

Exploring Maracas:  
A Practical Guide for the Beginning Maraca Player

By Brad Meyer

## Introduction

Almost every percussionist has been faced with playing a pair of maracas in their life, whether it was for solo music such as Javier Alvarez's *Temazcal* or David Hollinden's *Slender Beams of Solid Rhythm*, in the band or orchestra, or at a jam session with friends. This article is geared towards turning the awkward feeling of shaking a maraca like a tube shaker into the joy of expressing simple to intermediate maraca patterns with the use of nontraditional terminology as a way to convey the optimal mental picture of how to perform the different patterns. So, no more delegating the "easy" maraca part to the lowest chair player in your section, let's grab the maracas and give the audience something special to remember!

## Body Position and Grip

The first thing to do when starting to play the maracas is learning the correct grip, and since there has been no universal standardization of how to do this, there are numerous techniques in regards to holding maracas. I approach the maracas like I approach any other implement or held instrument; I believe the grip should be a direct reflection of the relaxed hand position. With this in mind, relax the hand down to your side, and then raise it up till a flat surface is made between the thumb and the first finger. Here is where the bottom of the



Figure 1



Figure 2

maraca's head will rest. You will notice in the picture below that the handle of the maraca falls between the inner side of my thumb and the flat area just after the first knuckle of my first finger. The handle of the maraca should be pointing down in a perpendicular angle with the floor; this will be called "vertical position." Vertical position is shown in both Figure 1 and Figure 2. With that in mind, the rest of the hand should just curl loosely in a relaxed position around the handle of the

maracas. The handle will be in a slight diagonal across the fingers starting just in front of the knuckle of your first finger and will go down to the pinky finger's last pad. This position can be thought of as home base and will be the position of rest when holding the maracas. The "horizontal position" will refer to holding the maraca in the standard "match-grip" position, which is the same technique that is used when holding sticks or mallets.

Lastly, you want to make sure that your arms stay relaxed and your elbows are ever so slightly behind your body, this can be seen in Figure 3. Make sure you are careful to not let your shoulders rise up in an awkward, tense manner. You should feel almost as if you are rubbing your stomach with the heads of the maracas when you play in the vertical position. This economic and relaxed stance will help prevent muscle fatigue in the arms and shoulders.



Figure 3

## FUNDAMENTALS

The most important concept to understand about maracas and how to play them deals with the reality that they can have two sounds per stroke, one when they move up and one when they move down. This is due to the materials inside the maraca (whether it be beans, rice, etc.) hitting the top of the maraca before it hits the bottom. A performer cannot simply play a

maraca in the same fashion as playing a drum with a stick because this type of playing ignores the sound that occurs on the upstroke when playing maracas.

### The Single-Shot

There is a technique, which I call the “single-shot,” where one can quickly jerk a maraca down less than one inch to get a single sound. This can be done in either the vertical or horizontal playing position. The single-shot is how we will start some of our patterns; this way we do not get the extra “chick” sound that comes from raising the maraca up and the beads material inside the maraca hitting the top of the maraca before coming down for the first main note of a pattern. You will notice that though the sound happens quickly after you perform the single-shot gesture, it is not an immediate response like you would get after hitting a stick on a drum. The delayed response is something you will want to consider when playing with other performers so that you can be accurate as the time-keeper in your group. The single-shot can also be an effective way of playing slower rhythms where that only require one note at a time such as orchestral and band music.

### The Shuffle

The “shuffle” is a simple up and down motion with the maraca in the vertical position. It is easiest to describe by taking a maraca and playing quarter notes in the vertical position at 130 bpm as if you were hitting the bottom of the handle on an imaginary drum every beat. You will notice that the maraca has the upbeat sound before the main downbeat where the material hits the top of the maraca. This should create a triplet rhythm where the downward sound is the downbeat and the upward sound is the third partial of a triplet. Drumset players will recognize this rhythm as sounding similar to the standard shuffle pattern, thus I call this pattern the “shuffle” pattern. To practice creating your maraca sounds, practice with just one hand at a time, therefore giving all your attention to creating the correct rhythm as well as an articulate sound for both the upbeat and downbeat. The shuffle pattern is one of the most fundamental parts of playing more intricate maraca patterns. It should also be noted that these patterns do not work well at slow tempi, but for the sake of practicing, do practice the rhythms and patterns in this article at moderately slow tempi (around 80 bpm) as well as fast tempi (190 bpm and faster). When you play slowly, use larger motions to aid the maracas in making a sharp “chick” sound, and then when you increase the tempo, use smaller, economic motions to prevent muscle fatigue and increase endurance.

