

FUNdamentals of Tenor Drumming:

A Survey of Techniques and Common Issues

By Gene Fambrough

The modern world of tenor drumming has evolved tremendously since its early beginnings as a single drum voice in the marching ensemble. Through the days of “tri-toms” and “quads with a shot drum,” with each new season of DCI and WGI the instrument takes another leap forward. As more and more younger players are attracted to the incredible achievement of the contemporary tenor section, it is beneficial to examine the fundamental skills necessary to be successful on this instrument. Even with its unique visual aspect, tenor drumming still comes down to the basics.

With that in mind, I asked three prominent educators and performers—Julie Davila, Bill Bachman, and Amir Oosman—to provide their fundamental approach to tenor drumming. The goal was to find qualities that are agreed upon by different “schools of thought” in an effort to give aspiring tenor players concrete advice to help them become a better tenor drummer.

Gene Fambrough: Describe your basic approach to movement around the drums and how to achieve fluidity.

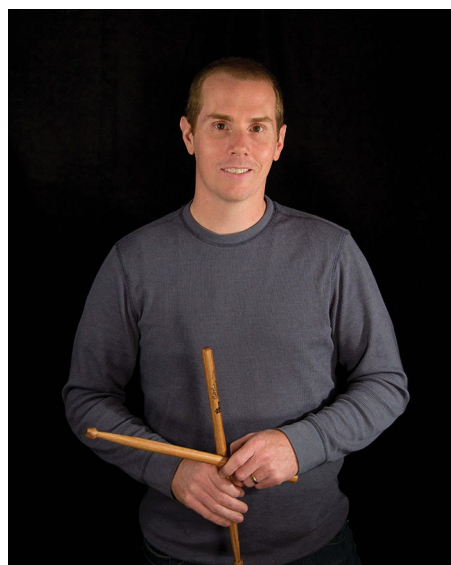
Julie Davila: To achieve fluidity and movement that allows the performers to maintain a resonant sound, there has to be a percentage of rebound that helps move the stick. I see a lot of young players try to control only the stick, where I believe part of the “control” is learning how to control, respond to, and move rebound.

Bill Bachman: Strive to play around the drums as similarly as you play on one drum first of all. The most effective grip I believe is American grip with the hand at a 45-degree angle and a straight line elbow to bead. This gives you the greatest range of motion and is good for lateral demands in both directions. In some tight proximity crossing situations, French grip will be beneficial as well.

Amir Oosman: My approach is to achieve consistent sound quality no matter what “rounds” are being played. After working out patterns, I like to step away from the drums/sticks and air the movement. Fluidity can only be achieved if you understand the fundamentals. Hiccups in moving around the drums are typically attributed to issues



Julie Davila



Bill Bachman

with playing on a single drum. Iron out the inconsistencies before applying rounds.

Fambrough: Do you have any “tenor-specific” exercises that you use to develop movement around the drums?

Davila: I like to use some of the stock tenor exercises of different 8’s patterns of two drum outs and ins, three-drum triangles, and four or five drum-across patterns. Accent-tap or “bucks” type exercises are essential in developing the skills to play with good phrasing and to develop flam vocabulary. It is important to then discuss how these exercises eventually relate to hand-to-hand exercises and patterns within the actual music. I also have my students do a lot of “hands separate” work so they can see and feel, in isolation, how the stick is moving; this is done in an effort to work on playing areas, sound quality, and fluid motion around the drums.

Bachman: It all starts with 8-on-a-hand rounds. Just about everything will come back to this as a common denominator. The “slow/fast” variations in *Quad Logic* have been standards for training this for decades.



Amir Oosman

Oosman: I wrote a scrapes exercise that I found useful for developing technique and applying a variety of combos. Start slow and go phrase-by-phrase

Scrapes Exercise

Amir Oosman

A ♩ = 94

R R L L etc.

5

9

B "o" noteheads denote cross-overs

17

21

C

30

© Amir Oosman

before practicing it continuously. (See Scrapes Exercise.)

Fambrough: *Are there any specific characteristics you look for in a potential tenor player?*

Davila: I typically find that drumset players make the transition to tenors pretty well. Generally, they are used to moving around the drums and not just working with a vertical plane.

Bachman: Good hands/fundamentals. Learning to move around the drums is easy compared to learning to drum well. That's why somewhere around 80–90 percent of the training is done on one drum.

Oosman: Sound quality on one drum.

Fambrough: *What are the biggest issues you encounter with younger/less experienced tenor players? Any proven methods of addressing these that you'd like to share?*

Davila: I find a lot of players tend to learn the physicality ahead of the music. The result is students achieve the “macro” of the physical attributes and large muscle actions of moving around the drums, but they don't always accurately place the rhythms and maintain a good quality of sound while doing so. A telltale sign is when they struggle when asked to slow it down, play the passage on one drum, or stop on a specific count that isn't “count 1” at the end of the phrase. Any of the above-mentioned practice strategies are typically revealing and a good place to start when trying to make the players more aware and in control of what they are actually playing.

Similarly, when the music calls for scrapes (sweeps) or crossovers, I tend to see young players neglect the rhythmic integrity and sound quality of the hand that is underneath. One strategy, either in personal practice or ensemble rehearsal,

is rhythmic reduction. If the passage is written in thirty-second notes, slow it down and have the performers say it and play it in sixteenths or even eighth notes. This will give each note an actual place, rather than just playing a “diddle.” Sometimes students don't associate a diddle to a precise rhythm. I reiterate, “rolls are rhythms!”

