

Snare Drum Marches

A Thematic Exploration

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Overview

In this paper, I shall present my ideas pertaining to the march as a musical form. Throughout this project, I have composed ten pieces that I have designated as marches, and so shall take this opportunity to discuss this approach, explore the musical form itself, and examine my pieces in this capacity.

Introduction

The snare drum as a solo instrument has many approaches and concepts. Numerous composers from varying traditions and backgrounds have contributed their work to the instrument's repertoire, and these contributions are as varied as those who wrote them. Pratt's rudimental contributions are synonymous with that style of drumming in the anglophonic world, while the French works of Lefèvre, Gout, and Raynaud, offer a distinctly continental contrast. The orchestral works of Delécluse are perhaps closer in style to Peters than Pratt, yet still influenced the contemporary rudimental works of Tompkins. Becker's work contains many Indian influences, both from the tabla and from the greater classical approach, while some composers take a much more exploratory and contemporary approach, combining the instrument with electronic samples, sound effects, and a great degree of originality.

For this project, having explored many of these composers and their works, I have opted to explore the march format from a solo perspective. Historically, marches began to be notated sometime around the 16th century. Though there exists a strong connection with the military and actual marching, the form soon became a musical style within its own right, with many of the great composers, from Mozart and Beethoven, to Shostakovich and Bernstein, all writing marches, many of which contained entire orchestras and were not limited to the parade ground.

It is this musical style, as opposed to parade ground repertoire, that I am here going to explore, and towards which I aimed my own works in this collection. Marches are characterised by strong, regular, and recognisable rhythmic themes and undoubtedly hark back to the parade ground roots. To this end, my own pieces are built around strong, recognisable accent phrases, with various vocabularic ideas used to decorate and expand upon them. It will be seen that I have moved away from certain traditional standards with these pieces, both in terms of tempos and time signatures, though I have tried to retain enough common ground to allow my pieces to retain the style of march.

Basic Structures

When writing any of these ten pieces, I began by considering the metric foundation. Simply, this means deciding upon the time signature and the subdivision. With these two elements established, accents can be placed in such a way as to form a strong theme indicative of marching itself.

This can be seen easily in the opening measures of *Port Cruinn*:

These four bars show this process in action. With a time signature of 6/8 and a primary subdivision of 16th notes, the metric foundation is set. A strong accent pattern is created over the top of this, forming the opening theme over these early measures. This theme can then be decorated, expanded, and reprised over the rest of the piece.

Though the vocabulary can be simple or complex, the accents themselves remain consistently accessible to the listener.

The above passage from bar 35 shows relatively dense phrasing, including an increased use of the accents. However, across these four bars, representative of the piece as a whole, there is a strong theme which is developed as the passage progresses. We might annotate the phrases as follows:

Above, the phrases are labelled as *a* or *b*, with a variation shown by an apostrophe. The passage opens with a simple *a-b* phrase, with *a* as a simple antecedent, and *b* as the consequent. The second measure repeats this, but with a variation on *b*, labelled as *b'*. When we examine *b* and *b'* together, we find the same 5-stroke roll at the beginning, and the same accents on the fourth and sixth 16th notes of the bar, with *b'* simply adding an extra accented 16th note on the fifth note. This simple addition provides enough variation to *b*, whilst remaining immediately recognisable. The third measure reprises the opening, with *a* playing twice, before the fourth measure resolves the passage. Opening the fourth measure with *b'* recalls the listener's attention to the second measure of the passage, while a final variation of *a*, labelled *a'*, provides a satisfying conclusion, slightly distancing the accents and adding a roll between them.

This form is replicated numerous times throughout the piece, including at the finale:

Above, the final four measures of the piece are shown with annotation added. This follows the same structure as the previous example, including much of the same phrasing. The passage again begins with *a*, one of the recurring themes of the piece, with a new variation of *b*, here called *b''*, to act as that bar's consequent. The second measure reprises the previous example, using the now-familiar *a-b'* phrase. The third measure is again *a-a*, strengthening the theme, with a final variation of *b*, here shown as *b'''*, leading to the resolution at *c*.

Despite the use of rolls and drags, these passages are remarkably similar, adhering to the stylistic characteristics of a strong, regular, and recognisable rhythmic theme.

