

CHAPTER 1: THE DJEMBE ENSEMBLE

DJEMBE *pronounced Jembay*

The Djembe is the most popular drum of West Africa. It is usually carved from a hardwood tree by hand. The top has a goatskin or antelope skin head that is tightened with the use of metal hoops and rope. Early Djembes used pegs for tuning. The skin is soaked in water to make pliable, and stretched over the top opening of the drum. Pegs are inserted in the sides of the drum through the skin and pounded into the hole to further stretch the skin. After the skin dries it becomes quite tight. Rope tension is an ingenious system for tuning, and is the next progression in the advancement of tuning in drums. Today some companies make Djembes that have modern tuning, but I do not suggest them to serious players for the simple reason they do not

sound authentic. However, for the High School Curriculum they are quite handy because they are easy to tune and usually have synthetic heads so they do not have the humidity problems that a natural skin has. The top of the Djembe is typically between "12-15" in diameter, and the bottom 5-8" in diameter and it stands "22 -28" in height. A solo drum is tuned very tight and high in pitch where as the accompaniment drums are tuned looser and lower in pitch. A typical Djembe ensemble will have 5-10 Djembe players. These players will have certain roles and rhythmic parts. 1 or 2 of the players will be soloists, and 1 of those soloists will be the conductor of the group and he will give all the cues for the drummers and dancers to move to the next section of music. The actual leader of the group is often times an elder. The other Djembe players will play accompaniment parts, usually 2 to 3 rhythmic parts split among them. In Djembe music there are common cues and rhythms that an experienced Djembe player will know. All these drum parts interlock and form an even stronger sound: the ol'

"sum is greater than it's parts." But we are not even close to finished. Now let's look at the bass drums of the Djembe ensemble.

DOUN DOUN pronounced Doon Doon

We add the Doun Douns... the bass drums of the Djembe ensemble. They supply a repetitive bass line that is usually played between 3 drums, but sometimes as many as 5-6 drums. The rhythm of the Doun Douns will usually be the determining factor on what the song/rhythm is. For example, some songs will have the same Djembe rhythm as another, but have a different Doun Doun part. To become a good Djembe player, one must also know

the Doun Douns. The Doun Douns are double headed, carved out of a hardwood tree, with cowskin stretched and tightened in a similar manner as the Djembe. Cowskin is used because the Doun Douns are played with a heavy stick, and cowskin is thicker and stronger than goatskin. The 3 Doun Doun's are named...from larger to smaller.... Doun Doun, Sangba, and Kenkeni. The Doun Doun is usually about 16-20" in diameter and 2'-3' in length. The Sangba is smaller, and the Kenkeni is even smaller. The sizes are not set in stone. As in many cultures, what is available and handy is often used.

BELLS

The bells used in Djembe music vary from region to region, as do many aspects of Djembe music. In The Gambia the bells are not stressed as much as they are in Guinea. Ghana has possibly the most

elaborate of bell music in West Africa. Later in the book we will learn a Ghana rhythm that uses as many as 6 tuned bells. Some of these bells resemble a cowbell, and some can be as simple as a piece of metal pipe. Generally speaking, West Africa is extremely poor and many times what is available is used as percussion. This is common to many cultures.

SHAKERS

Shakers can vary from metal shakers to calabash gourds with beads affixed around the outside. Sometimes various seed pods are also used. One thing I have learned over the years in West Africa is they like buzz sound in the music. Djembes

sometimes have metal razz-plates that buzz when you strike the drum. The balafon... or the African xylophone... often has buzzers underneath the keys so when a key is struck it buzzes. This is created by making holes in the gourds underneath the keys, and glueing thin plastic over the holes. The keys are struck with rubber mallets. When the key is struck air is pushed down into the gourd and makes the thin plastic buzz. Some say that the reason for the buzz is amplification. It absolutely does work in amplifying the sound. It also gives melodic instruments, such as the balafon, some of the timbre of the human voice. Anyhow, back to shakers. Often times the shaker is played by a newer younger member of the group or a woman who is also singing, and the rhythm is very basic, such as playing the pulse. In other cases the shaker part can be very involved and require a very experienced player. One thing for sure, simple or elaborate, it adds another color and timbre to the music.

