

# Styles of Play for the Bodhrán



## Traditional Styles

On 1 May, 1995, I attended a workshop taught by [Tommy Hayes](#). In the course of the class, Hayes described the various styles of bodhrán play used in Irish traditional music. Hayes identified three hand styles and five stick styles. Hand styles are those which do not use a stick: The drum is played directly with the hand. Stick styles, as you may have guessed, are those which use a stick. A fourth hand style, described below, is used by [Jesse Winch](#). Most of the original regional styles have died out, but new twists are appearing.

## Hand Styles

Two of three hand styles are quite similar. In **Roscommon style**, the drum is played with the back of the knuckles of the hand. Hold the drum with your left hand, resting on your left knee, as I've described [elsewhere](#). Hold your hand loosely open, with the fingers have curved. Bend your wrist slightly, so that your knuckles lie in a plane parallel to the drumhead; move your forearm up and down in small motions, allowing your wrist to flop loosely. Strike the skin with your knuckles. You should get one beat with each downstroke, one with each upstroke; rolls are produced by moving your hand twice as fast. This style is easily combined with **Clare style**, which differs only in using just the index finger. Close your other fingers and leave your index finger half extended, and play as described above. By alternating between one and several fingers, you can vary the tone of the beats. Hayes noted that this style works particularly well on a drum with jingles set into the rim, like a tambourine; indeed, it is quite similar to several hand-drumming styles from the Middle East, central Asia, and South America. At a concert in August 1995, I saw [Johnny McDonagh](#) play several songs with these hand styles; they produced a softer tone than a stick.

The third hand style is completely different. Tommy Hayes learned it from a drummer from West Cork, who in turn said he'd learned it from a old man in his town. But [Mícháel O Súilleabháin](#) does not believe it to be a traditional style; it certainly bears a striking (sorry!) resemblance to some techniques used in Middle Eastern drumming. Wherever it originates, it works beautifully. Place the drum vertically in your lap, with the skin facing away from you, and lean the top edge of the drum back against your chest. Hold one hand in front of the drum, palm inward, with the middle three fingers curled under, and the pinkie and thumb crooked. Play the drum by rotating your forearm and striking the drum alternately with the knuckle of your thumb and the back of the last knuckle of your pinkie. To get a roll, add an additional beat with the thumb on the upstroke. Played well, this method produces a very soft, even rhythm. It also leaves the left hand completely free to add beats, slaps, etc.

I saw another hand style used by [Jesse Winch](#) at a recent concert. He places the drum across his lap, as in the previous style, leaning against his body. He holds his hands in front of the skin, palms toward his body, and plays the drum with the fingers and thumbs of both hands, in a manner similar to many styles on the *tar* or tambourine.

## Stick Styles

The most common style of play is the **Kerry style**, with a two-headed stick played obliquely to the drumhead, the main beat produced with the lower head and the upper head used for rolls and ornamentation. This is the

style I've described [elsewhere](#). But there are several other styles, which produce slightly different tones and rhythms.

In the oldest stick style, still found today in Waterford, a thong is tied around the middle of the beater and twist around the middle or index finger, so that the stick hangs perpendicular to the fingers. The hand and arms are used much as in the Kerry style. This style tends to be very loud and allows very little fine control. It is not used in musical performance.

More useful and more common is the **single-headed** or **West Limerick style**. A short stick is held by one end, sticking straight out from the palm, like you hold the stick shift of a car. Alternately, the stick can be braced between the lower jointed of two fingers. The hand and arms are used as in the Kerry style, and the open end of the stick is swung across the head to strike once in each direction. Rolls are accomplished, once again, by increasing the speed of the hand.

The Scots developed a unique style, which might be called **tambour technique**, using the name of the Scottish framedrum. In this technique, the center of the stick is gripped in the fist (or by fewer fingers in the same position). The hand and forearm are rotated to allow alternate ends of the stick to strike the skin directly. In this style, it is possible to play very fast, very easily; but in the long run, it seems to provide less control than the Kerry method.

Finally, [Tommy Hayes](#) has developed his own, unique style. I don't entirely understand it, so my explanation is likely to be utterly confusing. You can probably learn more from Hayes' [video](#). The stick is held between the tip of the thumb and the crease of the first knuckle of the index finger, with the top of the stick tilted slightly away from the hand. The other fingers curl into the palm, so that the outside of the middle finger rests against the stick. The drum is played by flicking out the middle finger, so that the upper end of the stick snap back and into the skin; this is the first beat. The middle finger is closed, allowing the pressure of the thumb to snap the stick back, flicking the lower end against the skin; this is the second beat. Note that there is no follow-through, and the forearm does not move; the hand rotates slightly as the fingers control the stick. To produce a roll, the hand is turned toward the skin about fifteen degrees, so that the upper end of the stick can strike twice before the lower stroke.

Hayes developed this style entirely on his own, never having played another style. He admits freely that it is a devilment to learn his style after becoming proficient with any other. He believes that his approach allows him to play much faster, very precisely, and thus to play much more complex rhythms. But because the stick snaps into the skin, there is less bounce and he gets a sharper, less resonant tone.

