

Songs for Snare Drum

Jhāna

NLPG-00587677

Jonathan Curtis

01.11.2023

Funded by Arts Council England

Overview

In this paper I shall explore the piece *Jhāna*, from my compositional collection. The aim is to show the various techniques used for both its composition and performance, and to explore the various conceptual bases on which it is built.

Introduction

The collection in which *Jhāna* exists is called *Snare Drum Compositions Volume II: Meditations*, and it is this last word that is of interest here. The collection seeks to do a number of things pertinent to the idea of meditation, both from a thematic and compositional perspective.

On the one hand, the pieces use the idea of meditation as a general aesthetic theme, seeking to create a general atmosphere of meditative absorption, and providing a coherent thread running through the five pieces of the collection. On the other hand, the pieces seek to invoke a feeling of meditative concentration in the performer, utilising complex, dense, and challenging vocabulary to create repetitive and evocative phrases.

Jhāna takes its name from the meditative concept of the same name, which describes a deep state of concentration that many meditators seek to attain. It represents something of the concentration required to perform the more difficult passages of the piece, as well as the atmosphere it seeks to create. As with all of the pieces in this collection, *Jhāna* is a snare drum-centric piece, with a three-part unpitched accompaniment. The unpitched accompaniment seeks to further evoke the thematic ideas whilst emphasising and contrasting the snare drum's phrasing.

Basic Structure

Jhāna is written in the time signature of **14/16**, with the tempo given as 8th notes at around 220bpm. Though the piece could be feasibly written in the more common **7/8**, **14/16** more accurately expresses the underlying meter that comprises two groups of seven 16th notes per measure. This can be clearly seen in the opening bar:



The two principle beats of the bar each contain seven 16th notes, setting out the fundamental meter for the rest of the piece. This meter could also have been expressed in **2/4**, but this would necessitate the use of septuplet brackets throughout, and would further miss the point of the functional nature of time signatures.

The piece is structured around five sections, the second and third of which modulate to half-time. This has the effect of maintaining the tempo and meter, but halving the relative speed of the phrases.

18

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

mp *<f* *mp*

The piece modulates to half-time for the first time at bar 18. Above, where previously the 8th notes would occur at ca. 220bpm, they now effectively occur at half that rate. Though the tempo does not technically change, the phrases behave as though either the tempo has halved, or the note values have doubled.

The piece follows a simple structure, alternating between half- and common time throughout the arrangement:

1. Common
2. Half
3. Common
4. Half
5. Common

This allows the sections to function differently, which in turn informs the phrasing within each section. The sections in common time occur at a fast tempo, and so the phrases centre around expressing energy and intensity. The two half-time sections allow for much more space, which is itself contrasted by the use of extremely dense rhythmic ideas.

Thematically, this juxtaposition between fast and intense sections, and slower, more densely complex sections represents the tumultuous elements of jhanic meditation. Meditation can, at times, feel intense, and at other times extremely placid; sometimes dense and complex, and sometimes completely empty and still.

Though it is possible to take thematic metaphors too far within compositional analysis, the very nature of this piece encourages the performer to adopt a calm, still, and concentrated state of mind while performing it. This allows for a calm intensity, rather than a more explosive intensity that other styles of music may cultivate. The speed comes from relaxed control rather than tension and exertion, and this approach is certainly beneficial to those seeking to perform this piece.

Core Vocabulary

The first section of the piece introduces the main theme, to be reprised and developed through later sections. The opening four bars utilise simple measured roll stickings, arranged into numbered groupings. The first note of each grouping is accented and decorated with a flam.

These groupings describe a certain number of notes that begin with an accent: a 7 comprises seven 16th notes, the first of which is accented; a 3 comprises three 16th notes, the first of which is accented. The opening two bars therefore proceed: 7-7-2-2-4-3-3. The twenty-eight 16th notes of the first two bars are so arranged, and this concept provides both the accent pattern that acts as the main musical idea for this section, and the basic sticking for each grouping.

14/16

Flammed measured rolls

3

6

9

12

15

17

Frisé

Frisé

Frisé

Frisé

<f>

The above 17 bars show the opening section to *Jhana*, annotated to show the main vocabularic ideas. The measured-roll idea that begins the piece can be thought of as possessing two variations: odd and even. Odd measured rolls form odd-numbered groupings, and are defined by a single stroke accent followed by double strokes. The even measured rolls define even-numbered groupings, and are based on paradiddle stickings, featuring two single strokes, the first of which is accented, followed by double strokes

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| 3: <u>R</u> LL | 2: RL |
| 5: <u>R</u> LLRR | 4: <u>R</u> LRR |
| 7: <u>R</u> LLRRL | 6: <u>R</u> LRRL |

It will be noticed that the 2- and 3-note groupings within the piece do not follow the stickings listed above for those values. As the accented groupings were decorated using flams, the 2- and 3-note stickings were substituted to incorporate rudimental customs specific to flam-based rudiments. This means that the 2 became a flam-tap, RR or LL with a flam on the first stroke, and the 3 became a Swiss triplet, RRL or LLR, again with a flam on the first stroke (the Swiss triplet sticking was taken and placed in the 16th note context, and not played as actual triplets). This process can be thought of as an expansion of the measured roll concept described above, with

simple substitution made to ease the transition between the shorter flammed groupings. The sticking for the first two bars therefore runs as follows:

RLRRLL RLRRLL RR LL RLRR LLR LLR

Each bold and underlined stroke above denotes a flammed accent.

These sticking ideas have featured heavily in many of my pieces, and allow for the simple creation of accent phrases using numbered groupings. The basic method provides a starting point for the sticking which, as demonstrated here, can be substituted as appropriate to the context.

