

Bodhrán 101

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The first obvious question for most folks is "How do you pronounce 'Bodhrán'?" Think of the front of a boat (bow) and a man's nickname (Ron). Put the emphasis on the first syllable and you get **BOW**-Ron. Some people prefer **BO**-Ron. A few put the emphasis on the second syllable and shorten the first, making it buh-**RON**. I've been told that, at least to a degree, the pronunciation varies from county to county in Ireland and that **BOW**-Ron is the most common. The one thing they all seem to agree on is that the "dh" is either not pronounced at all or is, at most, an "aspirated consonant" (a sort of a breath noise) in the middle of the word.

Next comes "What exactly IS a bodhran?". The simple answer is that it's a traditional Irish frame drum. A frame drum is usually one or more strips of wood bent into a circle with some sort of skin attached across one of the circular openings. It is generally accepted that the definition of the term "frame drum" includes the stipulation that the depth of the drum be less than the diameter of the circle.

In the particular case of the bodhran, the skin is usually held in place by tacks and may also be glued. Usually the skin is goat, sheep, cow, horse or greyhound. Occasionally the skin may be artificial material. Artificial skins are pretty much impervious to weather but, until recently, they have rarely had as nice a sound as natural skins. Often bodhráns have one or two bars across the inside of the frame, usually positioned to allow a hand to fit between the bar(s) and the back of the skin. On some drums, the bars are necessary to keep the frame from warping under the tension of the skin. Some makers provide simple ways to remove one or both bars to expose more of the back of the skin while playing.

The last question dealing with the moving parts is "What do you call the stick you use to beat on the drum?". The Irish word is "cipin" and is usually pronounced "ki-**PEEN**" or "chi-**PEEN**". Curiously enough, the word translates as 'stick' or, sometimes, 'kindling'. Other common words for the stick are 'tipper', 'beater' or 'stick'.

OK. Now that we have names for everything, where do you go to get one?

My number one favorite way to learn about bodhráns is to go somewhere where they are being played and listen to them. If you can find a place where multiple drums by multiple makers are being played, so much the better. For example, the California Traditional Music Society (<http://www.ctmsfolkmusic.org>) sponsors an annual event called the Summer Solstice Folk Music, Dance and Storytelling Festival. At this festival, amongst MANY other things, there are usually a few hours of bodhran workshops plus vendors, jam sessions, etc.

My second choice place to look is the Internet. There is a web site called simply "The Bodhrán". As of this writing (June 2007), the web address (URL) is <http://www.ceolas.org/instruments/bodhran/>. This site includes links to list of makers, players, tips on care and feeding, jokes, etc., etc., etc.

There are some music stores that carry bodhráns but they usually only carry the low-end drums of whatever makers they represent. They can order other models by those makers but they may tack on a price increase for the special order.

If there is a bodhrán maker near you, it can be quite interesting to visit the workshop and see how they are made.

Which drums do I have and/or recommend? I currently have drums from (in order of acquisition) Boreal Woodworks, Buck Musical Instruments, Mountainbrook, and Albert Alfonso. I like each of them for different reasons. As far as recommendations, I go back to what I said in the previous section: look at, listen to, and feel many different drums. What you like best may be different from what I like best. I prefer a big boomy bass sound with lots of sustain. Many makers seem to be heading towards higher-pitched sounds with little or no sustain. This is a largely personal preference although the musicians that you find yourself playing with may offer opinions as well.

Now that you've purchased a drum, what do you need to know about caring for it? Many drum makers ship the drum with a pamphlet describing their take on drum care. Mostly the ideas can be covered in a few simple principals:

