

SMOOTH OPERATOR: HELPING YOUR PERCUSSIONISTS IMPROVE THEIR MULTIPLE BOUNCE ROLLS

Joe Tornello

We have all stood on the podium or listened to another band and said, “Why does that drum roll sound so bad!” Sometimes it is the tuning of the drum that makes the sound less than desirable, or a mis-matched pair of sticks, but oftentimes it is the percussionist who is not making adjustments based on the music. Below you’ll find some tips for helping your percussionists improve their multiple bounce rolls, enabling them to be a “smooth operator!”

There are several key factors that influence the quality of a multiple bounce roll. First, the quality and length of the buzzes in each hand will significantly influence the success of the roll. Second, the dynamic(s) that is indicated in the music, or being requested by the conductor, will require the percussionist to physically adjust the roll. Third, the tempo(i) in which the roll is being performed will dictate certain actions to be taken by the percussionist.

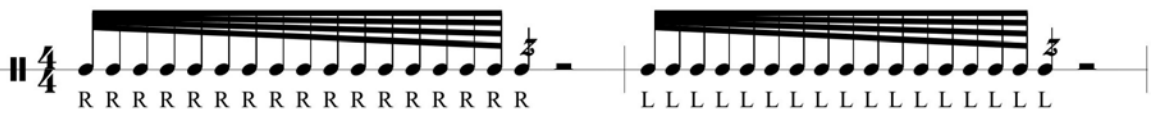
When working to perform multiple bounce rolls, the developing percussionist, and even those who are accomplished, must work to master the quality of the bounces in each hand. Often times the first several bounces are too open, making it very challenging to make the roll sound “smooth.” Also, if too much pressure is applied, the roll will sound choppy from hand to hand due to the sustained sound not being long enough in each hand.

In an effort to improve the sounds in each hand, refer to figure 1a and 1b below. Start by letting your percussionists work with only one hand at a time. A visual representation of what you and the students should listen for is shown in Figure 1b. Ask the students to listen for an even sound in each hand, being careful not to allow too much space between each note of the multiple bounces. By focusing on the sound and quality of the buzz in each hand, the student has the ability to isolate issues that are typically not obvious when both hands are working together. Much of the early practicing will be trial and error by each student, finding what does or does not work for him or her. Strive to make the sustained sound or bounces in each hand last as long as possible, but again, careful to create a smooth decay without too much space early in the figure.

Figure 1a

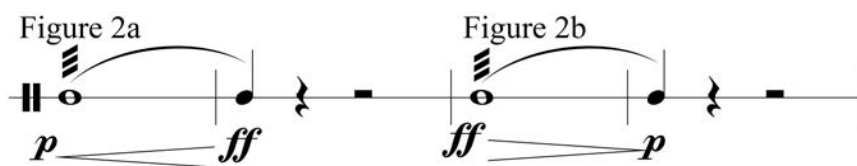


Figure 1b



I will save any discussion of technique for another article, as there are many preferences and expectations to consider. The basic concept to keep in mind is to use a relaxed grip; simply let the stick and head work in harmony, allowing the stick to bounce freely. As this is repeated several times, you can ask your students to start to manipulate the bounces so there is a smooth decay. Increasing or decreasing the downward weight after the initial striking of the head will be required to improve the quality and duration of the subsequent bounces. If there is too much space near the attack of each hand, then slightly more downward weight is required. If the sustain is very short, simply ask the student to relax and use less downward energy. When teaching your students, avoid using words like “pressure” or “force.” It is easy to say “you need more pressure to close the space of the notes,” but often that gives students the wrong impression. Terms such as “weight” and “energy” help reduce the stiff motions that percussionists attempt to avoid.

The second area that often causes challenges in creating smooth rolls is the dynamic in which the rolls must be played. How often do we see figure 2a or 2b written in our repertoire? Typically most students are not aware of what changes should be made to perform the figure appropriately. For each multiple bounce roll, whether one count or sixteen counts, a base rhythm should be applied. The underlying base rhythm will help your students keep better time while rolling and will increase the quality of the roll.



When increasing the dynamic of a roll, the base rhythm must gradually get faster in order to keep a sustained and sound smooth, see Figure 3a. Similarly, when a diminuendo is required while sustaining a roll, the base rhythm must gradually slow down, see Figure 3b. Depending on the current ability of your students, you may only want to practice the first measure of Figure 3a and the last measure of 3b. Once the students can play the rhythm, add the crescendo or decrescendo, then buzz each stroke. As your students become more advanced you can add the remaining figures appropriately. It is unlikely that a performer would need to play through the entire exercise in order to play a roll of 12 counts, but practicing the full exercise will prove to be helpful in several ways. This can help build endurance, solidify long roll tone quality, and improve rhythmic accuracy.

Figure 5

Beats Per Minute	Strokes Per Beat	Base Rhythm	
		Strokes	Notes
60	8		
76	6		
96	5		
120	4		
144	3		
160	3		

Discussing the rhythmic values in relation to the tempo also gives you a terrific opportunity to tie in mathematics to your lesson plan. Notice the strokes per beat when the tempo is 60 beats per minute (bpm) and 120 bpm. You'll see that the number of strokes are cut in half at 120bpm, meaning the roll will feel exactly the same to the percussionist. When at the slower tempo, playing eight notes per beat is the same as playing four notes per beat at 120 beats per minute, double the speed-half the amount of notes. Using this approach can oftentimes be helpful when teaching younger students very slow or fast tempi.

After you and your students have spent time learning and practicing the main concepts reviewed in this article, I think you'll find the multiple bounce rolls produced by your percussionists will be much improved. Depending on the grade level in which you are teaching, the progress may vary, but the understanding of what to do in order to be a "smooth operator" will be much better. •

Joe Tornello joined the Boise State University faculty in 2011 and is currently the Director of Athletic Bands. He is the director of the Keith and Catherine Stein Blue Thunder Marching Band, oversees the pep bands and is the Director of the All Campus Concert Band. Tornello came to Boise State after completing a residency at the University of Kentucky in which he completed his DMA in Wind Band Conducting, studying with Dr. John Cody Birdwell. Additionally, Tornello studied percussion and performed in the percussion ensemble under world renowned percussionist and pedagogue, James Campbell. Prior to his time at the University of Kentucky, Tornello was the director of bands at North Stafford High School, in Stafford, Virginia. He earned a Master of Arts degree with an emphasis in Music Education from Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, Alabama and a Bachelor of Music Education from Virginia Tech. Joe is a former member of Carolina Crown Drum and Bugle Corps and taught the tenor section and battery of Spirit Drum and Bugle Corps from 2000-2007. He currently resides in Boise, Idaho with his wife, daughter and their Bernese Mountain dog.