

# RUDIMENTS – AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

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When I was asked to write an article on “rudiments” for this publication I thought, “Are you kidding? Why are we still talking about this?” Why, indeed. As recently as April 2005, *Percussive Notes* devoted an issue largely to the discussion of rudiments. The cover of the issue read: “Rudiments Revisited: Were 26 enough? Are 40 too many? How about 80?” (*Percussive Notes*, vol. 43, no. 2, April 2005).

The fact that we even have to ask that question is symptomatic of a much larger problem concerning rudiments: As experts in our own field, we percussionists have failed miserably in our attempts to 1. Define what a rudiment is; 2. Describe the purpose of a rudiment; and 3. Express the proper place rudiments have in percussion study and performance. As a result, rudiments have taken on a life of their own apart from any rational methodology for teaching percussion, and have forced us to 1. Try to rationalize their very existence; 2. Invent increasing numbers of rudiments in attempt to ensure their relevance; or 3. Ignore them altogether. This article, then, is an attempt to start a discussion about the purpose and necessity of rudiments in our teaching and performance, and to present an alternative methodology for the study of percussion that may replace the traditional view of rudiments as the “scales and arpeggios” of our instrument.

## What is a rudiment?

A *rudiment*, as defined by the American Heritage Dictionary, is, “1. A fundamental element, principle, or skill. 2. Something in an incipient or incompletely developed form.” These two definitions together express the idea of a rudiment as something that is basic, or elemental – a part of something larger, or the early stages of

something more complex. These non-musical definitions can help us arrive at a working definition that suits the purposes of this article. A rudiment should be something that is essential to the development of a higher level skill or essential to percussion playing and performance. Rudiments, then, are not in and of themselves higher-level skills; rather, they may be more simplistic or basic ideas that can be applied in increasingly complex musical situations.

A definition of a rudiment was presented by Haskel Harr. Harr, writing in *Percussive Notes* in 1979, took similar ideas into account when presenting his definition of a drum rudiment as: “...a fundamental rhythmic pattern which, when practiced diligently, will aid in developing a basic technique for playing the drum.” (PN, vol. 18 no. 1, 1979, p. 71)

I would propose as a working definition a slight revision of Harr’s: **A rudiment in percussion playing is a fundamental sticking pattern or skill set which will aid in developing a basic technique for musical performance on percussion instruments, specifically, the snare drum.** This definition allows for a broader view of ourselves as percussionists rather than “drummers” while retaining the idea of a rudiment as a basic or fundamental skill. The revised definition also highlights that which must be the paramount concern to all percussion performers and educators – playing music.

If we can agree on this definition of “rudiment,” we may begin to arrive at an understanding the proper purpose and place for study of rudiments in percussion performance.

## **Place of Rudiments in Percussion Study:**

The 40 International Drum Rudiments, as they are published and disseminated presently, are mistakenly used or interpreted as a basic skill set or benchmark for all percussionists, regardless of personal goals or area of interest. And although those who are trained percussionists may intuitively know which rudiments are important to their particular area(s) of expertise or interest, having a list of 40 rudiments sanctioned by the professional organization of percussionists leads other educators (such as band directors) to think that these rudiments are all equally important to all students, and that mastery of each is essential to effective performance on percussion instruments. This is simply not the case. For almost every student, the study of rudiments as they are presently understood can be eliminated from the percussion curricula without any significant compromise in a student's ability to become a competent, professional musician.

Why are rudiments unnecessary in percussion study today? First, consider that rudiments originally served a military purpose. There were a small number of sticking patterns that were played to communicate specific commands across a battlefield. There were other rhythms or patterns that signaled events in a soldier's day outside of battle. Thus, simple, repetitive patterns were developed to serve those needs. Over time, these became more complicated and more numerous, requiring greater skill to execute them properly. In response to the desire of rudimental drummers to display their skills publicly, competitions were held in which the performance of rudiments comprised one adjudicated component. In 1932, as a result of a meeting of drummers during the American Legion National Convention, a list of rudiments, known as the Essential 13, were selected as a membership requirement for the Thirteen Club, organized by the

National Association of Rudimental Drumming.

