

Marching Cymbal Technique

BASICS

Posture

Great cymbal technique is built on the foundation of great posture. Align your ankles, knees, hips, shoulders, and ears from the ground up. Extend your collarbones outward and relax your shoulders away from your ears. Posture should project strength and intensity. Aim for relaxed strength; unnecessary tension will result in poor visual and sound quality.

Grip

We will be using the Garfield grip this season, as it facilitates comfortable and natural control of the cymbal. Follow the steps below to set the grip:



Put your hand through the strap with your palm facing the cymbal



Rotate your wrist by pushing the thumb downwards until your palm is facing away from the plate



Pull your thumb back towards you until the strap is centered between your thumb and pointer finger



Push your pinky down towards the cymbal, allowing the strap to rest snugly between your thumb and pointer finger

To check the size of the strap, set the grip and turn your palm to the ground. If the pad of the cymbal is not touching your palm, the strap is too loose. If the pad is touching your palm but the strap is causing pain or cutting off circulation, it is too tight.

Be aware of how your hand and wrist are shaped. The pictures below demonstrate incorrect shape (left) and correct shape (right).



Fingers are together, palm is cupped and away from the pad; the straps are loose. The wrist is bent downwards. Excessive tension, cramps may develop. Less surface area contacted for poor control.

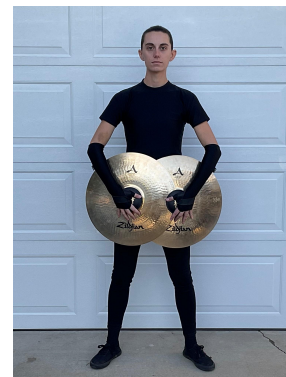


Fingers are spread, palm is flat against the pad. Straight line from elbow to middle finger. Relaxed muscles, cramps significantly reduced. Greater surface area contacted for better control.

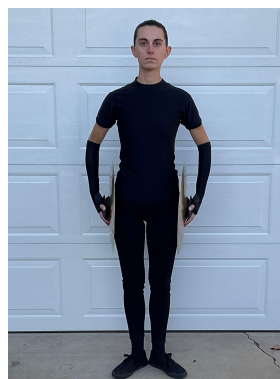
Positions

Cymbals are played in a variety of positions depending on the type of note being played and the desired visual effect. It's important to be comfortable both with holding the cymbals in all the positions and moving between them.

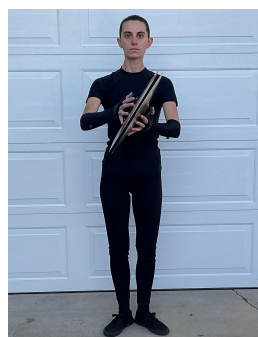
- ❖ **Standby** - This position is essentially “at rest” for cymbals. Feet are shoulder-width apart, cymbals flat against your body with the edge of the right cymbal underneath the pad of the left cymbal. Elbows are comfortably bent, shoulders relaxed and down. If your cymbals have logos, they should be aligned and perpendicular to the ground.



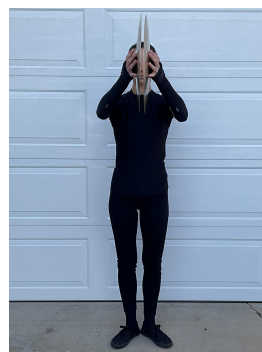
- ❖ **Set** - This position is the precursor to playing positions. Feet are together with cymbals at your sides and slightly away from your legs. The knots of the cymbals are aligned with the seams of your pants. Elbows are slightly bent and comfortably away from your body.



- ❖ **Flat** - Also called **Horizontal**. This is the default playing position. The cymbals are held in front of the body, knots centered at your sternum. Elbows are open and rounded. The angle of the plates should be the same as the angle of a seatbelt from your left shoulder to your right hip. The cymbals will be perfectly parallel with a two-finger-width space between them. The prep for this position is accomplished by opening the back edges of the cymbals towards your body: left fingers push the cymbal against the forearm, right wrist rotates and moves slightly back. The front edge of the right cymbal is pointed at the contact point (about 1.5 inches inwards from the front edge of the left cymbal).



