YAMAHA Educator Series

PERCUSSION

Michael Gould

Michael Gould is an Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Michigan. He maintains an active teaching, clinic and performing schedule. Michael is a Yamaha Performing Artist and can be contacted at gould@umich.edu.

Developing a Great Sound:

The Swing Ride Cymbal Pattern

By Michael Gould

Sound production on a percussion instrument is often one of the last frontiers a student is faced with before moving on to other, more challenging techniques or another instrument within the percussion family. If one looks at the time a student spends on sound production with other instruments, for example, the trumpet (embouchure, breath support, posture), one quickly realizes that perhaps some more attention should be spent focusing on these issues with percussion. Because a student can achieve an immediate and somewhat recognizable "sound" on any given percussion instrument, especially in comparison with other beginning students on other instruments, sound quality issues usually fall much later in the maturation process of the percussionist. However, the earlier these issues can be addressed in the developing percussionist, the more musical, sensitive and mature he/she will become while performing.

The teacher plays a crucial role in the development of a student's sound through example. This paradigm has been in existence since the beginning of time–"Hear a great sound, play a great sound!" This is the role of the teacher-student relationship. This can also be achieved through a student's critical listening of recordings, and watching live and recorded performances. Although the following will detail achieving a great sound on the ride cymbal while playing a swing pattern, the principles of achieving excellent sound production cross-over to every instrument in the percussion family—from beautiful seamless closed rolls, great crashes on cymbals to warm, full-bodied strokes on a timpano.

The following will detail how I develop the ride concept with my students. This process is heavily dependent upon both the student and myself performing each example during the lesson, as well as listening to and playing along with recordings.

Before one even approaches a cymbal or drumset there are three areas that should be addressed in creating a great ride cymbal sound: the stroke, playing area and position of the instrument.

Free-rebound stroke

The stroke is one of the most important components of creating a good tone or sound. The free-rebound stroke is well suited for creating a relaxed approach to striking the cymbal, and helps achieve a full, resonant cymbal sound. The following describes the creation of the free-rebound stroke while striking a drum. A similar technique is followed for playing the ride cymbal:

The free-rebound stroke coordinates muscle movements in the fingers and wrist. The two phases of the stroke consist of a down stroke and the contrary upstroke. The down stroke starts with the stick (striking implement), wrist and forearm in a neutral position parallel to the drum. The tip of the stick should reach slightly off center from the middle of the drum. In bending the wrist, the stick should rise about 12 to13 inches above the drum. With a quick whip-like motion of the wrist, similar to casting a fishing rod or bouncing a ball, the stick is propelled to the surface of the drum. The fingers remain loose, and do not inhibit the motion of the wrist. These are the actions needed to complete the down stroke.

Michael Gould

Upon completion of the down stroke, the upstroke begins as the stick rebounds from the tensed surface of the head. The whip-like rebounding action will help bring the stick back to the position it assumed at the beginning of the down stroke. This type of free-rebound stroke employs the complete range of motion of the wrist and provides the greatest volume. For lower dynamics, the performer begins the downstroke much closer to the striking surface. By decreasing the height of the downstroke, the drum resonates less, which results in decreased dynamics and loss of some sound quality (for a more detailed description of the free-rebound stroke, see Gary Cook's, Teaching Percussion, Schirmer Books; ISBN: 0028701917).

Playing Area – Position of the Cymbal

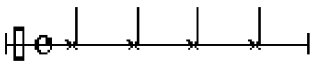
Placement of the stick on the ride cymbal dictates the overall tone quality of the instrument. For general ride playing the striking area should be 3~5" from the edge of the cymbal. As with every cymbal or idiophone, one must experiment to find the best sounding area or "sweet-spot" of each particular instrument. The height, angle and mounting of the cymbal also play a large part in the overall sound of the cymbal. The height of the ride cymbal should be positioned so that the wrist of the percussionist is in a neutral position. This is similar to shaking someone's hand—the wrist is not bent at a sharp angle. The angle of the cymbal is also critical to sound production. If the angle of the cymbal is too sharp, the cymbal will become choked. It is important to split the difference between getting a great angle for one's hand position/stroke and not choking the cymbal. The cymbal should remain free-floating on the cymbal stand without being choked by the washer, rubber sleeve or wingnut.

