

# Songs for Snare Drum

Attainment

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## Overview

In this paper, I present the compositional and technical elements used within the piece *Attainment*. I shall discuss the use of vocabularic concepts, rhythm, and ideas that come together to express the themes intended by the piece.

## Introduction

As with the other pieces in this collection, *Attainment* seeks to evoke certain feelings, sounds, and ideas pertinent to the theme of meditation. The term itself describes certain stages of meditation in which new insights, understandings, or states of concentration are attained. The name also represents the sense of technical attainment one experiences when learning a craft or completing a piece of music.

## Basic Structure

In the time signature of **12/8**, *Attainment* presents a meter comprising four groups of six 16<sup>th</sup> notes per measure. With a tempo of dotted quarter notes at around 70 bpm, these 16<sup>th</sup> notes are frequently diddled to become rolled 32<sup>nd</sup> notes. The phrases formed are then broken up and decorated with the extensive use of flams, drags, isolated diddles, and 8<sup>th</sup> note accents. Combined with the underlying meter and tempo, these phrasing ideas create a sense of strong and driving rhythm. If played loudly, this can be overbearing and intense, especially in the sections containing sustained rolls, but if played with a deftness of touch, it gives a sense of texture and forward momentum without too much vigour.

Structurally, *Attainment* consists of five sections, each with a different purpose and phrasing theme, though all stay relatively consistent with the main metric idea established in the first section. It is also the only piece in the collection to substitute the third accompanying percussion part for a drone. The main rhythmic accompaniment is produced using a bass drum and woodblock, while the drone is produced using a tam-tam. Thematically, this is loosely based on the idea of Tibetan singing bowls and lends an eerie undertone to the piece. The use of sustained rolls within the meter seeks to expand on the thematic notion of 'drone,' giving a sense of repetition and concentration.

Both rhythmic accompaniments remain largely constant throughout the five sections, emphasising the sense of forward momentum and, in many cases, contrasting with the syncopated phrases on the snare drum.

Following the rising drone from the tam-tam, the piece begins with a five-beat introductory sequence in **15/8** between the bass drum and the woodblock, before the snare enters in the first measure of the piece proper, settling into a driving **12/8** meter. In the opening section, the snare drum plays on the 16<sup>th</sup> note subdivision, voicing four groups of six per measure. This is accompanied by a powerful shuffle pattern on the bass drum with accents from the woodblocks.

## Core Vocabulary





18

R R L L R R R L R L L R R L L R L L R L L R

3 3 5 3 3 2 3

19

R L R R L R R L L R L L R L R R L L R R L

3 2 3 3 5 5

As we enter the third section from bar 18, the vocabulary changes to a form of the measured roll concept. The annotated groupings are played using three rudiments: flam taps for the groups of 2, Swiss triplets for the groups of 3, and flammed 5-stroke rolls for the groups of 5.

This section, and its use of vocabulary, is reminiscent of the opening section of *Jhāna*:

14/16

R L L R R L L R L L R R L L R R L L R R L L R L L R

Flammed measured rolls

3

L L L R L L R L R L L R R L L R L L R R L L R R L L R R L L

<f

6

R R L L R L R R L R R L L R R L L R R L R L R R L L R R L

Above, the opening 8 bars of *Jhāna* demonstrate the same compositional approach in a slightly different meter, this time comprising two groups of seven 16<sup>th</sup> notes per measure, rather than four groups of six.

The third section of *Attainment* is also bereft of diddled strokes, comprised almost entirely of 16<sup>th</sup> notes throughout its eight-bar span. One notable exception to this occurs in bar 23, which sees a 32<sup>nd</sup> note quintuplet in the second beat:

