



# The Bodhrán Demystified

## An Irish Folk Drum Primer

By Jacob McCauley

In the ever-expanding world of percussion, it's rare to find a drum that's deceptively simple in its design yet capable of great versatility, tonal richness, and complexity in its rhythmic potential.

One of the clearest answers to that call comes from none other than the Irish drum known as the bodhrán. As a relatively misunderstood and often underestimated instrument, appreciation of the bodhrán has begun to grow considerably in the last several years. However, its progress and evolutionary track has been somewhat obscured by the social stigma and general reputation that has sometimes gone along with it. It has been both revered and maligned as an instrument — maligned because of its relative affordability and accessibility, sometimes putting these drums in the inexperienced hands of neophyte players who have good intentions but little skill or knowledge of how to extract its full potential. It has long been one of the main goals of my career as a full-time bodhrán player and teacher to help spread the knowledge of its true potential and ultimately raise the public awareness of this truly universal type of percussion.

### **SIMPLE ANATOMY = INFINITE POTENTIAL**

Some of you may not know what a bodhrán is. The bodhrán is a simple frame drum with an attached animal skin (generally goat). It is played with a wooden stick called a tipper or beater. Contrary to popular belief, the bodhrán



The author with his custom deep-shelled bodhrán.

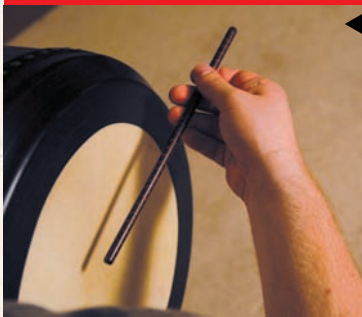
is not an ancient type of drum; it is actually fairly modern. There is much debate as to whether a type of bodhrán was used prior to the 20th century, but there is no solid evidence to support this. Although frame drums have been played in Ireland throughout its history, it is the modern bodhrán technique that truly defines the instrument today. It was not until the mid-20th century that the bodhrán began to emerge as an instrument widely used in public playing. At this point, the bodhrán was in its most basic and traditional form. The larger size of the 18" diameter (some-

times as large as 20") with a thin 2"-3" shell was the most common variant.

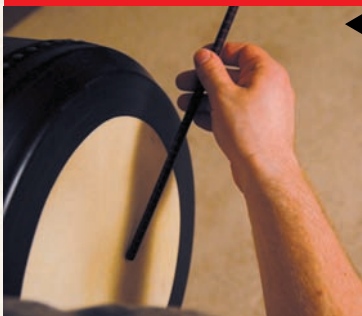
The traditional technique involves grasping the tipper around the middle and using a wrist motion, striking the drumhead on the up and down strokes. The back hand (i.e., the non-tipper hand) at this point was generally either holding the frame or crossbars of the drum. This gave the drum a very open, ringing sound.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the traditional music scene in Ireland started to undergo an explosion of popularity and entered more fully into the global musical mainstream with the emergence of popular

## Technique In Motion



The tipper is in its basic starting position preparing to strike the skin.



The tipper strikes the skin in a downward motion.



The tipper has now made contact with the skin and is ready to strike the skin in an upward motion back to the starting position.



The tipper has now started its upward motion striking the skin.



The tipper is now back to its starting position and is ready to repeat the process.

bands like The Chieftains, The Bothy Band, De Dannan, and Planxty, all of whom started exploring interesting musical arrangements in their recordings, as well as pushing the boundaries of innovation in traditional playing. During this “renaissance,” the bodhrán started to become an important and evolving addition to these instrumental arrangements.

By the 1980s the bodhrán began taking on a different look (closer to the more streamlined design of modern bodhráns), featuring some vast improvements. Smaller and deeper drums became more apparent, as well as the incorporation of a tuning system. The ability to tune the head was a monumental step forward for the bodhrán’s versatility, as well as its ability to cooperate no matter the current weather situation (bodhráns, like any drum with a natural skin head, are notorious for going out of tune in conditions in which there are fluctuations in temperature and humidity). With the now varying size of the shells, we start to see the development of the customized bodhrán. The changes in shell size allow for a different feeling of comfort, as well as altering the sound signature.

As we move forward over the next two decades we continue to see the bodhrán grow as a popular Irish (and Scottish) instrument. More and more bodhrán makers emerge, and we see the vast differences in designs and features. Although the basic principle is the same, the enormous amount of small variances come into play and allow for each maker to have its own unique look. The many variants mostly refer to the shell design; difference in size, depth, type of wood, thick or thin skin, etc. As the demand for bodhráns increases, we see the emergence of more quality makers; however, we also see the influx of the cheap and affordable bodhráns. This cheap instrument begins to morph into what I like to call “the tourist bodhrán” which is readily available and cheaply sold all over Ireland, in music stores, in gift shops, and even at airports. bodhráns have also made their way into most music stores worldwide, thus spreading the instrument far and wide to many different players.