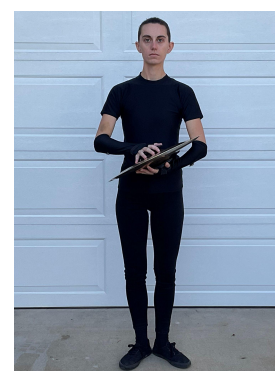
- ❖ **Port** - Also called **Vertical**; this position is the base for high crashes. The cymbals are vertical and parallel with a two-finger-width spacing and knots at eye level. Shoulders are relaxed and down, elbows open and wrists unbent. The port crash prep position consists of opening up the cymbals into a “V” shape with the bottom edge of the right cymbal slightly up and in, pointed at the contact point (about 1.5 inches up from the bottom edge of the left cymbal). The crash is performed by pushing your hands straight inwards as if clapping, hitting the contact point first, then pulling your hands apart until the cymbals are in an “A” shape. From there, the cymbals are snapped into an even “V” shape, followed by a second snap back to parallel.



- ❖ **Choke** - Cymbals are pressed against the body, top edges tucked into the underarm area. There should be a two-finger-width space between the front edges of the cymbals. When choking after a crash, aim to press the knots against your ribs, and use your forearms to squeeze the cymbals and dampen all sound. When performing taps, tap chokes, or zings, the cymbals should be held slightly forward away from your body.



- ❖ **Hi-hat** - Hold the cymbals near-horizontally, with the right cymbal on top and offset from the bottom plate by lowering it about half an inch. The plates are pressed against your abdomen, elbows away from your body. Be careful not to let the front edges of the cymbals scoop upwards or dip downwards.



- ❖ **Ride** - This position is used when acting as a ride cymbal for snare or tenor players. When using only one cymbal, use your right hand and turn the cymbal knot-upwards. When using both cymbals, keep the right hand turned up and hold your left hand palm-down. The cymbals are held comfortably in front of you, elbows out and away from your body.

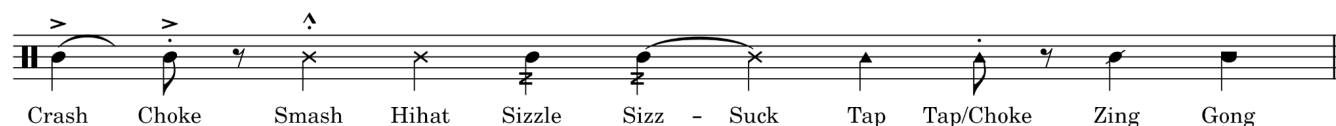


Transitions

Moving between different positions is typically accomplished by flipping the cymbals into the new position. These flips are also heavily utilized in a variety of musical and visual effects.

- ❖ **Standby to Set** - The cymbals are snapped from the standby position to set at the sides of your body. A “zing” sound should be produced as the cymbals come apart. Your left foot will snap into a feet-together position.
- ❖ **Flips** - The most common transitional motion is the flip. Motion is initiated and led by the wrist, NOT the elbow. As you perform a flip, try to let the cymbal’s weight and inertia carry it through the flip, and minimize excess motion at the end by snapping into a firm grip with your fingers. Keeping your fingers spread and your hand relaxed is essential to performing quick and efficient flips.
 - **In-flips** - These are accomplished by applying pressure with your middle finger and thumb, rotating the wrist in and down, then smoothly following all the way through the motion. Practice by placing the bottom edge of the cymbal on a flat surface, pushing the cymbal in and down and tracing the motion around the whole edge of the plate. In-flips are used from set to flat, flat to port, and set to port.
 - **Out-flips** - These are opposite from in-flips. Push the bottom edge of the cymbal in and up with your pinky, then “spill” forward with the palm and allow the plate to flash away from you. The cymbal and pad should slip against each other as you rotate your wrist up and snap your fingers back down onto the plate. Out-flips are used from port to set.
 - **Sandals** - A sandal is a combination of in- and out-flips, with the right hand performing an out-flip while the left hand does an in-flip. The initial motion of a sandal is tilting the top edges of both cymbals to the right, then finishing each hand’s respective flip. Sandals are used from port to flat and flat to set.
- ❖ **Loading/Unloading** - This refers to whether the strap is on the hand (loaded/on-hand) or the strap is loose around the wrist (unloaded/off-hand). Both are used to accomplish different visual effects.
 - To unload from flat or port position, tilt the top edge of the cymbal out (away from body-center) and allow the cymbal to slide over your hand. The strap will fall away from between the thumb and pointer finger, hanging freely on your wrist. This motion is often accompanied by a slight circle motion of the arm to bring the cymbal all the way around the wrist, catching the pad in the palm of your hand.
 - To reload from a palm-up position, push up and in with your thumb (towards body-center) and make a slight circle motion with your arm, following the direction of the cymbal as it swings around your wrist. Be sure to **spread your thumb and pointer finger** so the strap has plenty of room to slide in between them.

