

SUSPENDED CYMBAL

by Mark Dorr

Basic Set-Up

Cymbal / stand height should be adjusted so that the optimum playing surface area may be easily reached. Waist to mid-chest height usually works the best, depending upon where the cymbal is located in the percussion set-up. The cymbal itself should be nearly horizontal (parallel to the floor), with the arms and mallets / sticks at a comfortable height.

A stick tray is useful to help keep the mallets organized.

Carry an extra supply of cymbal felts, plastic post insulator, protective washers, and wing nuts in your cymbal bag. These small parts seem to always be the easiest to lose or have damaged on the way to a performance!

Type of Suspended Cymbal and Stand to Use

Varying the thickness and diameter of a cymbal can significantly change the response, ring, and tone color possibilities. Most major cymbal manufacturers produce specific instruments thin enough to have a quick response dedicated for use as concert suspended cymbals. Smaller diameter (i.e. 16") medium weight cymbals are good for general use playing and lighter textures. Larger diameter cymbals (i.e. 19") are designed for greater volume and projection capabilities.

The choice of exactly which cymbal to use always depends upon a variety of factors, including the musical context and style, the concert hall, and personal taste of the performer. It is always best to problem solve a bit when approaching a piece of music. What is the overall effect to be achieved? How important is articulation verses sustained qualities in a particular passage? What tone color might be best? Is the passage calling for a smaller cymbal for softer sound or a larger, slightly heavier one for a louder, more sustained effect?

There are two main choices of suspended cymbal stands: 1). gooseneck and 2). pole-type. The gooseneck-type stand allows the cymbal to resonate more with the least amount of dampening of the cymbal. A pole-type stand allows for more flexibility with positioning in a multiple percussion set-up. If a pole-type stand is used, be sure that the plastic post insulator, felt, and cymbal support structure are all in good working order. Extraneous noise (buzzing, rattling) is usually due to metal-on-metal contact between the cymbal and its stand. This may be damaging to both. Also, be careful not to over tighten the top adjustment nut. The more the top felt is compressed, the more the cymbal will be dampened. Whichever type of stand is chosen, the cymbal must be able to resonate and have unrestricted movement.

Tone Production

Unless otherwise specified in the score, a suspended cymbal is usually struck near (but not on) its edge. This provides the fullest and richest sound possible.

To produce the basic stroke, move the mallet toward and away from the surface in one continuous motion. Draw the sound out of the cymbal.

Depending upon the thickness of the cymbal and the type of response needed, one may want to tap the cymbal lightly before striking it.

When executing a roll, the cymbal can be controlled the best by placing the mallets in a straight line opposite each other at 3 o'clock and 9 o'clock, respectively.

Single stroke rolls are generally used unless otherwise indicated. The goal is to move the mallets at a speed with which the cymbal produces a sustained sound. In this respect, suspended cymbal rolls are produced in the same way as on the timpani and mallet keyboards. In the case where snare drum sticks are called for in the score, the player might want to try using multiple bounce rolls during suspended cymbal rolls.

A performer may dampen the cymbal by touching near the edge of the plate with the fingers. In rare instances where the hands cannot easily dampen the cymbal, moving the player's torso into the cymbal can be an effective way to dampen it.

Implements

The most common type of mallet used on suspended cymbal is a soft to medium hardness cord or yarn wound keyboard mallet. Some manufacturers now also make specialty mallets designed specifically for use on suspended cymbals. Almost without exception, when a composition calls for a suspended cymbal to be struck with a timpani mallet, percussionists today substitute a keyboard mallet. Not only do the keyboard mallets sound far superior, they also enable the cymbal to respond more quickly and clearly.

Have a designated pair of mallets available exclusively for use on suspended cymbal. These mallets will tend to wear out more quickly than those used on keyboard instruments.

Use a softer mallet to bring out the lower, more subdued fundamental pitch of the cymbal. To highlight brighter overtones and articulation, use a harder pair of mallets.

When rolling, a pair of yarn or cord mallets works the best.

A wide array of timbres and effects may be achieved on the suspended cymbal. Use of snare drum sticks, brushes, triangle beaters, knitting needles, coin scrapes, sizzle effects, fingernails, and bowing the edge of the plate are just a few of the ways composers have utilized the full tone color spectrum and possibilities associated with suspended cymbals.

CRASH CYMBALS

by Mark Dorr

The type of crash cymbals used for a given musical passage is often left up to the discretion of the performer. The ultimate choice of which cymbals to use can be influenced by a number of factors, including the musical context of the passage, the desired tone color to be achieved, acoustics of the hall, size of the ensemble, and conductor's preference, among others. The musical style, dynamic level contrasts required, and tempi are also important considerations. Does the cymbal part contain repeating rhythmic figures as is often found in a march? Are the crash cymbals being used for tone color embellishment or to highlight the climax of a musical phrase? The final musical decision of which cymbals to use are based upon studying the score, listening to several different recordings with different players / ensembles, conversations with your conductor, and, of course, your own personal taste. In short, use the size and type of cymbal that fits the musical situation the best. Larger, more resonant cymbals might be useful for musical climaxes and for dramatic effect. Relatively smaller cymbals would be useful when the cymbal part is faster and more rhythmic. Thicker, heavier cymbals would be appropriate for Wagnerian-style tunes. Thinner cymbals will possess a lighter tone suitable for some passages in Debussy. Use your imagination and listen to the musical results!

