

TECHNICAL CRITIQUE OF MOUNTAIN RYTHYM DJEMBES

By Ray Dillard

While all three wood types available in this series offer excellent sound, there are some differences worth noting. It is clear that the Pine drums can offer a great sound with a minimum of weight to contend with. This is extremely important for the young player, as “handling” the drum is certainly part of mastering the playing techniques! The Mahogany drums add only a small amount of weight, but have some sonic advantages for the player with a bit more “defined” playing technique. Maple offers superior sound, but is also quite a bit heavier. This difference in weight can make the drum much more difficult to “handle”. It is important to realize that the added weight may indeed preclude a player from taking advantage of the benefits of the wood due to the challenges of handling such a heavy drum! With this being said, here are my comparisons of drums in the Circle Series with additional comparisons made to the Pro Series Maple drum of the same size.

In these comparisons, I will be referring to the three principal tones played on djembes.

1. **The Bass Tone**

This is the lowest note available on the drum in any given tuning. It is played by striking the head at or near the centre with the entire palm of the hand.

2. **The Open Tone**

This is the primary tone played by the fingers just inside the rim of the drum, allowing for a full bodied, ringing sound. This is accomplished by striking the skin and allowing the fingers to “bounce” off the skin to allow the head to “ring”.

3. **The Harmonic Tone - (The Slap)**

This is the primary “high” tone played by the fingers. This tone is played by striking the skin with the fingers near the edge. This is a bit more complex a tone to play, and is also difficult to describe in words.

I will also speak of the balance between these tones on the various wood types. This is based on similar striking forces and the resulting volume of the tone described. This is used to distinguish which tones are the most pronounced on each wood.



Circle Series Djembes

Pine

1. Light and easy to handle
2. Very easy to get a good sound on, right from the beginning
3. Very clear Open Tone
4. Harmonic Tone (Slap) is relatively easy to produce
5. Timbre Balance - Open Tone is loudest, then Harmonic, then Bass

Mahogany

1. Only slightly heavier than Pine
2. More clear Bass Tone, with a slightly longer duration than Pine
3. Timbre Balance - Harmonic Tone is loudest, then Bass, then Open
4. Very balanced overall sound
5. All three tones speak clearly and are quite unique, indication a minimum of interaction of the head to areas which are not struck directly
6. Very easy to play

Maple

1. Much heavier than either Pine or Mahogany
2. Richest timbre in the Bass Tone, clear focussed and long sustaining
3. Most pure sounding Open Tone of the three woods
4. Easy to play, and hear the distinction of each of the three primary tones
5. Extremely balanced overall sound
6. Harmonic Tone and Open Tone sound quite different; this difference is less pronounced on the Pine and Mahogany drums
7. Pitch centre between the Bass Tone and the Open Tone is further apart on the Maple drum than on the Pine or Mahogany drums. This allows these two tones to speak more independently

Pro Series Maple Djembes

The unique shape of these drums offers some significant difference in the overall sound of these drums. While all of the drums in the "Circle Series" are certainly high quality, professional instruments, the "Pro Series Maple" drums offer the experienced player considerably more tonal control. These drums are quite easy to play, offering a generally more "defined" sound than the drums in the "Circle Series". While all of the drums in the "Circle Series" are made with just as much attention to detail and with just as high quality materials, the shape of the "Pro Series" offers a more expressive sound-palette. The comments that follow are generally a comparison of the "Pro Series Maple" drums to the "Circle Series Maple" drums of the same size.