The Breakdown of the Swing Ride Pattern

The Quarter Note Ride Cymbal Pattern

The basis for the swing ride pattern is built off of a four-quarter note pulse in common time (example one). The percussionist should employ the free-rebound stroke for each of the four-quarter notes. The grip may be altered from a matched grip to one where the thumb is on top of the stick. This is similar to a French grip used when playing timpani. The hand remains very relaxed.

Example one: Quarter Note Ride Pattern

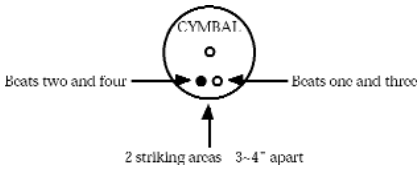


Two Playing Areas on the Ride Cymbal

Two playing areas are utilized on the cymbal while performing a swing ride pattern. There are several reasons for keeping two distinct areas of attack. First, one wants to differentiate between strong and weak beats. This helps establish an excellent groove and will usually match up very well with the bass player. One does this by alternating beating areas between each quarter note pulse. Second, establishing two striking areas helps keep the cymbal "excited". If one were to perform in the exact same beating or striking area of the cymbal, one would notice a much drier or dead sound.

It also helps if the student develops a mental-aural concept of a great cymbal sound. The mental-aural concept places an image with the sound of the instrument. It also helps the student hear a great sound before playing one. I like to explain the four-quarter note ride pattern as the sound of someone walking (like a walking bass line) down a very resonant hallway with tap shoes on. This seems to tie together the two areas on the ride cymbal with the gate of someone walking with their left and right feet. During this phase of the pattern, the stick heights should remain at the same height for both playing areas.

Example two: Two Playing Areas



"The Drop"– Stroke and a Bounce

The drop is an integral part of the swing pattern to help relax not only the performer's approach to playing swing, but to help with the overall "groove." The "a" of beats two and four lead to beats one and three and can be considered one stroke followed by a bounce (sometimes referred to as a stroke and a bounce). The performer only supplies the upstroke for the last eighth note of the triplet followed by the natural rebound of beat one or three. The stroke height should be the same distance away from the cymbal as beats 2 and 4.

Example three: The Drop—Stroke and a Bounce

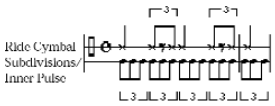
Yamaha Corporation of America • Band & Orchestral Division
3445 East Paris Ave., SE • P.O. Box 899 • Grand Rapids, MI 49518-0899
www.yamahapercussion.com

Michael Gould

Triplet Subdivision or Inner Pulse

Since swing is generally triplet-based music, one must subdivide the ride pattern in triplets. This will help place each triplet in-time and help with the overall "feel" or "groove" of the style. If the student cannot play the triplets on the snare drum while simultaneously playing the ride cymbal pattern it is important that a metronome or the teacher play triplets with the student.

Example four: Triplet Subdivision or Inner Pulse



Putting It All Together!

The beginning drumset student will have a much better chance of creating a great sounding and grooving cymbal sound and swing pattern by adhering to a relaxed free-rebound stroke with the proper cymbal position and playing area. By critically listening to not only the teacher during lessons, but recordings the student will further develop ideas on sound and ride cymbal patterns. Following these simple steps not only creates a great cymbal sound but a grooving swing pattern. Good Luck.

Overview:

1) Free-rebound stroke

2) Playing Area--Position of the Cymbal

3) The Quarter Note Ride Cymbal Pattern

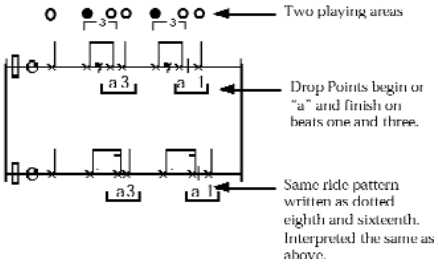
4) Two Playing Areas on the Ride Cymbal

5) "The Drop"--Stroke and a Bounce

6) Triplet Subdivision or Inner Pulse

7) Now Play!!

Example four: Putting it all Together!



Yamaha Corporation of America • Band & Orchestral Division
3445 East Paris Ave., SE • P.O. Box 899 • Grand Rapids, MI 49518-0899
www.yamaha.com/band