

Cymbals - How to get Started!

by Kirk Gay

Cymbals are one of the most interesting instruments that a percussionist can play. They can be one of the most beautiful sounds in an ensemble or when played incorrectly they can sound like a car crash! Here we will discuss a few helpful hints on selecting both crash cymbals and suspended cymbals. Just call me the “Heloise” of the percussion world! Well, maybe not!

Crash Cymbals: When buying crash cymbals finding the right pair can be almost as tricky as playing them! When I refer to crash cymbals in this context, I mean two cymbals that are struck together and not a single crash cymbal on a drum set. A good thing to look at when you are buying cymbals for yourself or a band/orchestra is to determine what type of music you usually play. If you play light classical or French music you will want thinner cymbals. In comparison, if you play a lot of marches or mostly Germanic music you will want a thicker cymbal. Now, if you are a band and orchestra director you are probably thinking, “Well, my ensemble plays all kinds of music from Beethoven to “The Theme from the A Team!” In this case you would want to buy an “all purpose” set of cymbals. Most groups usually don’t have the budget to buy multiple sets of cymbals.

Here are some good guidelines to follow when looking for a set of general-purpose crash cymbals.

1. A medium to medium heavy thickness will work best. This is usually marked on the cymbal.
2. Listen for a darker sounding tone with a wide range of overtones.
3. Make sure that both cymbals are not the same pitch. This will help create a broader sound.
4. 8" or 19" cymbals are good sizes for all around playing.

One last thing to think about is straps and pads for your crash cymbals. It is good to look for a pair of softer suede or leather straps. If you get a pair of straps from a music store or cymbal company, they will often have a shiny side with the company logo stamped on them. I usually invert them and use the rough side on the outside making them easier to grip. If your hands sweat when you play the cymbals, this will help you as well. It is best to get a pair of straps that tie inside the bell. These are easy to maintain and if the strap stretches a little you can always retie them or use a double knot to hold them. Make sure that you keep an eye on them so they don’t come loose while playing!

In general, I don’t suggest using cymbal pads on your crash cymbals. They tend to muffle the sound slightly and dampen the ring. However, for some younger players pads do help control the cymbals and the slight vibrating shock that you get when crashing them together.

Suspended Cymbals: Most of the qualities that you look for in crash cymbals you look for in suspended cymbals; however, there are a few differences. Here again there are many options to choose from, but we will concentrate on what to look for in an all-purpose suspended cymbal.

You will want to look for a cymbal of medium thickness. A thin cymbal is nice for soft delicate notes; however, for loud notes or big crescendo rolls a thin cymbal won’t give you enough body of sound. A cymbal that is too thick won’t give you enough ring and sustain. Most cymbal companies make cymbals that are specifically marked for suspended cymbals. Check out cymbals between 18" and 20". These will be the best for general playing.

Again, check the pitch and sound of the cymbal. It is a little easier with suspended cymbals because it is just one cymbal. Listen for a good range of overtones and for the sustain. If possible stand back 20 feet or so and have someone else play the cymbal with a yarn mallet. This will give you a better idea of the overall sound of the cymbal.

Most people mount their suspended cymbal on a regular stand. This will work perfectly fine as long as the stand does not have any rattles and the cymbal is resting on a felt washer and not touching any metal. Nothing can ruin a beautiful soft suspended cymbal note like a buzz or a rattle from the stand! Another alternative is using a gooseneck cymbal stand. This is where the stand has an arm that you can hang the cymbal by a strap. This stand can be more expensive; however, the cymbal tends to ring a little better and it is less likely that the stand will rattle. The gooseneck stand makes changing cymbals during a piece easier if necessary.

Always strike the cymbal with either a medium weight stick or a yarn mallet. Many stick companies have started to market lines of mallets and sticks just for suspended cymbals. Most of the products are great, but if you have a pair of medium to medium soft marimba mallets they will work fine as well. Unless the music calls for a cymbal scrape or effect, do not use metal beaters on the cymbals. This produces a harsh tone and will bend the edges of the cymbals.

When purchasing either a suspended cymbal or crash cymbal set, make sure that you completely check them out before you purchase them. If you deal with a music store, have them order a couple of pairs for you to try out. It is very scary to buy cymbals and not get a chance to hear them until they are delivered to you. I know some drummers that would rather buy a car sight unseen than buy cymbals without hearing them before hand! Remember that once you purchase them you will have to listen to them for quite a while. Make sure that they are ones that you will want to hear forever! Good luck!

Kirk Gay was born in Detroit, Michigan and currently makes Oviedo, Florida his home. Mr. Gay obtained his Bachelor's Degree in Percussion Performance from Northern Illinois University. He later went on to study at the Cleveland Institute of Music where he received his Master's Degree in Timpani Performance. Kirk was a section percussionist with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic. In 1998 he toured Europe with the New World Symphony under the direction of Michael Tilson Thomas. He has performed with the Walt Disney World Orchestra, The Orlando Philharmonic and The Brevard Symphony Orchestra. He has arranged for The Crossmen Drum & Bugle Corps, The Magic Drum & Bugle Corps, and the Phantom Regiment Drum & Bugle Corps.

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