### TONE-CONTROL TECHNIQUES

As a professional full-time bodhrán player/teacher, I consider it a large part of my job to help spread awareness of

proper technique. It takes many years for any instrument to develop a proper reputation, and this is something that is slowly being rectified.

As with the common evolutionary track of any instrument, new techniques and abilities are discovered, and ultimately what is now becoming possible is quite fascinating. As opposed to other forms of frame drums such as the tar and bendir, modern bodhrán playing has allowed the instrument to take on a much broader range of sound. Starting with the obvious low and open bass tone, it is possible to create notes ascending all the way up to higher pitched tones, ranging even two octaves above the open tone. This is achieved by exerting pressure on the backside of the skin. One of the first innovations of backhand technique began with the application of pushing in the centre of the skin with the hand to raise the overall pitch of the drum. By doing so, the pitch will change from its regular low bass tone to a higher note depending on how much pressure is applied. This technique, however, is limited, because the skin cannot be bent beyond a certain point or the risk of skin damage can occur.

With the continued innovation of the bodhrán, there are now improved techniques for changing the tone and pitch. A goatskin can be quite responsive when the right pressure is applied in the right place. However, it is best if this pressure is a subtle application. By applying very slight pressure with a finger, fingertip, or side of the hand, you can alter the tone higher or lower. As the hand pressure reaches closer to the frame, the pitch becomes higher. This must correspond with the tipper, as well as coordination of where pressure is applied.

In theory, what is being done is making the drum smaller and larger. This is what I like to call “broad tonal changes.” If the hand is placed in the middle of the skin, and the tipper is hitting slightly above the hand, the player has now cut the drum in half in terms of its tone. This can be achieved by either placing the whole hand, or using the side of the hand for a more precise sound. As the hand is moved up or down on the skin, the pitch can become higher or lower; this is all achieved with very little pressure. As long as the tipper always stays above or below the hand, the tone will continue to change.

Although these pitch and tone

**BACK HAND  
DAMPENED**

**SOUND:** The dampened sound is a mid-range hit commonly played with most rhythms. ▶



**BACK HAND  
OPEN (BASS)**

**SOUND:** With this technique, the skin is allowed to vibrate and produce a nice low frequency. This tone is used with most rhythms to help signify the downbeat as well as accents. ▶



changes are quite substantial, it is now possible to be even more precise with the tone control. An innovation that I have been working on for the last several years is what I call fingertip manipulation. Fingertip manipulation involves very subtle pressure by the fingertips (as well as sides of the fingers), contacting pressure points on the skin. Essentially the entire skin of the drum can be mapped out in terms of where the pressure points lie.

When the time and research is put in, you can create your own muscle memory of where the corresponding pressure points are with regards to a certain note. Much like learning where to place your fingers on fretless instruments (like the violin), this is a very similar principle of muscle memory. Because of this, the technique involves careful accuracy to achieve the desired pitch or note. I say note because at

this stage of tone control, the ability to create melodic notes becomes possible. With this added ability, without a doubt, the bodhrán becomes a truly unique percussion instrument.

### TIPPER TECHNIQUES

On the other side of the spectrum is tipper technique. There are two main playing styles in the bodhrán world today. The traditional style, known as the “Kerry” style, involves using both ends of the tipper, with the hand holding the tipper close to the center. The fingers are wrapped around the tipper similar to a pencil grip, but this of course has certain variations. Some great examples of the traditional style would be the playing of Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh of De Dannan, Peadar Mercier of The Chieftains, and Christy Moore of Planxty.

The more modern style is the “Irish

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top-end” style. This style involves holding the tipper much closer to the top, grasping the tipper between the thumb and index finger. Again, there are slight variations, of course, but the general concept has stayed the same. The style encompasses only using the bottom end of the tipper, and uses what are called “top-end rolls” instead of the double-ended triplets done with the “Kerry” style. One of the most influential players of this style is John Joe Kelly of the band Flook.

Of course, the techniques here also continue to evolve and new innovations are found. As more control is gained by modern techniques, new rhythms and the ability to play odd time signatures, complex rhythms, and polyrhythms are possible. Modern techniques have become much more refined and often require less movement, increasing the creative rhythmic possibilities. In essence, you need to be a minimalist to be able to play to your full potential. Excess movement means more work, more energy, and ultimately forces you to do more to achieve less.

This is my primary concept in terms of my own technique, one that has been in

development for several years. This technique involves holding the tipper approximately 3/4 at the top, and balancing the tipper between the thumb and index finger. However, the tipper is not held low (or close to hand) as common with most top-end style techniques. The tipper is held closer to fingertips, resulting in what I call fingertip control. The rest of the fingers lay gently on the tipper and are there purely for control and stability. When speed is needed, the tipper is allowed to move on its own momentum, without being held back by the remaining fingers. Essentially what happens is the tipper pivots between the thumb and index finger, while the other fingers lay relaxed so as to not get in the way. When more control is required, the remaining fingers gently put pressure back on the tipper.

