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# Cymbal Seminar

by Mitchell Peters and Dave Black

Good cymbal technique adds enormous power, dynamic contrast, and color to an ensemble, but too often percussionists focus on the big three – snare drum, mallets, and timpani – and neglect cymbals and other accessory instruments.

The basic techniques of cymbal playing are important, but in the long run what counts is that your cymbal playing sounds good. Never be afraid to experiment or adjust technique to find a more comfortable and effective way to play. Beginning students should learn the fundamental cymbal techniques at all dynamic levels using one pair of cymbals instead of changing from a small pair for soft dynamics to a larger pair for louder dynamics. A basic pair is eighteen-inch cymbals of medium weight. Younger players should use a smaller size for easy handling.

In concert cymbal playing the foundation of it all is having a good solo cymbal crash. Nothing accentuates an exciting passage as well as a brilliantly executed cymbal crash. What constitutes a good cymbal sound is subjective, but good-quality cymbals are an excellent starting point. The goal is to get each cymbal to vibrate fully.

The concept behind getting a good crash is minimizing the initial contact

(impact) sound and focusing on a full and resonant tone after the contact. Think more in terms of playing legato than of playing percussively.

There are two widely used basic crashes, each named for the motion of the strong hand. Some performers use an upward motion with the strong hand, and others prefer a downward motion. Whichever motion a player uses the weak hand moves in the opposite direction. The right hand will be referred to here as the strong hand.

Relaxation is the key to a good sound, and this starts with the grip. Do not put hands through the loop of the straps, but grasp the strap close to the bell of the cymbal using the top of the first joint of the index finger and the flat fleshy part of the thumb (see illustrations). By gripping the straps firmly and not too close to the bell of the cymbal, the cymbals will ring freely. Use the thumb lightly on the bell to guide and control the cymbal during fast passages, but the thumb should not be on the bell when the cymbals are crashed for maximum resonance.

Leather or rawhide straps are the best. The cymbal knots are important to prevent the thongs of the strap from coming undone and slipping through the hole of the cymbal. If the thongs are long enough, tie them again directly on top of the first knot



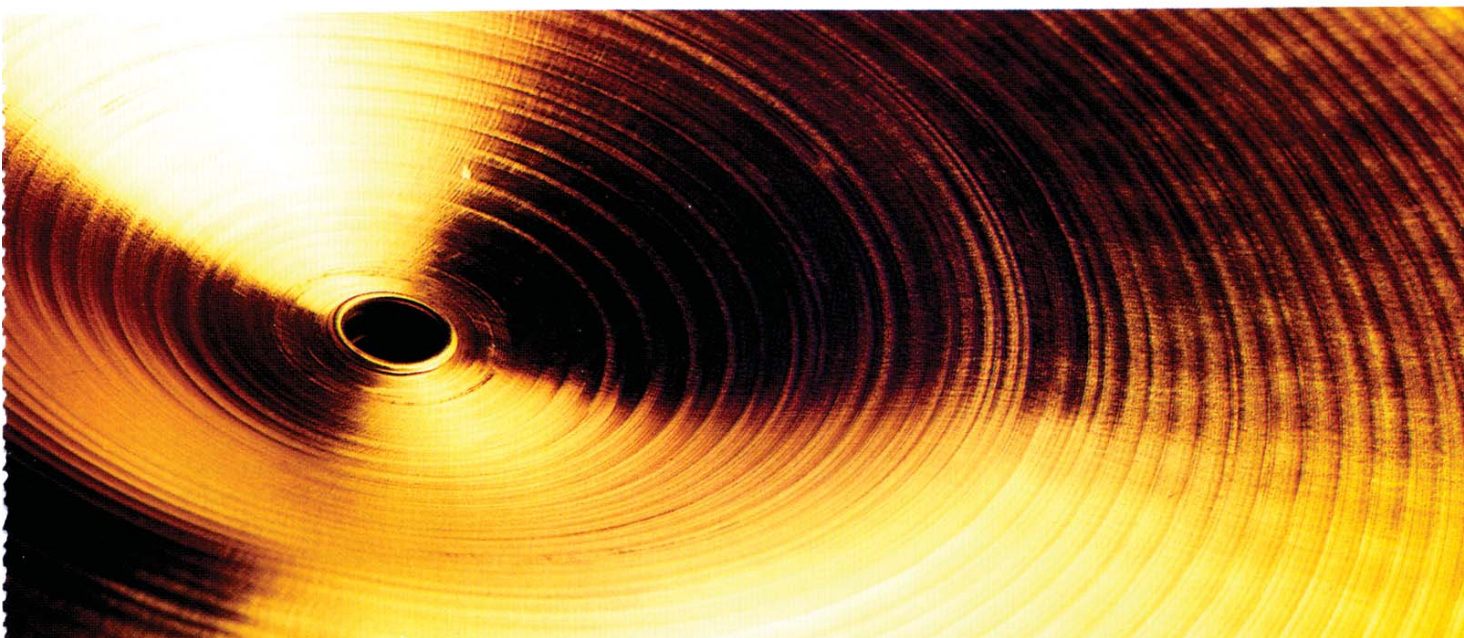
for added security. The diagram illustrates the standard method for tying the cymbal knot; check the knots frequently because they occasionally become loose.

