

Mapex Black Panther Snare Drums

by Chap Ostrander

One color...many different sizes and sounds. Mapex's new snares are a different breed of cat.

Mapex USA has recently introduced their new family of snare drums, the *Black Panther* series. As their ads quoting Henry Ford say, "You can have any color you want...as long as it's black." While this is essentially true, there is much more to the *Black Panthers* than shell color. The drums are offered in birch, maple, bird's-eye maple, steel, aluminum, and brass shells, and are available in several different sizes. Combined with different styles of hardware finishes and hoops, each category of drum takes on its own "signature" look.

Let's start off with the features that are common to the whole family. The drums are supplied with coated *Ambassador* heads on top and *Ambassador* snare heads. The hoops are either die-cast or 2.3 mm *Power Hoops*. Four types of strainers are utilized: two die-cast side-throw models (one full-sized and a smaller one for some of the piccolo and soprano drums), a vertical-pull model that includes rollers underneath for extending the snares past the width of the snare head, and a simple but effective small strainer for the

WHAT'S HOT

- wide range of sizes and materials creates varied acoustic possibilities
- drums have lots of "headroom" for intensive playing
- entire line is priced affordably

WHAT'S NOT

- low-volume snare response requires special tuning in wood models

thinnest piccolos.

The die-cast side-throw model is of a very straightforward design, with an adjustment knob on top of the housing. The housing contains a nylon guide block that holds the lower part of the strainer. While the adjustment knob is loose and moves freely on the vertical pull strainer, the knob on the side-throw strainer requires a bit more pressure. This is because there is a spring between the knob and the lower part of the housing, which serves to keep the adjustment in place. I favor this feature because I like to know that the adjustment I make is going to stay in place after I set it.



Left to right: bird's-eye maple snares with chrome (top) and black (bottom) hardware, aluminum, brass, and birch snares, and maple snares with brass (top) and chrome (bottom) hardware

Jim Esposito

Except for the piccolo models, each drum has an adjustable butt plate. The vertical strainer doesn't allow you to adjust the snares while it is engaged, so it's nice to be able to make that adjustment from the other side while the snares are on. The lever of the side-throw strainer doesn't get in the way of the tuning knob per se, but it just feels easier to tweak the tuning on the side opposite the strainer. (Note: An adjustable butt plate also allows you to "center" the snares on the bottom head without having to loosen the adjustment and fiddle with it.)

The vertical-throw strainer was all business. I've read snare drum reviews where strainers of this design tended to release when the snares were tensioned too loosely, but this was definitely not the case here. The lever goes into place, and that's that.

The snares (twenty strands on all models) are held in place with plastic strips. However, they do have holes for use with snare cord. They also have channels, so that if cord is used, the snares will lie flat. Another nice touch is that drumkey-operated screws are used at both strainer and butt ends, enabling the player to make repairs or changes without having to hunt for a screwdriver.

I'm impressed by the lugs on these drums. With the exception of the piccolo drums, the lugs are single-sided, with a set for each head. The piccolos need double-sided lugs due to space restrictions. The casings are die-cast and compact, with nothing inside them but a threaded insert and a nylon wedge to hold it in place. The design of the lugs gives the drums a rounded, "warm" look. These drums don't exhibit sharp edges, but instead give the impression of being very solid.

The lugs are isolated from the shell via nylon spacers, as are the strainer assemblies and butt plates. There are also nylon washers on the tension rods, which afford a smooth feel while tuning. The logo badge is held on with four screws, and backed with a nylon spacer as well. The single air vent is bolted on, which means that it won't work loose and rattle over time.

The overall manufacturing process is very well thought out. Each lug is shaped to fit the curvature of the shell, and each is secured to the shell by one screw (two on the piccolos). On the wood shells a small pilot hole in the shell matches up with a pin on the upper part of the lug, which keeps it aligned. The pilot hole does not penetrate the shell. This process isn't needed for the metal drums, since the shell is stiffer and holds the lug in place. No internal or external muffling is supplied.

Now on to the particulars of the different shell types.

