

ROOTS OF RHYTHM - CHAPTER 3: THE BUHAI FROM ROMANIA

Instrument:

Buhai, an animal friction drum

Country:

Romania



Flag:

The national coat of arms (formerly centered in the yellow band) has been removed by the government.

Size and Population:

Romania has an area of 91,700 square miles (slightly smaller than Oregon) with 130 miles of coastline. Its estimated population as of July 2004 is 22,355,551.

Geography and Climate:

Romania is in southeastern Europe, bordering the Black Sea, between Bulgaria and Ukraine. It borders Bulgaria, Hungary, Moldova, Yugoslavia, and Ukraine (north and east). Romania is in the northern part of the Balkan Peninsula and its territory is marked by the circular Carpathian Mountains and the Danube River on the southern border, which runs into the Black Sea. Romania lies midway between the Equator and the North Pole. There are six regions in the country: Walachia and Dobruja (south), Banat, Transylvania, and Moldovia (center), and Bukovina (north).

Romania has hot, sunny summers and cold, cloudy winters. Various levels of moisture range from 40 inches in some mountain areas to less than 20 inches on the plains.

Background and History:

Romania, meaning "land of the Romans," was called *Dacia* around 300 B.C. The Roman Empire conquered the area around 106 A.D. and developed it considerably by building roads, bridges, and a great wall. They were forced out after 100 years by invading tribes, including the Goths, Huns, and Slavs, and after the Romans left various tribes stayed and began living there. Many of today's Romanians are descendents of these tribes and the Romans. Other invasions by barbarian tribes prevented unification, but by 1350 the regions of Walachia and Moldavia had formed independent states. For centuries these two regions were under the political control of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, but these areas finally secured their autonomy in 1856.

Romania became an independent country in 1861 when Walachia and Moldavia joined. Just after the World War I, Transylvania and other surrounding lands were added to Romania, almost doubling its size. During World War II, Romania first fought for the Germans and then switched



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to the side of the Allies. In 1947, Romania became an official communist country and soon after, the U.S.S.R. had complete control of the country. A new 1965 constitution stressed local control of the country, and in 1989 the Communist leadership was overthrown. In 1990 Romania held national elections and a non-Communist party took control. Romanian, the official language, is the only Eastern European language that comes from the Roman Latin.

Culture:

Romanian culture is largely derived from the ancient Romans, with strains of Slavic, Hungarian, Greek, and Turkish influence. Poems, folktales, and folk music have always held a central place in Romanian culture. Although Romania has been influenced by trends outside the country, it also has a rich native culture, much of which was influenced by the music of Gypsies, nomadic tribes who once wandered through the country by the thousands. An important part of Romanian culture is a variety of festivals that celebrate weddings, christenings, and holidays.

One festival in particular correlates to a new vegetation cycle around the beginning of the New Year. This exuberant folk festival, which celebrates the passing from one year to another, is marked by a 12-day cycle (December 25 – January 6). The 12 days symbolize the 12 months of the year. During this period, the year grows up, gets older and finally dies. All the rituals from these 12 days are meant to symbolically restore the world.

One of the most important traditions associated with this folk cycle is “Plugusorul” (plue-guh-sorul - a small plow), one of the oldest and most beautiful Romanian traditions performed in Walachia and Moldavia. It is an old agricultural custom, which symbolizes the main occupation of the peasants. On New Year’s Eve or even on New Year’s Day, a group of men, having whips, bells and either a plow or a *buhai* (boo-hi), a friction drum, go through the village, wishing agricultural wealth. Two or four oxen, also decorated, pull the plow. In this tradition, carol singers recite the plowing carol, accompanied by whip snaps, *buhai* noises, shouts, and sometimes flutes and other musical instruments. The plowing carol is a long recitation in verse representing allegorically the whole work of the field, from the plowing to the kneading and baking of rolls of pure cornflower. For example, the carolers recite the following:

Our plow works wonders
It has four or five coulter
Sharpened, tempered
Sharp and cutting,
Never sleeping

And where it passes it leaves
A soft and fertile furrow;
And where it furrows!
And where it furrows!
The field laughs and blooms.

