



# YAMAHA

## Educator Series

PERCUSSION



*Barry Larkin*

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## Traditional Grip: The Other Percussion Embouchure

*By Barry Larkin*

After teaching at the university level for fourteen years, I am quite surprised at the longevity of the traditional grip and its resurgence during the last quarter of the twentieth century. For the past few years, many of my private students have been asking for instruction in this grip style without having any understanding of its origins. Subsequently, I decided to begin the study and practice of traditional grip in order to understand its appeal to my students, to gain better ability to communicate with and write for the Iowa State University drumline, and to have some fun. What follows are my observations concerning the current use of the traditional grip, some revelations I have made, and advice I now give to music educators.

Like many other percussionists from my generation, my first view of the traditional grip was during a local parade in the late Fifties. The memory is vague but the impression of those drummers and of that wonderful "thunder" is still very fresh in my mind. Several years later, my father bought a drumset and proceeded to do his best impressions of Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich all the while using traditional grip. My older brother used the set during his "garage band phase" and I remember going to outdoor jam sessions with him where everyone played traditional. It never occurred to me that there was any other way of playing. At the age of fourteen, my interest in percussion resulted in six brief months of lessons using traditional grip, but I did not begin formal study until I was in college.

My studies at Arizona State University with Mervin Britton focused on matched grip. When I asked about traditional, he explained its origins as follows: When early military leaders decided to incorporate the beating of drums into their arsenal, they simply tied a rope around one of the tension rods (or tensioning ropes) in order to carry the drum. Unfortunately, in this position the drum will either fall between the performer's legs (very undesirable when marching) or off to one side. If the rope or strap is slung over the right shoulder, the drum will fall to performer's left side, and the batter head will be at approximately a 45-degree angle to the ground. Playing matched grip with the drum in this position will cause the performer to hold the left arm up with the elbow parallel to the ground. Anyone who has tried this knows that the result is a very sore upper left arm and shoulder. The same stick angle can be maintained by simply moving the left arm to what is now called the "traditional grip"—a far more comfortable position.

In the Sixties and Seventies what became known as the "Total Percussion Movement" aimed to get students to play mallets, timpani, and snare with a more standardized "matched grip." At this time, from an educational point of view, this made sense to me, and I joined the ranks of many who believed that use of the traditional grip would eventually die out.



*Barry Larkin*

As I later began studies with Mark Sunkett (a former Marine Band snare drummer) we had several discussions about traditional grip. He made me aware that because of the proud heritage of drumming in the military, the use of traditional grip would most likely continue to be practiced and be taught for historical preservation. During these years, I studied the standard rudimental literature and marched with the Arizona State University Marching Band. We marched matched grip using a high stepping sling system that held the drum in front of the performer. As the years went on, I had little contact with traditional grip freelancing in the Phoenix area except when I would be on a gig with an older drummer who played that way. It seemed that the traditional grip was dying out and there was little need for it to be incorporated into my quiver of techniques...that was until 1984 and my first college job.

When I became the first full-time percussion professor at Stephen F. Austin University, I was introduced to the world of Drum Corps International through one of my students, Keith Mallory. Keith had raw power, strength, and endurance in his left hand and arm beyond anything I had ever seen. Later, while teaching at East Tennessee State University I was again exposed to students who were former members of the Madison Scouts. I attended my first DCI show in the summer of 1991 and was astounded, not only at the playing but also by the fact that every snare drummer used traditional grip. I eventually decided to learn this technique for myself; purchased my Yamaha SFZ marching snare and started practicing. The result of my adventures into the world of traditional grip has given me new insights into: 1.) my attitude toward marching percussion 2.) my personal playing and 3.) my own teaching philosophies.

Time spent strengthening the left hand for traditional work spilled over into all aspects of my technique. Tambourine rolls are quickly improved if you use your left hand as I do and my one-handed marimba rolls have gone through a developmental revolution. What I have gained in ability on drumset would take another article to cover. In the beginning, the goal was to learn and gain appreciation for a new technique. What resulted was a new respect for this historical grip and the style of playing that now surrounds it.

As a result, I no longer quickly dismiss traditional grip as I once did but strive to have my students understand its role in the past and present. What was first developed to overcome a logistical problem, is now a firmly established technique in the quilt of our history. Discussion and teaching of traditional grip is now part of the Iowa State percussion studio and percussion methods class. I am now able to analyze problems based on my personal experience with the grip and relate it to other ideas and techniques.

In conclusion, I challenge music educators everywhere to think of traditional grip as another embouchure, just as a flutist switches from flute to piccolo or a trumpeter moves from trumpet to cornet. It is not only a technique but also one of many styles that if nothing else, should be embraced for its role in history. A hundred years from now historical groups in Washington D.C. may still be playing as they did during the Revolutionary War. World Class drum corps will most probably continue to inspire countless numbers of young people to take up this technique. To these young students the traditional grips feels and looks "cool." They don't care that it only uses four muscles to matched grip's nine, they don't care why it evolved but if it inspires passion for playing, I am all for it. Don't worry if you think your concert chops will suffer. I am the principal percussionist for the Des Moines Symphony and the left hand part of the "Scheherazade" snare excerpt has never sounded better.

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