Into The Woods

The wood drums all feature laminated 6-ply shells, with staggered seams and no reinforcing rings. They are offered in widths of 5 mm, 6 mm, or 8 mm, depending on the thickness of the plies,



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This close-up reveals the beauty of Mapex's bird's-eye maple finish.

with a bearing edge of 45°. The snare beds on the wooden drums deserve comment, because they're longer than average. The bed on most snares measures about 4" to 5". The beds on the *Black Panthers* cover a length of about 12". I'm not sure of the concept behind such a design. (If you talk to five drum technicians about snare beds, you're likely to get ten different theories.) I do know how it affected the sound of the drums that I heard.

At first I found it difficult to get full snare response at very low volumes. If I tuned the batter heads and worked with the snare tension to achieve such a sound, the drums wouldn't perform well when played louder. However, through a happy accident that occurred when I was reassembling a maple drum after changing its hoops, I discovered that the snare response could be dramatically improved simply by bringing the tension of the snare-side head up about a half-step. What a difference! The response was right there, down to a soft touch. On the high side of the volume scale, these drums simply *would not* choke. Each had a full-bodied voice with total snare response through the range of medium-loud to triple forte (*fff*).

So my conclusion is that although you definitely have to work to get the range of snare response you want from the Mapex wood-shell drums, it's in there. They can be tuned to perform well at low volumes, and from medium volumes on up they simply sound *great*. (As an aside, the metal-shelled drums have more conventional snare beds, and therefore offer good response at lower playing levels without the need for special tuning.)

On the inside, the wood shells are virtually unfinished. I had no problem with the quality of the sound that the drums produced as they were, but it occurs to me that an unfinished shell has nothing but potential. If the player wishes to change the sonic characteristics of the drum, he or she can take advantage of various options available today, with the application of a sealant, polyurethane, or even fiberglass.

The outside of the shells are finished with a flat black stain that

allows the grain of the wood to show through. A striking contrast is created when the quality of the flat black is combined with the different hardware finishes and hoops. In other words, each drum possesses its own "signature" look (owing to the style of hoop and color of the hardware in its makeup) while staying within the *Black Panther* family. (Please note: The style and color of hardware has been predetermined by Mapex. This includes matching coatings for the hoops, lugs, tension rods, and snares. In other words, you cannot order a drum with your choice of hardware color.)

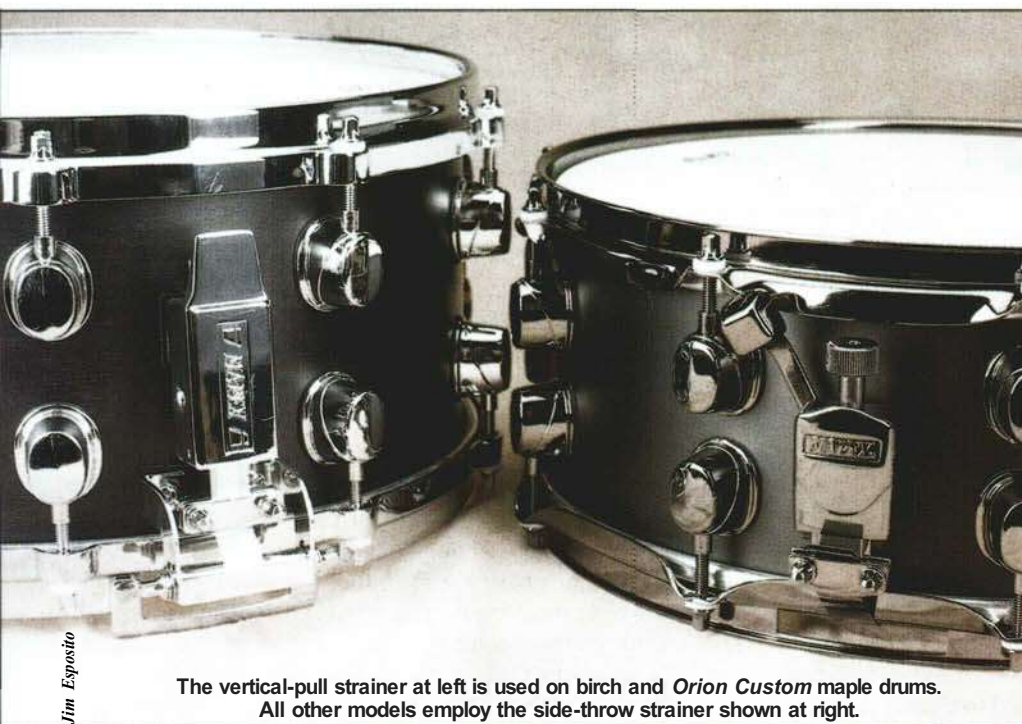
The birch snare comes with an 8 mm shell, in 5 1/2 x14 and 6 1/2 x14 sizes. The shell is fitted with chrome hardware and 2.3 mm *Power Hoops*, and is one of two in the line that utilize the vertical-pull strainer. The sound of the drum is characteristically dry, with less sustain than the other wood types. The snare sound is sharp