1. Most focussed Bass Tone, with extremely clear pitch-centre
2. Most balanced sound of the three main tones, with each tone sustaining for approximately the same length of time
3. Interaction between the three main tones is minimal, allowing greater audible distinction between tones when playing fast
4. Maple projects best, thus a lighter stroke can yield more volume, allowing for a more relaxed feel while playing

5. Pitch-centre between the Bass Tone and the Open Tone is quite far apart, allowing for the tuning of a very low Bass Tone without sacrificing the sharp, crisp Harmonic Tone

When comparing the optimal tuning range of the 10" drum to the 12" drum, it is found that the ranges are approximately a musical "fifth" apart. (i.e. the distance from C to G). It should be understood that each of the drum sizes has a very broad range that it can be tuned into, but there is a range which works with the head size and the drum depth to produce an optimal sound. It is this which is being considered as the optimal tuning of a given drum. In general, the Pine drum's optimal tuning is about a musical third (i.e. the distance from C to E or E flat) below that of the Mahogany drums. The Mahogany drum's optimal tuning is about a musical second (i.e. the distance from C to D or D flat) below that of the Maple drums. Interestingly, when the Bass Tone of a Maple drum is tuned to a pitch lower than that on a Pine or Mahogany drum of the same size, the higher Harmonic Tone is still as high or higher as that of the Pine or Mahogany drums. This further emphasizes the distance between the pitch-centre of the Bass Tone and the Open Tone on the Maple drums.

And then there were the 13" Drums (and EVEN the 14"!) . . .

All things considered, the thirteen-inch Djembes seem to be sized optimally for "sound". They are obviously heavier, and a bit more challenging to handle. This is especially true in the case of the Maple drums, but the reward for dealing with this is worth it! Something about the length of the "throat" of the drum coupled with the head diameter brings together the most optimal drum in terms of both playability and timbre.

The range of these drums, both in the Circle Series and the Pro Series is amazingly large. You can easily tune the drums across a range of a musical sixth (i.e. the distance from C to A or A flat). The Maple drum has an optimal playing range even greater! This allows the drum to be used in a greater amount of musical settings where different Bass Tone notes might be preferred.

The Circle Series drums in thirteen inch, available in Pine, Mahogany and Maple, sound much more "similar" than one would expect. In the smaller drum sizes, these three woods had quite unique "voices", but in this size the differences are more subtle.

Pine

1. Full, rich bottom end and a sharp, clear top end
2. Open tone is very balanced to the Bass Tone
3. Light weight and easy to manage

Mahogany

1. Open Tone is fuller, and even more balanced to the Bass Tone
2. Harmonic Tone is richer than the Pine
3. Only slightly heavier than the Pine
4. Beautiful, unique "look"

Maple

1. Very balanced in terms of both volume and timbre
2. Great value for a very dedicated player

3. Economical alternative to the Pro Series
4. Full, strong Harmonic Tone, with a powerful Bass Tone
5. Open Tone is easy to play
6. Quite heavy compared to Pine and Mahogany

Pro Series Maple in 13" and the Jumbo 14"

1. AMAZING drums, highly versatile, fantastic sound
2. The 14" drum is quite heavy and tall
3. The sheer projection and power of these drums is startling
4. The tuning range is VERY large, approaching a musical octave or more
5. Capable of being played very soft, yet producing a substantial, rich tone
6. Totally balanced timbres, all three Tones are easy to play
7. The 13" drum is the clearest speaking drum in the entire line
8. The 14" drum has the most powerful Bass Tone in the entire line
9. VERY easy to play, even beginners will sound great FAST!
10. Drums this large made of Maple are beautiful to look at
11. Harmonic Tone can be played quite softly
12. Though heavy, the weight of the 13" feels very balanced when strapped on

The final word . . .

For me, the 13" Pro Series Maple drum is one of the finest djembe-type drums I have ever played. It sounds great. It feels great. You can play it at a variety of volumes with a variety of tunings, and it always works. It is easy to play, with a very balanced sound. You don't have to work hard to do anything on this drum. The craftsmanship on the entire Mountain Rythym line is outstanding. There is nothing in terms of craftsmanship, materials (other than type of wood), or attention to detail that separates any of these drums. From the smallest Pine drum in the Circle Series to the monster 14" Pro Series Maple, the "build" on these instruments is impeccable!

Ray Dillard resides in Toronto, Canada. Working full-time as business manager with the percussion ensemble Nexus and performing in Disney's *The Lion King*, Ray's recording credits include Grammy and Juno nominated projects with artists and ensembles from the United States, South America, Europe, Japan and Canada.
