

BASIC CONCEPTS FOR TEACHING CRASH CYMBALS

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It can be easy to overlook crash cymbals in a public school band. In trying to get trumpets to rest on beat four and clarinets to play B-flat instead of B-natural, there isn't always time to focus on one person playing crash cymbals. But crash cymbals are important because they are almost always a solo instrument and an improper entrance or the dreaded "pocket" can be embarrassing for everyone, especially the student. This article will provide some approaches to teaching crash cymbals.

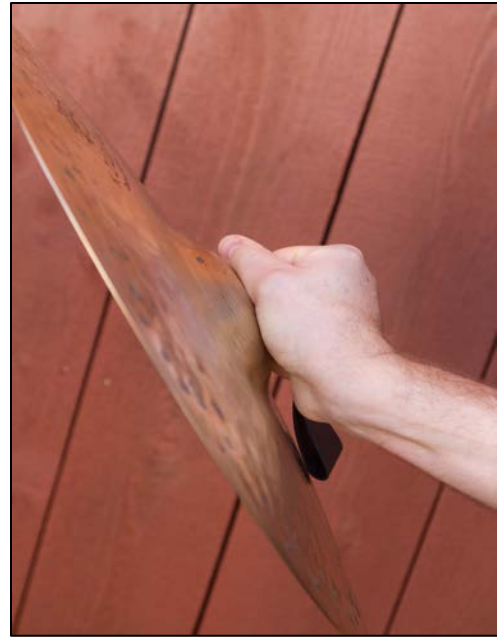
It should be remembered that crash cymbals are their own instrument, and as is true of virtually any instrument it takes time to get an intentional sound. Literally any person can walk up to crash cymbals and make a noise, but getting the desired sound consistently over time takes practice. It bears repeating that cymbals are a solo instrument and that crashes are often written to highlight an important part of a musical idea. Time spent working with students to get the desired sound will pay off in the concert.

Students first encountering cymbals often struggle just holding them. A general grip that works well is to grab the strap between the thumb and the first finger while the rest of the fingers wrap around the strap (Example 1).



Example 1

Students without much finger strength may struggle with any grip initially and should be encouraged to take frequent breaks. With frequent practice their hand and arm strength will develop and they will be able to manipulate the cymbals with more success. One common pitfall that has a direct impact on sound is that students end up with large parts of their thumb and/or palm on the cymbal (Example 2).



Example 2

If a student is struggling in the beginning with their grip, I may allow this until their hand and finger strength increases, but usually I encourage students keep as much of their hand and fingers off the cymbal as possible. Also, I do not teach my students to put their hands through the strap before gripping the strap, and I also do not use cymbal pads for concert playing. These pads are generally designed specifically for marching applications.

A variety of playing techniques exist, but there is no one "right" technique. In the end, what matters is the sound. The following are two techniques to consider, though they are by no means the only techniques for teaching crash cymbals. (For ease of description a right-handed player is described in each technique.)



Example 3

Start where you want the cymbals to strike each other. For the first technique, hold the left hand under the cymbal parallel to the floor. The elbow will be close to the stomach (some students will brace the elbow against their stomach or side). The right hand cymbal should be at approximately a 20-degree angle, with the front edge 1-2 inches inside the front edge of the left hand cymbal (Example 3).

Now bring the right hand cymbal back towards your body to prepare to strike (Example 4).



Example 4

The striking motion should move down and away from your body towards the other cymbal, with the front edge of the right hand cymbal striking the front edge of the left hand cymbal. The right hand cymbal should strike at an angle (the angle can vary depending on the desired sound), the idea being that the front of the cymbal will strike first and then the back of the cymbal will strike after, activating the entire cymbal. If the right hand cymbal strikes inside the front edge of the left hand cymbal at an angle, it is unlikely that a player will get a "pocket" (Example 5).



Example 5

Once the player can move the right hand cymbal consistently, they can move the left hand towards their body as the right hand moves away so that the cymbals are moving towards each other and more of each cymbal is activated.

This first technique works well for a student who may have trouble holding the cymbals up and in front of them. Some drawbacks to this technique include: 1) with the cymbals being held lower, some sound may get lost in the backs of the players in front of the percussion section, 2) the cymbals may be hard for the audience to see, and some directors consider the visual component important when crashing cymbals, and 3) the angle of the cymbals can be hard to set because the player cannot see the offset as easily.

The second technique involves holding the left hand cymbal perpendicular to the floor. Start where you want the cymbals to strike each other. Put the top edge of the cymbals just below eye level with the right hand cymbal at about a 20 degree angle 1-2 inches below the left hand cymbal. (Example 6).



Example 6



Example 7

To strike, bring the right hand cymbal down and to the right (Example 7).

To strike, bring the right hand in and up towards the left hand in a sweeping motion. The striking cymbal should move with velocity through the other cymbal so that the bottom edges of the cymbals clash immediately after the top edges, which will create a flam and should activate the whole cymbal (Example 8).

Once the player is comfortable moving only the right hand and can strike in the same spot every time, the player can move the left hand down at the same time while working to strike in the same spot. This can be a complex action for younger players and some directors may want to have students move only the right hand in the beginning.



Example 8

Some drawbacks to this technique include: 1) if the cymbals are heavy, smaller players may have difficulty holding the cymbals in front of them for any length of time and 2) for younger students, bringing a cymbal from out of their line of sight to hit a precise spot can be very difficult, as opposed to the first technique, where they can see the target and striking object right in front of them.

One particular advantage to the second technique is that the student can see "through" the cymbals to their music and then, if their stand is set high enough, they can see the director peripherally just above their stand. This alignment of cymbals, stand, and then director can be harder to achieve with the first technique described.

It important to remember that, regardless of technique, the goal is to get both cymbals to vibrate fully. To do this, it is helpful to have a flam at the striking moment. Also remember that if the performer is moving the cymbals with the correct velocity the audience won't hear two separate and distinct attacks. To achieve this flam, the performer should finish the motion and if they are in the correct hand position, this will give the full sound.

Soft Crashes

Bring the cymbal in your right hand to a point just below the inside edge of the cymbal in your left hand. You will use the whole cymbal, but you can focus on the edge while making sure the edges line up. Now pull the right hand cymbal down and away from the left hand. Leave the cymbals in contact with each other, or have them “kiss”, to give a different character to the sound.

Short Notes

For short notes, bring the cymbals towards (toward?) your body to aid in dampening. Cymbals should be dampened against your stomach. Students should be aware of not starting the cymbals too far away from their body, as it can make dampening harder.

Students may require repeated coaching to get them to consider the cymbals a “real” instrument. Most band directors are aware that some percussionists only want to play snare drum and that the cymbals are often further down their list. However, getting students to listen to their crashes and then compare them to crashes on recordings can motivate them to spend time developing their sound until they can create a crash that will be a musical and artistic sound instead of just a noise. •

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