

Motivating the Marching Cymbal Line

BY PAUL BUYER

What are the secrets to developing a great cymbal line in your marching percussion section? What sounds and colors are available? How do you get people to take the cymbal line seriously and gain respect within the band?

For years, an unwritten hierarchy has been evident in many marching band percussion sections at the high school and college levels:

- Snares
- Multi-Tenors
- Bass Drums
- Cymbals/Pit

Although the instruments may appear in this order in a musical score, they should not be prioritized in respect to their importance and value within the marching percussion ensemble. Simply put, a marching percussion ensemble includes *all* of these sections, and they need to be treated and respected as integral parts of not only the drum line but also of the entire band.

All of us have experience with students who audition and do not make their first-choice instrument. When asked to play in another section, such as the cymbal line, the response is often negative. Young players tend to resent playing cymbals and pit, viewing them as inferior instruments.

This negative attitude seems to come from veteran band members and, occasionally, directors who view cymbals and the pit as a “dumping ground” for those students who lack the essential performance skills necessary to play snare drum, tenors, or bass drum. It also comes from a skewed perception that the more technically challenging the instrument, the greater its level of credibility.

There also seems to be a popularity issue associated with playing snare drum and tenors, and a lack of appreciation for the musical contributions of cymbals and pit within the marching percussion ensemble. Wherever these ideas originate,

it is the instructor’s responsibility to instill a positive attitude and set high expectations for all members, while helping students grow and become better musicians.

If difficulty is the modern measuring stick for superiority, then one can certainly argue that multi-tenors are the most challenging instrument to play, while others will say the bass drum requires the most demanding skill. Although playing cymbals is not as technically difficult as playing snare drum, tenors, or bass drum, the importance of what a great cymbal section can contribute to a show should not be underestimated. If all players are treated with value and significance, and each section contributes to the goals of the group, then students will begin to change their attitudes.

Although DCI, PAS, and WGI have served as models of excellence for marching percussion ensembles for some time, this standard has not been embraced by all high school and college bands throughout the country. Motivating the marching cymbal line and getting others

to respect what they do can be very challenging. Success is accomplished by having a positive attitude and treating students with respect. I recommend using five categories when teaching marching cymbal players: sound quality, performance techniques, writing styles, visuals, and instrument selection and care.

SOUND QUALITY

The first question I always ask my students is, “What is the *most* important thing about playing a musical instrument?” After a series of both intelligent and humorous responses, someone in the group usually arrives at the answer I believe is most important: sound quality.

When teaching the cymbal line, it cannot be stressed enough that the first objective is to produce a good sound. In addition, players must have a concept of what a good cymbal crash sounds like. The instructor can demonstrate this. Far too many cymbal players produce poor-quality crashes that can be described as weak, flat, popped, forced, overplayed, and my personal favorite, the “Hoover



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Crash” filled with an air pocket. Like any musical instrument, sound quality is critical to good cymbal playing. If this is continually emphasized, your cymbal players will begin to take pride in producing a good sound.

The qualities I listen for in a marching cymbal crash are the same qualities produced in an orchestral cymbal crash: a full, rich, relaxed, resonant sound with rich overtones. One way to emphasize these characteristics is to intentionally play some poor crashes in order to focus the students’ attention on the desired sound.

A good cymbal crash is achieved by keeping some basic concepts in mind. First, the marching grip, or “Garfield grip” is recommended for marching cymbal players. This grip, where the hand is placed inside the strap, is most effective for a player’s stamina, strength, endurance, and control with visuals. In regard to sound quality, “keep finger tips off the surface of the cymbal in order to allow the instrument to vibrate freely” (Hannum, 1984).

Second, young players often produce poor crashes by forcing the cymbals together in an overly aggressive manner. There is also a tendency to primarily move the right-hand cymbal and not the left. A good cymbal crash is produced by moving both cymbals together in opposite directions.