VOICE

All of the music that we are considering has songs that are sung, usually by the women. They sing about history, famous people in their tribe, moral lessons, love, etc. It is the job of certain members of the tribe... Griots... to keep these traditions and stories. Most of them were not written down and it is the job even today for the Griots, or Jalibas, to pass on all these songs. Jalibas commonly play Kora... a harp like instrument, Ngons and Balafon. The Ngon is known to be the predecessor to the banjo. In West Africa one is born into a musical family. These families are known for their instruments by their last name. For example the last name Camara is a Djembe family name. In Balafon Kouyate and Mane are some family names. In Wolof Sabar you also have certain names such as Faye and Diaye. But the message of the Griot/Jaliba is not always serious.

One song from the Mandinka tribe... Forday... is about
an old man with one tooth who smokes too much!
All cultures have their funny songs too.

NOTATION

For the drumming we will use common music notation, however we will use different symbols to indicate strokes. We will not use a staff for the drumming hence it is not needed. For the Balafon and Vocal notation we will use common notation on a staff.

DJEMBE NOTATION

Bass stroke



Tone stroke



Slap stroke



SABAR NOTATION

I have never seen Sabar notation before.... so I made this notation using some of the common Djembe symbols, and added others for the stick strokes. I used to use 'X' for the slap on the Djembe, but now I use a '◇' and 'X' is for all stick strokes. Remember, Sabar is not ordinarily notated, and we educators have not settled on a definitive way, so you may see it written many different ways.

Bass stroke 

Tone stroke 

Slap stroke 

Stick stroke open 

Stick stroke closed 

Stick stroke muffled 

Stick on rim 

DOUN DOUN

The Doun Douns are played with a large stick. They are struck in the middle of the skin on one side only. Some Doun Doun players play more than 3 drums and they use a stick in each hand. Other Doun Doun players may play 2-3 drums with one stick, and play a bell with the other using a much smaller stick or even a nail. In Guinea there are 3 Doun Doun players... First plays the Doun Doun and a bell, 2nd plays the Sangba and a bell, and the 3rd plays the Kenkeni and a bell. We won't use a staff but rather the Doun will be the lowest, next Sangba, next Kenkeni. We will use One or two students on the Doun and Sangba, and one on the Kenkeni.

KENKENI
SANGBA
DOUN DOUN



BALAFON & VOICE

Balafon will be notated with normal common notation.

** A note on the words to the songs and spelling. I know in Gambia I could have 10 people write the same word differently so I decided long ago to use phonetic spelling.*

HOLDING THE DJEMBE WHILE SITTING

Tilt the top of the drum away from you in order to open up the bottom and let the sound come out. Wrap one leg around drum to hold in place. You should be free to play with both hands.

HOLDING THE DJEMBE WHILE STANDING

Traditionally a Djembe player stands up and plays using a strap slung over the shoulders to hold the drum between his legs. Today we also have the option of a Djembe stand. I would suggest sitting and getting some time on the Djembe before standing up.

3 STROKES ON THE DJEMBE

BASS STROKE



The bass stroke is the deepest fullest sound on

the Djembe. Use the heel/ palm of the hand and strike the drum in a downward motion, keeping the fingers up. One teacher once told me to think of the bass stroke as like landing a plane... keep the nose... ends of fingers... up! Let's try some bass strokes...

TONE STROKE



The tone is played with fingers together and the drum is struck near the edge. Your ear will determine when you get a good tone stroke, as with all the strokes, the ear is the deciding factor. Think about keeping your pinky about 1/2" onto the drum. If you are too far back, it will sound 'tinny'... and if you are too far in on the drum, it will sound muffled. My teacher once told me to think of the tone stroke as like 'patting' the drum. It seemed to help a lot. Let's try some tone strokes...