1. You're dealing with a skin (probably natural) and a wooden frame. Extreme hot, cold, wet or dry can destroy your drum. Avoid putting it anywhere that you are not comfortable yourself.
2. If the skin feels dry and rough, use a little bit on oil spread around one side of the skin. Pick either the outside or the inside and then always apply it on that side. If you oil the skin on both sides, it may become waterproof. If you then take it somewhere hot, you will have no way to reduce the tension on the skin and it may tear or rip off part of the frame (depending on which part is stronger). What kind of oil to use is much debated. Mink oil, Neatsfoot oil, and lanolin are popular. Check with your drum maker for his recommendation.
3. Get a case for your drum. This helps protect it. It also shows other musicians that you are serious about taking care of your instrument. When was the last time you saw a fiddle player carrying his instrument in a cardboard box?
4. If the skin is too tight, use only water to loosen it. Guinness will work but the alcohol will help the skin to dry out more quickly and the sugars will help the skin to rot. A small spray bottle is the best solution. Spray a little bit on the non-oil side and rub it around in a circular motion. Remember that the skin will continue to soften for as much as several minutes after application, so spray only a little, rub, wait. If, after a few minutes, you haven't achieved the desired result, spray again.
5. If the skin is too loose (usually due to humidity), be VERY CAREFUL in how you tighten it. You need to find a heat source that can apply warmth to the entire surface evenly. Failing this, move the drum over the heat source so that all parts of the skin get equal exposure. Remember, you are heating a skin. If the heat is uncomfortable to your hand, it may damage the drum. As in note 4, above, the change in tension will continue for a little while after you've stopped heating the skin. Warm it a little at a time and stop before you've gotten it to quite how you want it. If you're in a place with access to electricity, an electric heating pad is an excellent way to apply heat evenly over the entire surface.

Now that you have a drum and you're taking good care of it, where can you go to play it? Initially, the answer to this one is something like "as far from human company as you can possibly get". As a bodhrán player (this applies to other percussion instruments also!), you have one or both of two jobs whenever you are playing with other musicians. The easier job is to accompany and appropriately decorate the tune that the other musicians are leading. The more difficult job (and the one that is the most important if there are dancers trying to dance to the tunes that you are playing) is to set and maintain the beat. To a dancer, the single most important thing a percussionist can do is to clearly indicate beat one of every measure. If you do no more than this but you do it accurately, the dancers will love you. If you speed up, slow down, accent the off beats, or are inconsistent, they will come after you with mayhem in mind. For either job, you need to know what's coming before the melody players get there. To be able to do that, you MUST be familiar with a wide variety of tunes. Ideally, you should be able to sing, hum, whistle, or play on another instrument enough tunes to cover the majority of whatever is going to be played at the session you want to go to.

How do you know what tunes to learn? Go to your chosen session (without your drum) and ask, or listen and take notes, or (after asking permission) record the session. Now, go home and work out some simple patterns that compliment the tunes the way they are played at your chosen session. In the beginning, keep things simple. With time and practice you will come to know when more elaborate patterns are appropriate.

What can I tell you about Irish tunes?

First, let's address their structure. Most Irish tunes are composed of "phrases" or "parts" each consisting of eight measures. Most Irish tunes have two parts. The first part (eight measures) is called the 'A' part. The next part is called the 'B' part. If there are more than two parts, the additional parts are called by the subsequent letters (it's rare for an Irish tune to have more than six parts [A – F]). Often tunes are played with each part repeated once before going on to the next part (A – A – B – B). The most common exception to this pattern is when you are playing for dancers. Then it is common to play an extra 'A' part before going into the standard A-A-B-B. Sometimes the dancers will refer to this as "eight for naught". This gives them a chance to get into position and prepare for the speed of the tune.

Next, let's see how to identify the various common kinds of tunes. In this section it is extremely helpful to have at least a basic understanding of how to read music. At least at the beginning, it's not essential that you be able to tell at a glance what key a tune is played in or even whether some particular note is a C or a C#. It is essential to understand what the time signature is and to recognize whether the measures are full of short notes (usually eighth notes) or have only longer notes (quarter notes, dotted quarters, halves, etc.). As a rule, you probably don't want to be striking your drum multiple times for each note that the melody player is playing.

For the next section I want to first define some symbols:

▲ - Emphasized up stroke ▼ - Emphasized down stroke
↑ - up stroke ↓ - down stroke
* - rest | - bar line (end of measure)

Jigs: (including Single Jigs, Double Jigs, Treble Jigs and Light Jigs but not including Slip Jigs) These tunes all have a 6/8 time signature. The various names mostly refer to the relative complexity of the melody line and/or the steps that the dancers will do when you play them. In some cases (particularly Treble Jig), the name can also give some indication of the approximate speed at which they should be played.

The basic pattern is: ▼↑↓▲↓↑ Common variations include: ▼↑↓▲** and: ▼**▲**
A simple memory aid is "Rashers and Sausages" or "Pineapple Apricot".

