

# Closing the Drag Gap

The Ambiguities of Drags, Grace Notes, and Notational Interpretation

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## Foreword

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ambiguous nature of drags and grace notes within the context of rudimental drumming. Seemingly understood and regularly utilised by virtually all drummers, there are nevertheless many interpretations and, sometimes, confusions, with regards to drags that often necessitate the performer or composer to offer words of clarification.

While this paper does not claim nor seek the definitive word on the topic of drags, it does look to differentiate drags from the other rudiments, and if not solve the ambiguity, at least go some of the way to clarifying the elements involved.

We begin by examining the results from a survey gauging the interpretations of a cross section of the percussion community, before discussing the ambiguities themselves, their origins, and any possible solutions.

## I. The Survey

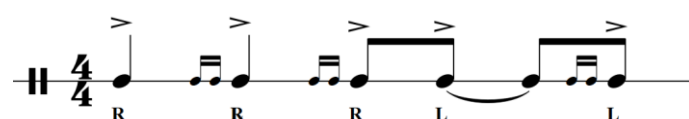
26 drummers were asked to complete a survey.<sup>1</sup> Of these respondents, eight considered themselves *intermediate*, nine considered themselves *advanced*, and nine defined themselves as *professional* level players. Fifteen considered themselves to be part of the “North American rudimental tradition”, while eleven did not.

The participants were shown the following two figures:

Figure 1



Figure 2



<sup>1</sup> (Curtis, Grace Note Research Survey, 2020)

They were then asked a series of questions about them. The first question gave two possible answers:

- a) These two figures show the same rhythm using different notation conventions (*the two figures sound the same*)
- b) These two figures show two different rhythms, as indicated by the different notation (*the two figures sound different*)

This first question aims to show how the drummers responded to the different types of notation, especially with regards to the grace notes in the second figure.

Of the 26 responses, 24 chose option **(b)**, whilst only two chose option **(a)**. This clearly shows that drummers not only recognised the difference in the notation (a trivial observation), but that this difference conveys different rhythms between these two figures. Over 90% of answers stated that the two figures *convey different rhythms*. In other words, the grace notes in **Figure 2** give different rhythmic instructions than the 16<sup>th</sup> notes in **Figure 1**.

Of particular interest are the two answers which answered **(a)**, that the two rhythms were *the same*.

#### **Respondent #18**

**Experience:** "Professional orchestral percussion teacher/marching band."

**Level:** Professional

**North American rudimental tradition:** "Yes"

**Answer:** "These two figures show the same rhythm using different notation conventions (the two figures sound the same)"

This respondent went on to say that the grace notes in **Figure 2** indicate that they are to be played with *bounce* or *rebound* strokes, and that they can be played *open* or *closed*.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Respondent #24**

**Experience:** "32 years, rudimental and jazz improv background"

**Level:** Advanced

**North American rudimental tradition:** "Yes"

**Answer:** "These two figures show the same rhythm using different notation conventions (the two figures sound the same)"

This respondent went on to say that **Figure 2** is "*more open to interpretation*" and that it can be played "*open, or closed as a ruff or buzz*." Interestingly, they state that the grace notes depend solely on the context... "*whether it was an orchestral situation, marching band, concert band, drum kit, etc.*" When asked to define the drag itself, they stated "*Notated with 2 grace notes as in Figure 2. Can be interpreted as either open or closed (buzzed) depending on the situation.*"<sup>3</sup>

These were the only two respondents which answered that the two figures showed the same rhythm. Both are advanced-level players with long histories and experiences, and

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<sup>2</sup> (Curtis, Grace Note Research Survey, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

both mention a rudimental or marching/orchestral background. Both also considered themselves to be part of the North American rudimental tradition.

**Respondent #18** solely discusses the technique of how the grace notes would be played, maintaining that the rhythm remains unchanged. **Respondent #24**, however, discusses interpretation as linked to the context, but again references the technique used to play the grace notes.

All of the remaining 24 responses agreed that **Figure 2** showed a *different rhythm* than that shown in **Figure 1**. In other words, the two figures *sound different* to each other rhythmically. Many of these respondents considered themselves to be *Advanced* or *Professional* level players (eight and eight, respectively), and 13 considered themselves to be part of the North American rudimental tradition.

