

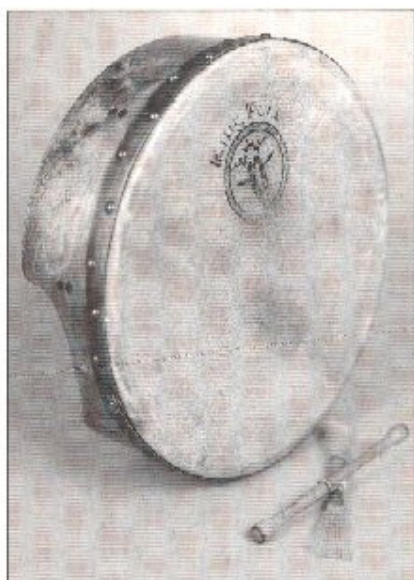
from hand to drum

HAND DRUM TECHNIQUES FROM AROUND THE WORLD



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In these next few articles we are going to be looking at the bodhran, the instantly recognisable percussion instrument found in Irish music. Basically the bodhran consists of two parts, the shell and the skin. The quality of both is vitally important if the drum is to sound as it should. Generally, most Bodhrans available in music shops are low quality, thin skinned and 'pingy' in tone. To get a quality instrument you will need to go to a specialist bodhran maker.



THE SHELL

The shell can be made in two ways, either by constructing a ply wood shell in a former or, as the original shells were made, with one piece of bent wood. This would be done by splitting, bending and joining together one piece of green timber which would finally be seasoned or, if it was sawn timber, steam bent. This is the original reason for the cross brace, to maintain the circular shape. This cross brace was originally two thin metal bars which the player held onto whilst playing the drum with the other hand. In those early days there was no damping of the head with the supporting hand. Nowadays many quality bodhrans have no cross brace at all, and the playing technique has changed drastically.

THE SKIN

The importance of the quality of the bodhran skin cannot be over-emphasised. It needs to be rich in tone to create the dark bass sound required for a good bodhran sound (in Gaelic bodhran means literally dead or dull sounding). The best skins are generally goat skin although you do find deer skin used as well. It is rumoured that some people use greyhound skin, whilst one unnamed individual claims to have used an elephant's ear! Pig skin is not used because the hairs go all the way through the skin, thus resulting in lots of tiny holes when the skin is finally prepared. Goat skin is superior because the fibres criss cross, thus making the skin more elastic and flexible for bending the pitch.

Anyway, after the abattoir, the Fellmonger de-hairs the skin in a poisonous and strong alkali solution before pickling it in sulphuric acid to preserve it. This was traditionally done by burying it in a bog for a month. The skin then either goes to the tanner to make it into leather for

shimmies and jackets, or else to the vellum maker to make into vellum (one of the only firms left in the country doing this is Cowleys in Newport Pagnell). Once this is complete, the bodhran maker will have a skin ready to go onto the bodhran. The skin is nailed onto the shell and the drum is complete. Better quality bodhrans now have a well engineered internal tuning system as shown in Fig. 1.

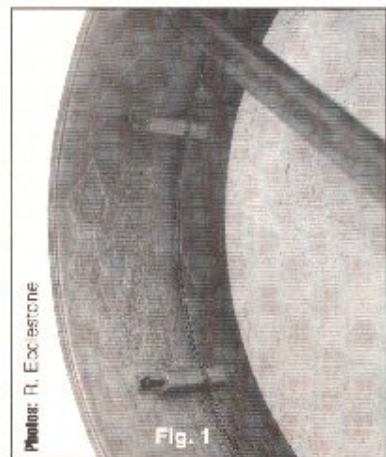


Fig. 1

Photos: R. Eccleston

There are many different ways of playing the bodhran – with the back of the hand, with the thumb and little finger, the double-ended stick method, the single-ended stick method, or the double-ended stick method with a brush on each end. Tommy Hayes has even created his own style of double-ended stick playing. In these articles, we're just going to look at the standard double-ended stick method. This is certainly the method I've seen used most often. It involves hitting the skin with both ends of the stick.

To look at the playing technique for the bodhran, we have to look at three basic things: the holding position of the drum as it is braced against the body, the holding position of the double-ended stick, and the unusual manner in which the stick strikes the drum. We'll begin with the normal holding position.