SLAP STROKE



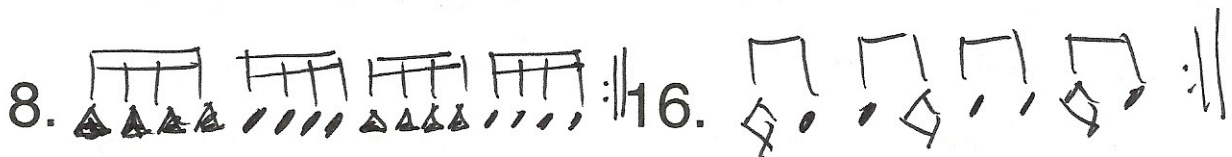
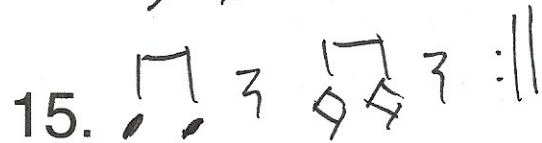
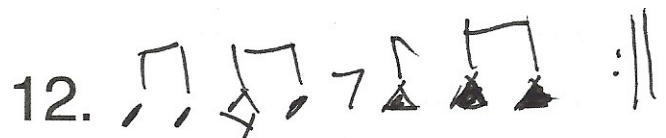
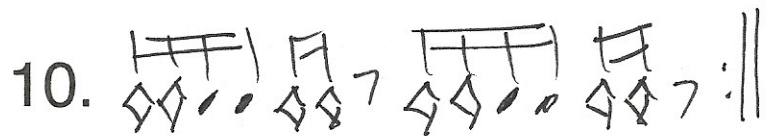
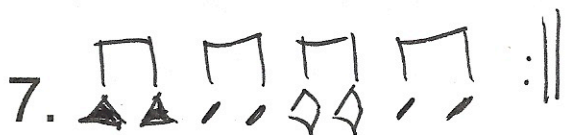
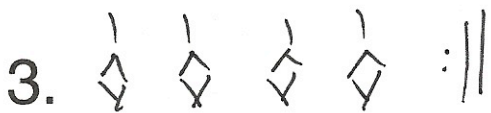
This is the one that hurts... at first. It's a very aggressive sharp sound that frankly takes a long time to develop. I like to start at the tone stroke position and move my hand in... get real loose and floppy, open the fingers and use a whip-like motion striking the drum. The heel of the hand is against the edge of the drum and actually 'lands' first... with the ends of the fingers striking the drum to create a very sharp sound. At first it's important to not hurt yourself. I've seen many blood blisters appear on beginners hands. Be careful! Let's try some slaps.

Note: I have seen many great Djembe players and none of them strikes the drum exactly the same. The point is there is a desired sound for each of these strokes, and we want to strive for that. A slight variation in hand position is not uncommon.

BASS, TONE AND SLAP EXERCISES

These exercises are designed to get your hands moving properly and work out any coordination issues. Hey, let's face it, some of this stuff is not easy! Always go slow when learning a new exercise. The key is not speed, but smooth movement and good sounds. You will find that going from one stroke to another will provide additional challenges in getting a good sound. We can work on speed and endurance later. Don't forget to use a metronome and tap your foot. I've seen many beginners who only do well when playing 'along'. Make sure you can also play these alone without relying on someone else. When you can do that, you will be able to play along with others even better. Get together with fellow classmates and work together. Also play each exercise a certain number of times... I suggest any multiple of 4... so you can work on your counting phrases as well as your stroke. Oh yes... we have a lot of work to do... but it's fun work!

Bass, Tone, and Slap Exercises



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TRANSCRIBE in CLASS¹⁸

More Bass, Tone, and Slap Exercises

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