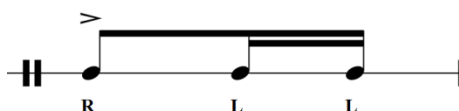
When asked as to the significance and purpose of the grace notes in **Figure 2**, a theme begins to emerge. Three responses refer to *dynamics*; eight responses state that the strokes are to be played *immediately before the accent*, and *hold no rhythmic value of their own* (paraphrased); nine responses make reference to *ornamentation*, *embellishment*, or some variation of the grace notes *decorating* or *setting up* the accents; four responses make direct reference to the technique used to play the grace notes. We should remember these 24 of the 26 total responses maintained that the two figures *sound different to each other rhythmically*, notwithstanding these stylistic or technical differences.

The overwhelming majority of respondents maintain a rhythmic difference between the two figures with regards to the use of grace notes. Themes of dynamics, feel, technique, and, crucially, the rhythmic value of the grace notes themselves, paint a picture of degrees of interpretation in the role of the grace notes, though there is an overwhelming consensus that the grace notes in **Figure 2** produce an inherently different rhythmic figure to that found in **Figure 1**.

## II. Definition

We can broadly define the drag as a pattern containing three or more strokes, at least one pair of which is a double stroke. Further, they contain strokes of two different time values in a 2:1 ratio between the single and double strokes.<sup>4</sup> This definition from Bob Becker comes straight out of the modern North American rudimental tradition.

This means that the smallest possible drag contains three strokes consisting of a single stroke of one note value and two double strokes of a value half that of the single. It is common, although not strictly required, that the single stroke is accented (*Fig. 1.1*).



*Fig. 1.1*

This basic figure can be described as a *half drag*, though naming conventions are often culturally or regionally specific, and somewhat arbitrary. Following this definition, it is possible to conceive of many drag variations which combine single strokes of one note

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<sup>4</sup> (Becker, Rudimental Arithmetic, 2008)

value with double strokes of half that value. A *non alternated single drag*, for instance, combines two single strokes with two double strokes (*Fig. 1.2*).<sup>5</sup>



*Fig. 1.2*

As shall be seen, this definition and the drag forms which result present significant ambiguity with regards to the nomenclature and their performance, not least because of competing notational conventions and conflicting academic instruction. This divergence is already becoming evident when the above definition is combined with the survey responses from the previous section.

### III. Notation

Firstly, we must consider the common ways in which drags are notated in snare drum compositions.



*Figure 1*

**Figure 1** presents a simple drag figure in line with the definition given previously.<sup>6</sup> It can be seen that the drag figures contain 8<sup>th</sup> note accents and 16<sup>th</sup> note double strokes. Problems arise, however, with this notational convention. Many drummers today would simply not recognise this figure as containing any drags at all.<sup>7</sup> Drags as they commonly appear in the global paradigm utilise *grace notes* (*Figure 2*).



*Figure 2*

Here, the same figure is presented using a much more widely accepted notational convention.<sup>8</sup> Within the survey, there are nine mentions of the word *drag* in answers for **questions 4 and 5**, despite a drag not being referenced in the survey at all until **question**

<sup>5</sup> (Becker, Rudimental Arithmetic, 2008)

<sup>6</sup> Though not authoritative, this study elects to utilise the more traditional *divisive* notation convention with regards to beats and note groupings.

<sup>7</sup> (Curtis, Grace Note Research Survey, 2020)

<sup>8</sup> The modern rudimental community may well disagree with this statement. However, a cursory search through various method books and websites overwhelmingly presents drag figures as in *Figure 2*. See, for example, (Vic Firth/John Wooten, 2020)

6; that is to say that nine responses explicitly labelled **Figure 2** as a drag completely unprompted.

Based on Becker's definition, both figures *are* drags. What is unclear is whether these two figures represent two identical, similar, or significantly different rhythms. In **Figure 1**, the double strokes of each drag contain a rhythmic value based on the subdivisions of each beat; specifically, each double stroke occupies a 16<sup>th</sup> note within the measure. **Figure 2** maintains the position of the accented strokes, though it is unclear whether the grace note notation implies a different rhythmic value than the 16<sup>th</sup> notes of **Figure 1**. What is the rhythmic value of the grace notes?

Survey responses suggest that most drummers recognise not only a technical, dynamic, or stylistic difference, but a rhythmic difference between these two figures, with respondents suggesting that the two strokes of the drag occur closely together, immediately before the accented stroke. Numerous responses state that the grace notes contain no rhythmic value of their own, and are instead linked to the notes they precede.

