

Drum Set Dununba

West African Dundun

The djembe is undoubtedly the most recognizable drum from West Africa. Its use is widespread across the globe, though few people (musicians included) are actually exposed to the sound of the djembe in a traditional setting. To the uninitiated listener, this music is all about the djembe soloist. Displays of virtuosity tend to dominate the sonic landscape, but the true melody of the music can be found at the bottom.

The dundun (or *dununba*), sangban and kenkeni are the backbone of a typical traditional ensemble. All three (often simply referred to as a set of “dundun”) are essentially the same type of drum, a simple carved shell bass drum with cow skin heads on both sides. The difference comes in the size and tuning, the dundun being the largest and lowest, the sangban in middle, and the kenkeni smallest and highest. In a traditional setting, these drums are played individually on their side with a bell attached. The performer strikes the drum with a stick in one hand, and uses a small metal rod or nut to play the bell with the other hand. Even in the smallest ensemble, made up of a dundun, sangban, kenkeni (all with bells) and two or three djembe players, this translates to an intricate web of rhythms.

Djembe virtuosity aside, I’ve always been fascinated by the bass melody created by the set of dundun. Often the djembe accompaniment parts are the same or similar across different rhythms, while the dundun, sangban, and kenkeni parts are what define each unique rhythmic composition. When I began studying this music in a traditional setting, I was immediately inspired to find ways to explore these rhythms on the drum set.

Drum Set Adaptation

The following is a study of an original rhythmic composition “Fan Kelen” by my teacher Mangué Sylla from Guinea, West Africa. This rhythm comes from a family of rhythms called “Dununba”, which all prominently feature the dundun in conversation with the sangban. If we think of this rhythm in 12/8, the kenkeni plays a simple 2 beat rhythmic pattern, while the sangban and dundun play a longer 4 bar pattern. *Example 1* shows the complete 3 part traditional version.

Example 1 - Traditional dundun, sangban, and kenkeni parts

In seeking to adapt this rhythm for drum set, I immediately thought of a rhythm that John Riley showed me during my time studying him at the Manhattan School of Music. Mr. Riley had adapted a traditional Afro-Cuban rhythm for the drum set, by splitting the voices into 3-parts. In his version, the left hand and left foot played a continuous ostinato between the hi-hat and snare drum, which freed up the right hand and right foot to play two additional rhythms. This concept lends itself perfectly to the steady kenkeni part that is common to all “Dununba” rhythms. *Example 2* is the kenkeni part along with hi-hat foot and stick notes to fill in the space and give the groove a steady flow.

Example 2 - Drum set left hand/foot ostinato

In order to execute the rest of this rhythm, you’ll want to get this hi-hat/snare ostinato on auto-pilot. Play this rhythm *for a while* until you really don’t have to think about it anymore. Once it’s comfortable you can begin adding the dundun part on the bass drum in one and two note groupings. This way you are continually reinforcing the independence of the left hand/foot ostinato as you build up the groove. Taking this approach rather than learning the groove out of time note-by-note may seem more difficult at first, but it will pay off in the end. *Example 3* shows how to build the first part of the phrase. Repeat each measure until it feels comfortable, and then go on. *Don’t stop the ostinato!*

Example 3 - Building the dundun part on the bass drum

The dundun phrase continues by repeating the first phrase and adding on from there. Referring back to *Example 1*, you'll now work on the dundun phrase that covers measure 2 and 3. *Example 4* shows you how to build this two measure bass drum phrase.

Example 4 - Dundun bass drum part continued

Once you've mastered that, you can put the entire phrase together. *Example 5* shows the complete 4 measure dundun phrase.

Example 5 - Complete dundun bass drum phrase

Practice that full rhythm until it's really comfortable before you try to add in the right hand. Fortunately the sangban part fits right in with the dundun, accenting certain notes of the phrase. Using the same "additive" approach as we did with the dundun part, try keeping *Example 5* going while you add the sangban notes in one at a time on the tom. Eventually you'll get the full groove as shown in *Example 6*.

Example 6 - Adding the sangban rhythm on the tom

The djembe accompaniment part that goes along with this rhythm is a simple two beat phrase similar to the sangban part. *Example 7* is a variation you can try that omits the sangban part so the right hand can play the djembe part on a cymbal, cowbell, or rim.

Example 7 - Djembe rhythm right hand variation

I find these grooves really fun to play, and they help open up my conception of the role the drum set can play in an ensemble. To hear this rhythm in a traditional setting as well as my adaptation, check out Mangué Sylla's album [Kon Koura](#), and our West African jazz EP [NOLLER/SYLLA](#).

Biography

Jeremy Noller is a freelance jazz drummer and educator currently based in South Korea. He is a graduate of both The Juilliard School and Manhattan School of Music, and has studied with legendary drummers John Riley, Carl Allen, and Billy Drummond. Also a student of West African percussion for over 10 years, Jeremy has performed extensively with world-renowned musicians from Guinea, Mali, and the Ivory Coast. His latest EP [NOLLER/SYLLA](#), a collaboration with Guinean percussionist Mangué Sylla, was released in March 2019 by Outside in Music. For more information, visit jeremynoller.com

FAN KELEN - EXAMPLES

JEREMY NOLLER & MANGUE SYLLA

EXAMPLE 1

Musical score for Example 1, featuring three staves: KENKANI, SANGBAN, and DUNDON. Each staff has a 12/8 time signature and contains rhythmic notation with eighth and sixteenth notes.

EXAMPLE 2

Musical score for Example 2, featuring a single staff with 'HAND' and 'FOOT' markings. The notation shows a sequence of notes with 'x' marks above and below, indicating specific hand and foot positions.

EXAMPLE 3

Musical score for Example 3, featuring two staves: RIGHT and LEFT. The notation includes rhythmic patterns with repeat signs and 'x' marks below the notes.

EXAMPLE 4

Musical score for Example 4, featuring two staves: RIGHT and LEFT. The notation includes rhythmic patterns with repeat signs and 'x' marks below the notes.

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