

The Art of Melodic Snare Drumming: Beyond the Chops

By Marcelina Suchocka

When we think of snare drumming, a word that often comes to mind is “chops.” The goal often-times for drummers is to build their technique to be able to accomplish an impressive flurry of fast notes. While these skills are undeniably important, they represent only a fraction of what a drummer can achieve. In my upcoming class at PASIC, I aim to explore the deeper dimensions of snare drumming, highlighting how true artistry lies not just in technique but in expression, musicality, and style. And just maybe, we can even play a melody on a snare drum!

Melody: a linear succession of musical tones, or pitches, that the listener perceives as a single, recognizable entity.

Historically, snare drumming evolved from military roots, where the role of the drummer was to announce military tactics and inspire the army, or to provide a pompous entrance to a king. Then it evolved to a versatile instrument that plays a crucial role in all the musical genres. A drummer's influence in an ensemble is undeniably important. The ability and choices a drummer makes oftentimes can shape an ensemble or make or break a concert! So how can we best prepare ourselves to be the best drummer we can be?

My roots in percussion started upon

attending “music school” in my home country of Poland. My family moved to Chicago, and I became a member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Percussion Scholarship Group (which performed at PASIC in 2005!). I attended the Manhattan School of Music for my undergraduate and masters' degrees, and then continued on to become a Fellow at the New World Symphony in Miami Beach. I won the Principal Percussion audition of the Sarasota Orchestra in May 2022. Besides my Principal duties in Sarasota, I am also Principal Percussionist of the Britt Festival Orchestra in Jacksonville, Oregon, Coordinator of Percussion at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute in the Berkshires, and play in several chamber ensembles: Excelsis Percussion Quartet, Pathos Trio, and ensemblenewSRQ.

I believe all of these ensembles and musical “venues” have led me to become a more expressive, fulfilled player. Throughout my early musical upbringing, solid technical foundation was always stressed to be paramount, and as I continued to develop my playing and listen to recordings and performances, I came to learn that the greats played with far more than that. They always had this element of uninhibited, effortless mastery.

A solid technical foundation is paramount for any drummer. One must first

master singles, doubles, rolls, rudiments, etc. Getting rid of any “physical hitch-es” enables players to be free to express themselves on the instrument. But how can one play a melody on an instrument that has no pitch?

Melody in drumming might seem like a contradiction, but it is achievable by thinking of the instrument as similar to a human voice. Simply put, melodic snare drumming is using our embouchure — the grip — to control the phrase and note lengths to tell a story.

Embouchure: a French term that describes the way musicians use their lips,



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facial muscles, tongue, and teeth to play a brass or woodwind instrument.

By utilizing varied note lengths, the angle of the snare drum tips, the strength of grip, and continuous motion, drummers can make melodic phrasing in their playing.

Finding your voice as a snare drummer involves more than just perfecting your technique; it requires a willingness to explore your musical influences and experiment with different styles. Whether you're drawn to jazz, rock, or classical music, incorporating elements from these genres can foster a more versatile approach to your playing. In fact, the more you can pull from various styles of music, the more it can "color" your playing — even with excerpts or playing in the orchestra! Listen to the jazz drumming greats, informed Baroque musicians, movie soundtracks, funk and gospel drumming, or just music that you enjoy! It's about discovering how to express your individuality through rhythm and melody, allowing your snare drum to

become a true extension of your musical identity.

Expression: an act, process, or instance of representing in a medium (such as words).

In my PASIC class, participants can expect a dynamic and interactive experience. We will cover a variety of topics, including ways to practice this idea of playing snare drum melodically. These exercises will challenge drummers to think beyond traditional patterns and explore how to create melodic phrases, develop improvisational skills, and express emotion through rhythm. The goal is to cultivate an inspiring learning environment — all jam-packed into a class in under an hour!

I will begin the clinic with some playing that demonstrates these concepts, speak briefly, and then pre-chosen participants will come up and perform selected works, and we will together discover ways to bring the pieces to life! Finally, I want everyone who attends the class to feel like they walked away with something — whether it's new information

or a rephrasing of what they already knew. While technique serves as a vital gateway to expression and creativity, it is the exploration of melody, emotion, and personal style that transforms a drummer into an artist. I invite all drummers — whether beginners or seasoned pros — to join me at PASIC and embark on this exciting journey together. Let's discover the art of melodic snare drumming and unlock the potential of this incredible instrument. **PN**



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