Given this history, we can see that there is an historical significance to many of these rudiments. However, the educational and pedagogical significance of these rudiments is not as clear. Almost by accident, what began as a limited number of sticking patterns used on one instrument for a specific purpose became mistakenly regarded by most percussionists as a necessary part of our technical development. This is simply untrue. There are numerous ways to achieve technical proficiency as a percussionist that don't include study of the 40 International Drum Rudiments, but that will still result in the ability to play a rudimental snare solo, as well as an orchestral snare solo or a mallet or timpani piece, etc. One alternative to the traditional approach is presented here:

As educators, we can approach percussion teaching with one primary goal: Our students will be able to perform music at increasing levels of musical maturity and technical difficulty. To this end, we have two musical objectives that will help us achieve this over-arching goal: 1) The ability to read and interpret music at an increasingly high level; 2) The ability to recognize and shape a phrase within a given musical context. We also have two primary technical objectives that will help us meet this goal: 1) The equal development of both hands; 2) Control of the sticks or mallets at all tempi and dynamic levels.

In order for effective learning to take place, the student must have the opportunity to practice these objectives in a structured way. The teacher's responsibility, then, is to lay out a musical path for the student wherein these objectives are ordered simple to more complex, and to provide the appropriate information and guidance at the appropriate time in the student's development. The learning must be music-based, not

technique-based, in order for both the musical and the technical objectives to be met. In other words, technique is built in response to musical demands, not the other way around. The danger to a technique-first approach is that this may result in a player who is an impressive technician, but who lacks the type of musical skills necessary to be considered an impressive musician. The music then becomes subservient to the technique.

Granted, in order to begin to play any instrument, one must have some sort of basis for approaching that instrument. We may begin by teaching students how to hold their sticks, how and where to stand, how to adjust their instruments in relation to their bodies, and how to strike the drum. (A more complete discussion of this approach can be found in McClaren, Cort, *The Book of Percussion Pedagogy*, [C. Alan Publications, 2006].) Once the student has demonstrated an understanding of these fundamental concepts, the study of music should begin.

### **Purpose of Rudiments in Percussion Study:**

As stated above, I believe that most rudiments are unnecessary to the development of a percussionist. However, they have existed as the “basis” of our technique for 75 years. What has their purpose been, and is there still any legitimate reason for their existence at present?

In Haskel Harr’s 1979 article concerning rudiments, he states, “Rudiments have long been a controversial subject among drummers and teachers, a controversy resulting from a lack of unified definition of the need and purpose for teaching rudiments.” (*Percussive Notes*, vol. 18 no1, 1979, p. 71) This statement is still true today: we do not have a clearly defined

purpose for teaching rudiments, or even for the existence of rudiments.

Three intended purposes for the development of rudiments have been put forth in the last 75 years. These include a descriptive purpose – describing the most common sticking patterns, a predictive purpose – predicting what snare drummers might encounter in the future; and a prescriptive purpose – prescribing to young snare drummers that which they need to practice to achieve minimum technical competency. However noble each of these stated purposes may be, they are not met and cannot be met by rudiments. Consider the following:

**1) Purpose I: Descriptive:** In 1932 the first list of The Essential 13 Rudiments was adopted by the National Association of Rudimental Drummers. Later, the same body adopted The Additional 13 Rudiments. These two lists together became known as The Standard 26 American Drum Rudiments. In 1984, the Percussive Arts Society further expanded the list, resulting in the 40 International Drum Rudiments. Each time the list was expanded, one of the implied goals was to catalogue the most common sticking patterns likely to be encountered in snare drum music. The list was supposed to be descriptive of the music most likely to be played by a percussionist.

