

**Four-Stroke Ruffs: The Magic Recipe**  
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Many players are intimidated by the ubiquitous four-stroke ruff, especially by soft ones (Kije, Festive Overture). Of course, loud four-stroke ruffs can be a challenge as well (third movement of Shostakovich 10)! Where do you place them? How do you place them when the conductor is making a huge expressive gesture with a downbeat the ensemble seems to “slide” into (last four bars of Scheherazade III, for example)?

Before we get to the actual exercise, there are many ways to skin the proverbial cat when it comes to ornaments. For example, you could perform them lrlR, or rlrL, or rllR, or lrrL (or a few other ways as well, although those are probably not used regularly [rrlL, llrR, etc.]). The most important things are: A) to figure out the hierarchical relationship between grace notes and the primary note (the note being decorated or ornamented), and B) where first contact with the head begins (and ends!).

**Hierarchy**

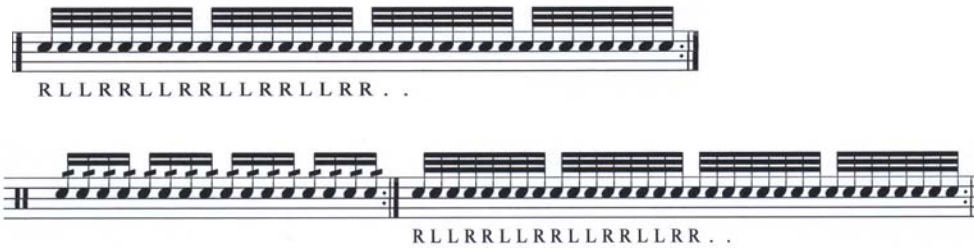
“Hierarchy” is just a doctoral word for “levels of structure,” or “importance.” Many young players confuse the ornamental hierarchical level with that of the primary stroke level. For example, they might play all ornamental strokes at the same dynamic level as the primary notes, or sometimes accent the ornaments and obscure the primary rhythm of the passage by accident. Truly, such passages may be thought of in three levels: in Lt. Kije, for example, you have a grace-note level (low), a non-accented note level (middle), and an accented-note level (higher). Of course we’re splitting hairs, as it all needs to be really soft, but the hair-splitting is what separates the great players from the good ones. So when we talk about hierarchy, it’s just a fancy way of discussing the relationships between these levels. The important thing is to understand that they do exist and to have the technical prowess to make distinctions—and sometimes to manipulate them on command.

**Timing**

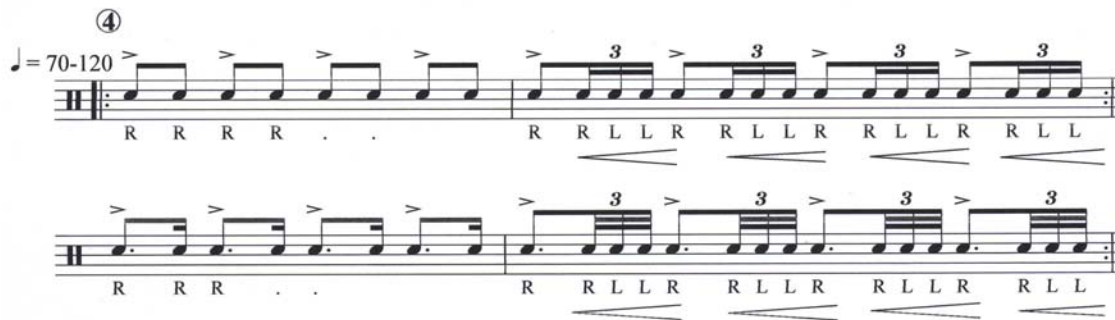
The exercise below is one I learned while a student at Northwestern with Patsy Dash, and also one I continued to work on with John Beck during my time as a Doctoral student at Eastman. It’s based on a Moeller-like right hand check pattern with the inner triplet strokes produced by the left hand. The coolest thing about the exercise is the ability to use a different “check” pattern to manipulate the size of the ruff—or, how much time elapses between the first of the grace notes and the release. I have included two examples below of an eighth-note pattern and a sixteenth-note pattern, but you could also include a triplet pattern between them as well.

By the way, if you have trouble placing the two left-hand notes, page sixteen of *Accents and Rebounds* (George Lawrence Stone) will help you. Below is a summary of Stone’s basic idea of manipulating a double-stroke roll by offsetting the placement of the thirty-second notes (this one in 4/4), although this isn’t the actual Stone exercise *verbatim*. After you figure out this first example with the metronome, try going back and forth

between a regular double-stroke roll and then transitioning to the “Stone” roll without any bumps or hiccups. You can always put a bar of regular sixteenth-notes at the front of any of these as a “re-check” pattern.



Below is the actual four-stroke exercise. I usually start pretty slow and try to create a crescendo with my left hand by making sure both hands are in constant motion, and I can take advantage of gravity and momentum to give me a stronger second double-stroke, so I do not have to squeeze it or “stick” the left hand. Neither hand ever stops moving.



You can set the metronome at full subdivision of sixteenths, triplets, etc. to gauge how successful you are, and then take the next step: don’t play the exercise! Instead play ruffs using one of the subdivisions, but only play on beat one. Then reset, and try to place it on beat one again (without playing the exercise). Repeat this until you feel comfortable with the subdivision and can “land” the primary stroke cleanly on ‘one.’

Try to incorporate this into your warm-up routine, and then you can start to make decisions about appropriate subdivisions for every four-stroke ruff you play, based upon tempo and how open or closed it has to be. Next time we will take a look at how to apply this to specific repertoire, but until then, give it a shot and see if it works for you!

I would like to thank Patsy Dash and John Beck for teaching me this basic exercise and the “spirit” of Doug Howard for causing me to define an exact subdivision and placement protocol for every single ornament I play.