



Ten Mechanical Considerations Guaranteed to Improve Drum Set Performance

By Dr. Tom Morgan

Tom Morgan has been Director of Percussion Studies at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas, where he teaches applied percussion and directs the Washburn University Percussion Ensemble. He holds Bachelors and Masters degrees in music education and music theory and composition from the University of Northern Colorado and a Doctoral degree in percussion performance from the University of Oklahoma. Along with his teaching duties at Washburn, Dr. Morgan has a large private studio made up of elementary, junior high and high school percussion students from the surrounding community. He is the author of *A Sequential Approach to Fundamental Snare Drum*, and *A Sequential Approach to Rudimental Snare Drum*, snare drum instruction methods, and *The Drumset Reading Workbook*, all published by C. Alan Publications.

As a performer, Dr. Morgan is very active in the Topeka and Kansas City areas, performing and recording with numerous groups, including the Trilogy Big Band, a seventeen-piece jazz ensemble with two recently released CDs on the Sea Breeze Jazz recording label. He has also recorded with the Boulevard Big Band and performs with them at Harlings in Kansas City. In addition, Tom has performed with the Topeka Symphony Orchestra, the Kansas City Symphony Orchestra, and the Topeka Jazz Workshop big band. He is a regional endorser for Pro-Mark drumsticks, Encore Mallets and performs regularly on Tree House Drums, which are hand made in Topeka, Kansas. He is in demand as a clinician at festivals and music camps throughout the region.

As I adjudicate high school and college jazz festivals and conduct drum set clinics I am always struck with how often the same kinds of problems keep cropping up. Many of these problems have little or nothing to do with actual playing (that involves another whole set of problems), but rather with the physical set up of the drum set itself. The solutions to these problems are really quite simple and do not require years of dedicated practice. I would like to offer ten simple suggestions that can improve a drummer's performance. They are in no particular order of importance:

- 1. Use a rug.** On a hard wood or linoleum floor, the hi hat and bass drum will slide away from the player if something is not done to hold them in place. The simplest solution is to set up the drums on a rug. The rug should be relatively thin so the pedals can rest securely on the floor. A rug should be considered standard equipment
- 2. Put the music stand on the left.** This will make it possible for the drummer to turn pages with the left hand while still playing the ride cymbal with the right hand. Putting the music stand in front of the drum set is not a good idea because the drummer has to stand up and stop playing to physically deal with the music. Left handed drummers who set their drums up in reverse should put their stand on the right.
- 3. No extreme angles.** The drums and cymbals should slant gracefully down toward the player. Slanting drums or cymbals at extreme angles will make it much more difficult to move smoothly around the set. Check out pictures of some of the great jazz drummers (Mel Lewis is an excellent example) to get ideas.

4. **Give the ride cymbal priority.** Because the ride cymbal will probably be in use 90% of the time, put it in the most comfortable location. Fit the tom toms around the ride cymbal, not the other way around. When playing a ride pattern, the upper arm should be relaxed at the side of the body.

5. **Experiment with throne height.** The only way to have a relaxed playing style is to actually be able to relax while you play. Relaxed playing begins with proper throne height. Sitting too low can cause back problems as well as restrict the movement of the feet. Sitting too high can make playing rim shots difficult. Keep trying different heights until you find the most comfortable height for you.

6. **Position foot pedals for maximum techniques.** Pedals can and should be positioned so that playing with the foot flat, with a rocking motion, and with the toe are all possible. Sitting too close or too far will eliminate one or more of the possible techniques and limit the drummer. Try using every possible technique and move the pedals so they can all be utilized.

7. **Let the tom-toms ring.** Remember, your drums must project and that means they must resonate. Dampening the heads with tape will give you a sound that won't carry past the first row of seats. Free-ringing tom-toms will project and will also make fills and solos sound smoother and more connected.

8. **Let the cymbals move freely.** The fastest way to crack a cymbal is to crank down the wing nut so the cymbal can't move when it is struck. Most cymbals sound better when they are allowed to vibrate naturally. The plastic sleeve between the stand and the cymbal is very important as well. Allowing the cymbal to rub against the bare metal stand will eventually cause an indentation that can lead to cracking. Plastic sleeves can be easily purchased at most music stores.

9. **Take the "stuff" out of the bass drum.** If the bass drum is being used in a jazz setting, an appropriate tuning would involve a strip of felt under each head. This allows the bass drum to resonate in a controlled manner, and to blend well with the longer sounds of the walking bass line. A completely dead bass drum (with a blanket or pillow inside) is the common tuning for rock or funk which corresponds to the more staccato electric bass patterns. Using a dead bass drum sound in the high school jazz ensemble doesn't work if the repertory is primarily in a swing-oriented style such as Count Basie or Woody Herman.

10. **Select appropriate sticks.** The shape and size of the bead of the stick will greatly affect the sound of the cymbal. In the jazz style, sticks with a more elongated bead rather than a round bead generally produce a more appropriate sound, depending on the cymbal. Experiment with different sizes and shapes of sticks to find the most musical cymbal sound.