The player should drop the right-hand cymbal while bringing up the left-hand cymbal. This should be done in a relaxed and fluid manner with enough velocity to produce the desired dynamic level. A good exercise to develop this dual motion is to hold one cymbal at a time and notice each hand’s motion while looking in a mirror. Then, while holding both cymbals, practice dropping the right-hand cymbal on the left cymbal, allowing it to sizzle. Then, bring the left-hand cymbal up to the right, allowing it to sizzle. After this technique is mastered, begin separating the cymbals and allow the full crash to take place. The player should think of allowing the cymbals to crash into each other by letting the cymbals do most of the work.

Developing the ability to produce consistent, quality crashes can be challenging for students to master. When practicing cymbal crashes, I offer my students this golf analogy: Playing cymbals is like going to the driving range. If you

hit a bucket of balls, how many of your shots are good ones? This is one of the challenges facing today’s cymbal player—to play a quality crash every time.

Finally, when a student plays a good crash, it usually “feels” right. Trying to recreate that feel every time can help kinesthetically develop a quality cymbal crash.

PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES

One of the most effective ways to motivate and challenge your cymbal section is to incorporate a variety of cymbal techniques into your performances. Many sounds and colors are available with crash cymbals, and most of them work exceptionally well in the marching percussion ensemble and can enhance a variety of musical styles. The cymbal performance techniques I use most frequently include crash, hi-hat, choke, sizzle, slide, crunch, tap, and scrape.

The **crash** is the most common performance technique. It is approached the same way as an orchestral cymbal crash,

making sure that both cymbals are in motion and allowing for full vibration and resonance. Crashes are played at a 45-degree angle and usually played *forte*, punctuating the climaxes of the music. Crashes should be played in a relaxed manner and should never be forced or overplayed.

A **hi-hat** technique is achieved by placing both cymbals together and opening and closing the top cymbal. Keep the cymbals slightly off-center to achieve a crisp sound. Remember that the hi-hat is a relatively soft sound and will not be heard over tutti band playing. Hi-hat parts work well in softer sections and where upbeat rhythmic playing is needed.

The **choke** is played in the same manner as an orchestral choke, muffling the cymbals to produce a short sound. Do not muffle the cymbals too soon, as this can create a very unpleasant sound and also hurt the player. A choke should be approached as a full crash followed by a muffling technique. Chokes work well in





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staccato passages and at the ends of phrases.

The **slide**, also known as a “fusion crash,” simulates an open-and-closed hi-hat technique on drumset. Fusion music and disco provide good examples of this effect. Slides are quite powerful and become rhythmically interesting if the parts are split. Slides are executed by holding the cymbals in a hi-hat position and sliding the top cymbal across the bottom cymbal. Both cymbals are then pulled towards the player and muffled, creating an airlock.

The **sizzle** simulates an open hi-hat sound on a drumset. To achieve this sound, play a crash and loosely keep the cymbals together, allowing the edges to sizzle against each other. Sizzle crashes are effective when playing longer notes and for special effects.

The **crunch** is a somewhat obtrusive sound, but effective in some musical situations. It is played by bringing the cymbals together and smothering them, producing a very short, fat “crunch.” Some students have learned this technique incorrectly as a choke. Crunches sound good in staccato passages, ends of phrases, and are effective when preparing for one of the holding positions discussed later.

Taps and **scrapes** are wonderful timbres to experiment with, but are not very loud. Taps are played by tapping the edge of one cymbal on the edge of the other. This produces a very defined metallic sound, creating interesting articulations. Scrapes, or zischens, are analogous to scraping a coin vertically down the grooves of a cymbal. The marching technique requires the player to scrape the edge of one cymbal upwards across the grooves on the inside of the other cymbal.

Cymbal lines can also offer a variety of holding positions for the snare line. Several options that can be used to simulate a drumset include hi-hat, ride up, ride down, and crash-ride.

