Lunga

Sound Quality

The lunga drum is melodic as well as rhythmic. Drummers control a lunga's pitches by squeezing and releasing the cords that run between its two drumheads. Changes in pressure on the cords affect the tension on the drumheads and thus the pitch made by a drum stroke. Each lunga drum has its own exact pitches, depending on the dimensions of its wooden body and the thickness of its two goatskin heads. For the sound recordings on this website, Alhaji played drums in three general pitch categories: large-size with low pitches, medium-size with medium pitches, and small-size with high pitches. Whatever the size of a lunga's voice, Alhaji consistently intones three pitches: low-tone, mid-tone, and high-tone. Alhaji makes melodies with three diatonic intervals: low-tone to mid-tone is a minor third, mid-tone to high-tone is a major second, and low-tone to high-tone is a perfect fourth. These intervals are easy to sing but difficult to play on an actual lunga drum. This technical challenge is one reason why chanting the vocables is such a wonderful way to learn this music.

Musical Roles of the Lunga

The lunga drum has two musical roles: lead lunga part and answer lunga part. The lead lunga is the musical leader of the ensemble. It calls the ensemble to begin, signals endings, and plays the drum talks that are associated with each item of repertory. The answer lunga drummers respond to the calls of the lead lunga by playing the phrase that is appropriate for the item of repertory. The musical back-and-forth between lead and answer lunga parts is an essential feature of Dagomba dance-drumming. In comparison to the variety of phrases sounded by lead lunga and the gung-gong players, the answer lunga drummers repeat the same phrase over-and-over with only modest leeway for change.

Description of the Lunga

The body of a lunga drum has the shape of a gently curving cone connected by a hollow cylinder. A circular drum rim made of coiled-up cane wrapped in raffia grass fits over the round opening on each end of the drum's body. Goat skin is sewn onto the rim to make each drumhead. Cords made of antelope skin are strung back-and-forth between the two heads, holding them in place and enabling the drummer to apply the pressure that controls the drum's pitches. Alhaji points out that the pressure actually pulls on the cane rim, whose subtle movement affects the tension of the goat skin.

Players wear the lunga drum over one shoulder, holding it snugly up into the armpit with a long scarf. A curved wooden stick with a flattened knob on the end is the drum beater. (For tips on how to play the lunga see Playing Technique/lunga.)

Playing Technique

Getting ready to play

Free the ropes

The first thing you need to do is to loosen the cord that maintains pressure on what Alhaji refers to as the "lunga ropes," that is, the antelope leather cords that are squeezed and released to control the drum's pitch. Alhaji teaches that this cord needs only to be held in place by wrapping over and under itself a few times: in other words, do not tie it with a knot. (See below, Care of Drums, for advice on how much pressure should be put on the lunga ropes when the drum is not in use.)

Prepare the scarf
After the lunga ropes are free, slide out the lunga drum stick and keep it handy. Unfurl the scarf. Observe the way the scarf is simply looped around the lunga's central cylinder and tied with a slip knot. One end of the scarf does not move, but by pulling on the other end you can get the lunga drum into its proper position. It is crucial that the lunga drum be snugly up in the armpit; it must not be down by the ribs. You cannot properly apply pressure to the drum if it is not tight enough under the shoulder. Once you are clear on which end of the scarf needs to be pulled tight, slip your arm through the loop in the scarf and slide on the drum. In Africa musicians wear the drum on the left shoulder and hold the drum stick in their right hand. Even though I am left-handed, I will write for right-handed players. Now you are ready to use the slip knot.

**Position the lunga drum**

Here is how to get the drum into good playing position. Get the slip knot positioned directly at the top of your shoulder. Control the knot with your left hand, putting your thumb underneath and your index and middle fingers above the knot on either side of the section of the scarf that you will pull. At this point in the process, the lunga drum should be hanging loosely near your ribs with the scarf in the middle of the cylinder.

Next, tighten the scarf. With your right hand pull the scarf directly upward, while keeping control of the knot with your left hand. By pulling on the scarf the lunga drum should slide upward into your armpit. Notice drummers usually have trouble getting the drum to easily slide into place, so be patient and have faith that with practice this will be easy to do. Be sure to pull straight up on the scarf; this helps a lot.

