



Bass Drum

David L. Collier

For most of our early years in percussion, our goals have been to master snare drum, marimba, or drumset. The other instruments that we had to play in band often got no attention in our practice routine. At times this was because we could not practice them at home. In other cases it might have been because we thought it was unnecessary to work on instruments like Bass Drum, Cymbals, Tambourine and Triangle. As we grow as performers and become increasingly sensitive musicians, the artistry needed on these instruments becomes more apparent. Let's begin our study of Accessory Instruments with **Concert Bass Drum**.

"But I don't like Bass Drum." "Mr./Ms Doe only put me on bass drum because he/she doesn't like me." "All I've got to do is hit it, right?" How many of you have had these thoughts? All of us have had them at one point or another, but Bass Drum is a fantastic instrument once you get involved with it. It is probably *the* most important instrument in the band because of the power it possesses to direct the entire ensemble. Everyone listens to the bass drum—and follows it. This means you have incredible power over the music—and you have an incredible **responsibility**. Bass Drum players must have impeccable time, must always watch the conductor, and must always listen to the ensemble. In addition, the percussionist on bass drum needs a large palette of sound colors to use in various situations. How is this done? Through changes in technique, stroke, and where we strike the head.

NAMES

English	<i>Bass Drum</i>
German	<i>die Grosse Trommel</i>
French	<i>la grosse caisse</i>
Italian	<i>la grancassa, gran cassa</i>

BACKGROUND

A new, large drum that was either carried or placed on the floor with the heads in a vertical position was introduced to the musical courts of Europe with the appearance of Turkish Janissary music in the second half of the 18th century. The instrument was unique in that with the skin heads in a vertical position, the performer could play on both sides. At this time the drum was often played with a leather-covered wood beater on one side and a switch on the other. This instrument moved quickly into the orchestra in works such as Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* and the *Military Symphony* of Haydn. In many works of the 19th century, bass drum and cymbals were often played together. Only in later works with the addition of more complicated rhythms and rolls were two distinct parts created for bass drum and cymbals, as we have today.

TECHNIQUES

- **Basic grip** is the same as **French Grip** on timpani.
- Thumb is facing toward the ceiling; back of the hand is perpendicular to the floor.
- Grip firmly between the thumb and first fingers with the remaining fingers wrapped around the handle of the mallet.
- Grip should be firm but not tense.



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- **Basic stroke** should be from the wrist and not from the arm.
- Draw a backwards C or a bass clef sign in the air and contact the head at the bottom.
- This motion should have a moderate degree of snap to increase the velocity of the mallet.
- After striking the head, be sure to **follow through** away from the head (See Diagram 1).

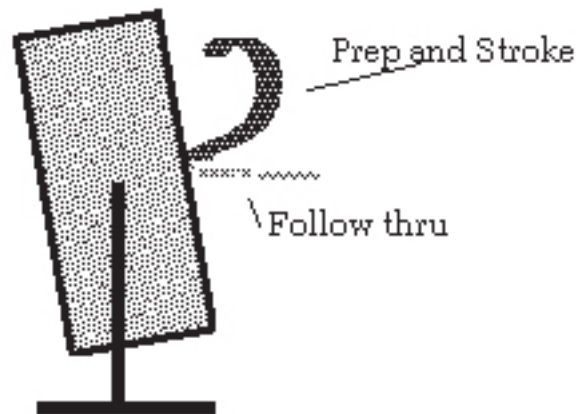


Diagram 1



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WHERE TO STRIKE

- Divide the head into three circles for various types of playing (See Diagram 2).
- **Center circle** (area 1) surrounds the node of the bass drum and is the point of least vibration on the head and therefore produces the driest, most articulate sound.
- Use this area when you want a very short sound with excellent articulation.
- The center is also where one should play the powerful “cannon shot” blows that are sometimes called for.
- **Second circle** (area 2) is the area for most general-purpose sounds.
- This portion of the head, which is about 4–6 inches off center, has a moderate amount of resonance with just enough articulation for the majority of strokes.
- **Third circle** is used primarily for rolls (area 3). This area, which is very close to the rim, produces a light, airy tone with very little articulation.
- By using all three of these areas, the sensitive percussionist can produce an incredible number of sounds on the Bass Drum.

