

Playing Dynamically

One of the things that separate a good musician from a great one is dynamics. It's more than just how loud or soft you play throughout sections of a song, but dynamic playing involves changes that keep the interest of the listener, even if they're small ones.

In this article, I'd like to discuss some things that will help you play the drums more dynamically. First, balancing and adjusting the different voices of the drum set when playing. Then, specific exercises to develop the control it takes to alter the dynamics in your playing. Let's start with some options for the most used parts of the drum set.

BASS DRUM

Most players either play the bass drum with their **heel down** (with the whole foot on the footboard of the pedal) or **heel up** (raising your heel an inch or so from the footboard). It's possible to play dynamically using either technique alone, but practicing both will give you more options. For example, jazz drummers will often feather the bass drum, playing it lightly to keep the time. This is usually easier to do with heels down. On the other hand, playing fast double strokes on the bass drum requires more power and is easier done with the heel up.

Double strokes on the bass drum are also done using a **Heel-Toe** technique where you start with the heel up and alternate the bass drum strokes between the heel and the toe.

SNARE DRUM

A **normal stroke** on the snare drum is usually done by striking the **center of the drum** with the stick starting between 6-8 inches from the drumhead. From there you can lower the dynamics by playing **ghost notes** (softer strokes with the stick starting 1-2 inches from the drum head) or **accented notes** with the stick starting between 10-12 inches from the drumhead). The exact height of the stick may vary from drummer to drummer but the point is that the louder you want the note to be, the higher you should start the stroke or allow the stick to rebound from the drum head after you strike it. (This is a very important concept in playing dynamically and I will refer to it later).

Another popular technique for accents on the snare drum is the **rim shot**. Rim shots are when you play the head and the rim of the drum with one stick at the same time. Playing them both together produces an accented note and makes the drum "crack" more.

Conversely, a **cross stick** is a technique where the tip of a drumstick is placed on the head near one of the bearing edges and the shaft of the stick is struck against the rim opposite the tip. This produces a softer "wood block" type of sound.

You can also get different sounds by playing the drum **off center**. Experiment with each of these snare techniques, moving the stick around to alter the sound.

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HI HAT

There are many variations you can play on the hi hat. It is a very expressive instrument. You can play it **closed** tightly, wide **open**, and anywhere in between by adjusting the pressure your foot has on the hi hat pedal. You can play **bark** accents on the hi hat by slightly opening them as you strike the hi hats with your stick and quickly closing them.

You can also get different sounds by striking different parts of the hi hats (the **bell**, the **bow**, and the **edge**). A common way to play the hi hats is by alternating the strokes between the bow and the edge. This gives the flow a lilt as you play.

RIDE

In general, going to the ride cymbal from the hi hat when you play opens up the sound and makes a dynamic change because it resonates longer than two hi hats closed together. As with the hi hat, you can get different sounds out of the ride cymbal by playing it in different places. The most common way is to play it on the **bow**. You can get different accents by playing the **bell** or by playing the **edge** (the same way you would strike a crash cymbal).

It can take some time to master these techniques. Practice each of them separately to make sure you are comfortable with them before you incorporate them into your playing.

STYLES

Different styles of music also have varying guidelines when it comes to dynamics and the four limbs. The main differences are in **rock** and **jazz** although any style can have its unique variances. In rock drumming, the beat is usually propelled by the bass and snare drum so they are usually a little louder than the hi hats or ride cymbal. In traditional jazz drumming, it's just the opposite where the ride cymbal is what drives the beat and is usually louder than the bass and snare drums, which accompany and accent the music. This is something to take in consideration when working with different styles of music but is more of a guide than a rule.

EXERCISE

A simple but very important exercise to practice is to play a basic beat using any combinations of the above techniques and gradually increase and decrease the volume of all of your limbs at the same time. (Make sure you do not change the tempo though. Use a metronome to make sure you stay in time).

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This really helps for transitioning dynamic levels smoothly and develops the control that it takes to play at various volumes. Do the same exercise with each limb individually (increase and decrease the volume one limb at a time while the other limbs stay the same volume).

Take note of how the different limbs feel when you play them at different dynamics. You want to make sure that you are not increasing tension as you increase volume. Tension prohibits speed and control. As I mentioned in the SNARE section above, the louder you want a note to be, the higher you should start the stroke. For example, if you start a normal stroke 6-8 inches from the drum head, start an accented stroke 10-12 inches from the drumhead and the extra distance and the velocity of the stick will make the higher stroke louder. There is no need to add any tension to your playing to play louder.

FILLS

You can also do the above exercise with fills. If you are going from a quiet section to a louder section, the fill you use needs to increase in volume appropriately.

Start by playing a 16th note snare roll and increase and decrease the volume. (Again, use a metronome to stay in time). Once you feel comfortable with that, do the same thing with more complicated fills.

Listen to a variety of music to hear how all these techniques are used and practice and apply them to your own playing.



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