Indeed, Haskel Harr, in the 1979 article cited above, makes reference to this very idea: “But [rudiments] do supply us with material for hand development and acquaint us with short rhythmic patterns which we may find in drum music.” Five years earlier, Dan Spalding also mentioned this idea in an article entitled “81 Drum Rudiments?” One purpose of the article was “...to introduce his [Spalding’s] Seven Essential and twelve most common auxiliary rudiments that he felt are the most common in drumming literature (both orchestra and rudimental)...” (*The Instrumentalist*, 1974, p. 22)

But if the rudiment list is supposed to be descriptive of the most common sticking combinations, who determines what is “most common?” And most common in what context? And most common at what point in time? Just because a sticking combination is deemed common by one group of people at a particular point in time does not mean that by learning that particular pattern, one’s musical skills will improve. So, while it may be worthwhile to preserve and document common sticking patterns at a particular point in our development, there is really no pedagogical purpose to this exercise.

**2) Predictive:** The crafters of this list wanted to devise a group of rudiments that would stand the test of time in terms of what a percussionist might need to know in order to function well on the snare drum. At one point before the adoption of the present list of 40, William F. Ludwig, Jr., stated to the committee, “So you have an awesome task which may well leave an imprint on the music world for 100 years or more.” (Quoted by Fred McInnis, “The History of the 40 International Drum Rudiments: 20 Years Later the Adoption Debate Continues,” *Percussive Notes*, April 2005, p. 25).

However, rudiments by their nature are short and very specific sticking patterns. The more complex music becomes, the more sticking combinations are encountered. As we know, there are an infinite number of stickings and combinations, along with an infinite number of ways to embellish such sticking patterns. The current list of 40 Rudiments represents a very small proportion of what a snare drummer will encounter in his or her playing career, and the list by its very nature is stagnant - it is not representative of the very real changes that happen in music over time. As such, their use is very limited and cannot truly be predictive.

**3) Prescriptive:** Another goal in revising the list of rudiments was to better technically prepare percussionists for what they might encounter in orchestral or rudimental music. On the surface this goal serves an educational purpose, but in reality, the list of rudiments has become very narrowly focused on music encountered by marching snare drummers.

Again, reviewing the history is valuable here: The first list of rudiments was developed by and for rudimental snare drummers. In addition, proponents of expanding the list of rudiments have historically come predominantly from the marching band or drum corps point of view. For example, the committee appointed in 1979 to oversee revision of the rudiment list was appointed by the PAS Marching Committee. Not surprisingly, rationale for revision at that time (c. 1979 – 1984) seemed to focus on the needs of those in the marching camp: Fred McInnis, in a 2005 *Percussive Notes* article, quotes Sherman Hong, a member of the PAS International Drum Rudiment Committee: “These revision discussions occurred to accommodate development in rudimental drumming caused by advances in playing and various patterns used by drum corps, tighter head tensioning – which allowed much more intricate patterns to be played – and orchestral snare playing advances.” (“The History of the 40 International Drum Rudiments: 20 Years Later the Adoption Debate Continues,” *Percussive Notes*, April 2005, p. 25). Presently, one of the leading arguments for expanding the list of rudiments is, according to McInnis, to reflect “...recent advances in rudimental drumming – particularly the further development of drum and bugle corps drumming.” (McInnis, p. 28) There are those now and in the history of the development of the list of rudiments who thought the list was too large or that there should only be 1-2 rudiments. However,

those in the marching band and drum corps fields have had undeniable sway over the development of this list, causing rudiments to be of little use as an educational tool for the percussionist. Even those not in the marching and drum corps camps have been guilty of failing to realize this present list of rudiments was not developed with the current needs of the percussionist in mind. Certainly band directors, who are responsible for the day-to-day training of young percussionists, do not understand how narrowly focused the list of rudiments really is.

The present list of 40 rudiments fails to achieve any of the goals that were intended: The list is not descriptive of what's really out there; rudiments are not predictive of the music one may encounter for the snare drum; and these sticking patterns are not a prescription for the adequate technical preparation of developing percussionists. Although we must have a method for the technical development of young percussionists, this method should be based on music, not rudiments.

