

The Charge Stroke Demystified

By Kyle Forsthoft

Joseph Tompkins' collection *Nine French-American Rudimental Solos*, released in 2007, has become a standard work in snare drum and percussion pedagogy. The pieces in the collection were composed as a result of his exposure to French rudimental drumming, codified in texts such as Robert Tourte's 1946 text *Méthode de Tambour et Caisse Claire d'Orchestre* [*Method for Military and Orchestral Snare Drum*] and in Guy LeFèvre's method books *Le Tambour: Technique Supérieure* [*The Drum: Superior Technique*] (1979) and *Étude Progressive de la Technique: Caisse Claire, Vol. 2* [*Progressive Technical Studies: Snare Drum, Vol. 2*] (1987). LeFèvre developed his method books for concert and drumset applications by extracting aspects of traditional French rudimental drumming compositions taught to him by Alexandre Raynaud.¹ LeFèvre's books present short passages dealing with technical aspects of the French rudimental style and also contain longer solos and excerpts from the traditional repertoire.

By combining the unique aspects of the French rudimental style with the American rudimental style as typified by the works of Charlie Wilcoxon and John Pratt, Tompkins has created a repertoire of exciting new hybrid solo snare drum literature, which also includes *Walkin' Down Coolidge* (2008), *March* (2009), and *Nine French-American Rudimental Solos, Vol. 2* (2011). The twenty solos, which currently make up Tompkins' French-American output, are now widely taught, studied, and performed. These creative and popular works are revolutionizing the way teachers and students think about, approach, and play not only the snare drum, but all percussion instruments.

Among the many novel musical possibilities the French rudimental style offers, one of the more interesting aspects of the style is the frequent use of a rudiment called the "Coup de Charge," hereafter translated as the Charge Stroke. This rudiment is but one element of the French style that has been borrowed from the older Swiss rudimental style. In my experience playing and teaching with both Tompkins' and LeFèvre's works, Charge Strokes are one of the techniques students have difficulty understanding and executing consistently. This article seeks to demystify the Charge Stroke by defining it and offering solutions on how to approach and practice the rudiment in context.

DEFINING THE CHARGE STROKE

Example 1 shows a common figure incorporating the use of the Charge Stroke.

Example 1: A typical French figure incorporating the Charge Stroke



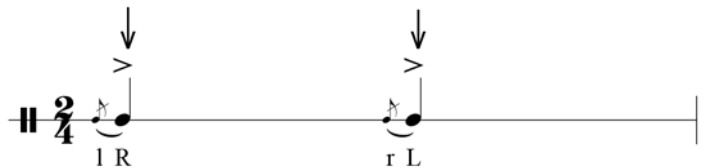
We see that the figure is based on an even triplet rhythm, but that the third partial of each beat is subdivided further into a dotted sixteenth note and an accented thirty-second note. This accented thirty-second note and the following downbeat comprise the Charge Stroke.

I find this rudiment intriguing because the location of the accent obscures the true location of the beat and gives the music a certain sense of "lift" that is characteristic of both the Swiss and French rudimental styles. Compare this sense of lift to the more "grounded" nature of the

British-based American rudimental style, which places a high degree of emphasis on easy identification of a regular pulse.

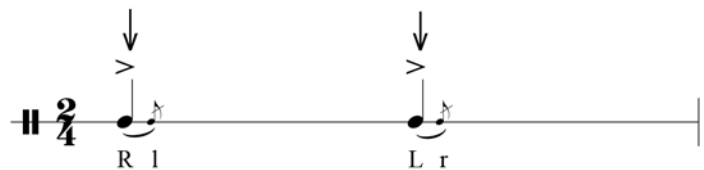
In purely technical terms, the Charge Stroke is a single-note ornament that modifies a stroke to give it greater emphasis. Musically, this makes the Charge Stroke similar to the Flam. In a normal Flam, shown in Example 2, a primary note directly on the beat and indicated by the vertical arrow is modified by the addition of a softer grace note that occurs slightly before the primary note. This has the twofold effect of lengthening the sound of the primary note and adding to its perceived volume. The effect is often further emphasized in performance by adding an accent mark to the primary note as seen in Example 2.