Area 1: Staccato and Cannon Shots

Area 3: Rolls and Special Effects

Area 2: General Playing

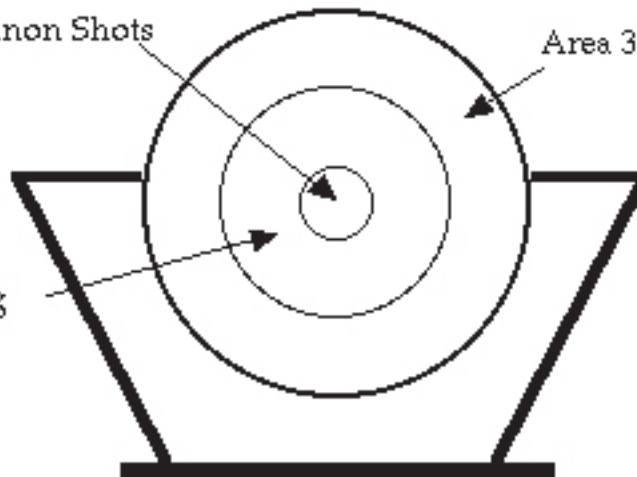


Diagram 2

MALLET CHOICE

- For **general** playing, you will need a mallet with a moderately large head and with a fair amount of head weight.
- For extremely **articulate** passages, a pair of hard felt beaters (i.e., small marching bass drum mallets) will be useful.
- For rolls you will need a matched **pair of mallets** that have heads slightly **smaller** than a general-purpose mallet.
- A well-stocked percussionist will have a pair of **general mallets**, a pair of **rolling mallets** and a pair of **hard mallets**.



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MUFLING TECHNIQUES

- Never put anything on the head or inside a concert bass drum.
- The most effective techniques for muffling involve the hands and knees.
- Best method for muffling the bass drum is to use the non-playing hand on the playing head.
- Gently place the fingers of your left hand near the rim of the bass drum while striking the head with the right hand.
- If a drier sound is needed, move the left hand toward the center of the drum.
- Increased control of the sound may be obtained by also using the knee.
- Elevate the right knee on a small stool and gently press it into the playing head. This can be used alone or with the hand muffling.

This technique is very easy to use on any type of bass drum by performers of any size. It also enables the player to easily see the music and the conductor. **Practice, experimentation** and **keen listening** will guide you in developing this technique.

MUSICALITY

Another factor a performer must consider is the length of the notes. Often what we see printed is not exactly what the composer may have intended. At times the note values we see are too short in relation to other wind parts, as if only the attack of the drum were written. I recommend a careful analysis of the score to compare the bass drum part with other wind parts. If everyone else has a half note and the bass drum has an eighth note, perhaps you should allow the drum to resonate for an entire half note before muffling. This aids in the phrasing and overall musicianship.

The next time you get a bass drum part, *listen* to the rest of the ensemble and determine what the **role** of the bass drum is at every moment. Is it providing the ostinato pulse? Is it a low, rumbling effect? Is it a very rhythmic, syncopated solo? Is it the tremendous climax at the end? By deciding what your musical role is, you can decide what mallet to use, where to play, how to strike the drum and how to muffle. The combination of these aspects advances the art of bass drum performance into the realm of music and out of the pit of noise.

Good luck!

PODIUM NOTES

Directors: Most of what I have said above will happen if you reinforce it. You can create a musical percussion section by instructing the players in the art of breathing, phrasing, and sound color. Point out how the bass drum punctuates the low-brass syncopation. Have them listen to the French horn chord they are supporting with that soft roll. Show them how they are the rhythmic backbone of the entire march. Often the printed music itself will not tell them what to play or how to play it. It only shows them where in time to play. Also, many poor playing habits can be passed down from other, older players. Start at the very beginning to instill solid pulse, accurate rhythm, and musical sensitivity in your percussionists.



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In addition to the correct technique, proper heads and tuning will radically affect the quality of the bass drum sound in your ensemble. The best sound possible for a Bass Drum is found with quality calfskin heads. Colleges and professionals should invest in this type of head. In most high school situations, I recommend the Remo FibreSkyn II or Renaissance heads for all concert Bass Drums. These heads are a synthetic imitation of calfskin. They have a warm, rich sound with very little “ring,” yet are very durable and not affected by climate.

When tuning a Concert Bass Drum, tune the playing side a minor 3rd higher than the resonating side. This will produce a greater number of overtones and avoid a sense of pitch in the drum. Tune the playing head tight enough that it produces a rich, low tone—one that is felt more than heard—which does not have a clear pitch. Do not place any muffling in the drum or on the heads. Carefully check that the same pitch is found at each tuning rod. If you have questions, just contact me.

