

Different Drums, Same Groove: A Comparison in the development of Function and Approach between Bodhrán and Jazz Drum Set

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Abstract

Many percussion instruments that accompany other instruments, especially in the Western world, follow a similar development from functioning as “the time-keeper” and pulse of the ensemble to their own independent voice within the group. The path of change and evolution can be seen from percussion instruments in the jazz and rock genres, with the evolution of the drum set; and in the traditional Irish music genre, with the development of the bodhrán. The common development within these styles has little to no influence upon one another, which shows an underlying connection within these collective cultures. This then points towards a common development model for the function of percussion instruments that is effected by the growing acceptance of the instruments, how the music and the listener co-evolve, and an increasing demand for technicality and musicianship as time passes. Such a process is especially highlighted by the similar developments of the function of the drum set in American jazz music and the function of the bodhrán in traditional Irish music. Based on my investigation and analysis of presentations, lectures, interviews, scholarly articles and books, and audio recordings, I have reached the conclusion that the previously mentioned development model exists and creates a link between the functions of these two percussion traditions. The model begins with the origin of how these instruments were used in a celebratory context and then proceeds with four stages that are as follows: the Time-Keeper phase, the Experimental phase, the Virtuositic/Melodic phase, and the Globalization/Fusion phase. This shows a progression of these instruments being used in a very basic manner to gaining an independent voice within the ensemble. This model supports the concept that there is a link in the human understanding of how music develops in the Western world and that the role of the percussionist tends to evolve along a similar path in both the collective culture of Western society and its subcultures.

Keyboards: Percussion, Progression, Function

1. Introduction

The bodhrán is a folk, percussion instrument native to Ireland. Evidence suggests that the instrument developed in the twelfth century or later, but underwent its functional development between the 1960’s to the present.¹ It is a frame-drum with a skinhead, primarily goatskin.² It is usually played with a small wooden stick, known as a tipper or cipin, in one hand, while the other hand holds the drum and applies pressure on the head for pitch variation.³ This instrument plays the role as timekeeper in the Irish session environment. (See Figure 1)

The jazz drum set is the combination of multiple instruments into a cohesive set-up that allows the player to play multiple instruments at one time with ease. It developed from the 1920’s to around the 1960’s.⁴ Jazz drum set grew out of the mixing of musical cultures in the United States, especially the diverse culture found in New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz. It is played with drumsticks or other types of hitting implements and usually consists of a bass

drum with a pedal, high-hat cymbals, a ride cymbal, a snare drum, and an array of tom-toms. The instrument is a central part of the jazz rhythm section. (See Figure 2)

Despite developing at different times, both instruments show similar functional evolutions, underlining the possible connection between the many different types of music and musicians in the Western world. Much of the change in bodhrán playing came from the influence of rock and roll in the later part of the twentieth century. Jazz would have had a limited influence, if any, on the Irish music genre.⁵ Therefore, the similarities found are those of the function of these instruments within their respective genres, not similarities in style or influence between the two.



Figure 1. Seán Ó Riada

Playing bodhrán with Ceoltóirí Chualann.⁶



Figure 2. Chick Webb

Playing drum set with a jazz swing band.⁷

2. Origins

The origins of these instruments are important to consider when beginning a comparison of their change. Both instruments grew out of militaristic and festive musical events. The bodhrán was used in many festivals and marches, including St. Stephen's Day, May Day, and St. Brigid's Day. The Wren Boy's tradition on St. Stephen's Day is one of the most popular of these celebrations where groups of men and boys celebrate with their bands through the streets and homes, finishing with a large party full of music and dancing.⁸

The jazz drum set was also born out of a marching band tradition brought to New Orleans by confederate and U.S. military bands. Before these marching bands developed, the slaves in New Orleans held tribal dances and celebrations from 1817 to 1885, with drumming that would later inspire and become mixed in with the marching tradition.⁹ Between 1900 and 1917, the early bands in the dance halls of Storyville, New Orleans hired a snare drummer and a bass drummer from the marching tradition. Eventually "Dee Dee" Chandler would add a bass pedal with more instruments, creating the drum set.¹⁰ The celebratory origins of both the bodhrán and the drum set laid a foundation from which to build.