employs the vertical-pull strainer. The voice of this drum is rich and loud, with a bigger sound than that of the thinner maple snare. The 6 1/2 x14 that I played had a sound that would work equally well in a concert hall or a rock venue. The ring of the drum was easily controlled with a *Zero Ring* or small bits of duct tape. Rimclicks and rimshots were both clear and cutting.

More attention was paid to the finish of the bird's-eye maple snares. Where the other maple and birch drums have flat finishes, the bird's-eye drums are much smoother, with barely detectable seams. I had to remove the head from one of them just to find the outside seam. The thinner-shelled drum (6 mm) features black chrome hardware, black-coated snares, and die-cast hoops. These are offered in nine sizes, ranging from 3 1/2 x12 to 6 1/2 x14. The 6 1/2 x14 drum that I played possessed a sound similar to that of the 5 mm maple, but somewhat darker. I attribute the darkness of the

sound to the coated black snares that come with the drum. Although I would recommend trading the hoops from die-cast to 2.3 mm *Power Hoops* to open up the sound, I wouldn't rash to change the snares. This drum definitely has its own character—an uncommon voice, if you will. It may not be everybody's cup of tea, but you should check it out nonetheless.

The 8 mm bird's-eye maple has chrome hardware and die-cast hoops, and comes in four sizes, from 3 1/2 x13 to 6 1/2 x14. The same relative difference holds true between the two bird's-eye drums as between the two standard maple snares. The 6 1/2 x14 drum that I sampled sounded very much like the 8 mm maple snare. I felt that the sonic difference between the standard and the bird's-eye maple drums was minimal, with the bird's-eye drums having a slightly higher voice. The cosmetic effect of the



The vertical-pull strainer at left is used on birch and *Orion Custom* maple drums. All other models employ the side-throw strainer shown at right.

and bright, and gives the impression that the drum is tuned higher than it is. My sample was a 6 1/2 x14, and it was very responsive, with little need for muffling. Rimclicks were sharp and clear, and rimshots were lively and almost metallic in nature.

The thin maple drum (the *Orion Traditional* model) has a 5 mm shell with 24 kt gold hardware and die-cast hoops on the 13" and 14" sizes. The available sizes range from 5 1/2 x12 to 6 1/2 x14, a total of five models. The snare sound was full and warm, though not as loud as the thicker-shelled maple drum. I played a 6 1/2 x14 and found the sound to be a little boxy. The drum had a fair amount of ring to it, but it sounded closed-up. On a hunch, I traded the die-cast hoops for the 2.3 mm *Power Hoops*, top and bottom, to see what difference it would make. This really opened up the sound of the drum. It still was not as big as the 8 mm drum, but it was crisper and cleaner.

The thicker maple drum (the *Orion Custom* model) has an 8 mm shell with chrome hardware and die-cast hoops, and is offered in five sizes, from 3 1/2 x13 up to 8x14. This is the other drum that

bird's-eye grain is undeniably striking, however. It makes for a very attractive finish worthy of its own line.

Testing Their Metal

The aluminum snare has a black anodized finish and is fitted with black chrome hardware and black coated snares. It's available in four sizes, from 3 1/2 x13 to 6 1/2 x14. An aluminum shell is, by its nature, dry and not as reflective as steel. That quality is embodied in this drum. The coating on the snares seems to add to that dryness, giving the drum the sound of having cable or gut snares. When I traded the black-coated snares for a set of gold-plated ones, I heard a slight difference in the crispness. I'm not saying that this quality is a negative one, just that you need to shop for the sound that you want in a snare drum. In this case I feel that the black coating on the snares is a positive contributing factor. The 5 1/2 x14 drum that I played had a lot of character, with little need for muffling. Rimshots and rimclicks were clean and powerful.