The piece *Hotspur* both simplifies and expands this concept; simplifies because the phrasing is much simpler, yet expanding upon by the more adventurous use of subdivisions. This is evidenced in the opening passage of the piece:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 2/4 time. The first staff contains four measures of music. The first measure has a triplet of eighth notes (R R L) followed by a quintuplet of eighth notes (R R L L L). The second measure has a triplet (R R L) followed by a quintuplet (R R R L L). The third measure has a sextuplet of eighth notes (R L R L R L) followed by a triplet (R R L). The fourth measure has a triplet (R R L) followed by a quintuplet (R R R L L). The second staff contains three measures. The first measure has a triplet (R R L) followed by a quintuplet (R R L L L). The second measure has a quintuplet (R L L R R L) followed by a triplet (R L L). The third measure has a sextuplet (R L R L R L) followed by another sextuplet (R R L R L). Brackets above the notes indicate the groupings: 3, 5, 3, 5, 6, 3, 5 for the first staff and 3, 5, 5, 3, 6, 6 for the second staff. Below the notes are letters R and L indicating fingerings.

Above, the first four measures of the piece show the same concepts applied as with *Port Cruinn*. The simple time signature indicates two primary beats to the bar, common within the marching style, while a much more uncommon mixed subdivision makes up the phrasing itself. The opening theme begins by dividing each beat into two 8th notes: the first 8th note becomes a 16th note triplet, and the second becomes a 32nd note quintuplet. At first glance, this may seem outlandish, but in actuality, the 32nd note quintuplet is very similar to a 16th note triplet played as a 32nd note roll.

If we consider the rhythmic rates involved, 16th note triplets played as a 32nd note roll comprise six 32nd notes within an 8th note, while the 32nd note quintuplet comprises five. These two subdivisions are adjacent on the rhythm scale, such that their function is nearly identical. Note the final phrase of the fourth measure, which comprises a 16th note sextuplet on the second beat, the final three notes of which are played as a 32nd note roll. These last three rolled notes act as a climactic resolution to the quintuplet rolls early in the passage. They are, in effect, a slightly faster roll than the quintuplets that come before. This gives the end of the bar a sense of emphasised resolution by the changing of the subdivision up one rung on the rhythm scale:

The image shows a single staff of musical notation in 2/4 time. It illustrates the comparison between a 16th note triplet and a 32nd note quintuplet. The first measure contains a triplet of eighth notes (R R L) followed by a quintuplet of eighth notes (R R L L L). The second measure contains a sextuplet of eighth notes (R L R L R L) followed by another sextuplet (R R L R L). Brackets above the notes indicate the groupings: 6, 5, 5. Below the notes are letters R and L indicating fingerings. Below the staff, two brackets indicate the number of notes: '6 notes' under the first sextuplet and '5 notes' under the second quintuplet.

The above example shows this juxtaposition. When considering the underlying 8th notes of the measure, 16th note triplets occupy one 8th note, as do 32nd note quintuplets. If the 16th note triplets are played as 32nd note rolls, as shown here, then within one 8th note, they play six times, while the 32nd note quintuplet only plays five. Shown in this manner, we can see that the use of 32nd note quintuplets in this context is not as outlandish as it seems. In fact, the slightly slower rate of the subdivision makes them significantly easier to play, while the 32nd note roll at the end of the original passage requires a faster roll by the performer.

With that established, we can again examine this opening passage with annotations to show the phrasing:

This annotation shows us the simplicity of the opening theme. Each phrase is one beat in length, and the accent placements are simplistic. The opening phrase at *a* comprises just a single accent on the beat, and forms the basis for the theme. In the second measure, *b* is introduced as an alternate antecedent, placing accents on a sextuple subdivision, before *a* reprises the theme. We could conceive of the first measure itself as the antecedent of an opening phrase, with the second measure its consequent, as mirrored by the phrasing within each measure.

The third measure again begins with *a* as the antecedent, while a variation, *a'*, simply reverses the subdivisions and places the accent on the second 8th note of the beat. The final measure, like the second, begins with *b*, and a second variation of *a*, *a''*, resolves the passage with the change in subdivision to the faster rate.