When the drum is up under your shoulder you need to fix the scarf place so that it will not slide back down. This is also a simple technique, especially if you continue to keep hold of the knot with your left hand and the free end of the scarf with your right hand. Merely tuck the free end of the scarf under the knot. If you have done it properly, pressure on the scarf will stop it from slipping loose. Even when you squeeze and release the tension on the lunga ropes, the scarf will stay tight and the drum will stay snugly in position. Remember: if the drum slips down to your rib area you can't play the lunga part correctly. Once you have gotten the drum in position and secured the scarf you can release your hands. I like to be sure the knot is directly at the top of my shoulder, since it seems more comfortable and effective in keeping the scarf from slipping. In other words, at this point you can make minor adjustments that work for you.

**Holding the lunga with the arm, elbow and thumb**

Let us assume the lunga drum now is under your left shoulder, up firmly in the armpit. Allow your left arm to hang freely at your side. Notice that your upper arm segment from the shoulder to the elbow naturally presses in on the upper rear section of the lunga ropes. Although the upper arm is not the most important source of pressure on the lunga, it is part of the technique. Now, bend the elbow and raise your hand so that the inside of your wrist slightly touches the rim of the lunga drum. The place on the inside of the wrist where the blood vessels are close to the skin surface where the pulse is easily detected should be touching the lunga ropes. When your left arm in this position notice how the lower arm segment from the elbow to the wrist can apply pressure to the lower front section of the lunga ropes. Finally, slide your thumb through two or three of the double course lunga ropes. This helps you steady the lunga drum and insures that the segments of the left arm that press and release the lunga ropes are in proper position. It is crucial that the "pulse point" of the wrist be in contact with the lunga ropes rather than the outside of the wrist. If you are holding the drum correctly, the left palm should face upward and slightly inward. The palm should never face downward. You will find that you must outwardly rotate the elbow joint to make the inner part of the lower arm come into contact with the lunga ropes.

Use the thumb to control the position of the lunga drum. It should be roughly horizontal to the group. Novice students often allow the back of the drum to fall, so that the drum is slanting upward. This is bad technique. Try to keep the scarf at the middle of the lunga's wooden cylinder so that the drum naturally stays level. The front drum head should be kept steady so that you can strike the center of the drum skin. Again, patience is necessary before you can use your right arm to control the stick and left arm to control the drum while at the same time pressing and releasing the lunga ropes.

**Controlling the lunga ropes: how to squeeze a lunga**

**The importance of pitch and melody**

Although music lovers usually admire African music for its rhythm, melody is vital to Dagomba dance drumming. The lunga's music is melodic and rhythmic. Drummers must be able to accurately control the drum's pitch, which requires proper control of pressure on the lunga ropes. Lunga players must be able to consistently intone low, middle, and high pitches. The drum's melody comes from the player's ability to always play these three basic pitches with the same amount of pressure on the lunga ropes. Not only must the melodic intervals be constant, but also the drummer sometimes must glide upward and downward between low, mid, and high pitch classes. Furthermore, in order to make the drum replicate spoken language, the pitch of some notes must be approached from above or below.

**Pressure and pitch**

Consistent intonation requires precise and subtle control of the tension on the antelope leather ropes that run between the two drum heads. More pressure on the lunga ropes increases tension on the drum skin, making the pitch higher; less pressure decreases tension on the drum skin, making the pitch lower. The playing technique is challenging. Like playing a fretless stringed instrument such as a violin, players must exactly replicate the pressure they apply to the tension cords. Easy to say hard to do!

**Conventions and personal approach**

In Africa, lunga players find their own way to produce the correct sound. Mentors do not insist that their apprentices adopt a standard, formally systemized technique. Instead, each learner discovers a way of playing that makes the drum "talk" correctly. Alhaji points out that since every person's body is different, individuals need to find their own manner of squeezing and releasing. He cites each person's unique physique as a reason why he thinks that audio recordings are better than video recordings for students to use as learning tools. He also recognizes that his own personal way of handling the lunga, while attractive and charismatic, is very hard to emulate. Nevertheless, Alhaji does give clear advice to beginners on how to press and release the lunga ropes.
Elbow rotation

Elbow rotation comes from moving the stick quickly and directly toward and away from the drum skin. Hitting the center of the skin while holding tension in the shoulder. Having the right arm in correct position, with little muscle tension, is crucial to good lunga technique. You do

The shoulder muscles should be very loose; test their relaxation by waving your right elbow in and out; it should swing easily with no right angle. From the shoulder to the elbow the arm should be loose; the elbow hangs freely down from the shoulder, which has little muscle tension. The wrist is moved by flexion and extension. Hyper extension increases pressure; the wrist pushes inward while the knuckles of the hand move in the opposite direction. The opposite motion in the wrist joint decreases pressure: the wrist moves outward while the knuckles move inward. Drummers who play lunga frequently often develop a callous on the inside of their left wrist, an indication of the essential function the wrist plays in playing technique.