## Using the left hand for pitch and tone control

In most styles, your left hand is held against the back of the drum, free to be used as you see fit. Most commonly, players press their hand against the skin in various ways to modify the pitch and tone of the drum. A flat palm held against the skin will dampen the sound, producing a flatter, duller tone. The edge of your hand pressed into the skin will make it ring; by varying the pressure and position of your hand, you can change the pitch by an octave or more. A good exercise is to play regular sets of four beats, and alternate among a flat palm against the upper edge of the skin, the inner edge of your hand pressed against the top edge of the skin, the outer edge of your hand pressed against the middle of the skin, and an open skin, allowed to ring freely. These four tones are the basic tools you have available.

## Tricks and Gimmicks

Bodhrán players have developed many ways to add to their repertoire. These are just the most common ones.

## Playing the rim

There are two methods of playing the rim of the drum. The older method, which probably dates back hundreds of years, is to turn the drum sideways and play on the surface of the rim, just as you would play on the skin. More recently, [Johnny McDonagh](#) developed the **rim shot**: Occasional beats are played on the edge of the skin where it passes over the rim or on the very edge of the rim. (Note that this method can damage the drumhead by cutting it against the corner of the rim. If your drumskin passes over a sharp corner when it reaches the rim, I suggest that you do not try rim shots.) Rim shots can be thrown into any rhythm; here are two common approaches. In a jig, many drummers add a rim shot on the fourth beat of the six-beat rhythm, which is the second accented beat. This beat is usually an upstroke, so the rim shot is produced by sharply striking the bottom edge of the rim as the beater swing upward. Of course, any upstroke can become a rim shot in the same manner. In a reel, it is more common to put a rim shot on the downstroke, by striking the upper quarter of the rim close to the body. If you move the drum slightly away from your body, you can play rimshots on both the up- and downstrokes, and freely mix rim shots with normal beats.

## Brush stick

The first bodhránist to play with a brush was [Johnny McDonagh](#), who still uses a narrow hair-brush with soft bristles pointing outward on all sides of a cylindrical shaft.



The double-headed brush stick was invented by [Jim Sutherland](#). It is simply two soft drum brushes connected to the ends of a short, stout stick, and it is played exactly like any other bodhrán beater. The drum is struck with the brushes instead of the heads of a beater, producing a lovely soft sound. Sutherland used it to get a jazz feel on swing music played by [Easy Club](#). [Ken Larson](#) makes [brush sticks](#); the picture here is one of his sticks. [Mance Grady](#) makes brush sticks, too; the ones I saw had shorter, stiffer brushes.

## Shakers, jingles, and bells

You can produce a variety of special effects with shakers and bells. A large tambourine could be played like a bodhrán, with the jingles providing interesting effects. [Jesse Winch](#) ties bells to the crossbars of his drum and then bounces it as he plays, to add a jingling to his rhythms. You could produce a similar sound by wearing bells on your ankle or shaking them with your left hand. A shaker can be used in a similar manner, held in either hand. I've found that holding a shaker in my beater hand produces a nice counterpoint to the rhythm.

## Other use of the left hand

Since the left hand is free to move in most styles, it can be used in other ways that simply to damp the skin. Middle Eastern framedrum styles offer a large range of techniques for slapping, snapping, and striking the skin to produce different tones; there is no reason that these methods cannot be combined with traditional bodhrán technique. They may not be well received at some sessions; be sure you practice them carefully in private before unveiling them in public.

[Mance Grady](#) invented the *slide bar*, which is used on the back side of the head to change the pitch and to move quickly from one part of the drum to another with no adhesion to the skin. Grady holds a patent on the slide bar (also called a *back slide*) and no doubt would be happy to [make](#) one for you. [Lark in the Morning](#) offers one version for sale; I have a [picture](#) of their model.

## Non-traditional Methods

Musicians in genres other than Irish traditional music have adapted the bodhrán to their needs. In particular, the bodhrán is quite popular among [Middle Eastern percussionists](#), perhaps because of its similarity to the *tar*. In this style, the drum is held upright in front of the body, skin outward, with one hand supporting the drum from below. A traditional tar has a hole or semi-circular notch cut into the frame to allow the drummer to anchor it with his thumb. The drum is then played with the fingers of both hands. [Glen Velez](#) is one of the top practitioners of this style. Some traditional bodhrán players have found that this style allows them to play some rhythms more easily than the traditional stick styles; polkas are particularly hard to accompany with a stick, but are relatively easy to play with both hands on the surface of the drum.

The bodhrán is also used in other genres:

- Classical music: [Maxwell Davies' Symphony No. 5](#)
- Contradance music:
  - [Hillbillies from Mars](#)
  - [Swallowtail](#)
- Folk: John Lionarons, Philadelphia, PA
- Rock:
  - [Jim Sutherland](#)
  - [Johnny McDonagh](#)
  - [Cordelia's Dad](#)
- World music: Tammerlin (formerly Tory Voodoo)

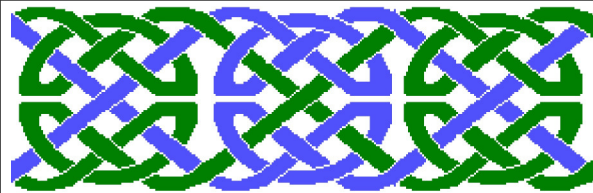


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