The modern rudimental tradition, however, seems to recognise no rhythmic difference between **Figures 1** and **2**. The grace notes in the latter figure are simply a notational convention; the drags themselves retain their rhythmic value as in **Figure 1**. We read this from Becker:

*"There is some ambiguity about the execution of drag rudiments vis-à-vis the two types of notation. Players familiar with older rudimental performance styles may find traditional notation implies a specific rhythmic feeling and a particular approach to articulation. In any event, it is **generally assumed that double grace notes in traditionally notated phrases are to be played in the subdivision of the underlying pulse of the figure.**"*<sup>9</sup>

Becker's *assumption* here applies to the rudimental fraternity of the modern North American tradition, within which **Figure 1** is a perfectly common example of a drag.<sup>10</sup> This convention names a hierarchy of drags hinted at earlier. Becker suggests in numerous sources that this interpretation of the drag is often equivalent<sup>11</sup> or analogous<sup>12</sup> to various measured (double stroke) rolls.

In relation to the stylistic or technical responses from the survey, Becker addresses the distinction between an *open* or *closed* interpretation of drags and the grace note convention:

*"Part of the ambiguity is a result of the notational conventions used to indicate these figures in printed snare drum music during the 20th century (i.e., the use of "grace notes" for the doubles). The practice makes sense in that the doubles are executed from flam height – the "double flam" mentioned in your question, and*

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<sup>9</sup> (Becker, Rudimental Arithmetic, 2008) p. 42, bold text not part of original quote.

<sup>10</sup> (Curtis, Bob Becker Interview Part 1 – Composition and Technique, 2020)

<sup>11</sup> (Becker, Rudimental Arithmetic, 2008) p. 35

<sup>12</sup> (Curtis, Bob Becker Interview Part 1 – Composition and Technique, 2020)

*flams of course are always notated with a principal note and an appoggiatura. In most orchestral styles the double stroke in RRL (or LLR) is played quickly, or "closed", and not necessarily in a rational metric relation to the beat. In the rudimental styles referenced in RA, these double strokes are performed discretely rhythmically."*<sup>13</sup>

Here, Becker clearly acknowledges not only a stylistic difference, but a *rhythmic* distinction between a *closed* orchestral style in which the drag is "not necessarily in a rational metric relation to the beat", and an *open* modern rudimental style in which the drags are "performed discretely rhythmically".

It seems, then, that notational inconsistency during the development of (non-standardised) drum notation is at least partially to blame for any confusion. We are beginning to see a divergence to some degree between the orchestral and rudimental traditions with regards to the interpretation of grace notes. Drags, it seems, can be interpreted *open* or *closed* as defined in the above quote, similar to rolls by which double stroke or buzz rolls are distinguished. However, we should recall here **Respondent #18**, who stated that both figures presented *the same rhythm*, while listing both professional orchestral *and* marching as part of their drumming background.

The ambiguity is now present and obvious. What are the rhythmic values of drags, and what role do grace notes play in their presentation within a score? One thing at least is clear, with a seemingly universal consensus: the grace notes of **Figure 2** imply *some degree* of difference in performance. This difference may or may not be rhythmic in nature, but both perspectives recognise differences in style, feel, dynamics, and/or technique.

#### IV. Historical Evolution and Standardisation

Drumming as we know it today in the Western tradition<sup>14</sup> can trace its lineage back to various schools of military drumming. There are currently more than 64 *essential* rudiments as recognised by the Percussive Arts Society (PAS). It is thought that over 40 rudiments were in use as early as 1777, with the National Association of Rudimental Drummers (NARD) officially adopting 25 from an 1869 field manual.<sup>15</sup> It seems that, even in this period, naming conventions were ambiguous:

*"Some of these rudiments had interchangeable names that make determining the exact number in use during those years problematic. E.g. depending on the author, the Ruff was sometimes named the Half Drag, the Drag, or the 3 Stroke Roll."*<sup>16</sup>

We can see from the above quote that drags and ruffs are at the heart of this naming confusion. One generally accepted stance is that many rudimental terms are onomatopoeic, with the techniques deriving their name from the sound created and/or the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> This ambiguous term is used here to refer to drumming as taught to percussionist and drum kit players in the broad "west", specifically Europe and North America. This term should not be taken too seriously; it is used here to roughly describe the current state of drumming in the English-speaking world.