Novice drummers often use the elbow and wrist incorrectly. The elbow only controls the motion of the forearm. Alhaji teaches that pressure by the elbow itself is not crucial to the technique. Drummers do not pay close attention to the ropes that are touched by the elbow; they should always be supple and free. Some new students mistakenly twist their left hand when trying to squeeze the drum. This motion does not enable pressure to be applied to all the ropes, which is an important dimension of making the lunga give out its full, rich sound. It is the tender skin on the insight of the arm that presses against the lunga ropes. Although the technique may rub the skin in a rough manner, this is the correct technique

Holding the stick

Hold the stick in your palm as you would hold a badminton racket, a baseball bat, or a machete. In other words, grip the stick in your fist so that the handle rests against the knuckles. Unlike other types of stick drumming, the stick should not be parallel to the forearm and first finger. The stick should be roughly perpendicular to your forearm. Use the first finger (index finger) of the right hand to hold the stick in your hand. Do this by wrapping your finger around the stick handle, encircling it. Fasten the stick in your hand by yanking down with his thumb. Remember: the thumb’s job is to control the position of the front head of the drum, keeping it horizontal and stable, and to help the wrist do its work.

Let the lunga breathe

Proper sound is enormously important in this music. When Alhaji teaches he spends a lot of time on sound quality. He wants the lunga drum to "breathe." His most frequent criticism is, "You are choking the lunga. You must let it breathe." He makes this comment when he notices a student holding the lunga tightly, never releasing the ropes, and always pressing in at the elbow. Squeezing comes more naturally than releasing. Learning to release pressure in a controlled manner seems more difficult, but it is absolutely essential. Alhaji himself frequently "pumps" the drum between his drum strokes, using rapid changes in pressure on the drum heads to create a marvelous "whooshing" sound. As you work on your lunga skills, develop the ability to relax your muscles, as well as the strength to squeeze the lunga hard enough to obtain the high pitched tones. Listen closely for the quiet sounds of the lunga during moments after you strike the drum strongly.

Using the drum stick: how to beat a lunga

In my experience teaching Dagomba dance drumming, I have noticed that students often do not hold the stick correctly. This fundamental problem leads to many failures and difficulties in playing this music. In hopes of helping students get this basic aspect of the drumming right, I ask you to indulge me in the following, admittedly pedantic, set of instructions.

Hitting center

"Hit center," is Alhaji's plea to his students. I say, "Score a bull's eye with every stroke." Yet again, easier said than done. When playing a drum stroke, the head of the stick should always strike the center of the drum skin. If you hold your arm correctly, your chances of "hitting center" are greatly increased. The stick head moves in an arching motion; the speed and amplitude of its path in space affect the force it exerts on the drum skin.

Arm and wrist position

I tell my students to allow their right arm to hand limply from the shoulder. Then, raise up your wrist until the stick head is positioned in the center of the lunga drum skin. The angle at the elbow of the upper arm and lower arm should be about 90 degrees, roughly a right angle. From the shoulder to the elbow the arm should be loose; the elbow hangs freely down from the shoulder, which has little muscle tension. The wrist should be positioned below the drum head. If we think of the round head as a clock, the wrist is at 5:00. The shoulder muscles should be very loose; test their relaxation by waving your right elbow in and out; it should swing easily with no tension in the shoulder. Having the right arm in correct position, with little muscle tension, is crucial to good lunga technique. You do not need to move the wrist out of its location near the drum skin when you play the drum. Achieving a resonant, loud lunga sound comes from moving the stick quickly and directly toward and away from the drum skin. Hitting the center of the skin while holding the stick with a relaxed hand and arm is the goal.