23

R L R R L L R R L L R R L L R L R R L L R R

5:4

In this example, the figure containing the quintuplet has been annotated to show the underlying 16<sup>th</sup> note subdivision. This allows us to see the quintuplet starting on the fourth 16<sup>th</sup> note of the second beat and culminating in the accent on the sixth 16<sup>th</sup> note of that beat. The five 32<sup>nd</sup> notes of the quintuplet occur across the two 16<sup>th</sup> notes – and therefore four 32<sup>nd</sup> notes – of the fourth and fifth notes of that beat. The accent on the sixth 16<sup>th</sup> note forms the first note of a new grouping of 3, transitioning neatly into the next phrase. Though this may be seen as quite challenging from

a theoretical perspective, the idea of odd-numbered tuplets as pick-up rolls is a concept I have explored in great detail in my other works.<sup>1</sup>

The remaining sections revert to the same broad approach as demonstrated in the first, with diddled strokes decorating a syncopated main phrase that plays off the four groups of six 16<sup>th</sup> notes in each measure. The vocabulary continues to play with the idea of density by combining closed drags with open diddles, and these odd groupings continue to provide a high degree of syncopation for the accents.

## Accompaniment

This piece contains a three-part accompaniment, as with all pieces in this collection. However, this piece forgoes the use of the mid-toned taiko part in favour of a drone, played on a tam-tam. Using soft beaters, the drone is created by playing a continuous roll that allows the large tam-tam to wash, the intensity of which can be manipulated by the strength of the performer's strokes.

The two rhythmic accompaniments are performed on the bass drum, mounted, and played with beaters, and the woodblocks, which provide a high-pitched contrast to this. This piece contains the simplest accompanying parts of any within this collection, and this reflects their function. Much of the rhythmic syncopation is created by the snare drum's phrasing as described previously. To ground this, the bass drum plays a firm beat throughout, alternating between a driving shuffle figure, playing all the 16<sup>th</sup> notes of the measure, or playing just the dotted quarter notes.

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Snare Drum, Bass Drum, and Wood Block, across two measures (2 and 3). The time signature is 12/8. The Snare Drum part features a complex rhythmic pattern with accents and a dynamic marking of *mf*. The Bass Drum part provides a steady, grounded rhythm. The Wood Block part consists of sparse, high-pitched accents. The Snare Drum part includes a sequence of rhythmic notations: R R L R L R L R L R L L R L R L R L.

The above passage shows the opening two bars of the piece, including the accompaniment. The shuffle figure of the bass drum part grounds the rhythm, giving the snare drum free reign to syncopate more adventurously. The high-pitched woodblocks provide a contrast, repeating a simple figure sparsely throughout.

With the snare drum as the centre point of these pieces, I approached each accompanying part functionally: what is its role within the piece? In this case, the more grounded rhythmic

<sup>1</sup> See (Curtis, 2022), especially pages 43, 44, 45, and 104.

accompaniment of the bass drum, alongside the consistent backing of the drone, simply provides a base from which the snare drum can play its syncopated phrasing. This all feeds back to the thematic element of the piece, which seeks to evoke feelings of a trance-like meditative state and the insights that may bring.

*Attainment* is an exploration of expectation and subversion. The recognisable and simplistic nature of the **12/8** meter creates an expectation of where we would expect the natural points of emphasis to be, and this expectation is strengthened by the strong, shuffled figure on the bass drum. This expectation is then subverted by the syncopated patterns on the snare drum, creating something of a contrast between the familiar and the unfamiliar. To this end, the snare drum both adheres to and frequently breaks away from, the expected rhythms implied by the meter.

## Performance Considerations

*Attainment* is the only piece in this collection to feature a drone in place of the mid-toned accompaniment. The bass drum and high-pitched woodblock provide contrasting rhythmic accompaniment, while an acoustic drone provides a dark ambience behind it all. This can be achieved by a large gong or tam-tam, or a slow draw over a deep stringed instrument.

A deeper snare drum, or even a field drum, serves this piece best, as the rolled segments are loosely inspired by the traditional piece *Three Camps*. A full-bodied and deeper snare drum tone harks back to the rudimental roots of much of the vocabulary, although a metal drum can give it a more modern twist if desired.

When performing this piece on the snare drum, there are several considerations performers may focus on. Firstly, the extensive use of rolls necessitates a strong double-stroke technique. This is further compounded by the need to retain a generally middling dynamic, such that the accents stand out as much as possible against the constant rolls.