CYMBAL NOTATION



Crash - The most common cymbal sound. Performed by prepping the plates, hitting the contact point with the edge of the right cymbal, then pushing straight forward with the right hand to create a resonant “flam” sound. Fingers should be pulled away from the cymbal while it’s ringing, and put back on when moving or choking. Crashes can also be performed in port position.

Choke - Rather than letting a crash ring, the sound is cut off abruptly by bringing the plates into choke position and pressing the fingers back onto the cymbal. For port crash chokes, the cymbals are dampened against the front of the shoulders in an “A” shape.

Smash - Similar to a hi-hat, a smash is performed in flat position by simply smashing the plates together and gripping firmly with the fingers to mute any extra resonance.

Hi-hat - This sound imitates the sound of a drum kit hi-hat. In hi-hat position, the front edge of the right cymbal is slightly raised then smashed down onto the left cymbal in a clamshell motion to create a “chk” sound.

Sizzle - A sustained sound similar to a half-open hi-hat. In flat position, gently drop the right cymbal onto the left. Find a balance in pressure; too much force will dampen the sound, and too little force won’t produce enough vibration. Sizzles can also be performed in port position.

Sizz-Suck - Add a forward movement of the right hand through the sizzle followed by a sharp inwards motion while firmly pressing your palms together. You should feel a small vacuum pocket that cuts off the sound of the sizzle, resulting in a “tsss-t” sound.

Tap - A sustained “ting” sound. These can be performed in either port or choke position. In port, angle the cymbals to create a slightly narrowed “A” shape. Prep the right cymbal to be vertical by turning your wrist slightly up, then bring the plate straight down onto the top edge of the left cymbal. For taps in choke position, hold both cymbals slightly off the body, prep the right cymbal straight out, then bring it straight in to hit the front edge of the left cymbal. Fingers should be held off of the cymbals for all taps.

Tap Choke - Typically done in choke position, this is simply a forceful tap followed by an immediate choke, producing a short, punchy “psht” sound. The right cymbal will push the left cymbal into the body; be careful not to choke the left cymbal before or as it’s being struck.

Muted Tap - A tap performed with both plates pressed against your body, creating a quiet “click” sound. Muted tap preps are much smaller than regular tap preps.

Zing - In port “A” position, bring the top edge of the right cymbal to just above the bell of the left cymbal, contact as quietly as possible with fingers dampening the sound, then sharply push the right cymbal straight up and off of the left, creating a resonant “zing” sound. Fingers should be held off of the cymbals for as long as the zing is resonating.

Gong - Hold in flat position, then turn the right cymbal so the bottom edge is perpendicular with the left and centered over the knot. Prep slightly up then hit the bottom edge of the right cymbal against the forward edge of the bell, following the motion through in a small circle forward, up, and back. Fingers should be held off of the cymbal to allow the sound to resonate.

Modified and other implements - many implements are used sparingly, or are variations of regular implements (change of grip, position, or part of a visual). These are often indicated by a word or phrase above the notehead.

- ❖ **Skank** - In choke position, whip both hands forwards, angling the right cymbal so that the back portion (behind the bell) contacts the front portion of the left cymbal (in front of the bell). Both cymbals are quickly brought back into choke position and muted.
- ❖ **Modified crashes** - Loaded grip crashes can be performed with the contact point at the top, front, bottom, or back edges of the cymbals. Sunshine and windmill crashes use modified contact points. Various crashes can also be performed with unloaded grips such as spider or thumb grip.
- ❖ **Modified taps/zings/gongs** - These implements can be performed in various positions and angles, depending on the intended visual effect. Unloaded grips can also be utilized.
- ❖ **Visual implements** - Implements performed as part of a visual should still have good sound quality, but the visual aspect takes precedence.