As a final example to demonstrate this approach, we can explore the opening measure of the piece *Main Battery*:

Possessing one of the more unusual time signatures within the collection, it is, again, deceptively simple. Time signatures are, above all other things, functional, so when faced with an unusual time signature like this, we must first ascertain what its function may be.

18/16 simply states that there are eighteen 16th notes within each measure. By looking at the beam groupings of these 16th notes, we can see that they are arrayed in two groups of nine. This means that there are essentially two beats per bar, each containing nine 16th notes, providing the underlying meter of the piece. The nine-note subdivision is further divided into three groups of three, as shown by the sub beam groups in each beat.

When we explore the structural makeup of this piece, we find a slightly more advanced theme:

18
16

a a' a'' b

3

a* c b' c

The top line of this opening passage comprises three variations of the same phrase, *a*, followed by its resolution, *b*. The second line introduces a new phrase, here called *a**, based heavily on the original *a*. For all intents and purposes, *a** functions the same as *a*, and is based on the same original idea, but features enough variation to count as a separate phrase. The fourth measure, the first that does not begin with some form of *a*, introduces a variation of *b*, before resolving on the same *c* introduced in the previous bar.

We can see that the first three measures all begin with some form of *a* that, despite the subtle variations, essentially expand the same initial phrase. This repetition at the beginning of each measure adds a layer of coherence to the passage, and allows for a recognisable refrain to occur as it progresses. Listeners will hear the repeated accent pattern far more succinctly than the notational variations within.

These examples serve to highlight the simplistic nature of the thematic ideas, despite the differences in vocabulary and metric context. By retaining this simplicity, the listener gains a degree of coherence and familiarity as they recognise repeated phrases throughout the piece. This actually allows for a greater degree of freedom in the vocabulary itself, as the accents anchor this recognition, despite the complexities of the phrasing between.

Rudimental Vocabulary

The use of vocabulary within these pieces draws primarily from the rudimental tradition. The role of the snare drum in a marching context is strongly linked to the development of rudimental drumming, and as such, shares much of the same vocabularic base. We can now consider certain contrasts between the rudimental tradition and the marches of this collection, as, though they are closely linked, they are not identical.

Rudimental compositions, by definition, seek to compose musical ideas through the creative application of the rudiments themselves. Many famous rudimental pieces annotate the score, showing precisely which rudiments have been used to create the phrases for each measure. The very purpose is to apply the rudiments in creative and interesting ways that nevertheless remain idiomatic to the thematic traditions of that style.

Within these marches, though superficially similar, the function and purpose of the application is different.

2
4

9-str. 5-str. 5-str. Flamacue Flamacue

The example above shows a passage from Pratt's *Drum Corps on Parade*,¹ annotated to show the use of rudiments (the individual flams have been left unbracketed). This simple passage flows smoothly, with the main musical idea comprising a simple and idiomatic accent phrase. From a compositional perspective, the order and positioning of the rudiments defines the musical phrase. This is especially notable in the use of the flamacues, which have the effect of syncopating the accent to the second 16th note of the beat; here, the accent's position is completely defined by its place within the flamacue itself.

In contrast, we can consider the following phrase from my own *La Volta*:

The use of rudiments is equally as prominent as in the previous passage, yet its function is distinctly different. Here, the accents come first, and the rudiments are applied in such a way as to retain, emphasise, and decorate that extant accent passage. Compositionally, these marches aim to express accent phrases that are fundamentally *march-like*, expressing strong forwards momentum, and the regular repetition of strong and recognisable accent patterns. The accent phrase shown here continues a theme that is established from the very beginning of the piece. This theme comprises the core musical phrase of *La Volta*, and the rudiments in this passage simply serve to further decorate it.

Analysis through the composer's intentions is inherently difficult, since it cannot be definitively seen in the notation alone. Nevertheless, the rudimental vocabulary is clear, yet its function is distinctly different from a piece that is decidedly rudimental in nature.