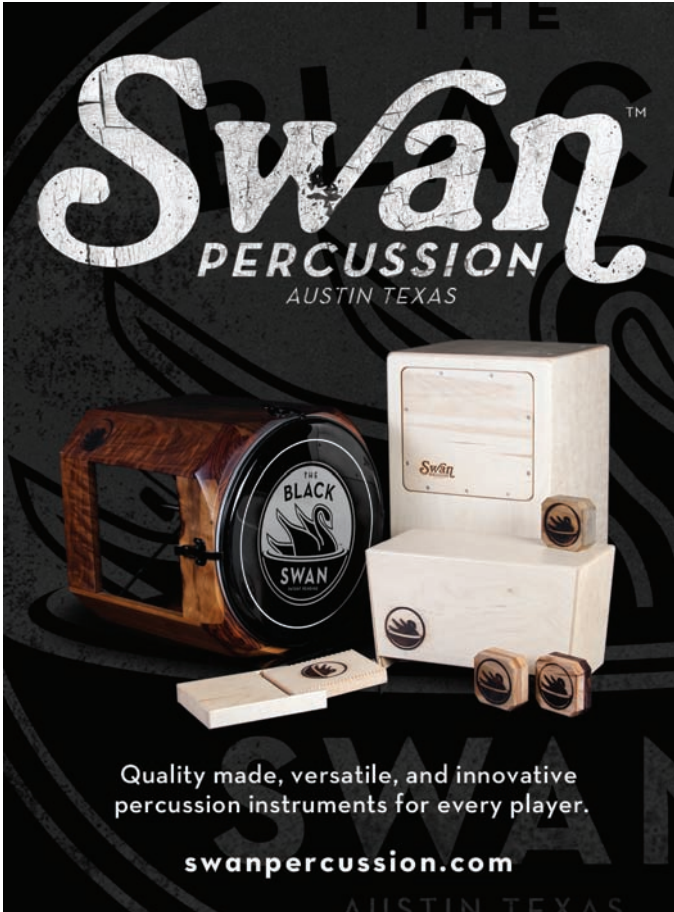
One of the main benefits of this technique is the ability to achieve top-end-style rolls while maintaining complete control. Another major benefit is the ability to achieve complex rhythms and odd time signatures. This allows for the bodhrán to expand beyond its traditional roots, and enter many other genres

of music. Essentially, if the music has rhythm, a bodhrán can play it.

## TODAY'S PLAYING FIELD

As bodhrán technique and abilities grow, we begin to see the innovation of bodhrán makers grow to meet the needs of today's modern players. Although the bodhrán is still a young instrument, we can look back at the history and notice how it has evolved. One of the first major innovations was achieved by Irish maker Seamus O'Kane who invented the first tunable bodhrán in 1976, owing to very damp conditions at that time (the Irish, better than anyone, understand the meaning of “damp”). Since then, tunable bodhráns have become the professional standard because of their flexibility with different weather conditions.

Bodhráns now come in all different diameters and depths, as well as different woods and materials. Even in the last 10–15 years we have seen bodhrán technology take giant leaps in terms of construction, skin preparation, and new features. One of the most influential



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and technologically advanced bodhrán makers is Christian Hedwitschak from Germany (bodhranmaker.de). Christian has applied a never-before-seen attention to detail with regards to his frame construction, tuning systems, skin preparation, and vast range of models. His latest innovation is the creation of the Compressor tuning system, which greatly influences the overall frequencies and overtones to allow for a richer and plentiful tone, especially when matched with his superb DragonSkins (highly responsive goat skins). It is certainly an exciting time for the innovation of bodhrán, and you just never know what new technologies a bodhrán maker will come up with next.

There is no doubt that the bodhrán is an instrument that will continue to grow and evolve throughout history. With the continued advancement by players and makers, the sky is certainly the limit. I believe that over the next several years we will start to see the bodhrán taking a much more universal role in not just traditional music, but many other genres as well. As general awareness grows, more

A traditional bodhrán (left) alongside McCauley's deeper-shell version courtesy of German bodhrán maker Christian Hedwitschak. ▶



and more people will have the privilege to learn this wonderful instrument and use it successfully in virtually any type of music. Let's all keep a close eye on the bodhrán world and see what happens next. Excited? I certainly am!

*Jacob McCauley is an award-winning bodhrán player and teacher based in Toronto. Some of the artists he has per-*

*formed and recorded with include Irish band The Chieftains, award-winning Scottish band Lau, champion Irish fiddler Maeve Donnelly, and Canadian and U.S national fiddle champion Shane Cook. He is currently in production of his first Instructional bodhrán DVD and an album with Santiago Dobles of progressive metal band Aghora. jacobmccauley.com. ▶*

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