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Bass Drum Exercise

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1

5

9

13

17

21

25



Cymbals

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In every band or orchestra, cymbals play a crucial role. They provide impact and color to all types of music. Good quality performance on both Suspended Cymbals and Crash Cymbals takes practice, inquisitive-ness and sensitivity to master. Let's start with the fundamentals that are crucial to our goal.

NAMES

English	Suspended Cymbals
German	<i>das Becken (hängend)</i>
French	<i>la cymbale (suspendue)</i>
Italian	<i>il piatto (sospeso)</i>
English	Crash Cymbals (pair)
German	<i>die Becken (paarweise)</i>
French	<i>les cymbales (à 2)</i>
Italian	<i>i piatti (a due); i cinelli</i>

BACKGROUND

Cymbals originated in Asia as small instruments almost like metal bowls with handles that were struck together. These were brought to Spain, southern Italy and the Mediterranean region by the Saracens in the Middle Ages. During the 17th century, large cymbals of cast or hammered alloys were used in Turkish Janissary music along with the bass drum. Cymbals were quickly adapted into opera and orchestral music as seen in such examples as Haydn's *Military Symphony*, Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* and the 4th movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

SUSPENDED CYMBALS

How to Mount

- Mount the suspended cymbal on a high-quality stand that has a metal washer, felt washer and protective rubber/plastic sleeve.
- Use a cymbal strap and hang the cymbal from a goose-neck stand.
- Be sure to position the cymbal flat and slightly above waist height.

Choice of Instrument

- If possible, have a minimum of 3 choices for your ensemble such as a 14", 16" and 18"
- There is no single *ideal* suspended cymbal.
- Use personal drumset cymbals to increase selection possibilities.
- Listen, experiment, strive for the perfect "color" and quality of sound.

Choice of Implement

- Best basic mallet is a medium cord mallet or a specialized suspended cymbal mallet.
- For other color choices explore these: stick, brush, metal scraper, coin, etc.



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Proper Technique

- Use a standard wrist stroke with a glancing blow to the cymbal.
- Strike the cymbal near the edge for most notes; use shoulder and bell when specified.



Diagram 1

- For rolls, place mallets at 3 and 9 o'clock and use a slow, single-stroke roll.

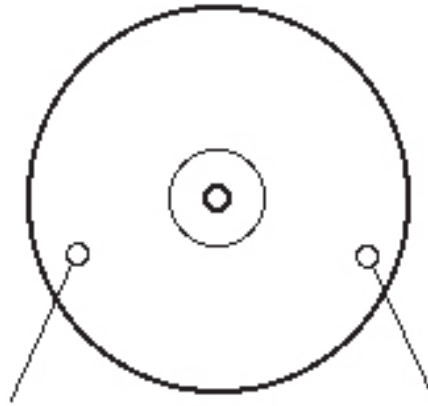


Diagram 2

- To dampen or stop the sound
 - (a) Grab with free hand after striking in notated rest.
 - (b) “Feather out” the sound by slowly grasping cymbal with fingers.
 - (c) For “secco” or very short sounds, rapidly grab cymbal immediately after striking.

CRASH CYMBALS

Choice of Instrument

- Ideally one should have a minimum of two or three pair of varying sizes and weights.
- Recommendations: 18" Viennese, 18" Germanic, 20" Germanic.

Positioning and Setup

- Establish a **cymbal station** that is not shared with other instruments.
- Use cymbal cradle, padded table, etc to rest cymbals.
- Have all choices within easy reach.



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- Create “direct line of sight” with instrument, music and conductor.
- Have trap stand/table for mallets/sticks close at hand.

Proper Technique

- Grasp cymbal straps without placing hands in loops.
- Stand in relaxed posture in ready position with cymbals about 3/4 to 1" apart.
- Hold cymbals in front of body at about 45° angle.



Diagram 3

- Drop and thrust top cymbal into lower cymbal.
- Be sure that cymbals make contact **off-center** and **not simultaneously**.
- Use gravity.
- Vary type of contact for different colors.
- Follow through and dampen when indicated.

PRACTICE ETUDES

With these cymbal techniques you can use any of the rhythmic exercises in a beginning snare method or rhythm studies book and start playing. Be sure to practice with various types of dynamics, tempo, types of contact, mallet choices and color choices.

Remember: accuracy, consistency and quality of sound are *always* important! Also, vary your muffling choices by deciding to stop the sound on all rests or not to stop the sound. With both suspended and crash cymbals, experiment with creating different colors.

EXPERIMENT!

Here are some simple exercises to begin with.

Good luck and have a great time with the variety of sounds possible with cymbals!



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Crash Cymbal Exercise

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