The **hi-hat holding position** simply requires holding both cymbals together for the snare drummer. Variations can include a loose or tight hi-hat to create different sounds and feels. Like playing a hi-hat groove on drumset, this sound is not as loud as playing ride cymbal, but it works well in many sections of rock and funk-style music for marching band.

The **ride up** technique involves vertically holding up one cymbal as the snare

drummer plays on the cymbal's inside. Variations can include playing on the bell and crashing on the edge, simulating a China effect. Ride up is the loudest permutation for drumset-oriented parts.

The **ride down** technique involves holding one cymbal horizontally as the snare drummer plays on the cymbal's outside. Ride down is a softer and more mellow sound than ride up and works well for up-tempo jazz feels.

The **crash ride** combines ride up and ride down, using ride down as a crash cymbal. From the cymbal player's perspective, the left hand holds a cymbal in the ride up position while the right holds a cymbal in the ride down position. A mini drumkit is now at the snare drummer's disposal. Crash ride is especially effective in shout choruses, swing shows, and rock arrangements.

The following excerpt on performance techniques is taken from my book, *Marching Percussion Arrangements For the Enhancement of Essential Performance Skills*.

Utilizing these techniques in all (stock chart) arrangements are beneficial because first, they can be performed at any ability level, and second, they can make cymbal playing more challenging, enjoyable, and rewarding and might help change the negative attitude that many students have about playing cymbals in marching band. Although these techniques have the capability of improving the musicality of (stock) arrangements, it is important to keep in mind that their use be musically driven and not technically driven. (Buyer, 1999)

WRITING STYLES

Probably the best way to motivate and challenge your cymbal players is to provide them with good parts to play. Nothing will deflate your cymbal players faster than having to hold cymbals for the snare drummers all the time. To be effective, cymbal parts must enhance the music and contribute to the overall musical performance. How is this accomplished?

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First, percussion arrangers should challenge cymbal players rhythmically. Most students are capable of playing rhythms beyond whole notes, quarter notes, and upbeats. Syncopated writing is a great way to improve students' counting and reading ability as well as their pulse perception and tempo control. Second, if the cymbal section is strong, experiment with writing split parts. Slides, crashes, and hi-hat techniques are very effective when split within the line and offer new opportunities to develop musical skills not found in unison playing. The following details values of split cymbal parts.

The rhythmic structure found in split cymbal parts is characteristically faster and more syncopated than unison cymbal parts... In general, split cymbal parts are a sign of an advanced arrangement which demonstrate the rhythmic understanding found in a bass drum line... When the cymbal part is split, the impact and volume of the cymbal section is diminished. As a result, smaller cymbal lines will balance the full ensemble and enhance the music better by playing unison parts rather than split parts. Very often split cymbal parts can detract from the overall performance if the ensemble is not at the ability level necessary. If, however, the cymbal players are producing great sounds, and the split part is rhythmically audible and enhances the music, intelligent decisions can be made regarding split cymbal parts at intermediate and advanced levels... Playing a split cymbal part can be extremely valuable to students who are capable and extremely destructive to those who are not, not to mention the musical consequences. (Buyer, 1999)

VISUALS

From an audience's perspective, cymbal visuals are among the most noticeable effects on the field. In fact, since many people tend to listen with their eyes, cymbal visuals can also appear to raise the musical level of the cymbal line. Visuals in general are very motivating for a drum line to incorporate into their performance, provided the visuals are appropriate to the music being performed and everyone in the section can execute them.

What visuals are particularly effective? There are infinite possibilities, but

a great motivational tool is to ask the students to come up with visuals on their own. Their ideas can be very creative.

Cymbal lines must never integrate visuals into the show at the expense of playing the parts well or producing a good sound. Visuals are intended to enhance the band's performance but in no way inhibit the execution of the music. If visuals are added and the music suffers, they simply must be taken out. However, some cymbal players believe that visuals help them memorize the music. In fact, visuals can become a kinesthetic reference when learning the parts.