Performers should therefore endeavour to produce the rolls from a lower height than they may normally choose, while still keeping the rolls open and well-articulated; these are not buzz rolls, but low, open double strokes. Ultimately, achieving this is contingent on the control one has developed in their fingers. At this tempo, the fingers are responsible for producing virtually every stroke, with the wrists and arms moving simply to accommodate the movement of the sticks as they rebound from each stroke. The wrists can rotate further to allow room for the larger accents, but it is the fingers that are responsible for the strokes themselves.

The snare drum phrasing is based on syncopating the accents against the underlying meter. This means that the underlying meter should be strongly felt, such that the syncopated accents sound intentional as opposed to random or erratic. The bass drum accompaniment fulfils this role, but soloists should take extra care that they maintain a strong metric pulse to ground their syncopation.

Another feature to observe is the use of closed and open drags together. We find in bar 17 the following figure:



In the third beat of this measure, a closed drag, shown by the grace notes, is followed shortly after by an open drag, shown by the strikethrough on the 16<sup>th</sup> note. The closed drag is to be played *acciaccatura*, with the two strokes of that drag occurring immediately before the 16<sup>th</sup> note they

precede, regardless of the tempo. The open drag on the final 16<sup>th</sup> note of that beat is to be played with a metric value; the strikethrough converts the 16<sup>th</sup> note into two 32<sup>nd</sup> notes, and these are played according to the underlying subdivision of the meter. This produces an effect of changing densities, with a quicker, more condensed drag that is non-metric, followed by one that is open and metric.<sup>2</sup>

On a technical level, both of these drags contain precisely two strokes, both of which should be clearly articulated and produced with the fingers. It would be a mistake to think that the closed drag is produced using a bounce or buzzed motion. Articulation is key, and the fingers produce two strokes, regardless of whether the drag is open or closed; the only difference is in how the drags occur rhythmically.

As described above, the bridge section from bar 18 utilises various measured roll and Swiss triplet figures. The sticking is derived based on the note groupings: a three-note grouping will always use the Swiss triplet sticking; a five-note grouping will always use a 5-stroke roll sticking, and so on. The accent at the beginning of each grouping is always a flam.

This passage can be somewhat challenging at first, perhaps more so than the fast rolls that come before and after. As always, we can appeal to the use of the fingers and the control required to produce the intricate sticking required of this section. However, one of the most important elements here is the level of relaxation across the top of the hand.

When called upon to produce intricate figures at high tempos, the natural inclination of the body is to tense the muscles to overcome any deficiencies with control. Simply put, when the brain and body feel, or even anticipate, a period of difficulty, the muscles tense to try to offset it. We do not want this to happen, as the tension serves to further diminish our control, compounding the problem.

When practising this section slowly, it is helpful to observe the muscles across the top of the hand and around the fingers. The nature of the drags interspersed with the unusual stickings requires total relaxation within the hand, so areas of tension should be spotted and reversed as quickly as possible. Though it is of course difficult to describe a feeling, when performing this section at tempo, the hands have a lightness and ease of movement that come from that cultivated relaxation. The control that comes from dedicated practice allows the movements to happen at speed without the tension, and this is especially true for this passage.

Rhythmically, this piece poses a challenge through its syncopation. The time signature of **12/8** has a very strong, driving rhythm that is further emphasised by the bass drum. However, this is frequently subverted by the syncopated and displaced accents that break the typical rhythms of this meter. Performers may benefit from working with a metronome that produces three- or six-note subdivisions against the dotted quarter note beat, as this will aid with both strengthening one's sense of the beat, as well as their own displacement against it.

## Citations

Curtis, J. (2022). *The Snare Drum Virtuoso*. Nottingham: Artificer Productions.

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<sup>2</sup> I am using the term *metric* here to mean that the notes occur on the underlying subdivision. *Non-metric*, in this case, means that the notes occur immediately before the note that they precede, regardless of the tempo or the underlying subdivision.