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*Dave Black is a noted percussionist and author in Los Angeles.*

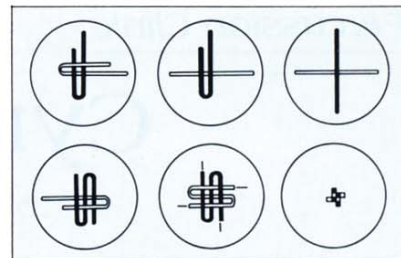
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Cymbal pads are not recommended but if used they should be small and not inhibit vibration.

For young or beginning players the basic one-hand crash with upward motion is a good starting point. One-hand means only one hand is in motion until the cymbals meet, after which both are in motion. This enables beginning cymbal players to focus on the motion of the strong hand and on the angle at which the cymbals come into contact. The result is a clean, resonant sound. When this motion is comfortable, add the preparatory motion of the other hand.

Begin by placing the cymbals together in the proper position. This position will serve as a memory lock when the cymbals actually meet.



Keep the top of the cymbals just below eye level to avoid blocking the music and the conductor. Tilt the cymbals slightly to the left with the right cymbal about a half to one inch lower than the left cymbal. It is important that the cymbals do not meet concentrically or an air pocket will form and produce a dead or flat-sounding crash.

Drop the right cymbal slightly below and away from the left. With the left cymbal stationary, strike the right cymbal against it in a glancing blow, moving inward and upward at the same time. The right cymbal should strike the left cymbal at an angle with the top of the cymbals meeting first, then follow through with the rest of the cymbal. The effect is similar to a flam.

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The follow-through is important, and when the cymbals make contact the player should focus on separating the cymbals by continuing the upward motion of the right hand and moving the left hand downward bringing the cymbals to approximately shoulder height and spreading them so the overtones ring freely. Spreading the cymbals will produce a brighter sound, while keeping them together will result in a darker sound.

All motions from the start of the crash through the strike and the follow-through should be relaxed and continuous. With repeated cymbal strokes, the player cannot place the cymbals together each time.

After developing control of the right hand, players can enhance the sound of the crash by adding the preparatory motion of the left hand. Start with the cymbals together in the contact position and drop the right hand and raise the left hand up slightly; move the cymbals in opposite directions, the right hand up and the left hand down. Make contact with the cymbals in the same manner as with the one-handed crash. For higher-volume crashes, the added motion of the left hand produces a bigger sound.

Because cymbals ring a while following a crash, players will often dampen the sound by bringing the edges against their chest.



*Dampening*

Buttons and objects in the player's pockets may create extraneous sounds when the cymbals come in contact with them. In a series of crashes the cymbals are usually not dampened between notes. These are the technical foundations of cymbal playing, and with practice and experimentation players will adjust to ways that are the most comfortable and produce the desired sounds.

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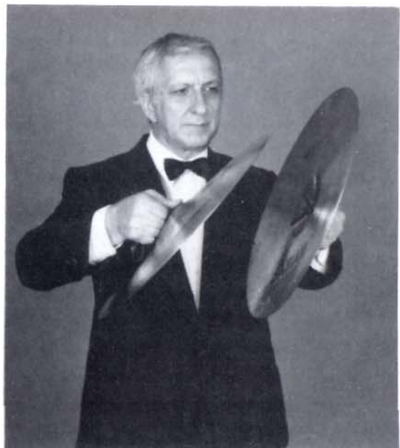


The angle of the cymbal and spacing of the flam will vary depending on the volume of the crash. The flam should always be subtle (closed) and not heard as two separate attacks.

The angle between the cymbals will be wider for loud crashes and will decrease as the volume gets softer. For soft crashes the cymbals will be almost parallel to each other. The distance between the cymbals also varies with the volume. For soft crashes the distance between the plates will be small, and become greater as the volume of the crashes increases.



Soft Crash



Loud Crash

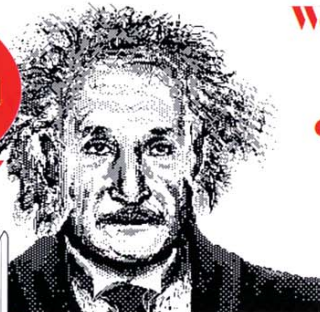


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