

Max Roach's Exercise for Developing a "Transparent Sound"

In college I had the great privilege of studying with the legendary Max Roach, an architect of the "be-bop" style of jazz music, and one of the most innovative and important drummers in history. Max stands out as one of the few players who added vocabulary to the drumset that is *still* standard today, and advanced the capabilities of the instrument in music.

In our lessons, Max referred to the drumset as the "multiple percussion instrument," pointing out that the drumset is a collection of instruments combined collectively to produce one voice. In what was easily one of the single most important drum lessons I ever had, Max taught me what he called his exercise for developing a "transparent sound". The exercise teaches you how to focus on the *interdynamics* necessary to balance (think *mix*) the *sounds* your limbs make and learn how to control, clearly and *transparently*, that balance of sound you want to project through the band to the audience.

Whatever dynamic level your ensemble is playing at overall, at any given time, the drumset player must be aware of not only the collective dynamics, but also his or her *interdynamic* balance, to support the music with the proper feel.

For example, in much contemporary backbeat-based groove music, the bass drum and snare drum, *in general*, will dominate the balance of the drummer's groove and the cymbals will support it, weaving it together and also perhaps adding accents for spice and color. In modern jazz music, the ride cymbal and hi-hat cymbals, *in general*, are the priority in the drummer's balance of sound (with the music's lighter feel) and the drums will weave around them dynamically, supporting the rhythm with undercurrents of counterpoint (comping), occasional dramatic bursts of color ("dropping bombs"), or a heavier backbeat groove.

To achieve a transparent sound, the drummer must develop the control necessary to have command of shifting dynamic balances in all four limbs that can be executed and adjusted by any *one (or more)* limb(s) without affecting the overall dynamic balance of the *others*. It is this skill, combined with how and what you *hear* with your ears, your personal sense of *taste*, musically speaking, your fundamental *technique*, and how well you keep time, that rounds out your *feel* for the music.

Observe the following musical example:

The image shows handwritten musical notation for a drum exercise. It is divided into two sections, A and B. Section A is labeled 'VAMP' and consists of four measures of quarter notes in all four limbs: RH/CYM, LH/SD, RF/BD, and LF/HH. Section B consists of eight measures of eighth notes in all four limbs, with a dynamic marking of 'ff' and a 'REPEAT 4x5' instruction. A dynamic curve starts at 'mp' and rises to 'ff'.

Letter A establishes a vamp where you'll play quarter notes in all four limbs, with right hand on the cymbal, left hand on the snare, right foot on the bass drum and left foot on the hi hat (or as Max called it, "the foot cymbal").

Begin the exercise by vamping at letter A, at an overall dynamic level of *mezzo piano*. Focus on hearing an equally balanced sound between the four tones you're producing by adjusting your four limbs. Think harmonically. You are playing a four-voice chord of "indeterminate" pitch. Take the time to find a truly balanced sound and groove on it a bit, now focusing on how it *feels* to produce the balanced sound. "This is," as Max said, "Your starting point."

At this point go to Letter B, proceeding as follows: choose *one* of your four limbs to execute the four bar crescendo, from *mezzo piano* up to double forte (peaking on the downbeat of Bar 5) then decrescendoing for four bars, repeating back to the *mezzo piano* vamp at Letter A. The *most important* factor here is to NOT disturb the *mezzo piano* dynamic balance of your other three limbs playing the quarter note rhythm while the fourth executes the crescendo and decrescendo.

In other words, don't let your limbs surge up or drop down *together* dynamically. This is where the challenge gets harder than it looks! With patience and repetition you will learn to control the separation of dynamics between your limbs.

Notice the musical example repeats four times. This is to give each of your limbs a pass, one at a time, through the dynamic separation. You might try a sequence as follows:

Vamp A, then Letter B w/RH / Vamp A, then Letter B w/LH / Vamp A, then Letter B w/RF / Vamp A, then Letter B w/LF.

I recommend using a metronome with this exercise to work on your *time* in relationship with your *dynamics* to help deepen your *feel*. It is common to rush the tempo when crescendoing and equally common to drag the tempo when decrescendoing. Working with a click will help you anticipate and overcome these pitfalls and multiply the advantages of this concept greatly. Try it around 120 bpm.

Of all the four limbs, the left foot on the hi hat is typically the hardest to control. This is usually because the space between the hi hat cymbals is only marginally opened. I remember seeing Max, Buddy Rich, and Tony Williams play live, and noticing, when each of them left the bandstand, how dramatically large the space between their hi hat cymbals was. When I tried mine that way it felt like my foot went right through the floor trying to close the pedal!

I didn't get it until I could see the parallel relationship of the foot to the sticks in my hand. Max pointed out that it was easier to play dynamically by staying low to the head for soft sounds, and raising up from the wrist, then forearm, for loud and louder ones. This way you could keep a looser grip and get a bigger sound vs. tightening the grip and hammering the drum for volume. It then made sense that if I needed a louder, "chick" sound from the hats, to help lock a band in, more space between cymbals was the sensible way to get it rather than stomping my foot with the hats only marginally opened working against me.

Nowadays, I regularly use this exercise as a warm up, especially if I only have time to do a soundcheck before a gig. It always helps me "tune in" in a musical and meditative way. If you stick with it you'll find it won't be long until becomes an instinctive reflex, refining anything you play. I considered this lesson to be a great gift in my pursuit of a mature sound and not a day I play goes by that I don't say a grateful "Thank You," to Max Roach for sharing it with me. Check it out.