Fig. 3

Look at Fig. 2 and see how the drum is braced in position with the hand inside the drum, pushing it against the rib cage whilst allowing it to rest on the top of the leg. It is important not to stoop over the drum. This will cause discomfort, particularly during longer playing sessions. It is equally important to get the pressure of the hand against the skin inside the drum correct, particularly in the more advanced stages of bodhran playing where it will be used to bend the pitch. If you have a drum with cross braces then your hand will need to slot in comfortably underneath the bars. More about this hand in later articles. For the time being the hand should be placed flat on the skin, inside the drum in the centre of the head. Sit like this for a while and see if it is comfortable. Compare your posture



Fig. 2

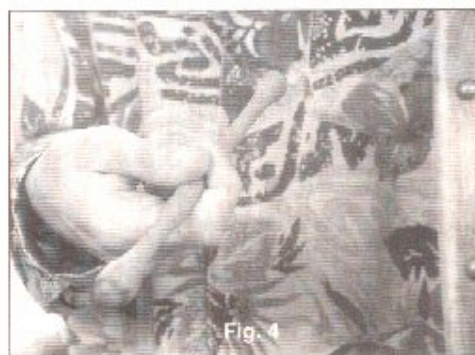


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

and position to those in the photos. When you are happy with this, put the drum down and take a rosie lee.

We will come back to this playing position later, after we've begun to look at and analyse the stick holding position and the manner in which it strikes the drum. This will prove tricky on paper but, with the help of the photos we should get a good idea of what we're aiming for. If we look at the stick we can see that the bump or balance point on the main body of the stick is not exactly in the middle (if your stick has no bump

at all, then you can use an elastic band wound round and round; this has the advantage of being adjustable). Hold the stick like a pen with the longest section pointing downwards. Your thumb and fingers should be just underneath the bump, as in Fig. 3. Now flip the top of the stick so that it points away from you. Your thumb should be on top, as in Fig. 4. Notice how this movement has resulted in the wrist relaxing and bending almost to a right angle.

Analyse the pictures carefully and check that all the details of the hand positions are identical. Now we can unite this with our playing position.

Put the drum back into position as before, referring back to the previous sections and photos if need be. The drum should be roughly at a right angle to the body. Relax and do not hold it too stiffly. Bring the stick up to the drum as in Figs. 5, 6 and 7. The stick should be about an inch from the head, parallel to the drumskin, with the bottom striker pointing to



Fig. 6

10 o'clock and the top striker pointing to 4 o'clock. (Fig 7, looking at the drum as if it were a clock face). Notice the relaxed wrist position used to achieve the correct angle of the drum stick (Fig. 5). A relaxed wrist is extremely important for fluent bodhran playing.

To begin with we will strike the drum with one end only, the bottom end. This end of the stick does most of the work in this style of playing, the



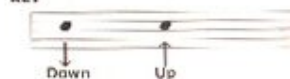
Fig. 7

other end coming round to fill in and build up some of the fast triplet rolls and 'tiddley dees' in the rhythm. This will make more sense in later articles. The manner of striking the drum is very unusual and involves what can only be described as glancing blows. From the playing position you are already in, turn your wrist around its axis so that the whole arm turns (like you were using a screwdriver). Do this sharply so that the bottom beater glances off the head with a single strike. You should end up with the bottom of the

stick pointing downwards towards 4 o'clock and the top of the stick pointing to 10 o'clock. Now, from this position do the opposite. Twist the arm and strike the drum, this time with an upwards stroke. The motion should be identical but opposite to the downwards stroke, glancing off the head on the way up. After this stroke you should be in your original position, with the bottom of the stick at 10 o'clock.

For the time being, the hand which is inside the drum will remain flat against the head, about central to the skin. This will mean that we will only get a dull thudding sound. Don't worry, this will change when we look at pitch bending technique and playing in the 'cup' of the hand. The emphasis for now is on the stick technique only. Now we have two basic strokes which will be notated thus:

KEY



Note on examples

These are designed as exercises to prepare your hands for the sort of patterns which will come up in the traditional pattern covered in later articles.



Here are a few basic patterns using these strokes.

Based on basic paradiddle: R L R L R L R L



To finish off with this month, I have to extend my gratitude to Derek Heather, the maker of King Puck bodhrans. Without his help this article would not have been possible: the pictures feature one of his bodhrans. Anyone interested in superb specialist hand-made bodhrans can contact Derek Heather at 11 Randor Close, Devizes, Wilts SN10 5BH Tel: 01380 724572. *Buenos tardes.*