Video examples of transitions and note vocabulary can be found on the YouTube channel

“Marching Plates Technique” - <https://youtube.com/@marchingplatestechnique>

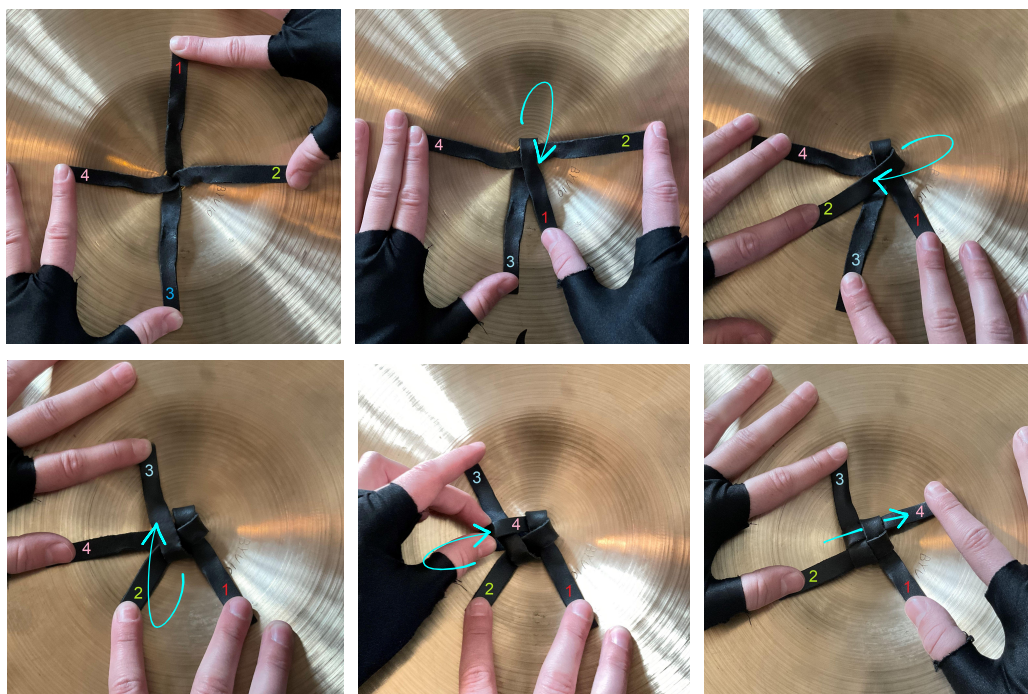
GENERAL

Visuals

Besides adding to the ensemble musically, cymbal players perform a wide variety of unique visuals and movements. Many visuals are adapted from basic motions like flips and musical vocabulary, many others are inspired by movements from dance and colorguard. The best ways to learn new visuals are to ask your instructor or veteran players, and to watch other cymbal players perform - [YouTube](#) and [Seavine](#) are excellent resources for cymbal visuals, and you can slow the videos down to get a better understanding of how the players are moving and manipulating the cymbals. Most visuals take time and practice to master, so don't be discouraged if you can't immediately perform a flashy and complicated visual.

Cymbal Knot

In order to adjust the strap to a comfortable size, you need to understand how the cymbal knot is tied. Below is a step-by-step process for how to tie the knot. It's common for players to put a penny inside the knot to help it sit flat and to keep it from slipping through the cymbal. It's important to keep your straps adjusted properly, or your grip may become unstable, throwing off your technique and potentially leading to severe hand cramps. Be sure to check your straps before and throughout every rehearsal.



Conditioning

Because of the demanding nature of the instrument, it's important to be physically prepared to play cymbals. Upper body exercises such as push ups and tricep dips can greatly increase your strength and allow you to play with better control and endurance. Core and back exercises will also help you strengthen the larger muscles needed to support the weight of the cymbals with proper posture, and you'll reduce the risk of injury or chronic pain in the future. Individuals with weak hands, wrists, and forearms may consider grip strength exercises and wrist curls.