Bachman: Underdeveloped hands/fundamentals. Focusing on accuracy and excellence on one drum can never be done enough. From there it's helping the student maintain the straight line elbow to be as much as possible—not rolling over to the outside drums, avoiding the “windshield wiper” side-to-side floppiness.

Oosman: Many players approach moving around the drums too soon. For example, you need to understand what constitutes a quality double stroke on one drum before expecting to have any success in playing scrapes. There is no shortcut to this, and I

find that too many young drummers skip the essential steps of fundamentals.

Fambrough: *What was your prior experience (e.g., snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, or none) leading up to playing tenors? Any specific advice for people in those situations?*

Davila: I started on drumset first, playing along with records and developing motion and coordination. I was grateful that I had teachers who guided me to spend a percentage of time in both camps of (a) listening/playing to recordings, and (b) reading. Secondly, I spent a lot of time on rudimental snare drum. Learning rudiments helped me be a better tenor player. The better your skill sets and facility are on one drum, the better chance you have to be able to maintain quality and all the details of inflection and phrasing when moving around the drums.

Bachman: I played matched grip snare drum in high school until we switched to traditional near the end of my time there. I was the last cut from Dutch Boy's 1991 snare line, as my traditional grip wasn't up to snuff, so I played top bass and loved it. I was sitting at my drumset after that summer and decided to work my traditional grip on a flat drum. It was uncomfortable and awkward, and since I could play so much better matched, I decided to play quads. So, simply put, I played quads since traditional grip seemed an unnecessary burden.

Oosman: I didn't have drumline experience prior to my first year on quads. My middle and high schools didn't have marching programs, so I began playing drumset in the jazz band. It wasn't until I saw the Blue Devils rehearsing in 2003 across the street from my school that I became aware of drum corps and quad drumming.

Fambrough: *Any other bits of advice you'd like to share?*

Davila: Another practice strategy to work on developing quality of the inner beats within a phrase is to have the students play a four- or eight-bar phrase at three inches without any ornamentations, accents, or inflection—only sticking and rhythms. The benefits are two-fold: 1. it becomes a stick control exercise and 2. it helps develop more awareness and gain better understanding of the placement of every note within the phrase. Often, young players focus on patterns and sticking, but aren't particular enough about the integrity of the rhythm, I try to instill in my students that sticking offers variety and color in phrasing and inflection, but it does not alter rhythm.

Bachman: Work your fundamentals on one drum! Of course, from there, find the best teacher you can get—ideally one who has played quads. Work smarter and harder than those around you. You have to want it more than the next person.

Oosman: Don't get frustrated if you're hitting rims; it happens to all of us!

Julie Davila serves on the PAS Executive Committee and recently finished a nine-year term as chair of the PAS Marching Percussion Committee. She serves as a judge for Drum Corps International and was re-

cently inducted into the WGI Hall of Fame. Many of her groups have medaled in all divisions of the WGI activity, and in 1996 the John Overton High School indoor drum line won a National Championship. As a member of the Caixa Trio and as an active clinician specializing in marching and concert percussion, Julie has performed in Seoul, South Korea, Paris, France, Brazil, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and extensively throughout the United States. She is the author of "Impressions on Wood" and *Modern Multi-Tenor Techniques and Solos*, published by Row-Loff Productions, and a co-author of "Aptitude," published by Drop6 Media.

Bill Bachman is a world-renowned specialist in hand technique with a heavy background in rudimental drumming and its application to the drumset. Bill writes for *Modern Drummer* magazine, is the author of the book *Stick Technique*, designer of Vic Firth's Heavy Hitter pad series and signature "Billy Club" drumstick, and founder of DrumWorkout.com. Bill studied percussion performance at the University of North Texas and is a graduate of the Berklee College of Music. He has played with and instructed many award-winning marching percussion groups including the UNT drumline, Cadets, Bluecoats, Blue Knights, and Carolina Crown in his 12 years touring with Drum and Bugle Corps. He is a member of the PAS Health and Wellness committee and *Modern Drummer* magazine's education team, where he was nominated in the 2015 Reader's Poll under the "clinician/educator" category. He has presented hundreds of drum clinics and drum festival performances on five continents over the last 15 years. He is author of Row-Loff's drum instructional books *Rudimental Logic*, *Quad Logic*, and *Bass Logic*, which have become part of the curriculum in countless high schools and colleges, and the producer of the instructional drum DVDs *Rudimental Beats* and *Reefed Beats*.

Amir Oosman is a Los Angeles-based artist originally born in Karachi (Pakistan). After completing his bachelor's degree at University of California Santa Cruz, Amir earned his Master of Music degree (Performance and Composition) from California Institute of the Arts. CalArts helped cultivate his deep interest in world music, sound design, and audio engineering. Under the guidance of Swapan Chaudhuri and Randy Gloss, he developed proficiency in tabla and world percussion. Since graduating, Amir has toured the world as a clinician, performer, composer, and producer. As a marching percussionist, Amir was a member of the 2008 Madison Scouts, 2009 Bluecoats, and 2011 and 2012 Blue Devils Drum Corps. He won gold at the DCI I&E solo competitions in 2011 and 2012 and earned the DCI World Championship title with the Blue Devils. He is also the brain (and hands) behind the popular *Konnakkol and Quads* video on YouTube.

Gene Fambrough is Assistant Director of Bands and Associate Professor of Percussion at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). He directs the Percussion Ensemble, Steel Band, Drumline, and Electro-Acoustic ensemble, and assists with all aspects of the UAB Band program. He holds degrees from the

University of Georgia, East Carolina University, and the University of Alabama. **PN**



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