### The Ball-Toss Stroke

Now that you know the motion to perform the shuffle rhythm, let us work on playing with that same motion as the shuffle, but instead of playing in the vertical position, let us raise the maraca close to eye level with the handle facing away from you in the “starting lateral position” (shown in Figure 4). Toss the maraca with a forward motion, parallel to the floor (Figure 5), at a distance of about 12 inches in front of your ear and then return to the starting lateral position. This front and back motion will be referred to as the “ball-toss” stroke due to its similarity of tossing a baseball. It is important with this stroke to make sure that the sound of the maraca is even. Most likely, the maracas will have a louder sound on the forward stroke that



Figure 4



Figure 5

is away from the ear than the backwards stroke that is next to the ear (even though the maraca will be louder to the player when it is on the back stroke due to the maraca being directly next to the ear) because as percussionists, we are used to playing instruments below our wrist and not above. To counteract this, try acting as if you were slinging the material inside the maraca back over your shoulder (please only pretend to throw the maraca over your shoulder, do not actually let go of the maraca). This technique will be used to play patterns requiring duple meter rhythms. It should be noted that the reason the maracas get a triple sound while going vertically versus getting a duple sound going laterally is because of gravity and how it has the most amount of impact on the beads in the vertical plane, yet almost no effect on the beads in the horizontal plane.

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### Patterns In Triple Time

Maraca players often perform a basic groove, labeled *pattern 1a*, which is similar to the function of playing backbeats on drumset. This pattern is used to keep time and is also the pattern that would usually accompany a traditional small *Joropo* trio consisting of harp, guitar and

The image displays four musical patterns for maraca playing in 6/8 time, labeled Pattern #1a, Pattern #2a, Pattern #3a, and Pattern #4a. Each pattern is written for a Right Hand and a Left Hand. Pattern #1a features a right hand with eighth notes and a left hand with eighth notes. Pattern #2a features a right hand with eighth notes and a left hand with eighth notes. Pattern #3a features a right hand with eighth notes and a left hand with eighth notes. Pattern #4a features a right hand with eighth notes and a left hand with eighth notes. The notation includes stems, beams, and flags to indicate the specific rhythmic values and phrasing for each pattern.

maracas. The pattern can be thought of as eighth notes in 6/8 or triplets in 2/4, but either way there should be a total of three sounds made per main beat. The first stroke to initiate the pattern will be the single-shot mentioned earlier which is performed by making a short, quick down-stroke. Then the left hand will go up making the material inside the maraca hit the top of the maracas. The final stroke will be a switch of hands where the left hand goes down while the right hand goes up. Even though your hands are going in opposite directions, this should create the sound of a double-stop, which is important to remember because if you do not get a unison double-stop, then you are not performing the rhythm incorrectly. Finally, you will continue the rhythm by raising the right hand and then coming back down with the down being the next main beat in the measure. The resulting sound should be as close as possible to a straight triplet with the right-hand going down as the downbeat. A good way to practice is to vocalize while playing with the three words “right-left-switch” where the “right” is when the right hand goes down, the “left” goes up, and “switch” is when the right hand goes up at the same time the left hand goes down.

If you are having trouble performing *pattern 1a*, sit down in a chair with the maracas in vertical position and play on your legs with the bottom of the maraca handles. Try playing the first and third part of a triplet on your legs where the right maraca hits your leg on the first beat of the triplet and then your left maraca hitting your leg on third partial of the triplet. This is should be done around 140bpm. Remember to just focus on playing the first and third partial of a triplet on your leg, and the try to listen for the entire *pattern 1a* sounding from the maracas.

I always think of these patterns as having a certain feel or pulse to them, so I will use a tenuto-mark to show the main grouping of the each pattern. The tenuto-mark reminds to give that note in each pattern a small amount of weight on the main note; opposed to a concert snare double-stroke style where the point is to make each stroke as even as possible. This light accentuation gives each pattern a feeling of time, instead of each pattern becoming just an incessant barrage of maraca sound.