### **Eliminating Rudiments: A Proposal**

So where does that leave us? There are basic skills necessary to perform percussion music, but the current list of rudiments is far too narrowly focused on rudimental drumming. While a list of skills or patterns can be compiled that better serves the needs of all percussionists, the term "rudiment" has connotations that will not allow the focus to be where it should be: on the developing percussionist. Therefore, I believe a fundamental revision in how we think of "rudiments" in basic percussion study is needed. I propose a two-fold change:

**First: Rudiments should be eliminated altogether from the curricula for developing percussionists.** Instead, percussionists are to be aware of the

following basic skills. These skills should be taught within a comprehensive percussion curriculum that emphasizes music and musicianship. Although there might be some practice of these skills apart from the musical context, especially early in a percussionist's development, there should be no performance or adjudication of these skills apart from a musical context. These basic skills are as follows:

#### ***Alternating single stroke*** (all instruments)

–To play any percussion instrument, one needs to be able to execute even single strokes at all tempi and dynamic levels. This is the basis for all percussion playing.

***Open and Closed Rolls*** (primarily snare drum) – To sustain sound on a snare drum, one needs to be able to perform a roll. Depending upon the style of music, a roll may be open or closed. Percussionists should have a working knowledge of the concept of roll base and how tempi and dynamics affect roll base. With this knowledge, performance practice, experience and guidance, a percussionist will know when to interpret a roll as closed or open and will be able to choose the correct roll base for the given dynamic level and tempo. (N.B. it is not necessary for a percussionist to be able to name a roll in terms of the number of times the stick hits the drum, e.g. a 7-stroke roll or a 5-stroke roll, if he or she has an understanding of roll base.)

***Embellishments:*** This includes the flam or single grace notes and drags or ruffs.

***Flams:*** One will encounter a single grace note followed by a main note primarily on snare drum (where it is called a flam) and in keyboard percussion music (where it is called a grace note). In both situations, there is a single grace note which will be played more softly than the main note, regardless of the dynamic of the passage. An understanding of how to execute a flam or grace note at a variety of dynamic levels is

necessary for musical performance on all percussion instruments. *Drags/Ruffs*: The player should be able to perform these both with the grace notes open and with the grace notes closed at all dynamic levels.

Everything else a player will encounter in music is a combination of single strokes, embellishments and rolls. When, in a piece of music, a student encounters a passage that may present him or her with some difficulty, the teacher can guide the student by simply isolating the passage, having the student practice it slowly a number of times using a variety of stickings and dynamic levels, and then placing it back into the musical context. In this manner, instead of relying on a finite number of sticking patterns that cannot possibly cover all possible combinations, the student is addressing technical concerns through a musical approach. (A more complete discussion of this approach can be found in McClaren, Cort, *The Book of Percussion Pedagogy*, [C. Alan Publications, 2006] p. 48.)

**Second: The numerous sticking patterns known as Rudiments shall be relegated for use by marching snare drum players, in keeping with their historical purpose and present focus.** It should be understood, however, that rudiments are not necessary for the development of any percussionist, even one primarily interested in playing the marching snare drum. Further, undue focus on the practice and perfection of such a limited number of sticking patterns to the detriment of other areas will result in a player with limited musical abilities.

A limited number of sticking patterns, whether 26, 40, or even 80, cannot possibly adequately prepare a well-rounded percussionist for all the technical and musical challenges that he or she will encounter. Since the original rudiments were identified and named in 1932, the field of percussion has become more complex and dynamic than anyone at that time could have

predicted. In addition, the understanding of a limited number of basic skills (as proposed above), while important, should not form the sole basis for percussion study. Instead, we need to acknowledge that our field is evolving daily; the musical and technical expectations of today's percussionists far exceed those placed on percussionists even 20 years ago. To face these demands, we need to use a music-based approach to train and cultivate musicians who are creative and flexible; who have musical sensibility and technical agility; and who are not bogged down or boxed in by the limited technical skills that have been deemed important in the past. Our field has evolved. It is time that our thinking about the field evolves as well.

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