



Sustaining the Drone

Making the drone sound better and last longer - improve your playing

Stage One accomplished - getting a sound from the didgeridoo, now you can improve on that by making the sound clearer, last longer and with better definition. This will also help when playing longer notes as you will be able to hear the depth of the sound - the harmonics.

Having successfully made a noise with the didge, the next step is to improve that sound. The one-line quick answer to that is: practice, practice, practice, however if you know how to achieve the end result you may get there more quickly.

Breathing

Taking the breathing exercise I suggested in 'Before You Begin', apply that to the didgeridoo. Quick, deep breaths in through your nose and exhaling slowly through your mouth repeat this a number of times, once the breathing is smooth and regular, on the outward breath blow that raspberry sound remaining relaxed throughout. Again, once you have settled into a rhythm with your breathing and blowing a raspberry put the didgeridoo to your lips and blow the drone.

Don't alter your breathing pattern or put any extra effort into blowing out, just try to achieve a drone with each outward breath. This may come in fits and starts at first though once accustomed to blowing the didge the sound will become more even and constant. Ultimately every breath outwards will be a drone and have the same sound and seemingly without any extra effort.

The aim here is not to try and blow a long drone on the didge, or a powerful one, but to make the sound produced regular and even - the same each time you blow. By doing so you are acclimatising your muscles to being in the shape needed to play the didge including the muscles used to breathe with.

Lung capacity

I've mentioned before but not explained about not totally filling or depleting the air in your lungs. When breathing in you do not need to completely fill your lungs i.e. 100% nor should you ever completely run out of breath but should oscillate somewhere in between. I try to work around 50-75% at any one time.

When lungs are filled to capacity they are under strain, difficult to control and with a tendency for the initial release of air to be powerful and abrupt, but tailoring off quickly into a very weak airflow. Like wise completely running out of air means that your breathing will be weak with loss of control.

By breathing in and out regularly and evenly maintaining a decent rhythm will enable your playing to last for long periods without becoming out of breath or needing a break. Also the right amount of oxygen will be circulating in your body so that the energy used to play has a plentiful supply and is constantly regenerated.

Experiment

With everything I mention, try them out and experiment. Blow a drone for as long as you can and try to maintain an even note. Try it with lung filled to capacity and half full and empty and note the difference in how the drone sounds and how difficult it is to maintain an even note.

By finding out and pushing the limits you will find out not only what can and can't be done or what is easy and what is not but also the right balance for sustained smooth, regular, controlled playing.

Neutral position

I mention throughout these texts about the neutral position. This is the position of your mouth, cheeks, tongue, jaw etc. when totally relaxed. Using talking as a parallel, when you are talking your muscles are under your mind's control and by working together speech is created enabling you to

communicate with other people. When you are not talking, for example watching tv, asleep you muscles are relaxed and in the neutral position. In other words when you are at rest.

Use the neutral position as the starting point when practicing. You will probably have noticed the change in pitch from the initial sound made to a few seconds after the drone has started. Try to start the drone in the neutral position so that the tone and pitch is even from the very beginning.

Later on when your playing develops and you start playing more complex rhythms or techniques, you will find them easier to achieve. If you need to move any part of your mouth it can do so with minimum effort as it moving from a neutral or resting position.

Smoothness

Smoothness of playing is achieved by all the relevant factors being in balance - the right person playing the right rhythm with the right didge in the right place. The column of air - sound waves - travelling down the didgeridoo are sensitive things and easily disrupted. With any wave there will be some oscillation and feedback travels back up the didge. As your playing improves and strengthens as well as gaining more control you will be able to balance these factors and produce a very even drone.

Using the parallel with words again, but reading this time, if someone who is learning to read encounters an unfamiliar word they may stutter as they try to read, understand and control at the same time. Once they are familiar with the word and read it again, all the factors are in balance, the word reads smoothly and fits into the reading and flow of text naturally.

Power

I have encountered many people who try to give it lots of physical effort when first trying to play on the basis that they thought they had to blow hard to make a sound with decent volume. This is not the case.

The didge itself will act as a resonant chamber that will amplify the sound coming from your lips. Put the mouthpiece to your ear and listen to the sound picked up by the didge. Very much like an old Victorian ear trumpet!

Often by blowing too hard the air wave becomes forced with the increased air pressure and the clarity of the sound is lost. Blowing harder can increase the volume but only if controlled well.

Using the same exercise as above, once you have achieved a fairly constant and even drone, repeat but slightly increase how hard you blow. Do this several times increasing each time. Notice the length of the drone, and the pitch of the drone. Try it the other way - blow a drone with less air and less pressure and note the length and pitch of the drone. In both instances note the volume of the sound produced.

Exercises

At this stage of playing I would encourage anyone to try the above exercise and experiment with as many variations as possible. Once you become more familiar with the process you will notice that there will be slight variations as you play whether because you have moved your tongue, cheeks, lips etc. Make a mental note of these sounds and what you did to produce them. See if you can make the same sound twice.

Above all try to achieve a balance.

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