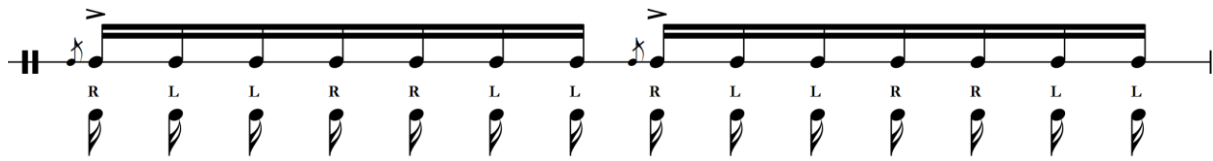
Following the fourth bar, these groupings are broken up by the use of 8th note flams. Where, in the previous passage, the accents had the same 16th note value as the notes that follow, here the accents become 8th notes, introducing a pause after each. This helps to retain the sense of urgency and forward momentum while increasing the emphasis on the accents.

In the above passage, we see a 5-3-3-4-2-2-7 phrase forming the main accent placements. This passage represents both a development of, and brake from, the measured roll sticking concept described above. Each accent at the beginning of each grouping has become an 8th note decorated with a flam, and so the sticking has adjusted accordingly in some instances. The 4-, 5-, and 7-stroke groupings retain their stickings, with the second stroke simply removed to accommodate the pause. However, the consecutive 3s have broken away from the Swiss triplet stickings, and have both strokes played on the same hand. The 2s, likewise, no longer stem from flam-taps as the second 16th note of that grouping has been incorporated into the 8th note. These are therefore played as simple alternating flams.

Half-Time Vocabulary

At bar 18, the piece modulates to half-time for the first time. Effectively halving the tempo, the loss in pace is compensated by the increase in density. Below, the first six bars of the second section demonstrate the dense phrasing made possible by the modulation to half-time. The reduced rhythmic rate allows for 64th notes within each beat, producing short, sharp bursts of rhythm within a spacious context.

When first encountered, this switch to half-time and the rhythms that accompany it can be jarring. In common time, there is a clear connection between the 16th note pulse and the phrasing:



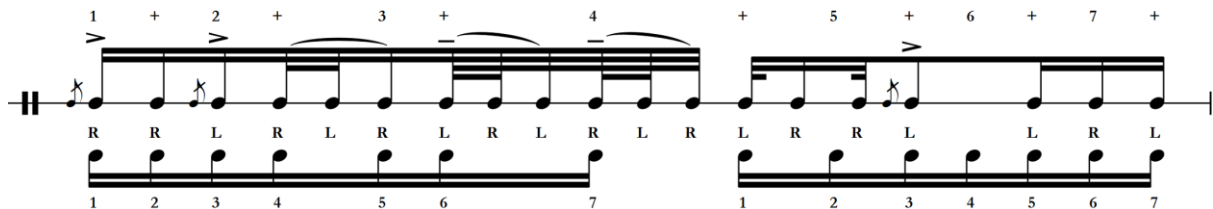
In the half-time sections, this 16th note pulse must be interpreted at half the rate shown above. In essence, the performer must learn to interpret the 16th notes within the rhythm as 8th notes, the 32nd notes as 16th notes, and so on:



From a performance perspective, it can be helpful to count in this manner as well. In the common time example, we may count the individual 16th notes, counting to seven for both principle beats of the measure: 1234567 1234567, giving us a one-to-one ration between the count and the 16th notes themselves.

In the half-time example above, we can mitigate the unfamiliar rhythms by counting in half-time, progressing to seven once across the whole bar, and filling in the gaps with *and*: 1 + 2 + 7 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 +, with 16th notes now occurring on both the numbers and the *ands*.

Though perhaps not practical during actual performance, for the purposes of study and preparation, this bar can be practised by discounting the half-time modulation. This allows us to consider each figure in relation to the underlying 16th note pulse:



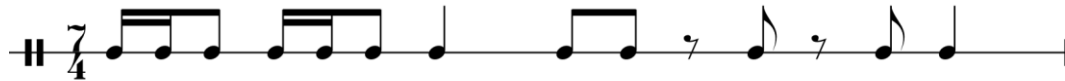
Taken in this manner, the syncopated 32nd note figures and the 64th note flurries can be seen in relation to the underlying pulse, reflective of the piece's first bar. In fact, this approach can be used to work out any rhythm one may encounter, so long as they understand the underlying pulse as described by the time signature.

From a vocabularic perspective, this section utilised frisé figures, as well as 32nd and 64th note syncopation to derive the density. The 64th notes in the example above show consecutive *frisé de 3* to produce the quick bursts, and this is typical of both half-time sections within the piece:



The figure in bar 25, above, shows both of these ideas within the same beat. Two 64th note *frisé de 3* begin the second beat, before the single 32nd note shortly afterwards pushes the subsequent three notes off the beat, syncopating the phrase.

In working with figures such as this, one becomes more adept at extracting the underlying rhythmic idea despite the unfamiliar notation. The bracketed idea, above, looks difficult because the notation used is uncommon. The same rhythm conceived using more common note values seems far less difficult:



Above, the rhythm from the bracketed rhythm has been rewritten using more common note values. 64th notes have been rewritten as 16^{ths}, 32nd notes as 8^{ths}, and 16th notes as quarter notes. The rhythm produced is exactly the same in both cases, but the context in which it appears means that the notes look different. In the bracketed example, the entire rhythm occurs within one beat of the bar, whilst above, it occurs over seven quarter notes. In essence, the performer learns to see equivalent rhythms by looking at the relationship between the different note types, rather than the note types themselves. There is no fundamental difference between 64th and 32nd notes, and 16th and 8th notes; both define a half/double relationship to each other. The only difference is in the context, and how the expressed rhythm relates to the underlying meter.