Elbow rotation

Alhaji emphasizes that drumming involves whole arm: upper arm, lower arm, and wrist. The muscles of the torso play a role, as does the ribcage. The arm gets the pressure roughly correct and the wrist makes the subtle adjustments. To use the terminology of music theory, the arm sets the pressure for the pitch class and the wrist modifies the pressure to make the exact pitch. The upper arm moves on the ropes simply by virtue of the way the drum fits into the armpit. The drummer varies the amount of pressure applied by the upper arm by moving the elbow away from and toward the torso. The lower arm presses in/up to increase the drum's tension and releases out/down to decrease tension. Motion in the elbow joint raises and lower the forearm; motion in the shoulder joint moves the arm in and out. The wrist also presses upward and inward to increase pressure and releases downward and outward to decrease pressure. The wrist is moved by flexion and extension. Hyper extension increases pressure; the wrist pushes inward while the knuckles of the hand move in the opposite direction. The opposite motion in the wrist joint decreases pressure: the wrist moves outward while the knuckles move inward. Drummers who play lunga frequently often develop a callous on the inside of their left wrist, an indication of the essential function the wrist plays in playing technique.
Rotation in the elbow joint moves the stick toward and away from the drum skin. The forearm rotates in, toward the drum skin, when a stroke is played; the forearm rotates out, away from the drum, as the stick rebounds off the drum skin. As it rotates, the wrist stays rather still and does not move to and fro, in and out. Don't hold the wrist stiffly and move the whole arm. Remember: rotation in the elbow causes the motion of the stick. The thumb serves as the axis around which the wrist rotates. You can move the stick by pulling slightly down/up with the thumb, sort of "twiddling" the stick between your thumb and index finger.

Muscle relaxation

The sticking technique uses a quick, flicking action of the arm muscles, which should always be supple and relaxed. If the arm muscles are properly tuned, a well struck stroke in the center of the drum skin results in a trampoline-like release of the stick away from the drum skin. Because the stick has "flown" off the drum, it is ready for the next stroke. When done properly, sticking does not produce fatigue in the player's arm. Once again, this is easy to say but very hard to do. Most novices grip the stick much too tightly, they do not use correct mechanics of elbow rotation, and their arm muscles tend to tense up. These elements of bad technique cause players to become tired; they can't maintain the repetition, speed and endurance needed for this music. The sound quality and volume of their playing also suffers.

Bad Technique

What things do newcomers tend to do wrong? Here is a checklist:

Holding lunga

- drum is not level; front head too high
- drum too low; not tight enough under shoulder
- left thumb not in right location; should be roughly at 6:00 or even touching lower ribs
- palm not facing upward; do not use the back of the hand or the outside of the forearm

Squeezing and releasing

- left shoulder moves upward when trying to play high pitched note; not part of the technique at all
- left wrist twists in and out; not part of technique; keep palm facing up; flex and extend wrist without twisting
- thumb used to pull ropes; not part of technique; use only to steady drum and as focal point for flexion/extension
- pressing/releasing with elbow; emphasize wrist, forearm and upper arm rather than elbow
- drum held too tightly; you must contrast the strong application of pressure with controlled relaxation
- choking the lunga cords; let the lunga breathe

Sticking

- stick handle not parallel to knuckles
- right thumb on side of stick; extend it outward to hold stick firmly and provide axis of rotation
- elbow not low enough; shoulder is hunched up
- stick moved by flexion of right wrist rather than rotation of elbow
- stick held tightly by all fingers rather than only the thumb and first finger; tight grip stops stick from freely rebounding away from drum skin
- stick head not hitting center; causes bad tone and possibly will put a hole in the drum skin

Advanced Sticking Technique: rolling and turning the stick

The answer lunga part uses only "straight strokes," as Alhaji would say. The lead drum's phrases, however, often require two other types of drum strokes. When the drum emulates words in the spoken language that have several syllables in rapid succession, Alhaji uses strokes in which the stick quickly hits the skin more than once; the effect is like a two stroke press roll. When the drum phrases call for a contrast in the volume of drum strokes, usually a relatively quiet first stroke followed by a fully accented second stroke, Alhaji tends to turn his wrist toward his body so that the first stroke is played with the upper side of the stick head and the turn the wrist away from his body back to the normal position so that the second stroke gets fully power. As befits a skilled virtuoso instrumentalist, Alhaji has an inventory of other fancy strokes that he uses to beautify his playing and to render the drum language in a lifelike manner.

Although the drum language can be played without rolling or turning the stick, it is misleading to think of these strokes as "ornaments." Rather, these strokes enable the drummer to imitate the spoken language with more verisimilitude.