

The War of the Rudiments

By Dan Moore

RUDIMENTAL DRUMMING IN general and drum rudiments in particular are often at the center of heated debate regarding their relevance to a contemporary percussion program. Should they be given only cursory mention due to their historical significance? Should they be a part of every percussionist's technical development? Should they be dismissed as a useless, antiquated teaching tool never to be used? All tough questions—none of which are about to be addressed in this article (I'm not that crazy). What will be addressed are the many positive aspects of rudimental drumming, and the importance and use of the fundamental philosophy of rudimental drumming known as the "rudimental idea."

Several years ago, percussion instructors seemed to have three main concerns about their students: 1. They did not read music well enough; 2. They could not play keyboard instruments; 3. They spent entirely too much time playing drum rudiments in an effort to earn that NARD button. With that, the first shots of the percussive civil war had been fired; the camps were divided, the battle lines drawn. On one side, percussionists denounced rudimental drumming as an antiquated method of rote learning; on the other side, drummers continued their relentless pursuit of the perfect three-minute roll.

The rudiments have a long and distinguished history, beginning, as noted conductor and author Frederick Fennell writes, "the early dawn of 19 April 1775; for it was on this day that William Diamond, the drummer for the Lexington Militia, beat the call 'To Arms' that assembled the Minute Men at Lexington Common."

The 26 standard American drum rudiments were developed by the National Association of Rudimental Drummers (NARD) in 1934, and remained relatively unchanged until the early '70s when respected percussionist Ron Fink suggested that there be 42 standard rudiments (*PN*, Vol. 10,

#2). This suggestion sparked some lively debate, which led professor of percussion James Petercsak to write, "Instead of increasing the number of rudiments, might it not better serve our purposes as educators and performers to think seriously about reducing the number? For instance, why could not a roll be identified simply as a sustained sound? Why not identify a flam as a grace note as would any other instrumentalist?"

In a 1974 issue of *Percussive Notes*, Dan Spalding suggested, in a slightly tongue-in-cheek manner, that there were by his count approximately 81 drum rudiments (excluding Swiss drumming, which is a whole other can of worms). Mr. Spalding went on to point out that any number of different rudiments could be derived from a list of seven essential techniques.

A few years later, after a great deal of work, the International Drum Rudiment Committee, under the leadership of Jay Wanamaker, released a list of 40 rudiments, which they grouped into four families: Rolls, Diddles, Flams and Drag Rudiments. The list included the standard 26 rudiments, yet it singled out what the committee referred to as seven essential skills: single-stroke roll, multiple-bounce roll, double-stroke roll, five-stroke roll, single paradiddle, flam and drag.

In a 1979 article for *Percussive Notes* (Vol. 18 #1 Fall), PAS Hall of Fame member Haskell Harr wrote, "A drum rudiment is a fundamental rhythmic pattern which, when practiced diligently, will aid in developing a basic technique for the drum. The drum rudiments are the scales and arpeggios of the other instruments." Mr. Harr went on to describe the rudiments as being "misunderstood" and asserted that the purpose of the rudiments "is to provide a basic system for developing dexterity with the hands for the control of the drumsticks."

I began to think about the Haskell Harr article, and years later as I re-read his precisely written statement, it

occurred to me that perhaps what he was saying had less to do with ancient rudimental drumming or a list of rudiments and more to do with the development and maintenance of the most basic percussion skills. The common thread running through all aspects of percussion lay not in the rudiments themselves but in the philosophy behind them—the philosophy I refer to as the rudimental idea.

The rudimental idea is the concept of isolating specific patterns or techniques and perfecting them through numerous, exact repetitions, building stamina, control, and dexterity. There is no mention of ratamacues or flam drags or five-, seven- or nine-stroke rolls; it is the philosophy of the rudiments that is important here. There are several notable rudimental drumming techniques and benefits that can be applied to many areas of percussion.

CELLS

The use of cells is one such technique: taking a small cell from an existing composition and creating from it a new exercise. The new exercise can then be slowed to a tempo that will facilitate the methodic breakdown of all component parts of the cell. This weeding-out of trouble spots effectively economizes practice time, enabling the student to concentrate on the most difficult passages without having to muddle through an entire piece, wasting valuable practice time and energy.

FLEXIBILITY

The rudimental idea also provides for performance of these cells at a variety of tempos ranging from slow to fast, allowing for effective performance at any given tempo.

STAMINA

The development of physical and mental stamina is still another benefit of rudimental drumming, and is important to a percussionist performing a four-hour drumset job or a 13-minute drum corps

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The War of the Rudiments

show. It is equally helpful to a percussionist playing cymbals on a Sousa march, playing the snare part to Ravel's *Bolero*, or performing contemporary solo marimba literature.

DEXTERITY

An additional benefit of the rudimental

idea is the development of "lead hand switching." This technique deals with the ability to perform a passage starting with either the right or left hand. This technique is particularly useful to keyboard percussionists and performers of multi-percussion music.

While most of the above-mentioned

techniques and benefits fall under the "common sense" category, there are also some hidden benefits that result from the study of basic drum technique. For example, if a performer can confidently play a variety of single/double combinations on a snare drum, those skills can easily be transferred to other percussion instruments such as marimba, vibes, timpani, drumset or multi-percussion. The idea is not to associate a particular scale or key with a specific sticking, rather it is to empower any musical idea as much from a kinesthetic level as from a cognitive level. If you have a particular pattern or passage under your hands so well that it requires little or no thought to execute (kinesthetic), then you will be able to perform that pattern with less conscious (cognitive) effort in a performance situation.

Many percussionists subscribe to the philosophies of the rudimental idea. The

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themes of practicing slowly and accurately and of breaking down difficult passages into smaller cells for practice purposes can be found in many great percussion instruction books. It is difficult or perhaps impossible to develop a list of rudiments that will suit every need because the rudiments mean different things to different people. To a band director teaching beginning percussionists, the rudiments might be down-stroke, up-stroke, double-stroke, buzz, and rimshot (which some say pretty much covers most of drumming). To a snare drummer in a DCI drum line, a list of rudiments may be incomplete without a fair share of "egg beaters," "Shirley Murphys," "Shocka-diddles," or "cheese-chas." A jazz vibes player or classical marimbist may use endless single/double combinations, flam accents, and flam taps. Of course, if you want to study ancient rudimental drumming, be sure to keep your ratamacue pyramids together. Or check out drumset artist Terry Bozzio's "rudiments from hell," which he has given such names as "fluff-a-diddles," "fluffed double para-fliddles" and "double para-fla-fla-fluffles."

The solution to the rudimental debate is not within the rudiments themselves—not the Ancient Rudiments, the 13 or 26 Standard Rudiments, the Swiss Rudiments, the 42 or 81 Rudiments, or even a list of essential skills. The solution cannot be found by attempting to change the names of the rudiments, streamline them, or rewrite them altogether. The importance of the rudiments is in the philosophy that they embody and how we choose to apply that philosophy to our specific situation.

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