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## CONTEMPORARY DRUM-SET PLAYING

### Development of Two Sound Levels

There are three basic sounds in contemporary drum-set playing: 1. snare drum (S.D.) 2. bass drum (B.D.) 3. hi-hat (H.H.) In a contemporary music setting, these drum-set components require the most attention because most drum-set music is based on these sounds. Most of the material in the book is written for S.D., B.D. and H.H., with the occasional addition of cym. bell (C.B.), ride cym. (R.C.), cowbell (C.B.) and tom-tom (T.T.) These sounds will expand the tonal possibilities of each exercise. To produce the type of drum-set sounds heard throughout today's music, you must develop two sound levels: accents and non-accents. In a playing situation there will be more than two sound levels, but for our purpose (building foundational drum-set technique) we will be using only two levels. The two sound-level technique gives you a place to begin building a consistent approach to striking the playing surfaces. It not only deals with what is played, but the way in which the playing surfaces are struck and where they are struck, so that your drum sound is compatible with contemporary music. You will find this technique widely used among the top players of the day. The following guidelines will help you develop two sound-level playing.

1. Accents should be played approximately 8"–12" from the playing surface, and non-accents should be played approximately 1/2" from the playing surface.
2. Blend the sounds of the hi-hat and snare drum on the unaccented notes. The snare drum must be played lightly so that it sounds like the hi-hat.
3. The difference in volume between the two levels should be the same as forte (f) to pianissimo (pp). The overall volume will be controlled by the dynamic level of each performance situation, while the relative distance between the two levels of playing will remain more or less the same.

Here are some specific ideas that will help you develop two-level playing on each instrument within your drum set.

#### SNARE DRUM

**Accents**—Use rimshots for live playing and some studio situations.

Strike the center of the snare drum with either end of the stick (the butt-end of the stick can thicken the snare drum sound) while the shaft simultaneously strikes the rim between two lugs. This technique produces a slightly lower and thicker snare drum sound.

**Non-Accents**—Play as an extremely soft, light tap near the center of the snare drum.

To do this, all tension must be released except for the amount required to hold the stick while playing a light tap.

#### HI-HAT (played with the stick)

**Accents**—Strike the edge of the hi-hat with the shoulder of the stick.

**Non-Accents**—Strike the top of the hi-hat (not to be confused with the bell) with the *tip* of the stick.

#### BASS DRUM

The two-level concept isn't as critical with the feet because most of the time the bass drum is playing notes that require accents. The distance between the sound levels in the feet is less than with the hands [forte (f) to mezzo-forte (mf), or forte (f) to mezzo-piano (mp)]. In any case, the bass drum must be blended with the hands in order to balance all of the sounds properly. The same rules apply when playing the hi-hat with the foot.

#### RIDE CYMBAL

##### Playing on the bow

**Accents**—Ride the cymbal approximately 2" to 2-1/2" below the bell. This produces a more controlled "ping" sound and will help avoid crashing the cymbal each time an accent is required. The cymbal must be played lightly enough in order to avoid sound "buildup."

Also, instead of playing 8" from the surface, go down to approximately 5."



**Non-Accents** - Play 1/2" above the playing surface as described before.

### **Playing on the bell**

The stick heights are the same as described above for the ride cymbal.

**Accents**—Strike the bell with the shoulder of the stick.

**Non-Accents**—Strike the bell with the tip of the stick.

## **THE TWO SOUND-LEVEL CONCEPT REVIEWED**

The "thick" sounds in the "Two Sound-Level Concept" combine:

- B.D. accents
- S.D. rimshots/accents
- H.H. accents w/shoulder of stick
- H.H. played w/foot accents
- R.C. accents with shoulder of stick on bell, tip or bow
- T.T. accents (no rimshot)

The "thin" sounds in a "Two Sound-Level Concept" combine:

- S.D. non-accents (tapping drum lightly)
- H.H. non-accents w/tip of stick
- R.C. non-accents w/tip of stick on bell and on bow
- B.D. non-accents
- H.H. w/foot
- T.T. non-accents

## **BALANCING THE TWO SOUND LEVELS**

Balancing the two sound levels is very important. As was stated before, there are three basic sounds in contemporary drum-set playing. When balancing these three sounds, it's wise to know how drums are mixed on recordings. You can then try to copy that mix when you play. On many of today's records, the snare drum is almost as loud as the lead vocal whereas 15 years ago, the drums were much further back in the mix.

Today the drums are quite up-front in music, so be aware that "loud" drums are not necessarily out-of-place. This changes from year to year, so watch and listen carefully in order to stay on top of these current trends, then adjust accordingly. I'm *not* saying that the drums should be loud to the point of being out-of-place, but loud enough so as to blend in properly with the style of music being performed. Keeping this in mind, when balancing the S.D., B.D. and H.H., the S.D. accent will be the loudest. Next will be the B.D. accent, which is slightly softer than the H.H. accent. It is a more transparent sound, tying the S.D. and B.D. together.

All of the aforementioned techniques are to be applied to every study in this book. Refer to these guidelines as much as possible until they are assimilated into your playing.

When applied properly, the use of the "Two Sound-Level Concept" will give each exercise a musical quality. Read and re-read this section until a thorough understanding of these techniques becomes "your own."