- ❖ Cymbal players use a lot of wrist rotation in their playing, which puts them at risk for developing tennis elbow and other similar injuries. Preventative care is always preferable to injury recovery, so be sure to condition your body both before and throughout the season. If you feel sharp or unusual pain - especially in the forearms - put the cymbals down and inform your instructor immediately; they will make sure you receive appropriate care and accommodations.

Stretching

Along with conditioning, stretching is an essential part of playing cymbals. It prepares your muscles for stress and allows for more comfortable and relaxed playing. Stretching also helps reduce soreness after strain (along with getting plenty of water and electrolytes). The best stretches for cymbals are hand, wrist, shoulder, and back stretches. Stretching should be done both before and after rehearsals and performances, and can be accompanied by breathing or meditation exercises. It should never cause pain; you should feel relaxed and energized during and after stretching. Try to focus on slow stretches that gradually relax your muscles rather than explosive or bouncy stretches, which may cause stress rather than preventing it.

Attitude

The most important thing to remember when playing cymbals - whether you are a new player or a veteran - is that learning takes time. Be patient with yourself both physically and mentally. Push your limits, but remember to take care of yourself and trust the process. If you are struggling, reach out to your instructors and work with them to find the best solution for you.

Cymbal Warmups

Liv Spencer-Rose

Flip Breakdown ♩ = 80-100

3 count

move "Tsss" - flat t move tsss - port t"... move flat move set move "Tsss" -

1. 2.

move port move set move set move "Tsss" -

2 count

flat -t move tsss - port t"... move flat move set move

1. 2.