Phase 1: Time-Keeper

The first stage of development for both of these instruments is defined by their role as "time-keeper." Since the creation of the bodhrán, it has served this function. Traditional music in Ireland had waned in the early 1900's and was seen as a low-class activity, with little legitimacy as a musical art form.¹¹ This attitude changed in the 1960's. The key person for the change of attitude toward bodhrán and traditional music in Ireland was undoubtedly Seán Ó Riada, who formed the group Ceoltóirí Chualann in the 1960's to perform arranged traditional tunes on a stage instead of the usual environment of house parties and dance halls.¹² This group was broadcasted throughout Ireland and helped the resurgence of traditional music. Ó Riada legitimized the bodhrán along with this style of music by bringing it to the cosmopolitan culture, using his experience as a classical composer to stage and arrange the folk music.¹³ He introduced the bodhrán to Ceoltóirí Chualann, playing it himself in the ensemble.¹⁴ Peadar Mercier of "The Chieftains" once stated, "I think he liked the rhythm of it; he liked the compelling attraction of it and he played it with tremendous skill... he led the group with the bodhrán and that's the one and only time the bodhrán took pride of place over the total ensemble."¹⁵ This legacy of traditional music and bodhrán was furthered by the group The Chieftains, with the bodhrán player Peadar Mercier and later Kevin Conneff. In this early phase, the bodhrán was providing a rhythmic base for the melody players to play on top of, adding some variations and punctuations with the tune as needed.¹⁶ These traits can be heard from Ó Riada playing on the album *Pléaráca An Riadaigh*.¹⁷ The main goal was to drive the tune forward and to aid in its execution with short fills or variations that would highlight the end of phrases and transitions.

Early jazz was known as Dixieland and the drum set played a much similar function in this phase as the bodhrán. It began in the early 1900's in New Orleans at the dance clubs and later spread throughout the city and the South.¹⁸ The Dixieland jazz drummer's role was primarily accompaniment, providing the rhythmic base.¹⁹ The bass drum was key in providing the accents on "one" and "three". Jazz drummer Zutty Singleton recalls, "We just kept the rhythm going and hardly ever took a solo."²⁰ This style can be heard in the first part of a radio series hosted by Loren Schoenberg and Mel Lewis on the history of jazz drumming.²¹ It was not until the jazz scene moved to Chicago in 1917 that drummers began to gain a stronger voice and added more fills and embellishments. This demand for attention was brought on by the aggressive styles of players like Chick Webb and Gene Krupa, whose soloing captured audiences' attention.²² It is clear that in this phase that the bodhrán and the drum set were used to accompany the other musicians or the dancers and were kept in the background because their voice had not yet been developed or accepted.

Phase 2: Experimental

The second stage of the development can be labeled as experimental. Experimentation with sound and style had occurred before this stage, but the voice of these two instruments starts to become more prominent and defined. This happened for the bodhrán around the mid 1970's to the mid 1980's with players like Colm Murphy of De Dannan and Tommy Hayes of Stockton's Wings.²³ The players were known for their driving pulse that brought the drum's sound

to the forefront, much like what Webb and Krupa had done for jazz in Chicago. This period of bodhrán playing was defined by a definite backbeat on beats “two” and “four”, while adding in more syncopated rhythms. The use of hand pressure on the head to change pitch added some tonal variation to help the player follow the contour of the melody, as well as adding short fills and rim clicks.²⁴ Tommy Hayes playing on the album *Take A Chance* by Stockton’s Wings highlights these traits.²⁵ Overall this style was filled with a vibrant, fast paced energy that allowed the drum to take its place in the ensemble, yet it remained primarily a rhythmic foundation.

In the same manner, the jazz drum set was finding its voice in swing music during the 1930’s. The drummers began to have a prominent role with fast and flashy solos and short, but intricate fills, while maintaining a back beat with the newly developed high-hat cymbals.²⁶ During this period, players like Webb and Krupa were moving to the swing style, while moving geographical to New York City.²⁷ Sidney “Big Sid” Catlett, and players like him, started to develop a triplet swing pattern that would drive the beat, using fills and solos to highlight phrases.²⁸ The recording of “Big Sid” Catlett playing in part three of the Schoenberg and Lewis radio series illustrates the use of the swing pattern and fills.²⁹ Buddy Rich, known for his fast hands and technical virtuosity, was the culmination and bridge between this stage and the next. He played fast and filled the space with notes, yet always followed the melody. His technical achievements created a new standard of playing that inspired future drummers.³⁰ At this point, these instruments and players had not yet developed an independent voice, seeing as their goal was still to support the ensemble, but they were no longer just a constant rhythm with which the band could play. Their experimentation shows a creative burst that would be honed with an ever-increasing demand for technical and musical proficiency.

3. Phase 3: Virtuosoic/Melodic

Virtuosity and melodic exploration mark the third stage of development. For the bodhrán, this stage took place in the mid 1980’s with players like Mel Mercier and Frank Torpey. Many non-percussionists may find it interesting that a drum could be melodic, but with pitch and timbre variation, many different “melodies” can be achieved. This period is known for increasing tonal variation with the player following the melody and playing fills much like drum set fills.³¹ Players in this time experimented by playing on many different parts of the drumhead, such as a crack near the rim or a resonant bass tone in the center of the head. There was a growing collaboration between Irish rock musicians and traditional musicians, creating a sound that was traditional, yet with groove that was generated by the combination of bodhrán and guitar.³² The players were still supporting the tune, but infusing the groove from popular rock music: with heavy backbeats, more syncopation, and complex time signatures.³³ The recording of Donnchadh Gough playing on the album *Pure Bodhrán- The Definitive Collection* highlights this style.³⁴ These traits indicate a desire for the bodhrán to be a part of an ensemble, but with an individual voice that adds another dimension to the ensemble’s sound.