Example 2: Typical Flam notation with arrows showing the location of the pulse



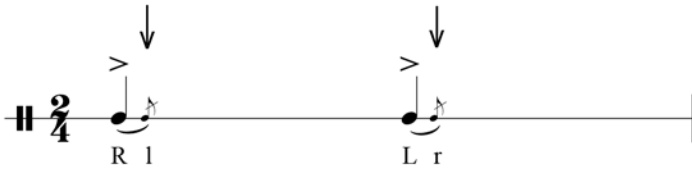
Unlike the Flam, the Charge Stroke accents the first note of the pair and de-emphasizes the second. In a sense, the Charge Stroke can be thought of as a Flam with the sticking "in the wrong order." In LeFèvre's texts, the "Coup de Charge" is translated as an Inverted Flam² or a Reversed Flam.³ Robert Tourte defines it as the "opposite of a Flam" and provides two possible way of notating this relationship in isolation.⁴ The first is shown below in Example 3.

Example 3: Tourte's first Charge Stroke notation in which the grace note succeeds the primary note



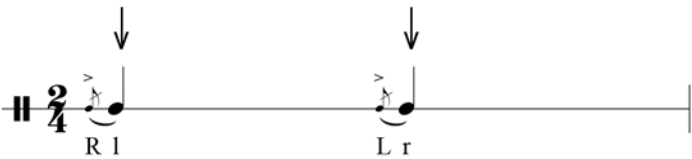
Here we see an accented primary note followed by a softer grace note. This notation has also been referred to as a Backwards Flam or a Malf (obviously derived from writing *Flam* backwards). As far as I am aware, the Malf is a modern figure that is performed by keeping the primary note on the beat, followed by the grace note as indicated, and this notation is indeed effective for that figure. Unfortunately, I feel that this notation is particularly misleading for notating isolated Charge Strokes because it leads the performer to believe that the beat continues to fall on the primary note, when in fact it should fall on the grace note, with the primary note preceding the beat slightly. Example 4 illustrates this difference in perception.

Example 4: Tourte's first Charge Stroke notation with arrows indicating the correct location of the pulse



Tourte alternately notates the Charge Stroke as in Example 5 below for ease of reading.⁵

Example 5: Tourte's second Charge Stroke notation, created by using accent marks on grace notes



Compare the Flams of Example 2 with the Charge Strokes of Example 5, which uses the traditional Flam notation, but with the accents now modifying the grace notes and the sticking reversed. While this portrayal of the Charge Stroke is more rhythmically accurate, the relative size of the notes is still problematic, as the accented note is smaller than the unaccented note.

With Example 6, I take Tourte's idea one step further. Notice now that the grace note is both emphasized (made larger) and accented, while the pulse still falls on the de-emphasized (smaller) primary note. I feel that this most accurately conveys how a Charge Stroke should both look and sound.

Example 6: An accurate notation for isolated Charge Strokes showing enlarged, accented grace notes and de-emphasized primary notes



Regardless of how the figure is notated in isolation, the Charge Stroke can be defined as a single-note ornament in which the first note of the pair occurs before the beat and is given greater emphasis than the second, with the second note usually occurring within the prevailing subdivision. Returning to the Charge Strokes in Example 1, we can see the accented notes occurring just prior to each beat and the unaccented second notes falling directly on the beats within the prevailing subdivision—eighth-note triplets in this case.