port move set move set

1 count

flat "Hit!" port "Hit!"... flat set port set

Ladders ♩ = 80-100

2 count

R Stomach L Chest R Eyes L Down Down

1 count

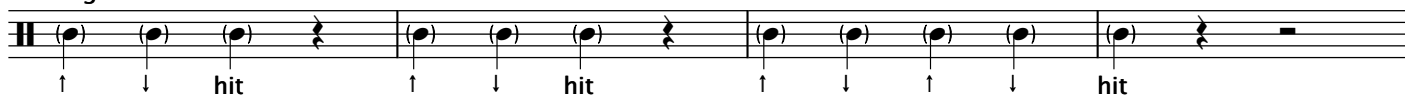
R Stomach L Chest R Eyes L Down Down

speed

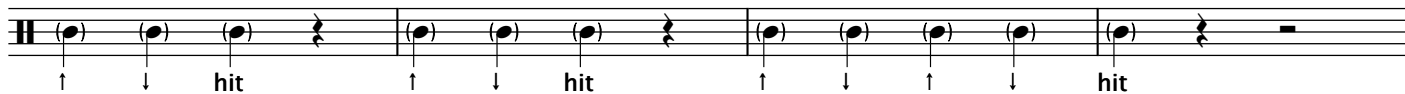
R Stomach L Chest R Eyes L Down Down

Wads ♩ = 110-140

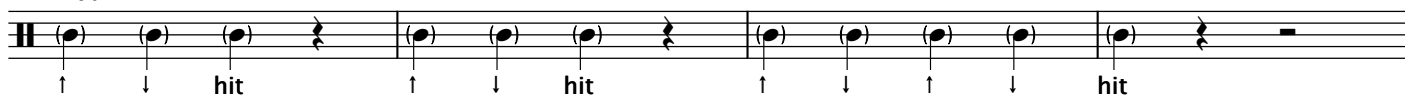
Right



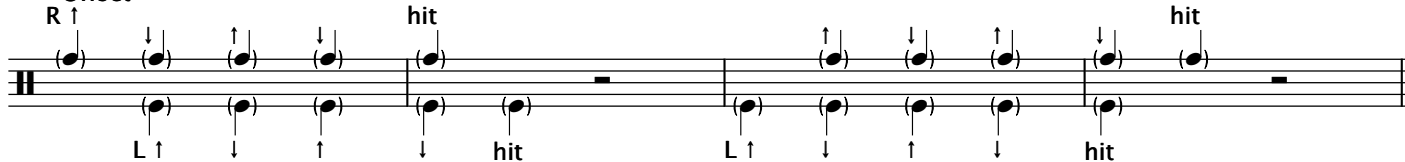
Left



Both



Offset


Off-Hand Swings ♩ = 110-140

tapoff



Right



Crash Breakdown ♩ = 100-130

4 count

Prep Contact Crash In

P CT CR In

2 count

P CT CR In

full crash

P CR In Down

Crash-Choke Breakdown ♩ = 100-130

4 count

Prep Contact Crash Choke

P CT CR CH

2 count

P CT CR CH

full crash-choke

P CH Pop Down

Tap-Choke Breakdown

♩ = 100-130

4 count

Prep Tap Choke Pop P T CH Pop

2 count

P T CH Pop P T CH Pop

full crash-choke

P T.CH Pop P T.CH Down

Port Crash Breakdown

♩ = 100-130

4 count

A V (offset) Contact Crash A V (even) In

2 count

A V (offset) CT CR (A) V (even) In

1.

2.

full port crash

A V CR (A) V In A V CR (A) V In Down

Sizz Breakdown

♩ = 100-130

4 count

sizz - off (suck)... (press)... sizz - off

2 count

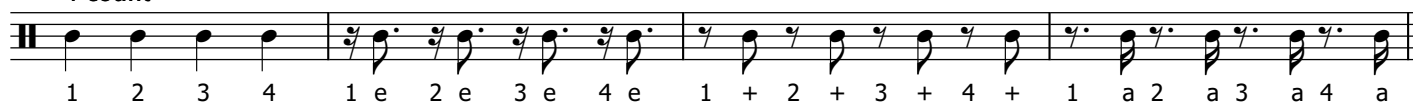
sizz - off sizz - off

1 count

sizz - off sizz - off sizz - off sizz - off Down

Gamut (8th Note Grid) ♩ = 120-150*(click, hi-hat, smash, tap/choke, crash/choke)***16th Note Grid** ♩ = 100-120*(click, hi-hat, smash)*

4 count



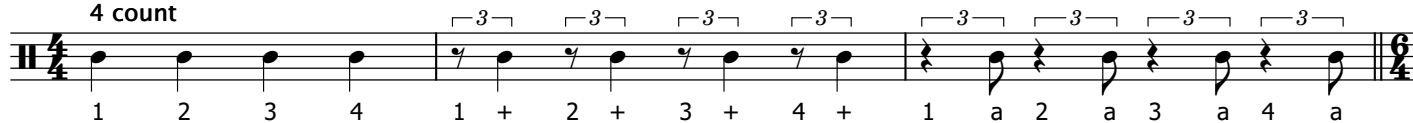
2 count



1 count

**Triplet Grid** ♩ = 100-120*(click, hi-hat, smash)*

4 count



2 count



1 count



Horizon Plate Warmups

to be played with full battery

Liv Spencer-Rose

8-8-16 (Implement Breakdowns) ♩ = 115

Flip up on count 7 of tapoff

Crash Breakdown

Musical notation for Crash Breakdown in 4/4 time. The notation consists of four measures, each containing a pair of eighth notes. The notes are: P (Pedal), CT (Crash), CR (Crash), and In (In). The notes are marked with an accent (>) and a slur. The notation is as follows: P CT CR In | P CT CR In | P CR In | P CR In.

Crash-Choke Breakdown

Musical notation for Crash-Choke Breakdown in 4/4 time. The notation consists of four measures, each containing a pair of eighth notes. The notes are: P (Pedal), CT (Crash), CR (Crash), CH (Choke), and Pop (Pop). The notes are marked with an accent (>) and a slur. The notation is as follows: P CT CR CH Pop | P CT CR CH Pop | P CH Pop | P CH Pop.

Tap-Choke Breakdown

Musical notation for Tap-Choke Breakdown in 4/4 time. The notation consists of four measures, each containing a pair of eighth notes. The notes are: P (Pedal), T (Tap), CH (Choke), and Pop (Pop). The notes are marked with an accent (>) and a slur. The notation is as follows: P T CH Pop | P T CH Pop | P T.CH Pop | P T.CH Pop.