Slip Jigs: These tunes require careful listening. Their time signature is 9/8 but the emphases in the melody line may break the nine into three threes or four-five or five-four and the pattern may change from one part to the next.

The basic pattern is: ▼↑↓▲↓↑▼↑↓|▲↓↑▼↑↓▲↓↑ Notice that beat one is a down stroke in odd-numbered measures and an up stroke in even-numbered measures. Getting the emphases in the right places takes some practice. A common 'cheat' that allows beat one to always be a down stroke is: ▼↑↓▲↓↑▼↑↓|▲** (on 8 & 9, move the stick into position for the next down stroke). Note that this 'cheat' does not work well with all slip jigs. It is best used with a slip jig that breaks the nine into consistent sets of three threes. For example, it usually works pretty well with "Kid on a Mountain" but not with "The Butterfly".

Reels and Polkas: These are usually written in 4/4 and 2/4 respectively but there are exceptions. Depending on the particular dance, sometimes the tunes types can be used interchangeably. These are probably the easiest tunes for beginning percussionists to master.

The basic pattern is: ▼↑▼↑ or: ▼*▲* or: ▼*↑*

An important note for reels and polkas is that the fiddle part is often written with a "pickup note" or "grace note" leading into the measure. The memory aid I use for these tunes is: "I Think I Can, I Think I Can".

Hornpipes are written in 4/4 time (like reels) and usually have two distinct beats at the end of each phrase. Often the measure will contain two sets of dotted quarter followed by eighth giving it a feel of DUM-da DUM-da rather than the straight "DA-da DA-da" of a reel. The theme song from the old Popeye cartoon is a well-known example of a hornpipe.

Marches can be written in 4/4, 6/8, 3/2 and sometimes other time signatures. The important thing to remember is that people are marching. Give them a strong beat each time a foot hits the ground. You may choose to entirely ignore the other beats.

Waltzes are in 3/4 time and are usually played at a slow to moderate tempo. Seriously consider not playing these. If you do play, keep it quiet and simple.

Airs can be in any time signature or none at all. Usually they are quite slow. Percussion rarely contributes anything of value to airs.

With any type of tune, if you discover (or someone points out to you) that you've lost track of the rhythm, stop, listen, find beat one, and come back in. It is **MUCH** easier to stop and re-start than to try to catch up to what the melody is doing.

OK, now that you've mastered a goodly array of tunes, you go to your chosen session only to find five other bodhrán players already there. It may be time to get out your penny whistle. As a very general rule, there should be no more than one percussion player for every 4-5 melody players. If the number of other percussionists is small, you may be able to work out an arrangement to take turns playing tunes. It is unusual for a session to sound good with multiple bodhráns playing at the same time.

Even if you are the only bodhrán player within 100 miles, ***ALWAYS ASK BEFORE JUMPING IN!!!*** There are players of other instruments who dislike percussionists in general and bodhrán players in particular (also bones players) because they've experienced other players with little skill and no sense of musical etiquette who believed they had some sort of God-given right to play. DO NOT assume that you can win them over with your amazing performance. That will only serve to inflame their already negative opinions. Put your drum away and play something else or listen or go home.

Finally, two common bodhrán jokes and some observations about them:

Q: What's the proper implement for playing a bodhrán?

A: A penknife!

Why? Because the bodhrán is an easy instrument to start to play. With a little bit of practice you can play along with a few tunes. Many beginning players decide that this is the time to go out in public. RESIST THIS TEMPTATION! Learn to play quietly and remember to be polite to the musicians around you. They may not tell you that you aren't ready for public playing but you may find that you only hear about sessions after they're over. When melody players invite you to play louder and start asking you to attend sessions or to come play with them at paying gigs, this is a really good indication that you're doing something right.

Q: How can you tell what a bodhrán player is knocking on your door?

A: He gets faster and faster and never knows when to come in.

It is a VERY common problem amongst bodhrán players, even those of us with many years of experience, that we want to play everything at light speed, so we push the tempo a little faster and a little faster and ... Pretty soon the dancers stop dancing and the mandolin players stop playing and nobody has a good time. Remember what I said earlier about dancers coming looking for you with mayhem in mind. It can get UGLY! Absolute, dead-on, consistent rhythm is VASTLY more important than any fancy frills you may want to add. Add in frills where they are appropriate only after you have mastered consistency.

Now go ye forth. Listen, learn, play, enjoy!

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