

Snare Drum Compositions

Volume I



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Foreword

This complex array of snare drum solos by Jonathan Curtis presents a unique combination of challenges for the performer and listener. Beyond requiring an assured technique, Jonathan's thoughtfully crafted pieces demand an understanding of proportion and compositional balance built on mathematical foundations.

The result is a beautiful confluence of intricacy and flow, with carefully placed accents that allow for melodic expression on the drum. There are deep and carefully considered levels involved in these works, which require us to seek to understand the process and logic behind their creation. Mr. Curtis presents us with highly organized music that, in an ideal performance, is completely organic to the ear.

- Joseph Tompkins, New York City, October 2021

Preface

The pieces in this book represent the first five to be produced from my work throughout 2021, for which I received a funding grant from Arts Council England to explore the snare drum as a solo instrument. They draw upon conceptual forms of composition (from mathematical and numerical systems, through to Hindu chanting structures and a heavy French influence), and are exploratory if not experimental. Some of these concepts are laid out in the performance notes at the end of this book.

Being a somewhat simple instrument, the snare drum often finds itself pigeon-holed, whether in a rudimentary military sense, in massed pipes and drums, or tucked away behind an orchestra. This work again represents my attempts to establish it as a solo instrument in its own right. Themes, philosophical concepts, vocabulary from many influences, and my own thoughts and ideas informed every note, accent, and rest placement.

It is fair to say that these pieces are difficult. This is not necessarily by design – I did not set out with the intention of writing *difficult* pieces – but neither did I shy away from it. These pieces are demanding in a number of ways, from the technical facility required to produce the figures, to the mental discipline to stay focused for pieces longer than average for this medium. The student should likewise not shy away from this, but instead embrace the challenge as a part of their own journey.

Students tackling this material must learn to enjoy the journey, because it will be long, arduous, frustrating, and rewarding in equal measure, just as it was for me. These pieces were written, tried, rewritten, and attempted again numerous times over; an approach I liken to a sculptor gradually honing their block into the perfectly crafted final piece. Every sticking choice, note, accent, roll, and tenuto was placed with care, and the attempt to incorporate every minute detail into one's performance should be treated as an exploration rather than anything else.

Musicians, even those with the very best technique, are not robots, and can only give so much to a performance of very demanding music. With everything present in these pieces vying for our attention, we must ultimately put the performance first, within which we simply do our best to adhere to the notes and instructions on the paper.

With the aforementioned attention to detail during the compositional process notwithstanding, anybody attempting these pieces should make them their own, and take responsibility for the performance as a whole, even if that means deviating from the exact instructions on the page from time to time. After all, our individual expression within the performance is what defines us as musicians.

Writing these pieces was a long and difficult process, but also an immensely interesting and enjoyable one. I am enormously grateful to Bob Becker, Rick Dior, Joe Tompkins, Rob Knopper, and Paul Hose, all of whom gave me invaluable advice, input, and feedback during this process.

I hope the reader finds learning and playing these pieces as enjoyable, challenging, and interesting as I did writing them.

- Jonathan Curtis, October 2021

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Introduction

This work presents an answer to the questions surrounding solo composition. Where a solo instrument is concerned, there are various conceptual and philosophical questions for which the composer must present answers: from where do they derive their musical content; does concept outweigh musical coherence; should tradition be respected for its own sake; what is the role of the listener?

Whilst the composer's answers need not be definitive, the composer cannot fail to provide any, whether or not they intend to. By inserting notes into a bar for the sake of musical performance, an answer has been given. A musical idea is not only a statement within the musical language, but a statement as to the very nature of music itself.

These pieces, then, present answers to some these musical questions. Though they are not intended to be definitive, final, or otherwise correct, they are musical pieces which make statements about the nature of music as it applies to the snare drum as a solo instrument. They explore various concepts, both technical and thematic, build on various compositional themes, and represent an ongoing journey through the complexities of this instrument.

Recurring themes within these pieces include the use of number and mathematics (*Dekatria*), the exploration of Hindu chanting structures as musical devices (*Jata Path*, *Isbhvara*, and *Veda*), and the use of rudimental vocabulary within a non-traditional context (*Numinous Measure* and *Isbhvara*).

Rolls and Notation

All rolls within these pieces, whether open or closed, are strictly metered. Open rolls are notated using standard strikethroughs, with each strikethrough representing an additional beam or tail to the extant note. An 8th note with two additional strike throughs equates to an open roll consisting of 32nd notes - a typical rudimental 5-stroke roll. Care should be taken to observe the correct number of strikethroughs. In *Isbhvara* and *Jata Path*, some 8th notes receive three additional strike throughs, indicating a 64th note 9-stroke roll, while some 16th notes receive two, indicating a 64th note 5-stroke roll.

The underlying note value of the closed buzz rolls, notated with a ζ stem, is determined by the tempo of the piece. Closed rolls in *Dekatria* are based on 16th notes, whilst those in *Isbhvara* and *Jata Path* are based on 32nd notes. *Numinous Measure* and *Veda* do not contain closed rolls.