The steel-shelled snare is finished in black chrome, with

chrome-plated hardware and die-cast hoops. It comes in four sizes, from 3 1/2 x13 to 6 1/2 x14. The shell has a triple bead around its center and is the first of two shell types to have a glossy finish. The drum that I sampled was the 3 1/2 x14 piccolo (not included in the photos here), and I have to say that it embodied everything you could want from a drum that size. It had great snare response at all volumes, a quick voice, a fabulous brush sound, and rimshots that were lightning-sharp. The sound was always under control, but if you wanted to open up and let loose—no problem. From a whisper to full volume, the drum had great sound with no choking whatever. Having sampled the piccolo, I'm sure that all the steel drums sound great.

Finally, the brass drums are finished in black brass (also glossy) with 24 kt gold hardware and die-cast hoops on the 13" and 14" sizes. Seven sizes are offered, ranging from 3 1/2 x12 to 6 1/2 x14. The brass drum has a warmer sound than the steel snare, but it still retains that metallic voice and body. I was fortunate enough to have two of these drums to sample: a 5 1/2 x12 and a 6 1/2 x14. I loved them both.

The 12" drum had a full, rich sound to it. It was definitely not a "coffee can with snares," but rather a serious drum with a high-quality snare sound, albeit with a higher voice. I took the drum on a gig doing a local production of a Broadway show, and it had more than enough sound to fill a medium-sized auditorium. As is natural with a 12" snare, cross-stick rimclicks suffer, but the rimshots were sharp and clear, and the drum had fine snare response from the slightest touch to the heaviest. The other brass drum I played (the 6 1/2 x14) would obviously be more at home in larger venues where a bigger sound would be called for. Rimclicks on this drum were high-pitched and cutting, and rimshots were powerful and metallic.

Earlier shipments of *Black Panther* snares were supplied with chrome drumkeys, but I am told that future shipments will come with matching black chrome keys. It seems only fitting.

Conclusions And Prices

Given their acoustic variety, their performance parameters, and their quality of construction, the *Black Panther* snares seem to offer something for everyone. Rock players will obviously benefit from the "headroom" that the drums offer. On the other hand, my wife, Adrienne (who is the touring percussionist with Solid Brass and the timpanist for the Princeton Chamber Symphony), found them equally applicable for use in orchestral settings. (She particularly favored the wood-shelled drums, with a special nod to the 6 mm bird's-eye maple snare.)

For the past nine months, Mapex has been a wholly owned company (as opposed to being handled by distributors). As such they are now solely responsible for the quality of their products, and for the customer service that goes with them. The company seems open to comments and would welcome feedback from customers. The drums are backed with a lifetime warranty.

Now for the really good news! The list prices of the *Black Panther* snares range from \$287.90 for the 3 1/2 x13 steel piccolo to \$629.90 for a black chrome brass drum with 24 kt gold hardware. So not only do these drums represent a full line of individual voices, but they are well within affordable limits for today's consumers.

Mapex USA is stalking the competition with their new *Black Panther* snares. In the company's own words, "The *Black Panther* series is the most comprehensive snare drum line ever manufactured." Given the range of choices that I saw, I would have to say that I agree.

Spaun Drums

by Mark Parsons

The Spaun Drum Company is the brainchild of two men who met a few years ago: Brian Spaun and Dave Pimentel. In retrospect, their talents and interests seemed to dovetail almost perfectly into the skills needed to design and build a line of premium drums—Brian did drum repairs, refinishing, and customizing, while Dave had a background as a machinist. Both were also dedicated drummers and both had a desire to build quality drums with unique features, but at an affordable price. They formed a partnership, did design and prototype work, and by early 1996 were shipping their first kits.

The Spaun Drum Company focuses on one line of drums, and in a sense focuses on *one drum* (albeit in different sizes and colors): All their shells feature the same materials, construction, number of plies, and type of bearing edge. All of their drums use the same custom-designed lug, and the same type of steel hoop is used on all snares and toms. (The bass drum hoops are maple.) The same

throwoff and butt is used on all sizes of snares, and all Spaun drums feature the same satin hand-rubbed finish (available in a variety of hues).

This "boiling down to the essentials" philosophy doesn't mean that Spaun isn't willing to make changes when the need arises. I found three things to "nit-pick" about on our test kit—and in each case they'd already implemented changes in their current produc-

WHAT'S HOT

- double-cut 45° bearing edges
- unique lug design
- excellent quality and craftsmanship

WHAT'S NOT

- large logo badges distract from the beauty of the shells