<sup>15</sup> (Engelman, 2007)

<sup>16</sup> (Engelman, 2007)

way they are played.<sup>17</sup> Under this theory, the word *drag* itself gives some clues to its performance, if not its rhythmic value. Observing a drummer performing a fast drag does seem to show a drag-like motion in the hand doing the dragging, and it does not seem far-fetched to assume that this motion is somewhat responsible for the technique's name.

Nevertheless, as the techniques and traditions evolve, many aspects of a maturing art form become standardised in terms of the techniques, their names, and the notation used to convey them in score. It is possible that the process of standardisation is somewhat responsible for the branching interpretations of the drag, both in its naming and notational conventions, and its performance.

As with much written literature from before a certain date, in which words are spelled with more phonetic and non-standardised English spellings, we can perhaps allow that the early pioneers of rudimental drumming used naming, performance, and notation conventions based on, essentially, their best guesses. This theory is especially attractive if we follow the *onomatopoeia* approach suggested previously. Drummers from different regions may have used terms differently in discussions to describe what they played and how it sounded, and used their written notation in a way which most accurately conveyed the way it felt to play or the way it sounded *to them*.

These regional idioms get passed down through tuition to students, and branching naming, notational, and performance conventions quickly spread and diverge. Considering the numerous global snare drum traditions (Swiss, Scottish, French, North American *et al*), it is not surprising that ambiguities and different interpretations abound.

A cursory look at Wilcoxon's work quickly reveals notation conventions at odds with today's more standardised model. His version of *Three Camps*, for instance, is broadly recognised as subsisting within a triplet-based rhythm, yet the original use of 32<sup>nd</sup> note 5- and 11-stroke rolls do not support this in how Wilcoxon had them scored.

Today, we still see notational differences across the globe, though these differences are slowly shrinking, due in no small part to the internet. The institutional North American tradition as espoused by Becker has formalised the rudimental syllabus in such a way that notation, performance, and rhythmic conventions are becoming more broadly adopted elsewhere. Becker himself, for instance, presents a table of *Drag Densities* which show different drag forms and how they can be manipulated using different rhythmic rates and subdivisions.<sup>18</sup> While this may indeed represent a standardised education within this tradition, many drummers, especially from elsewhere in the world, would still not recognise this as relating to drags as they understand them; the most common issue again being in relation to the rhythmic value possessed by drags and their grace notes (or lack thereof).

Doctor John Wooten noted and acted upon this problem in relation to his education series online.<sup>19</sup> In an email to drumming friends and colleagues, Wooten noted the controversy surrounding drags and ruffs, and pushed for a consistency of approach in the educational fraternity:

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<sup>17</sup> (Engelman, 2007)

<sup>18</sup> (Becker, *Rudimental Arithmetic*, 2008), pp. 36–37

<sup>19</sup> (Vic Firth/John Wooten, 2020)

*“With all the snare drum method books out there, one could make an argument either way as to what you call it. However, I do think that we have a responsibility in making sure we are consistent...”<sup>20</sup>*

There are strong opinions either way. One enthusiastic forum poster on a popular online drumming forum vehemently argued that there were no *closed* or *buzzed* drags at all, yet various other sources seem to directly and overwhelmingly suggest otherwise. This is, of course, anecdotal, yet represents the picture at large surrounding contrasting interpretations and conventions.

World renowned percussionists from every tradition seem to recognise the ambiguity surrounding drags and grace notes, and one approach that seems to rise to the fore by way of a solution is *interpretation*. It is up to the performer to *interpret* the composer’s intention at the point of performance. It is clear now that the different drumming traditions recognise differences in figures containing grace notes, and it is clear that they may each interpret them differently. If the performer is able to analyse the piece and probe the composer’s intent, then an informed stance towards grace notes, drags, or any other nuance, can be taken and incorporated into the piece’s interpretation.

What is as yet unclear is whether the ever forward-reaching global standardisation will eventually iron out this divide, or if the various drumming traditions will only strengthen their own approach and further widen the *drag gap*.

In a recent email conversation on the matter, with regards to this difference in interpretation, Becker had this to say:

*“Interpretation is at the heart of the matter... [This] is as it should be if rudimental drumming is the musical art form we aspire to.”*

Thank you to all participants who took part in the survey. Your responses were most interesting and much appreciated. Bibliography listed below.

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<sup>20</sup> (Becker, The Drag/Ruff Dilemma, 2011)



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