Instruments / Accessories

Have a selection of good quality cymbals available. Excellent instruments are equally important to solid technique and careful listening. Use a padded tray table or cradle to hold the cymbals during rehearsals and performances. A sturdy case is also needed to protect your cymbals when traveling. Recommended cymbal straps should be made of flexible leather or plastic. Avoid rigid wood-type handles as they may crack the cymbal bell. Wool or leather bell pads are not recommended for concert cymbals, as they tend to inhibit the sound.

Holding the Cymbals

For concert playing, do not place hands through the straps or use strap (bell) pads. Both tend to dampen the cymbal's natural resonance. Keeping the hands out of the straps also allows for quicker changes between instruments.

Place strap across palm and between the first and second joints of index finger. Grasp the strap between index finger and pad of thumb. Curl remaining fingers around strap to make a fist. Knuckles of the index and middle fingers are close to cymbal bell. Hold the straps firmly enough to maintain control and allow the cymbal to move but not enough to dampen the cymbal.

Executing the Basic Crash

Stand upright with feet shoulder width apart. Cymbals, music, and conductor should be in one direct line of sight.

Cymbal preparation, attack, and follow-through should all be in one continuous motion.

Hold cymbals directly in front of you at a comfortable height. Usually this is about mid-chest high and close to body. Cymbal plates are at a 45-degree angle in relation to the floor.

Move the cymbal plates toward each other. The edges should be slightly offset from each other at the point of contact, usually around 3/4". If right hand cymbal is lower in position relative to the left, then maintain this position all the way through the crash stroke. Doing so will reduce the chance of trapping an air pocket or locking the cymbals together, both of which will produce a dead sounding crash.

Crash articulation is achieved by bringing the cymbal plates together with one side making contact just before the other, creating a closed "flam" or grace note effect. This is accomplished by holding the cymbals at a slight angle relative to each other. The angle (as well as total distance the plates need to move) will change depending upon the dynamic level required. Be careful that only one longer attack is heard. Minimize initial contact sound.

Use the weight of the cymbals to help produce a full and resonant sound. Don't force the plates together. Experiment with the length of contact time between the plates before separating them ("pp" contact time tends to be longer than "ff").

After contact, pull cymbals away from each other and relax grip a bit to allow cymbals to resonate freely. A darker, more muted sound is produced by a slight separation of the plates. For full projection and uninhibited sound, pull cymbals apart until both are hanging from the hands with cymbal plate edges facing toward audience.

Use relaxed wrists for better sustain and softer attacks; a more rigid (but not tense) wrist motion is used for more rhythmic, faster passages.

For shorter note durations, bring both cymbals into your mid-torso after the crash. Stay clear of buttons on uniforms or tux sleeves as they may interfere with this process.

Crash Cymbal Troubleshooting Guide

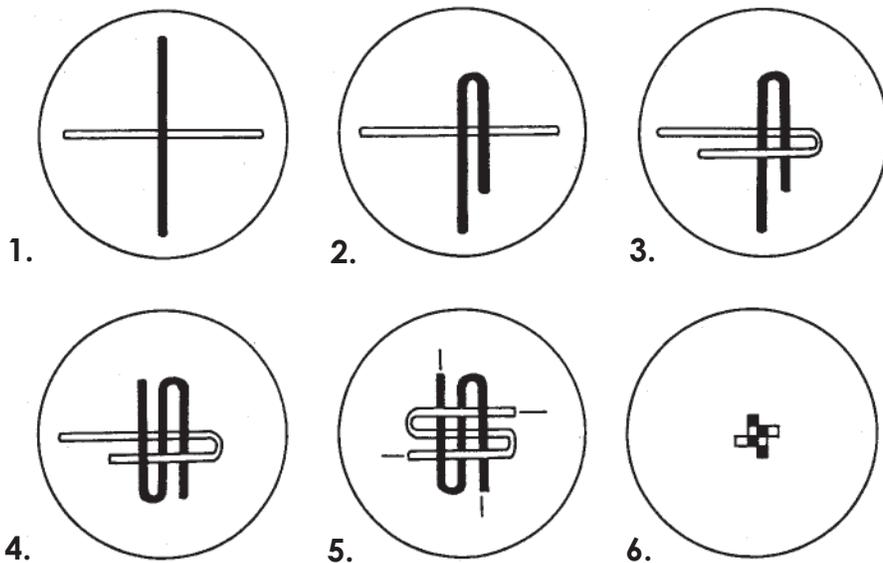
Symptom

Multiple attacks heard during crash
Flat or harsh crash sound
Dead crash or plates lock
Crash resonance too dark
Crash dissipates too quickly
Difficulty controlling "softs"
Harsh attacks
Heavy cymbals too "pingy"