### The Wrist Swirl

Seeing as how the triple feel is one of the most common groupings for maracas, it is vital to develop different timbres with the main triplet pattern. I use the three slashes or roll slashes to indicate a large “swoosh” sound, which is created by what I call the “wrist swirl” stroke. This stroke is used in *pattern 2a*. The “swoosh” sound is created when slinging the beads from the back of the maracas to the front of the maracas in the shape



Figure 6



Figure 7

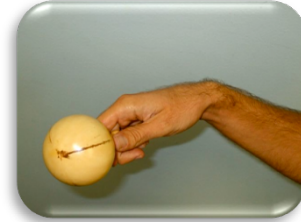


Figure 8

of a capital

letter “D.” This motion will throw the maraca head to the outside of the wrist by rolling the hand in much the same way as if you were skipping a rock across water. Figures 6, 7, and 8 demonstrate how the maraca should move when creating the wrist swirl stroke. You will notice that the wrist swirl stroke only produces one sound, which is different than the shuffle rhythm because there is no other pulse or sound that comes after this motion; this does not affect the rhythm due to the left hand performing both the second and third partial of the triplet with the regular shuffle rhythm. With the wrist swirl in *pattern 2a* there is a much more emphasized downbeat than *pattern 1a* due to the nature of the wrist swirl’s sound.

### The Flam Stroke

In *pattern 3a*, another triple pattern is given where the first beat has a grace note in front of it. Making a fast down-stroke motion, similar to playing a dead stroke on a drum, creates the flam. The motion of the flam will appear to be the same as the single-shot, except the maraca will move further so that the material in the inside of the maraca hits the top of the maraca before quickly hitting the bottom. The flam stroke can be performed in both the vertical and horizontal position. Also, the flam stroke will naturally emphasize the downbeat because the beads will bounce off the top of the maraca and accelerate due to gravity pulling the material inside the maraca down.

### The Fast Flam-Three Stroke

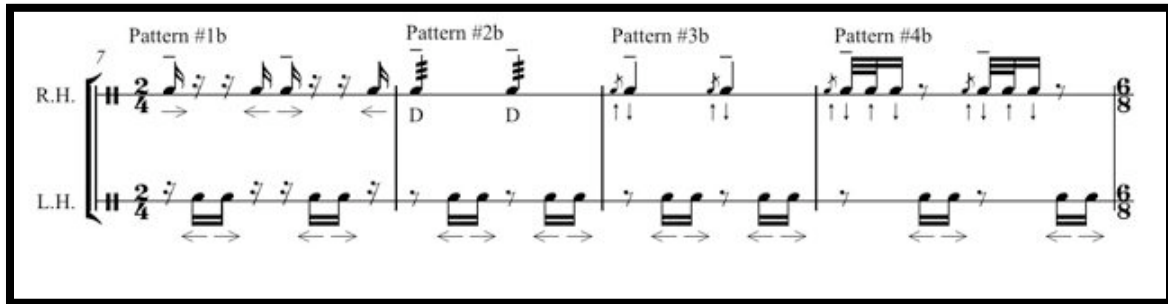
The last pattern to work on is called the “fast three-flam” stroke, which is a group of three notes with a grace note in front. This stroke is used in *pattern 4a*, and while this may seem like a lot of notes for one hand to cover, it is easily accomplished by acting as if you were playing a double-stroke in one hand. Simply turn the maraca so that the hand is in the matched-grip playing position (which I previously referred to as the horizontal position) and act as if you are playing a quick, stroked-out double-stroke in one hand. The act of lifting before the double-stroke will cause a small flam, and the stroking out of the double-stroke will cause the beads to hit the three times, once on the bottom, then the top, and then finally the bottom. The fingers will stay on the maraca handles while the wrist does all of the work. Doing this with both hands in an alternating fashion will produce an intense flurry of maraca sound.

### Patterns in Duple Time

Finally, try all of the different sounds using duple-based patterns (where the left hand in the lateral position) and adjust your right hand to achieve the correct sound or rhythm; the patterns have been conveniently rewritten as *patterns 1b*, *2b*, *3b*, and *4b*. The arrows pointing

left indicate the maraca moving away from the face and the arrows pointing right indicate the maraca moving towards your ear.