The passage above shows the eight-bar segno from my piece *Requisite Precision*, a march in this collection. The use of rudiments is again clear, with the abundant use of drags, flams, flamacues,

¹ (Pratt, 1985), p.4

and measured rolls. However, this passage should not be analysed in a rudimental fashion, but in a way that focuses on the array of accents and the phrases they produce:

Above, the same passage has had its dynamic markings removed for the sake of legibility, and its core phrases bracketed. Seen in this way, we can see the first and third lines match their phrase, as do the second and fourth lines; the former follow a simple four-part phrase labelled *a-d*, while the latter has a second theme running *e-b*. The third line begins with the same *a* as the first, while using variations of *b*, *c*, and *d*, each marked with an apostrophe. The fourth line begins with the same *e* and *f* as a second, before using variations of *g* and *h* in the final bar. For each variation, we need only look to the accents; *g'* is almost identical to *g*, but with the first 16th note removed; *e'* uses a triplet in place of the first two 16th notes of *e*, but is otherwise identical; *b'* removes the diddled strokes from *b*; *d'* adds a 16th note to the rest that begins *d*; and *c'* reverses the sticking and uses a flamacue in place of a drag figure, varying the interim strokes between the accents in *c*. In each case, the accents of the main phrase and its variation are retained.

Though the rudiments are used to form the vocabularic element of the actual notes to be played, they are not the primary focus. The rudiments are instead applied to decorate the accent pattern that defines the musical passage, as shown above.

Meter

Traditional marches generally adhere to common time signatures, the most common being **4/4**, **2/2**, **1/2**, **2/4**, and **6/8**. This is reflected in the rudimental repertoire that developed in tandem with marching music, such that nearly all rudimental pieces are in **2/4**, **4/4**, or **6/8**, reflecting the militaristic roots and functional role. Of the eighteen pieces in Pratt's *Rudimental Solos for Accomplished Drummers*, fourteen are written in **2/4**, three in **6/8**, and one that begins in **2/4** and changes to **6/8** part way through. Of the fourteen in his *14 Modern Contest Solos*, twelve are written in **2/4**, and two in **6/8**.

This undoubtedly reflects the practical nature of march music, with each time signature above containing two principal beats to the bar (doubled to four, in the case of **4/4**) to reflect the binary nature of actual marching.

Within my own collection, I aspired to expand this traditional meter to incorporate less common time signatures, while retaining the air of marching characteristic to the style. Of the ten pieces in this collection, the time signatures run as follows:

- Coldstream Dance: **4/4**
- Hotspur: **2/4**
- La Volta: **3/4**
- Laconic Incision: **10/16**
- Main Battery: **18/16**
- Port Cruinn: **6/8**
- Requisite Precision: **5/4**
- Stunning Repost: **12/8**
- Swing for the Bleachers: **6/8**
- The Highland Sling: **4/4**

This list contains a fair variety of meters, with a few notable examples. *Hotspur*, written in 2/4 but containing ample use of quintuplets, and *Main Battery*, written in 18/16 but comprising two principal beats to the bar, have both been discussed previously in this paper. Of interest here are the pieces *Laconic Incision* in 10/16, *Requisite Precision* in 5/4, and *La Volta* in 3/4.

The easiest of these to understand is *Laconic Incision* which, despite an unusual time signature, retains the two principal beats characteristic of marching music:

Above, the opening measures of *Laconic Incision* demonstrate the two principal beats of the bar comprising two groups of five 16th notes. This is a simple case of manipulating the subdivision within the beat; despite the unusual nature of the five 16th notes, their division into two distinct beats means that the musical idea remains recognisable and accessible. Every beat in the above passage begins with an accent, with other accents falling somewhere within the five-16th note subdivision. This fact means that, despite the complexity of the rhythm within the subdivision, the beat itself remains the primary point of focus.

There are, therefore, only two pieces that break this mould: *La Volta* in 3/4, and *Requisite Precision* in 5/4. We shall begin with the former:

We have previously explored some of the rudimental applications in this piece, but we are here focused on its meter. As the name suggests, *La Volta* is based on a dance similar to a waltz, featuring three principal beats to the bar. In the above passage, the three beats of each measure

The section further demonstrates the use of a reprise to familiarise an unfamiliar rhythmic context. As seen in the previous example, phrases linked by their thematic development occur throughout the section, but all ultimately point towards the larger reprised accent theme as a way to maintain cohesion.