Remedy

Close-up the "flam" more
Make more of the "flam" motion
Offset plates more at moment of impact
Separate the cymbal plates more
Direct edge of plates toward audience
Move plates a shorter distance
Try more "flam" or relax wrists more
Plates held together slightly longer at impact

Tying the Cymbal Strap



BASS DRUM

by Mark Dorr

Basic Set-Up / Implements

It is best to have a bass drum stand that completely suspends the drum and allows the performer to tilt / swivel the head to any angle between vertical and horizontal. This will allow maximum versatility in many different musical styles and playing situations. Sturdy wheel locks are of great benefit to prevent the drum shifting during performance.

The performer must stand behind or slightly toward the right (batter head) side of the bass drum.

The playing head, music, and conductor should be well within a direct line of sight.

A bass drum mallet caddy or tray table is necessary for easy access and organization.

A variety of mallets are typically required for playing bass drum. The size and weight of the mallet is relative to the size and type of bass drum being used. A basic set of mallets should include one large felt general use mallet, a pair of matched rolling mallets, and a pair of articulate mallets such as chamois-covered wood or hard felt. The rolling pair is slightly smaller than the general-purpose mallet and is designed specifically for use on the bass drum. Timpani mallets are not of sufficient weight and size to work in this situation and should not be used. Fast, rhythmic figures and dry, articulate passages are easier to execute with a pair of hard felt or chamois-covered mallets

In certain musical circumstances, a player is required to play with the bass drum fairly muted. In this case, the drum may be positioned horizontally with a cloth or felt mute placed on the batter head. This method is also useful when both hands are needed for playing rhythmic passages. Another option is to position the drum vertically and mute the drum with the right knee and left hand. The right foot may be placed on a short stool or the bass drum stand footrest. This will elevate the right knee in a position where it can rest against and therefore muffle the batter head. The left hand reaches around the drum shell and dampens the resonant head, leaving the right hand free to manipulate the mallet.

Although personal preference does play a part in drum positioning, many performers will set the bass drum at an angle 45-degrees or greater (relative to horizontal) for general use playing on the batter head. The right hand manipulates the mallet while the left hand is free to muffle the batter head. Some performers prefer to mute the batter head with use of a towel, oven mitt, or specialized felt mute manipulated with the left hand. It should be noted that in this style of playing, the resonant head is allowed to ring freely until the player reaches around the drum to muffle it.

Tone Production / Articulation

A wide variety of tone colors, shades, and musical nuance may be produced on the bass drum. A performer may do this in a number of ways, including changing the type and hardness of the mallets, shifting to a different playing area on the head, use and positioning of a mute on the drum head, the type of muffling system used, and the choice of using a calfskin or plastic head.

The concert bass drum is tuned to give a low, resonant tone that gives full body to the sound without defining a specific pitch. Only the head on the right side of the drum is played upon. The left head serves solely as a resonant head.

The basic stroke is produced with a combination of the forearm and wrist. Light, softer strokes are played primarily from the wrist, while the entire arm and wrist is used for louder, heavier strokes. As is the case with timpani and mallet keyboards, the bass drum stroke moves in a vertical fashion directly toward and away from the playing surface, drawing out the sound after contact. Some professionals prefer to use a "J" stroke. That is also perfectly acceptable, as it is still a basic vertical stroke. However, a sideways glancing or entirely circular stroke should be avoided for concert bass drum playing.

For the fullest and most resonant tone, the bass drum head should be struck slightly off-center. Depending upon the size of the drum and the type of head, the optimum playing area can also occur from 1/3 to 2/3 of the way from the edge to center of the head. It's best to try out different positions on the head and experiment a bit with mallets and muting to see what is possible. For example, when a very hard and dry articulation is desired, one may muffle the drum, use harder mallets, and play a bit closer to the center of the head. For a more indefinite sound with more overtones, the playing area may move a bit closer to the edge of the head.

Bass drum rolls are often notated in the same way as timpani rolls are. As with timpani, these are to be executed as single stroke rolls with the speed determined by the sustaining quality of the drum. Only in special circumstances will any other roll type be used. To execute a roll on the bass drum, one may use either traditional or matched grip. Position your body so that you can comfortably place the mallets equidistant from the center of the head.

Listen to the rest of the ensemble to help in determining the articulations (attacks and lengths of notes) required in the bass drum part. Articulations are not always specified in the actual part but rather left up to the discretion of the performer. Oftentimes the bass drum part reinforces the sounds being produced in the low brass and strings. Looking at a score, comparing parts with other members of your ensemble, and listening to recordings can be of great help.