

# from hand to drum

## HAND DRUM TECHNIQUES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

This month we'll begin looking at one of the many possible techniques for playing frame drum. There are many different sorts of frame drum found all over the world, the defining properties being any drum which has a shell which is shallower than the head is wide. This includes drums as varied as the Middle Eastern def, the African tar and the Irish bodhran. There are also many different techniques and playing positions. We will begin with the position used for the def which involves holding the drum with one hand and playing the head with the fingers of both hands. This is a good position for standing to play and being mobile to move around the stage.

If we look at Fig.1 and Fig.2, we can see the holding position for the left hand (right hand if left handed). In Fig.1 we can see that the drum is held in a vice-like grip. The hand is supporting the drum centrally at six o'clock with all the weight being central. You must not let it fall away from you or from side to side. We can see what role the thumb has inside the drum and how the fingers support the shell underneath. Notice particularly how the little finger and the ring finger (third finger) support the drum and how the next finger comes around the front of the head and is free to move backwards and forwards to hit the head. It is this stroke which many people find difficult to gain strength in (see instructions for the first stroke later on). Before we go on to attempt this stroke we must look at the position of the first finger. By looking at Fig.1 and Fig.2, we can see how the drum rests on the bass part of the finger and its continuation up until it reaches the base of the thumb. We can also see that the top portion of the finger is relaxed and pokes out away from the drum, and does not come round to muffle the head at all. You will resort to this only if your basic grip is not strong enough.

Before we go on to any playing, try holding the drum in this position for a few minutes. Really concentrate on being relaxed and not getting shaky, causing the drum to wobble about in the air.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Now we can go on to our first note which we will play with the second finger of the left hand (the free finger mentioned earlier). There are phonetic syllables for each stroke but I'll discuss those in a while. In Fig. 2 we can see the second finger poised to strike. Move the finger away from the head and, without disturbing the stability of the drum move it quickly to strike the skin, close to the edge of the shell. You are looking for a sharp and staccato sounding note not dissimilar to a rim shot. You



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will need to hit the drum as near to the edge as possible. Practise this to a crotchet pulse being careful not to lose any of the stability of the holding position. Don't get disillusioned, this stroke takes quite a while to master and can be very frustrating to begin with. A classic symptom of early frame drumming is that your arm will ache a lot and there will be almost no sound at all.

Now we can go on to the other hand and the phonetics. We have two options for the right hand. Either you can rest on the edge of the shell with your thumb or alternatively the hand can be free-floating. The advantage of using the thumb is that it can help support some of the weight of the drum. Try both ways and decide which suits you best. The first sound we will look at is the DUM sound. In different styles of playing I've come across the stroke played with either the thumb, the first finger or all four fingers. The version I am going to be using for these articles is the first finger stroke (obviously, if you were to use the thumb then it would not be possible to rest on the side of the shell with the thumb as mentioned earlier).

Fig.3a shows the hand position for the DUM stroke with the thumb resting on the side of the shell, while Fig.3b shows the hand position for the DUM stroke with the hand not resting on the side of the shell. You should hit with the finger flat but relaxed. Most of the length of the finger should strike the head. You will be aiming to achieve a rich full-toned bass sound. If you are playing with the thumb resting on the shell then the thumb acts as a pivot point for the movement of the hand (see Fig.3a and 3b for exact position of hand and fingers). Notice how far in towards the centre of the drum the striking finger is.



Fig. 3a



Fig. 3b

Practise this stroke to a crotchet pulse, again being careful not to lose any of the stability of the holding position.

Now we can go to our next sound, TEK. As with the DUM stroke it is possible to play with the hand free-floating or with the thumb resting. This stroke is played with the tip of the ring finger (third finger). Move it quickly to strike the skin as close to the edge of the shell as possible. As earlier, the idea is to attain a pseudo-rim shot effect – sharp and staccato. The strike will need to be short and sharp, possibly even hurting your finger to begin with.

Practise this to (surprise, surprise) a crotchet pulse, being careful not to (surprise, surprise) lose any of the stability of the holding position. And again, if you are playing with the thumb resting on the shell then it

should act as a pivot point for the movement of the hand, just as it did with the DUM stroke (see Fig.4a – thumb on and 4b – thumb off, for exact position of hand and fingers). TEK is also the word used for the first stroke we learnt – the left hand stroke.



Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b

Now we can begin to piece a few basics together. Starting with the right hand only, we will build some simple patterns using the DUM and TEK strokes. Notice how you need to move your hand backwards and forwards to articulate these two strokes (ie. the TEK strokes being played nearer the edge than the TUM).



That's all for this article. Next time we'll begin to employ the left hand TEK stroke and look at a few common Middle Eastern rhythms. As far as finding and choosing an instrument is concerned, we now have a lot of options open to us. Many shops are stocking traditional Middle Eastern frame drums and ethnic percussion. Alternatively, Remo have a big selection of frame drums in their World Percussion range. There are many different sorts, some having deeper shells than others. If you do get a deeper one, then make sure there is a cut-out in the shell, so your left hand can reach round to the front of the head whilst holding the drum. Arrivederci.