



Paul Middleton

beating the drum

50 Tips to
improve your bodhran
playing experience

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Typeset in 18pt Tekton Pro
Designed and created in InDesign CC

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to go straight there!*

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Introduction

My name is Paul. I am 75 and have been playing the bodhran for many years. I have played in gigs, sessions, at festivals and in masterclasses. Watching and observing the dynamics of music played by a diverse group of people has always fascinated me. And then I slowly realised that maybe there was a need for a booklet outlining the responsibilities of the bodhran player. So here it is! The Tips are in no particular order. Beware, this is not an instruction manual on how to play the drum but rather a guide to enhance your reputation as a competent drummer in sessions.

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Special Thanks

Special Thanks to my dear wife Pippa who passed away in January 2016, for her encouragement over the years and for making every music session an absolute delight; to John and Dot, Tony and Judy with whom we practised, drank and ate; to my drummer friends who taught me so much - Angel, Brendan, Rosie, Pablo, Ruth, Malcolm, Dave and Steve; and finally to my dear daughters Kate and Jess, and their partners Ed and Adam who have encouraged me to continue playing.

PRACTISING

This really is an essential part of being a musician.

I remember a few years ago at Sidmouth Folk Festival, I attended a bodhran workshop for (so-called) medium and advanced players. The instructor was a well-known player. The answers to his first question shocked me: *'how many of you practise between sessions?'* Only two of us in that group of 20 players actually bothered to pick up an instrument between sessions. This is just one of the main reasons why drummers can get such a bad name in sessions.

So here are some Tips to help you along the way.

Tip 1

Enhance the reputation of the bodhran, don't destroy it. Many sessions have been

ruined or spoilt by enthusiastic amateurs who believe they can contribute to a session by beating the drum, or maybe I should say, beating the hell out of a drum. This is so disrespectful to the melody musicians and completely unacceptable. When I first started playing, I attended many sessions over a 2 year period with my wife. I listened and looked and absorbed the music. I did not join in. I knew I was not ready.

Tip 2

Make sure your drum is always available to play at home. There is no point in keeping

your bodhran packed away - place it on top of its case with beaters waiting and ready to go.

Tip 3

Keep a folder on your computer desktop containing 10 tunes. These should be different

types of tune played by your favourite musicians, at different speeds - jigs, reels, hornpipes, polkas, marches etc. My folder even contains some wonderful and difficult Latin American rhythms which help to extend my skills. They really stretch you.

Tip 4

When you hear a new 'Best Tune' at a session, find out its name and source.

Then you can research its origin, download to your desktop folder and use it for an enjoyable practice.

Tip 5

Constantly repeat your drumming techniques.

You will find that a particular drumming phrase is quite difficult until mastered. Practise and repetition is the only solution, and then suddenly 'muscle memory' kicks in and you can move on to the next drumming technique to master. The internet is quite useful in finding new rhythms as there are top bodhran players who break these rhythms down into their component parts so you can learn them more easily.

Tip 6

Take your drum to practise on holiday!

I suppose this really applies to holidays in the UK, but when I lived in Spain I found that on many occasions I used my drum case as hand luggage. The drum by definition is hollow and can usually take quite a few essential items, even tablets and computers. But I had the luxury of having a base in the UK, so the drum was my hand luggage for quite a few years - I took it everywhere. You never know when a session might creep into your holiday evenings!

Tip 7

Learn by looking at and listening to, the best.

Most, if not all drummers, should have looked at and listened to the best players, on the internet. But it should not be just looking and admiring. Note particularly at how the maestros hold their beater, and what type of beater they are using for a particular tune or rhythm. The one advantage performers have over acoustic players is the miked drum. So the sound you hear on recordings is enhanced and not true to how we hear the drum in sessions. But it is still good to hear the best in the best circumstances.

Tip 8**Adjust your grip to your circumstances.**

This sounds like a strange Tip, but consider. You may have arthritis of the fingers or thumb (like myself), or your reflexes may be slow because of your age. So don't try and do the impossible - if the pace of the tune is frantic as in some Irish tunes, go half speed and gradually build up your flexibility to try and manage the increased speed.

Tip 9**Experiment with your grip.**

As you know, there are two main styles in bodhran playing - Kerry style (double-ended beater) and Top End (usually single-ended beater). You may have started playing with one of these two, but you should certainly try the other as you gain more confidence. There are also many ways to hold a beater - experiment with various grips until you find one that is suitable for your style of playing. Your grip also might change if you play with another style of beater.

Tip 10**Learn the importance of the up-stroke.**

As you gain experience and carefully listen to tunes at sessions you will soon realise that playing jigs means you have to take the up-stroke seriously. Many bodhran drummers do not. With many drummers this is a weak stroke - the down-stroke always seems much more easier and more natural. But you should practise control of the up-stroke, it really is important, particularly where the strong beat needs to be emphasised.

Tip 11**Learn the importance of missed beat.**

You really don't have to play every beat, in fact you shouldn't! There is a huge value in missing beats for emphasis. Listen to the tune and the melody musicians. Spot the spaces - there are always tiny natural breaks. Become aware. This is probably easier for top-end players, but double-ended players should practise and practise to break up their unrelenting beats by creating spaces.

Tip 12

If you are new to the drum, use tools to set you on the path. These days there are manuals, videos, blogs, and classes to help you become a good and better musician. Use them. The bodhran is a musical instrument - treat it seriously.

Tip 13

Limit the number of your beaters. As an enthusiast you probably have experimented with many types of beater - heavy, light, long, short, weighted, thin, thick, cane, brush etc. As you gain more experience and start to play in sessions, you really do not need to take along more than four. I always carry to sessions a thick cane, a thin brush-like cane, a long solid (all top-end) and a short weighted double-ended. The two canes are adjustable with rubber rings to change the tone. Experiment to find your 4 favourites.

Tip 14

Remember the importance of the left hand. As you gain more experience and confidence, and if you have been practicing, your left hand will play an increasing part of your technique. Some of you may play holding the cross bar on an open skin. This is fine if that is the sound and tone you are looking for. Note how Cathy Jordan of Dervish has succeeded with this style. But if you want to increase the tonal range and synchronise with the melody, use varying skin pressure and skin pressure location - but this does require a lot of practise.

Tip 15

Take your drum with you on your travels. When I am travelling around, visiting family and friends, I put my drum case into the car boot. Sometimes I play on demand, sometimes I practise, but the unexpected occasionally happens. I visited my daughter once and she informed me that a session was on that evening at the local pub. We went, we drank a few and I played. A most enjoyable, unexpected evening.