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# Fundamentals



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# Tambourine

*by Christopher Deane*

Over the years the tambourine has been used by composers as a purely coloristic instrument, a rhythmic instrument, and to serve as a folk reference instrument within various musical works (i.e., Spanish, Russian, Italian folk dance music). Genuine performance practices in middle eastern countries place equal importance on both the head sound and the jingle or zil sound. Western concert tradition heavily relies on the jingle sound over the head sound. The head is very important however, in that it provides a versatile resonant playing surface to activate the jingle sound. A tambourine without a head (or with a broken head) will not give the appropriate sound for most concert stage applications (one exception is concert band and orchestra arrangements of rock and popular music in which a headless tambourine is actually preferred).

### **Performance:**

Choose the weaker or less agile of the two hands to hold the instrument. Avoid changing hands during a performance. The instrument should be held at chest height with the plane of the head at a 45 degree angle for most applications (this gives the most articulate sound and reduces unwanted jingle sounds).

### **One Hand Rhythms:**

For soft musical passages, use the finger tips at the extreme edge of the tambourine. As the volume increases, the fingers move away from the edge towards the center. Loud playing is done with the fist slightly off center.

### **Two Hand Rhythmic Passages:**

Soft musical passages are played by resting the tambourine upside down (head rests on the knee so that the tambourine shell extends beyond the knee) and playing on the exposed wood shell with the finger tips. The instrument should tilt slightly to reduce unwanted jingle sounds. Louder phrases are played in the same position except that the finger tips strike the head instead of the shell.

### **For fast playing at louder dynamics the “fist and knee” technique is used:**

- Place right hand directly over the right kneecap (this may require a chair for the right leg to be stable).
- Hold the tambourine upside down in the left hand and move the instrument up and down between the fist and knee.
- Always begin passages with the fist sound rather than the knee. If left handed, reverse these directions accordingly. Some players use finger tips rather than fist for this technique.

### **Rolls:**

Shake rolls are used for most parts. Tambourine should be held at shoulder level with the plane of the head at about a 90 degree angle to the floor. A door knob twisting motion is usually the preferred motion. A technique called a thumb roll is often used for soft tambourine rolls. The thumb or finger tip is “scraped”

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along the edge of the headed side of the tambourine producing a vibration. Moisture or some substance that creates a mild friction (violin rosin for example) is usually required. The finger or thumb must be rigid. Too much pressure of the finger on the head creates an uneven or unpredictable sound. Begin lighter than needed and increase finger pressure until a roll is achieved. Louder rolls using this technique can be produced by moving the finger inwards slightly from the edge of the tambourine.

Rather than give a sheet of exercises for the tambourine, it is recommended that percussionists use any beginning to intermediate snare drum method to provide practice materials for the tambourine. The style of writing most often encountered for the tambourine is very similar to that called for in basic snare drum playing.