Bring On The Sleigh Bells

by Mark Shelton

It's that time! Percussionists with symphony orchestras, concert bands, jazz ensembles, and worship teams are shaking the dust (or snow) off their sleigh bells as they prepare to jingle their way through Leroy Anderson's "Sleigh Ride" or to add some holiday shimmer to a traditional Christmas carol. My quick tutorial will help you bring the same skill and musicianship to the sleigh bells as you do when playing congas, timpani, or xylophone.

Go Big Or Get Outta The Sleigh

The first step to sleigh bells greatness is investing in a quality instrument. A few bells attached to a strap will not cut through an orchestra or punch through a rockin' praise band. Get the real-deal set of sleigh bells designed as an actual volume-pumpin' piece of percussion gear. This type of instrument allows the performer to execute rhythmic figures in tempo--with a fairly precise attack. I recommend a model with at least two dozen one inch steel or brass "pellet bells" (also known as crotals). The bells are mounted on an oblong wooden block with a handle extending from one end. With this set-up, you can hold your own when the horn section kicks in.

Jingle Two Ways

There are a variety of techniques for producing sounds on the sleigh bells. Most general playing can be accomplished using either the standard method or the shaker method.

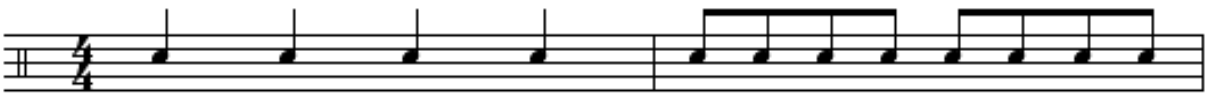
For the standard method, hold the sleigh bells by the handle so that the bells are below the handle. The instrument should be perpendicular to the floor. Sometimes I angle the instrument at around 45 degrees. Use either the palm of the free hand or the side of the closed fist to strike the top of the handle. This will cause the pellet in each crotal to produce a single sound. The sounds of all the bells may not be simultaneous, but the somewhat imprecise attacks are a part of the characteristic sleigh bells timbre.



There can be a bit of delay between the initial handle strike and the pellet making contact with the inside of the crotal. You may need to strike the handle a bit early to make up for the lag time and avoid dragging the tempo.
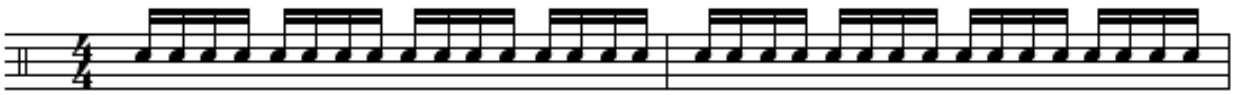
Rhythmic figures such as those in Example #1 can be easily performed with the standard method.

Example #1



To play rhythms such as those in Example #2, choose the shaker method. Simply hold the sleigh bells parallel to the floor and use an out-in motion similar to playing a shaker.

Example #2





Along with learning these rhythmic techniques, you will want to have a roll in your sleigh bells arsenal. An easy shaking of the instrument is all that is necessary to produce a

sustained sound. Develop control of the roll so that you can move from a rhythmic passage into a roll or vice versa. Practicing the exercise below can help develop this skill.

Example #3



No Needless Jangling

Preventing extraneous sound from the sleigh bells can be a challenge. A slight jiggle can set those little pellets into motion and cause unwanted noise--along with a glare from the conductor. Moving from another instrument to a sleigh bells entrance with little time for the changeover can increase the risk of unintended racket.

• Practice moving the sleigh bells in silence. The crotals will tolerate a bit of motion before producing significant sound. Get a feel for that tolerance.

• A padded trap table will assist you in moving the sleigh bells quietly.

• Leaning the instrument against a foam rubber pad on the trap table will place the pellets toward the bottom of the crotals. This decreases the amount of movement of the pellets as you pick up the instrument.

• Drill a hole in the handle, thread a cord through the hole, and suspend the sleigh bells from a boom cymbal stand or an overhead rack. This upright position keeps the pellets on the bottom of the crotals so that there are no concerns about “pick ups” or “put downs” involving the trap table.

• The instrument can also be adapted to remain in an upright position on a trap table by removing the single crotal on the end of the block and screwing a drink coaster into the vacant spot. This “coaster base” allows the instrument to stand vertically--awaiting a silent hoist into playing position.

What to Ring

Composers and arrangers often notate the sleigh bells part, but when there is no chart and the music director wants some jingle on the bridge of the tune, be prepared with the standard frosty licks. A single strike on all the eighths in uptempo music is the typical go-to rhythm. Plain ol' downbeats come in at a close second. Simplicity usually rules with the sleigh bells.

Be careful about sleigh bells overload. Consider saving the sparkle until the LAST verse of "Joy To The World."

A Year-round Sound

The sleigh bells need not be confined to the last month of the year. You might raise a few eyebrows when this instrument makes an appearance in July, but the bright timbre can deliver a ringing "ethno-rock" vibe to the mix from January through November. The tone combines aspects of both tambourine and shaker that can bring a sonic sheen to contemporary worship songs as well as traditional Christmas music.

Listen to the last couple of minutes of "Please" by Something Like Silas for an effective use of the sleigh bells.

Jesus Culture's cover of "Oh Lord, You're Beautiful" provides a shimmering example of the sleigh bells as a purely coloristic element.

You can catch me demonstrating the sleigh bells in a video tutorial on Worship Training.

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