

Basic Playing Instructions for the Didgeridoo

Background

The didgeridoo is an ancient instrument first played by the Aboriginal tribal groups of North-Eastern Australia. For thousands of years it has been an integral aspect of their culture and traditions, with distinct styles developing amongst the different tribes and regions.

Traditional didgeridoos from Australia tend to be made from a wide range of eucalyptus species that have had their soft interior wood eaten by termites. This leaves a tube of the harder outer wood that can then be harvested and turned into a didgeridoo. Artwork and a simple mouthpiece made from beeswax are then added to the tube once it has been collected and cleaned out.

In the last few decades, the didgeridoo has made its way out of Australia to find a place in contemporary music of all sorts. These instruments are now made from a wide variety of materials, from bamboo and teak, to plastic, ceramic and glass.

The Drone

The first and most important technique to learn on the didgeridoo is the drone. A drone is one long, continuous note. To play the main drone note on your didgeridoo:

- Place your mouth against the wax mouthpiece firmly enough to make a seal all the way around your mouth.
- Buzz your lips.
- Don't buzz too fast. The drone note is low and you will feel it lock in when you find it.
- If you are getting a sound like a dying trumpet, you're buzzing too fast. Slow it down.
- When you get the drone note, practice playing it louder and softer until you can make the note easily.

Once you feel like you've got it, try some of these slightly more difficult techniques at the same time:

- Hold your mouth in a long vowel sound without using your voice (ie. aaaah, eeeee, ooooh).
- Try speaking, singing and whispering the alphabet. Listen to how it changes the sound of the drone.
- Try rolling your tongue.

The Bark

To 'bark' or 'yip' over the drone note you must make a noise as if you were a small to medium size dog while buzzing your lips to maintain the drone. Here are a few practice tips if

you are having trouble making the noise while you are playing:

- Try barking and yipping without the instrument first. You should be pretty loud and in the upper register of your voice.
- Next, make the sound while buzzing your lips, but not playing on the didgeridoo yet. Get used to how it feels to do both at the same time.
- Now, play the drone and give it a shot.
- Once you've got it, try changing the kind of bark and the size of the 'dog'.
- Experiment with other animal noises using the same voice and pay attention to how the didgeridoo changes the sound of your vocalization.

The Phasing Tone

The phasing tone is a secondary tone created by your tongue that can sound like it is oscillating or sweeping through the drone note. This technique requires practice to develop fully. Here are some ideas to help get you started:

- Play a drone and simply wiggle your tongue around in your mouth. When you hear something happening, try holding that position for a moment.
- Make sure your cheeks are held firm and not puffed out too far. Streamlining the inside of your mouth will make it easier to hear the phasing tone.
- Play a drone and try whispering the sound, "Reee-Raaw", VERY slowly. Really work the 'R'.
- You can also try forming an "R" an "EE" and an "OO" at the same time with your mouth.
- Listen for the extra note while practicing. You will also be able to feel the new vibration inside your mouth.
- Once you can make the phasing tone reliably, try singing at the same time!

The Circular Breath

Circular breathing is a technique that allows you to maintain your drone note while inhaling a breath through your nose. This will allow you to play continuously for long periods of time without having to stop the drone note. The basic technique combines three actions, one of which you already know:

- First, practice making the drone note with just the air in your cheeks. This will involve your tongue, cheeks and jaw in a squirting motion to push the air out while buzzing your lips for the drone.
- Next, hold air in your cheeks while inhaling and exhaling through your nose. Notice how the back of your tongue is up against the roof of your mouth to keep the air in your mouth separate from what you are inhaling and exhaling.
- Now we put them together. Immediately after you start the drone with the air in your cheeks, take a quick breath through your nose. It will take some practice to get the timing down.
- Remember to keep your breath shorter than the amount of time that you can keep the drone up with the air in your cheeks.
- Once you have taken a breath, and before your cheeks run out of air, BLOW!
- When you have used a quarter to a third of your air, drop your jaw some and loosen your cheeks a little.
- You are now ready to use your cheeks again to maintain the drone while you inhale

through your nose.

- Take your breath and repeat the process.

**You can contact the author, Zackary Miller, concerning further instruction,
through his website:**

www.zackarymiller.com