Another useful resource is videotaping a performance. When students see themselves playing the music, marching the drill, and executing the visuals, it can be very inspiring. Like a football team's game-film sessions, videotape provides excellent feedback on the group's performance as well as individual areas that need to be addressed.

INSTRUMENT SELECTION AND CARE

A final approach to motivating your marching cymbal line is to get them to take pride in the instruments they play. Many marching bands use graduated cymbal sizes ranging from 16 to 20 inches. This combination provides a variety of colors and timbres, especially when playing split parts. The down side is that smaller cymbals, such as 16's, do not project very well. In addition, different sized cymbals will produce different sounds when played by the snare line in drumset-oriented music.

By using the same size cymbals throughout the line, such as 18-inch, a consistent sound will result. Most manufacturers offer a line of crash cymbals designated for marching band or drum corps; however, some instructors recommend symphonic-quality instruments. If possible, it is best to field test several different pairs of cymbals in the stadium where the band performs. Directors can sit in the stands and listen critically while students demonstrate several performance techniques on the field.

It is very important for cymbal players to use good quality cymbals. Regardless of the manufacturer, marching cymbals must be in good condition and should be maintained regularly. Cymbals that are cracked or damaged in any way should not be used. It is also important to use leather pads and straps, which will occa-

sionally need to be replaced throughout the season. If possible, cymbals should be cleaned regularly, although there are many opinions regarding the best cleaning products. Sharp looking cymbals make a difference in the visual effect of the band and in the attitude of the cymbal players.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Numbers

Although the total number of cymbal players in a marching percussion section can vary from year to year, it is best to have a minimum of one cymbal player for every two snare drummers. This allows one cymbal player to hold cymbals for two snare drummers when playing drumset-oriented arrangements, stand tunes, etc. An even better scenario is to have one cymbal player for *each* snare drummer, thus eliminating awkward playing angles and reaches from the snare line.

Drill

When writing drill for the cymbal line, always consider whether or not they will be required to hold for the snare line in the music being performed. If so, cymbal staging will generally have to take place in front of the snare line.

Memorization

It is very important for marching cymbal players to memorize their music. Out of sheer necessity, cymbal players are forced to memorize their music before any other section in the band. Making an audio tape of the music is very helpful to students when they are practicing and memorizing cymbal music.

Warm-Ups

Cymbal players should have a warm-up routine that allows them to play with the rest of the drum line. Although a stretching and strengthening program may be in place, it is important for cymbal players to warm up with the other sections. Doing this will allow them to work on ensemble playing and will keep them focused on the musical goals of the group.

Breathing

Correct breathing when playing cymbals is imperative, whether performing Tchaikovsky's "Fourth Symphony" in orchestra or "The National Anthem" in

marching band. When timing a crash, breathing, in addition to physical preparation, should be coordinated with the conductor's beat.

Musicianship

All members of a marching percussion ensemble, including cymbal players, should be sensitive to playing at different dynamic levels. Musicianship should be emphasized as students become aware of phrasing, accents, and how their parts relate to the music.

CONCLUSION

Whenever I give a cymbal clinic, I am always amused at the strange looks I receive from students when I advocate practicing cymbals. Practicing *cymbals*? Some percussion students think that playing cymbals is easy and does not require practice. This is not true. Developing performance skills on cymbals requires the same work ethic and practice discipline as developing technique on any other percussion instrument. In fact, having the confidence to execute a quality crash at the most crucial moment of a piece requires thorough preparation, experimentation, and repetition.

As cymbal players from thousands of high school and college marching bands perform around the country every fall weekend, music educators need to evaluate their musical standards. It should no longer be acceptable for cymbal players to merely play *together*, but to play together with good sound quality. Performance techniques, writing styles, and visuals can be explored after this initial standard is met. The result will be an enhanced musical performance and a positive musical experience for the student.

ENDNOTES

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