Port Crash Breakdown

Musical notation for Port Crash Breakdown in 4/4 time. The notation consists of four measures, each containing a pair of eighth notes. The notes are: A (Anchor), V (Vibrato), CT (Crash), CR (Crash), V (Vibrato), and In (In). The notes are marked with an accent (>) and a slur. The notation is as follows: A V CT CR V In | A V CR V In | A V CR V In | A V CH Down.

Stick Control (16th Grid, Groove) ♩ = 120

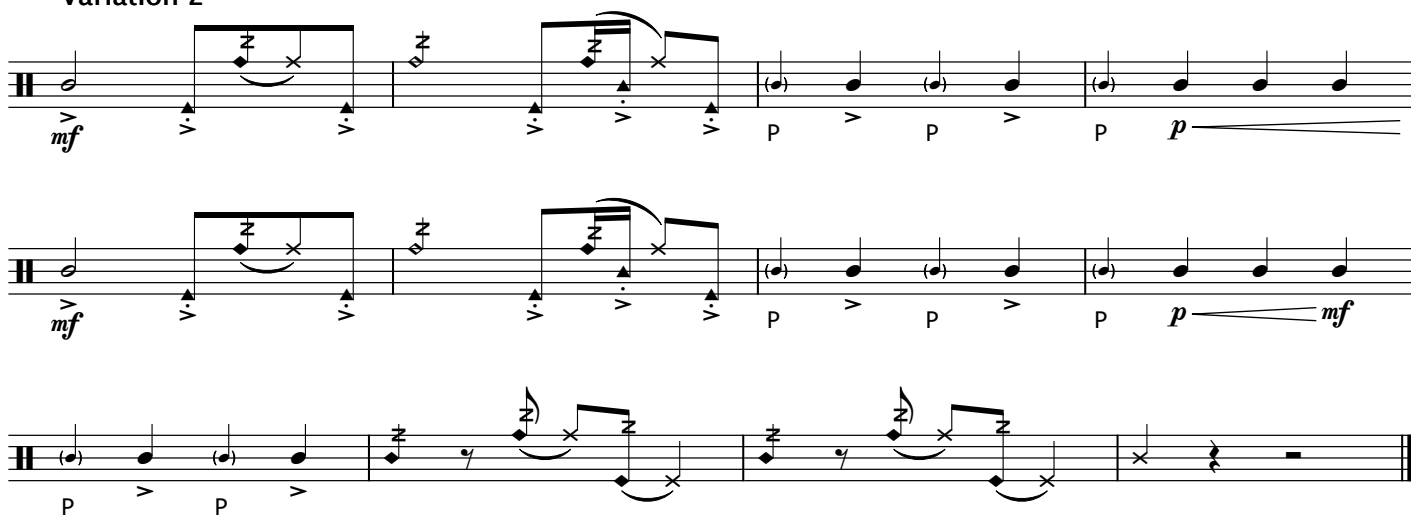
Pop up on count 7 of tapoff

Variation 1 (hi-hat/sizz)



Flip up to prep on count 7 of tapoff

Variation 2



DBL (Sound Cycle, Inserts) ♩ = 160

Flip up to prep on count 7 of tapoff

Rep 1 – Flat
Rep 2 – Port

CR (flat) (port) P (orch) (V) CR (orch) (port) P (tap) T Skank (open) P (zing)

Zing! P (gong) Gong Flat Sizz Smash P (A) (V)

CH (flat) (port) P (orch) (V) CH (orch) (port) P (tap) T.CH Skank P (zing)

Zing! P (gong) Gong Flat Sizz Smash Sizz

Show insert (TBD)

Show insert (TBD)

Spanks insert

Spanks insert

Tag concert crashes

(basses) (A) (V) Tag concert crashes Down

Skibidi Rolls (Sight Ripples, Triplet Splits) ♩ = 170

Variation 1: Up the line (buzz)

Set to Flat Flat to Port Port to Flat

Flat to Set Set to Port Port to Set

Variation 2: Down the line (diddle)

Set to Flat Flat to Port Port to Flat

Flat to Set Set to Port Port to Set

Pop up on count 7 of tapoff

Variation 3: Quarter triplets (tap rolls)

3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop

3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop

Pop up on count 7 of tapoff

Variation 4: 8th triplets (dynamics)

3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop

3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop

Variation 5: Groove (tap 5s)

3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop

3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop 3 P pop