzz stroke. With practice, a player is able to harness the rebounds and shape them into a buzz roll or apply the buzz effect into other playing situations.

Watch my Buzz Stroke video tutorial. You can find it on the Worship Training website.

Any stick-played rudiment or groove rhythm that you encounter will include one or more items from Mark's Big Six. Make sure all are in your skill set! Do you have a different opinion that might amend my list? Please contact me at markshelton@verizon.net.

Bio
Mark Shelton is a freelance musician and educational consultant based in Dallas/Fort Worth. Performance credits include North Carolina Symphony, Tin Roof Tango, Daystar Singers & Band, Gateway Worship, Dallas Wind Symphony, TALEA, and Strata Big Band. More about Mark at www.marksheltonmusic.com.

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