The “plugusor” carol is finished by giving the same gifts as in the case of other carols – nuts, apples, pears, money, etc. The “plugusor” and “the *buhai*” are not typically used together outside of this custom. The *buhai* is also heard during ritual mask shows founded by Romanian ancestors.

Music: Instruments & Rhythms

Instruments: The musical instruments in traditional Romanian culture include pan pipes (made famous by Romanian Gheorghe Zamfir), the violin, an end-blown pipe, the accordion, and the

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saxophone, to mention a few. The focus of this lesson is one ancient instrument in the drum family, a friction drum called the *buhai*.

The *buhai* (an old Romanian word for “ox”) is made from a wooden bucket or tub that functions as a drum body or resonator. The drumhead, made from goat or sheepskin, is soaked in water for several hours, stretched over the end of the bucket, and fastened there with rope. Some horsehair passes through a hole in the middle of the skin, and with the drum held by someone else the performer wets his or her hands and pulls along the length of the hair with one hand then the other, thus producing a noise resembling the bellow of an ox. The performer can raise the pitch of the drum by pressing into the drumhead with the free hand as the horsehair is being pulled.

Rhythms: While the rhythms of Romania include the standard four and six beats, and even five beats and seven beats, the *buhai* is intended to have the rhythm of an animal sound.

Listen & Play Along: *Use *Roots of Rhythm* CD Notes to support this section.

Note to teachers: if instruments are not readily available, consider having students make their own (a general activity for making drums can be found in the Roots of Rhythm: Introduction section, and a specific buhai-making activity can be found in the Resources section of this chapter) or encourage them to improvise - using everyday items such as buckets, containers, phone books, desk tops, etc., as instruments. Rhythms can also be created with body percussion including hand clapping, foot tapping, finger snapping, etc.

Listen to Tracks 25-27 of the Roots of Rhythm Companion CD to hear the sound of the buhai. Since the buhai is not an easy drum to locate, students can first imitate the sound of the buhai and then make their own (see Resources section for buhai-making activity). Humans are able to make a variety of animal sounds using their own voice but some people use musical instruments to do this, for example, hunters use duck call devices. Using your voice, make the ox sounds of the Romanian buhai heard on Track 26 of the Roots of Rhythm Companion CD. Then, make your own homemade version of the instrument with a can, plastic lid, and masking tape, following the instructions in the Resources section.

Now it's time to play the buhai! Play your homemade *buhai* along with the musical example on Track 28 of the *Roots of Rhythm* Companion CD, gently pinching the tape with your thumb on the sticky side and your index finger on the other side. Starting near the plastic lid, gently pull down the tape all the way to its end. Rhythms of the Romanian *buhai* are not in a particular beat but in un-measured, free time, meant to sound like an ox. These sounds can be notated with various dots and shaped of lines. Look at the various shapes below representing soft, loud and the length of time, and see if this is the sound on the CD. Read these graphic shapes and play along again with the sounds on the *Roots of Rhythm* Companion CD:



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Compose a *buhai* piece using the graphic notation above, then recite the carol and have several students accompany the carol on their instruments.

Other friction instruments: There are other musical instruments that use friction, and a famous one used in today's popular music is the turntable. The friction of the needle on the record is amplified with electronics for the musician. Have someone hold the *buhai*, and using both thumbs, make some DJ scratching sounds. Use a short, tight pull for the high sound and a longer, looser pull for the low sound. Write an "agricultural" rap that corresponds to the Romanian tradition but refers to American food, and then perform it with your homemade *buhai*.

