

Chops Builders

PART 1: ACCENT/TAPS

by Bill Bachman

Welcome to “Chops Builders”! In this new series I’m going to offer some exercises to increase coordination and to develop specific techniques and hand motions. We’re starting with accent/tap exercises that consist of groups of twos, threes, and fours played with an accent on the first beat. The lead hand plays the accent and the main grouping, while the other hand plays various “fill-ins.”

In each example, the lead hand plays the same continuous pattern. The goal is to coordinate the opposite hand’s fill-ins so that the flow of the lead hand never changes.

There are two techniques that you can use when playing these exercises: Wrist turns using full upstrokes and downstrokes, and Moeller strokes where the accents are played with a whipping motion and the tap strokes flow together. Both techniques are great, and each has its advantages, depending on the situation. Since well-trained hands will naturally take the path of least resistance, a well-rounded player with command of both approaches will find the choice between the two techniques will be automatic. (There are also gradients in between the two methods.) Having great technique allows you to think about music instead of how you’re playing the instrument.

WRIST TURNS AND MOELLER STROKES

First let’s look at the wrist-turn techniques, the full (or free) stroke, the downstroke, and the upstroke. Sets of two notes should be played as a downstroke and an upstroke. Sets of three notes are played as a downstroke, a tap (or a low full stroke), and an upstroke. Sets of four notes are played as a downstroke, two taps, and an upstroke. The stick should stop quickly after each downstroke, with the tip pointing down toward the drum so that the following upstroke or tap can be played with loose hands. This technique is great for slow to medium tempos but does have its limitations at high speeds.

At faster rates, the Moeller technique is great for accent patterns because it allows the wrists to take a break. We’ll use whipping Moeller accents, bounce taps, and Moeller upstrokes (where the stick taps the drum as the forearm lifts and the hand drops). Since you’ll be going too fast to stop the stick after the accent, all of the notes—including the accent—will flow together so you can conserve energy. The sets of two notes should be played with a Moeller stroke and a Moeller upstroke. Sets of three are played as a Moeller stroke,

a bounce tap, and a Moeller upstroke. Sets of four are played as a Moeller stroke, two bounce taps, and a Moeller upstroke. (As you get into groups of four and higher, finger control will become necessary in order to keep the taps going, since the accent’s energy will gradually dissipate.)

With the Moeller whip stroke, the accent is created more through velocity than stick height. Therefore stick heights will not be as strict as they are in the wrist-turn techniques. The Moeller accent strokes should bounce back up somewhat freely, in order to transfer much of the accent’s energy into the following tap or taps. Make sure the forearm lifts the stick for the Moeller upstroke only on the last tap preceding the accent. Otherwise the rebound potential of the taps is reduced, the sound of the taps changes, and the velocity of the upcoming Moeller stroke is slowed down preemptively. If you’re used to stricter playing techniques, this method will feel a bit lazy and out of control. But here it’s all about finesse and doing as little physical work as possible.

KEEP THE LEAD HAND FLOWING

In the following exercise, the lead hand’s motion remains unchanged throughout, and the motion of the fill-in hand always matches that of the lead hand. The fill-in hand will be added and taken away in different positions relative to the lead hand. The challenge is to coordinate the fill-in hand’s entrance to be seamless with the lead hand.

During the double-stop patterns, you want to play with the hands perfectly together. If there’s any flamming, you’re not playing accurately and your hands are likely not operating the same way technically. It’s important to master these double-stops, because if the hands aren’t playing in perfect unison, they won’t be able to alternate evenly either. Be sure to watch your arms, hands, and sticks, and try to create a mirror image between the hands when playing the double-stops.

When you play these exercises at slower tempos using wrist-turn techniques, try to make it look and sound perfect—just like a machine. When you play them using the Moeller technique, try to make it feel like a constant flow of strokes, with occasional forearm pumps to whip out the accents. Mastering these exercises using both technical approaches at many different speeds will provide you with more ways to make more music. Good luck!

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