I have found little evidence that isolated Charge Strokes occur with any sort of frequency in either the Swiss or French repertoires, isolated Flams being far more prevalent. As a result, the accented note in a Charge Stroke is not usually written as a free-standing ornament the way the grace note in a Flam is, instead being usually notated in the context of a subdivided rhythmic structure similar to that used at the end of each beat in Example 1. I suspect that this practice has arisen as a function of notational convenience but does not accurately reflect how the Charge Stroke should actually sound. Due to its strong conceptual similarity to the Flam, I posit that Charge Strokes need not only be played strictly as mathematically written, but are also able to be interpreted on a

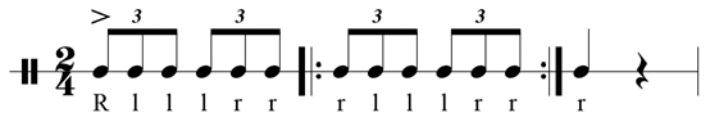
continuum from closed to open depending on tempo and context, just as Flams are. I will examine this topic in more detail below.

Since it has been established how the Charge Stroke and the Flam are both alike and different, we can now discuss methods to approach execution. When teaching students to play Charge Strokes, I have developed two different but complementary approaches, which I call the Subdivision Approach and the Moveable Flam Approach. We will continue to use the passage from Example 1 to illustrate these two approaches.

THE SUBDIVISION APPROACH

In the Subdivision Approach, I remove the accented first note of each Charge Stroke pair from Example 1 and play the remaining notes in the subdivision at an even, low dynamic level. Example 7 shows the resulting pattern.

Example 7: Underlying triplet subdivision from Example 1 with Charge Strokes removed

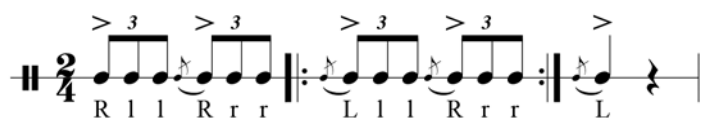


Without the Charge Strokes, the figure is simply built on a series of alternating three-note groupings in each hand that begin on the second triplet partial of each beat. Now very slowly try to play Examples 7 and 1 in succession, concentrating on retaining the subdivision sticking of Example 7 while inserting the Charge Strokes to recreate Example 1. Go back and forth between Examples 7 and 1 by adding the Charge Strokes, then removing them. If you are having difficulty feeling where the Charge Strokes are located, they occur between the second and third notes played by each hand. Use a metronome to help keep you oriented. 60 BPM is a good tempo to get you started, but the rhythms start to flow easily for me at around 92 BPM.

THE MOVEABLE FLAM APPROACH

Since we have established that a Charge Stroke is basically a Flam with the sticking "in the wrong order," let us momentarily return the sticking to its "natural order." In this case we reverse the two notes in a Charge Stroke, creating a normal Flam. I call this the Moveable Flam Approach. When you apply this idea to Example 1, it results in Example 8.

Example 8: Using the Moveable Flam Approach to replace the Charge Strokes from Example 1 with Flams



Note that the figure now ends on an accented left-hand Flam and that the Moveable Flam approach *does* change the sticking of the basic subdivision. Where we had Rll lrr lrr lrr in Example 7, removing the grace notes from the Flams in Example 8 leaves us with a subdivision sticking of Rll Rrr Lll Rrr L. Don't allow this to confuse you; in the Moveable Flam Approach the subdivision sticking is not the focus, the location of the Flam is. Now play Example 8 and gradually try to morph it into Example 1 by moving the accented note forward in time. Again, go very slowly and use a metronome to keep you oriented.

To move smoothly between Flams and Charge Strokes, I don't think about moving the notes in both hands, only the hand that has the accent. To move from a Flam to a Charge Stroke, I try to put the accented hand

in front of the grace note, in essence making that hand “cut in line.” To move in the opposite direction, the hand that has the accent in a Charge Stroke must wait until after the unaccented note so as to play a Flam.

When you’re feeling confident in your ability to play Examples 1, 7, and 8 individually, try to move freely between them. Until you are comfortable playing Charge Strokes, I recommend starting a sequence with either Example 7 or 8, whichever makes more sense for you, and moving on from there. A workable sequence might look like this: 8–1–7–1–8, and so on. Remember that there will be a slight change of subdivision sticking to get between Examples 1 and 8. The overall process is a little tricky, but with patience and time, you will see improvement.