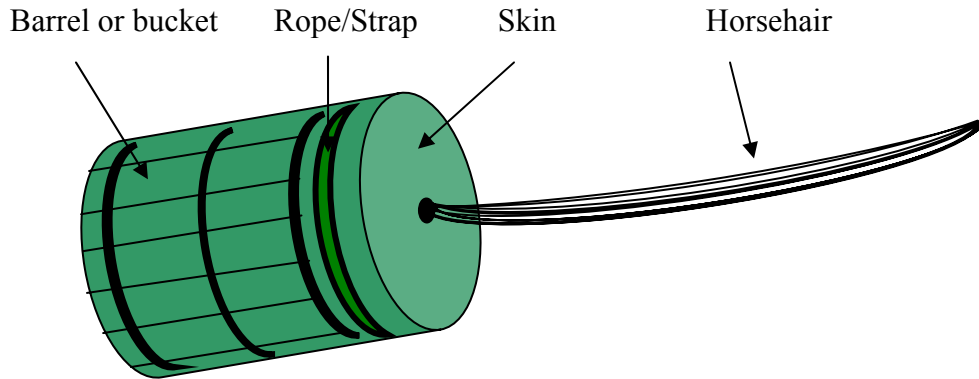
***Buhai* and Performer:**



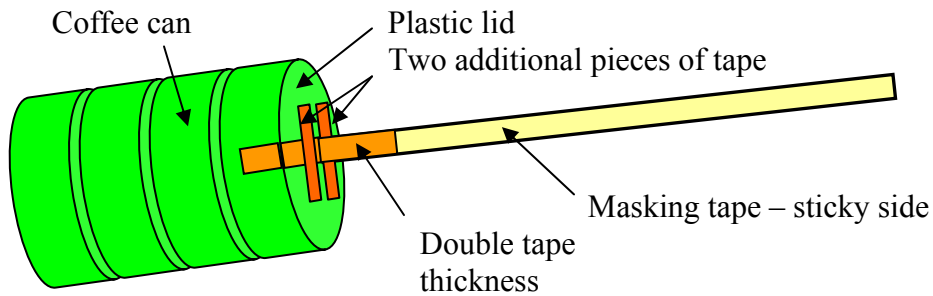
Photograph by Craig Woodson.

Resources: Traditional vs. Homemade *Buhai*

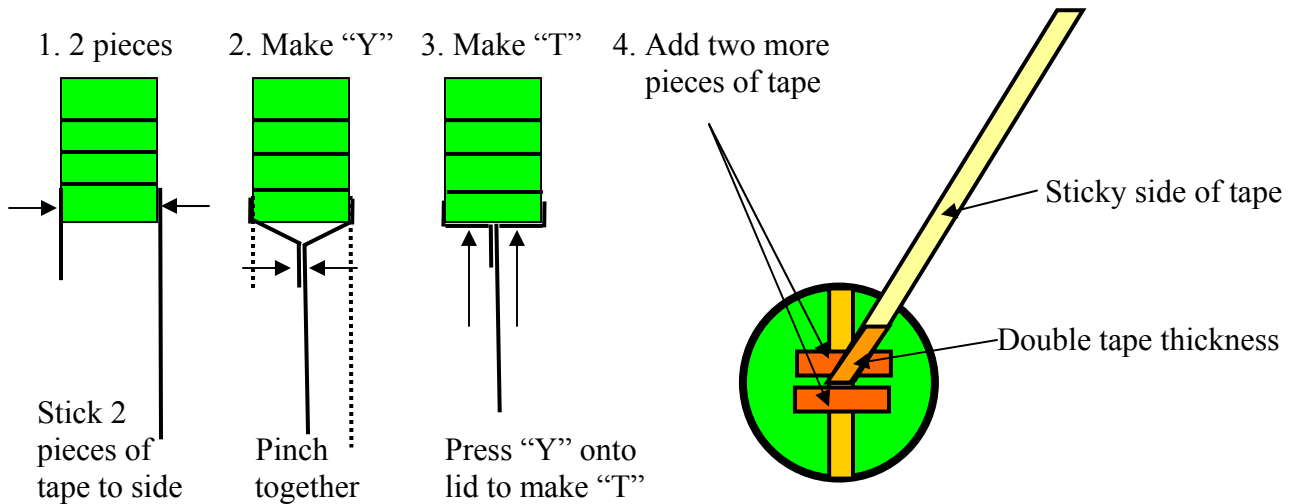
The Traditional Romanian *Buhai*



A Homemade *Buhai*



Four Steps to Make Your *Buhai*



Try the following science experiment. Keeping the tape on the lid, take the lid off, hold the lid, pull down the tape with friction. Is the sound softer or louder without the can? Put the lid back on the can, and try the friction pull again. Does the can make the sound louder or softer?