While playing these rhythms and combining them without any hesitation or mistakes is a hard task, it is achievable with focused practice. Use practice methods that you should be accustomed with such as using a metronome, watching yourself in a mirror, peer review of your sounds and rhythms, and any other techniques that you use in your practice routine. Practicing without thinking will result in a lack of detail and quality in your sound, and as a percussionist, your sound is your livelihood.



## OTHER ASPECTS

Developing your vocabulary is of the utmost importance when performing a solo on maracas due to the monotonous nature of the instrument. You should take the patterns mentioned in this article and expand upon them by watching videos of maraca players, finding performers who play maracas well, creating your own sounds, and (for the real go-getter) travel abroad to learn from as many maraca players in as many countries (especially in such places as Venezuela and Cuba). Shakers made out of gourds with either material put inside or wrapped over the gourd itself have been around for ages and have developed in every country in the world in some shape or form. This is why it is so beneficial to travel with the intent of educating yourself in your study of maracas. Also, it is important to fill up a stage as a maraca player. To stand on stage and perform your rhythms accurately is a great challenge in and of itself, but to explore the space around your body and, if possible, the space of the stage will create an engaging and interactive performance. This will not only help keep interest, but it will also create new sounds from your maracas, too. Try this by taking *pattern 1a* and move your right arm around, you will notice that any movement laterally or vertically will cause a timbre shift. That timbre shift can be utilized to create new and infinitely more interesting sounds from your maracas.

It should be mentioned that obtaining a quality set of maracas (such as the ones shown in Figure 9) is important for the any performer. High quality maracas should create a crisp, articulate sound. Generally, the larger and heavier the maracas, the harder the maracas will be to play. A great style of maracas for the intermediate to advanced maraca player are *Joropo* style maracas that are light and have an extremely crisp “chick” sound instead of an inarticulate “shoosh” sound. There are many fine maracas that are manufactured with synthetic materials, but for a genuine maraca sound, one should try to purchase hand-made maracas that are not the “tourist maracas” you can pick up at stores in your local mall. It may be difficult to find places that sell such *Joropo* style maracas, so your best bet of finding a set would either be through a colleague that has been to Venezuela or to go to a website like Drummers World that sells them online. If *Joropo* maracas are out of your price range or are too fragile (since they are made out of a thin, natural gourds), then you may want to purchase something a little bit less expensive and more durable. Maracas that fit into this category can be found through



Figure 9



companies such as Latin Percussion. I have found that the LP Pro Maracas, LP Fiber Maracas, and the LP Rawhide Maracas work very well, especially in large group situations like band, orchestra, and percussion ensembles.

## CONCLUSION

Playing percussion accessories should be a point of pride, and although you may not get many maraca gigs, you probably will be asked to play shakers, rattles, etc. countless times throughout your career. Becoming fluid and versatile on your shakers while being able to create interesting patterns will make you a more versatile and sought-after musician. Now, with the prospects of increasing your marketability as a percussionist, go grab a pair of maracas and start expanding your maraca vocabulary!



Brad Meyer is a percussion artist and composer with a broad teaching background. Meyer often tours universities and high schools throughout the Southern and Midwestern states presenting recitals and workshops on topics such as electro-acoustic percussion, contemporary marimba, marching percussion, and world music. Meyer is currently the pit manager for the Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps; he was also the front ensemble caption head of the Madison Scouts Drum and Bugle Corps in 2009, where he worked as a front ensemble technician for the two years prior. Currently, he is pursuing his Doctorate of Music in Percussion Performance under James Campbell at the University of Kentucky, where he also graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Bachelor Degree in Music Performance in 2006. Along with his studies at UK, Brad is the Wildcat Marching Band's percussion director and the UK

Steel Band/Blue Steel coordinator. He received his Master of Music Performance Degree under the direction of Dr. Scott Herring at the University of South Carolina, where he ran Palmetto Pans, the USC drumline, and debuted his first percussion ensemble composition, *Your Three Favorite Colors*. Brad's extensive training in world music, particularly on the Caribbean steel pan, Korean changgo, mbira (Zimbabwean thumb piano), *Joropo* maracas, and both Javanese and Balinese gamelan has provided a global perspective for his performances and research areas. From 2002-2005, Meyer was a part of The Cadets Drum and Bugle Corps' front ensemble, where he accumulated one world championship, three "high-drum" trophies, and three "outstanding service" awards. Brad is a proud endorsee of Vic Firth Stick and Mallets as well as Evans Drumheads.

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