

Care of Your Cymbals, Tam Tams, Gongs, and Crotales

By: Mark Carson (October, 2008)

All of these bronze instruments make wonderful sounds and require minimal care in order to provide years of service.

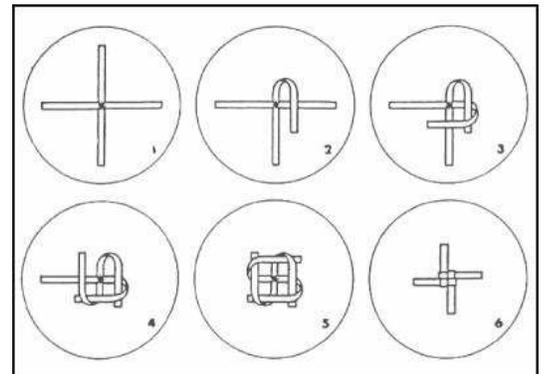
Cymbals of a professional grade are made of B20 bronze, which is composed of 80% copper and 20% tin. Safe handling, proper storage, and maintenance are critical to ensure that cymbals will produce great sounds over a long period of time. Hand, suspended, and drum set cymbals should be stored in padded bags or cases with some type of divider. This protects the edges from damage, and reduces the accumulation of dirt and grime on the surface of the cymbal.

Professional percussionists disagree over the topic of cleaning cymbals. Cleaning your cymbals removes dirt from the tone grooves, and thereby allows the cymbal to vibrate more freely, enhancing the high overtones. However, this results in a small change in the sound that the cymbal produces. Excessive cleaning, or cleaning with an abrasive product, will wear away the tops of the tone grooves, and dull the sound of the cymbal. If you decide to clean your cymbals, use products designed specifically for this purpose. Regular brass cleaners are abrasive, and will damage your cymbals.

Another important measure of prevention that can be taken with your cymbals is ensuring that cymbal stands are equipped with the proper felts and sleeves. Metal on metal contact WILL significantly shorten the life of cymbals. Keep in mind that the steel rod of the cymbal stand is harder than the bronze cymbal. If the cymbal is not protected by the proper felts and sleeves, the cymbal impact and vibration will cause metal fatigue on the center of the cymbal as you play. This will lead to premature cracking. In many schools, cymbal stands are missing felts and sleeves. This will lead to small cracks or key-holing (oval wear in the center of the cymbal). Additionally; do not over-tighten the wing nuts, as this also puts stress on the center of the cymbal, and will lead to cracking.

DW Percussion Tip: Buy polyvinyl tubing at the local hardware store and cut it to the proper length of a sleeve. Keep a zip-loc bag of these low cost replacement sleeves in your percussion cabinet.

Frequently check the condition of your hand cymbal straps and the security of the knots to prevent embarrassing accidents. Here's a simple diagram of how to tie a cymbal knot (to the right):



Small nicks in the edges of cymbals can be repaired by using medium to fine sandpaper to “erase” the nick, making the cymbal less likely to crack. Be careful to keep the sandpaper perpendicular to the edge of the cymbal. Only sand on the edge and do not allow the sandpaper to scratch the surface of the cymbal. An example is shown in this photo to the left.

Cracks and pieces broken out of cymbals are difficult to repair and should only be attempted by an experienced professional. Rarely are these repairs 100% successful.

Tam tams and Gongs require only common sense maintenance - use a sturdy stand, proper mallets, and store and move with care. Occasionally these instruments will develop a small buzz. Usually this buzz is the result of a small burr on the edge of the instrument. Burrs are best removed by someone with metal working experience.

Use of appropriate cords to suspend tam tams and gongs will prevent embarrassing moments. I suggest using two strands of braided nylon rope of an appropriate size and tying knots in the ends of both. Twisting the two strands together will make them even stronger. Using two small strands allows for a back up if one fails; however, it is still necessary to check the rope frequently to prevent mishaps. If your cords seem to wear prematurely, check the hole carefully for a burr. These burrs are very sharp and can cut through rope quickly depending on the amount the instrument is played. Removal of the burr is best left to a professional.

DW Percussion Tip: Save the excess cord when re-stringing your xylophone or vibraphones - two strands usually work well for tam tams. Most manufacturers sell the cord in lengths for a marimba, so there is extra when re-stringing smaller mallet instruments like vibraphones and xylophones.

Crotales are becoming standard in many school programs today, and while they sound beautiful, they are prone to abuse. The disks are heavy on the ends of a one-octave bar, so use a stable stand to prevent damage from someone passing by and catching clothing or a bag on them. When not being used, store crotales in a padded case. The most common problems with crotales include individual notes going dead (not ringing as long as other notes) and deterioration of intonation. Usually these two problems are caused by using inappropriate mallets (either too heavy, too hard, or both). Hard plastic or PVC mallets with 1" diameter heads work well on crotales; brass or very heavy plastic mallets are simply too much for the crotales to handle. Due to the manufacturing process, once a note has gone dead or out of tune, nothing can be done to repair the problem. This is why prevention is so essential.

 **Now that you know a little more about “Care of Your Cymbals, Tam Tams, Gongs, and Crotales”, please check back soon for the next article in our series “What’s Going on Back There?”.**



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