PRACTICE, INTERPRETATION AND DEVELOPMENT

At this point, the Charge Stroke figures in the music of LeFèvre and Tompkins are familiar and comfortable enough that I can play them at sight. However, when I was still developing my ability to play them, I used both approaches discussed above in conjunction. When working out a new figure, I would usually start by using the Moveable Flam Approach. This gave me an approximation of what the figure was supposed to sound like. Then I would use the Subdivision Approach to ensure rhythmic accuracy of the subdivision and build speed. For particularly difficult passages, I might start even more simply, playing all of the notes in a single beat or figure entirely out-of-time, just to figure out what order my hands were supposed to move in and which notes in the sequence were accented. By starting very slowly and diligently working with a metronome, I gradually developed fluency with the technique. Experiment with these and other approaches and see which are effective or not effective for you.

Once you are comfortable playing Charge Strokes, we can talk about how to interpret them. As stated earlier, Flams can be interpreted anywhere on a spectrum from very closed and tight to very open and wide, with lots of subtle gradation in between. What sound we choose in a given moment will largely be determined by context and our stylistic knowledge of the music. In the fast, quiet passages of Jacques DeLeculuse’s music, tight Flams are perfectly appropriate, while in a slower, more open rudimental solo by John Pratt, wider Flams might be called for. I approach Charge Strokes no differently.

When interpreting Charge Strokes in context, I try to play them open enough to emphasize the “lift” of the rhythm. If a passage contains both Flams and Charge Strokes, I will differentiate them as much as possible by playing the Flams tighter and the Charge Strokes wider. No matter your approach, try to play with light, bouncy strokes. As you increase tempo remain relaxed, letting the tension of the drumhead and the weight of the sticks do as much of the work as possible. The music should have flow and sound effortless despite the disconcerting note density and complicated rhythms. Try to find the tempo in each piece that allows you to play the figures with that sense of spring.

Beyond the works of LeFèvre and Tompkins, you can take Flam passages from any snare drum solo (short excerpts from Wilcoxon and Pratt work well) and use the Moveable Flam Approach to create your own Charge Stroke figures and sequences. The most useful Flam figures are those that incorporate doubled stickings. Hand-to-hand sequences tend to create awkward Charge Stroke sequences because of how the Moveable Flam Approach alters the sticking. Example 9 shows how the Moveable Flam Approach applied to normal Flam Accents results in an awkward Charge Stroke sequence.

Example 9: An awkward Charge Stroke sequence created by using a source pattern with alternating stickings

It is possible to play this figure slowly, but its flow suffers significantly as the tempo increases because the final unaccented subdivision note in each beat and the accented Charge Stroke that follows it are played with the same hand.

Example 10 gives you an effective demonstration of how Flam sequences with doubled stickings can be used to create interesting Charge Stroke figures. This figure uses a source pattern of four right-hand Swiss Army Triplets followed by two Flam Taps.

Example 10: An effective Charge Stroke sequence created by using a source pattern with doubled stickings

The musical and technical concepts that underlie the Charge Stroke are applicable to playing in a variety of musical styles, and adding this technique to my repertoire has had a significant and immediate impact on my playing on all percussion instruments. I hope you find this rudiment exciting, and I encourage you to experiment and discover how you can integrate it into your playing.

ENDNOTES

1. Guy LeFèvre, *Le Tambour: Technique Supérieure* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1979), Preface.
2. *Ibid.*, 30.
3. Guy LeFèvre, *Étude Progressive de la Technique: Caisse Claire, Vol. 2* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1987), 15.
4. Robert Tourte, *Méthode de Tambour et Caisse Claire d'Orchestre* (Paris: Editions Salabert, 1946), 10. 10. [translation mine]
5. *Ibid.*, 10.

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