This stage in jazz drum set is known as bebop, which occurred in the 1940’s. Bebop incorporates fast tempos in four instead of two due to the advancing technicality and ability of drummers.³⁵ Max Roach was one of the great players of this stage, using many melodic ideas on the drums to highlight the virtuosic playing of his fellow musicians. Shelly Manne loved the melodic aspects of the drums to the point that he tuned his toms to certain pitches. Hard-bop in the late 1950’s showed more syncopation and mixed time signatures.³⁶ Drummers would play “melodies” on the drum set with their fellow band members, supporting and commenting on what was being played. This can be heard in the playing of Max Roach on part four of Schoenberg’s and Lewis’ jazz drumming series.³⁷ In this stage of development both the bodhrán and drum set have reached a point that many would describe as artistic. They are no longer just a rhythmic aid, but an independent voice that both compliments and interacts with the other voices.

4. Phase 4

The fourth stage takes the virtuosity that arose in the third stage and looks outside of the styles for further inspiration. This stage can be described as fusion, as different types of music come together. A growing interest in multi-cultural musical collaboration has been brought about by the increasing globalization of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For the bodhrán, this change started in the mid 1990’s and continues to the present. The style of playing is growing more similar to the style of rock drum set playing, with tonal fills, rim shots, rim clicks, and driving bass rhythms.³⁸ These concepts are seen especially in the playing of John Joe Kelly of the band Flook, who completely emulates a drum set.³⁹ This can be heard on Flook’s album *Flatfish*.⁴⁰ The players were and are still experimenting with different beaters in order to find different sounds. An example of this is the extensive use of rods and brushes

by bodhrán player Martin O’Neill, such as on his album *Martin O’Neill: In Session*.⁴¹ The current stage has also witnessed the combination of bodhrán and other percussion instruments, like cymbals, with the collaboration of trumpet player Neil Yates and bodhrán player Cormac Byrne in their project “Five Countries”.⁴² The use of odd time signatures in traditional Irish music is growing, as Irish musicians are pulling material from cultures like Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe.⁴³ This is heard in the tune “Trip to Kareol” by the band Solas with alternating 7/8 and 6/8 meters.⁴⁴ This fusion stage is continuing as traditional musicians seek different and new sounds.

The jazz drum set took a similar path from the 1960’s to the present. The products of the avante-garde and fusion styles show drummers looking for new ways to approach the instrument, using rock and traits from African, Latin American, and Indian music.⁴⁵ Players are also using advanced independence and polyrhythms to create a multi-layered effect. Many different kinds of instruments are being added to set-ups so that a drummer has a plethora of timbre choices. These traits can be heard on the album *Weather Report* by the band of the same name.⁴⁶ The explorative process continues as the next generation of drummers continues to find the new sound. Both genres of jazz and traditional Irish music are seeking different mediums for the musicians to express themselves.

5. Conclusions

The bodhrán and the jazz drum set underwent massive changes during the twentieth century as musicians experimented. Everything relates back to what Colm Murphy and Mel Lewis, accomplished drummers in these styles, state about good playing. The common belief is that the tune comes first and that a drummer needs to listen to know what to play.⁴⁷ It is following those principles that the players throughout the history of these instruments have helped to develop the instrument. These artists use their creativity combined with intentional listening of their fellow musicians to highlight and support the music that is being made, driving development.

The fact that both of these instruments followed a similar path shows a link in the human understanding of how music and the role of the percussionist develop in the Western world. The cause may stem from a psychological or physical need in the culture and provides another avenue for future research. Further comparisons of other percussion instruments in different styles may lead to clearer understandings of the purpose and origin for such a progression. Analyzing and being aware of the progression from “time-keeper” to “independent voice” allows the listener to appreciate the artistry of every stage, as well as gives them a context to listen to percussion instruments in all styles at any point in their development. This enriched listening may also lead to further discoveries, connections, and insights across styles of music. For now it is clear that this progression exists and has given rise to beautiful music and musicians.

6. Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his appreciation to the University College of Cork for the lectures and experiences that have inspired and informed this paper, as well as his fellow bodhrán and drum set colleagues. He would also like to thank his faculty research advisor Dr. Reeves Shulstad for her endless support during the research process. Finally, he would like to thank his family, friends, and fellow lovers of Irish and jazz music for their support in this research endeavor.

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