

A Lesson With Max Roach

AN EXERCISE FOR DEVELOPING A TRANSPARENT SOUND

by David Stanoch

When I was in college, I had the great privilege of studying with Max Roach, an architect of the bebop style of jazz and one of the most innovative and important drummers in history. Max stands out as one of the few players who created a new drumset vocabulary that is still the standard today.

In our lessons, Max referred to the drumset as the “multiple percussion instrument,” pointing out that the kit is a collection of instruments combined to produce one collective 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.” It teaches you how to control the dynamics between your limbs so that you clearly project a balanced sound through the band to the audience.

In contemporary backbeat-based music, the bass drum and snare usually dominate the balance of the groove, and the cymbals provide support to weave everything together or to add accents for spice and color. In modern jazz, the ride cymbal and hi-hat are the priority in the balance of sound, and the drums weave around them dynamically, supporting the rhythm with undercurrents of counterpoint (comping), occasional dramatic bursts of color (dropping bombs), or a slightly heavier backbeat groove.

To achieve a transparent sound, you must learn how to shift the dynamic balance between all four limbs, making adjustments to any one or more limbs

without affecting the overall dynamic of the others.

THE EXERCISE

First, establish a vamp, or repeated pattern, where you're playing quarter notes with all four limbs, with the right hand on the cymbal, the left hand on the snare, the right foot on the bass drum, and the left foot on the hi-hat (or, as Max called it, “the foot cymbal”).

Play the vamp at an overall dynamic level of mezzo piano (moderately soft). Focus on establishing an equally balanced sound among the four tones of the drumset. You'll have to make some adjustments to get everything at the same level. Think harmonically. You're playing a four-voice “chord” of indeterminate pitch. Take the time to find a balanced sound, and groove on it for a bit. Now focus on how it *feels* to produce this balanced sound. This is your starting point, as Max would say.

Once you have the vamp evenly balanced, choose one of your four limbs and execute a four-bar crescendo (get louder), from mezzo piano (moderately soft) up to fortissimo (very loud). Then decrescendo (get softer) for four bars, until you return to your mezzo piano vamp. The most important factor is to maintain the mezzo piano dynamic balance with your other three limbs while the fourth executes the crescendo and decrescendo. Don't let your limbs surge up or drop down. With patience and repetition, you will learn to control the separation of dynamics in your limbs. I recommend starting the dynamic shifts

with the right hand, then the left hand, then the bass drum, and finally the hi-hat foot.

Practice this exercise with a metronome to help deepen your feel. It's common to rush the tempo when crescendoing and to drag the tempo when decrescendoing. Working with a click will help you anticipate and overcome these tendencies. Try starting at around 120 bpm.

Of all the four limbs, the hi-hat foot is typically the hardest to control. This is usually because the space between the hi-hat cymbals is usually only a couple of inches. I remember seeing Max, Buddy Rich, and Tony Williams play live and noticing a large space between their hi-hat cymbals. When I tried mine that way, it felt like my foot was going right through the floor when I tried to bring the cymbals together. But you might want to experiment with opening your hi-hats a little more than usual.

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 get my mind and body “tuned in” in a musical and meditative way. If you stick with it, you'll find that this process of adjusting your dynamics will become an instinctive reflex, where you're constantly refining your balance for different situations. This single lesson really helped me in my pursuit of a more mature sound, and not a drumming day goes by that I don't say a grateful thank-you to Max Roach for sharing it with me.

Vamp [A] [B] Repeat 4 times

mp (4) ff (8)

David Stanoch is a faculty member of the McNally Smith College Of Music. For more information, visit rhythmelodic.com.

