




Open-Handed Playing

Part 1: Unlocking the Hidden Potential

by Claus Hessler

MODERNDRUMMER
DIGITALLY ENHANCED

MUSIC KEY

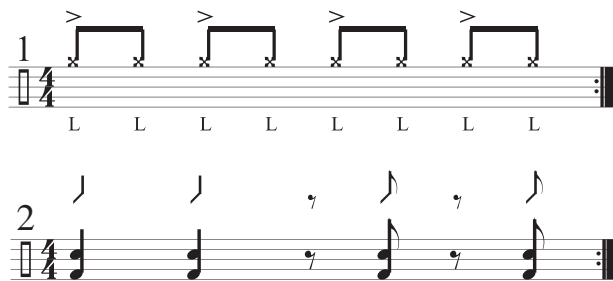
H.H. 
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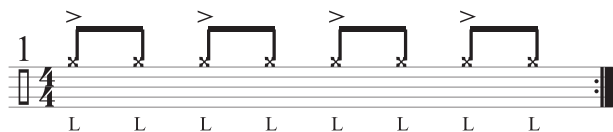
One of the biggest advantages to playing open-handed is that you no longer have to deal with the obstructed movement of crossing your hands to play the hi-hat and snare. Of course, there are ways to arrange your playing in order to avoid these negative effects, but there's no doubt that crossing the hands limits the ability to execute certain combinations of movements. In this article we're going to take a look at some of the advantages of the open-handed position when playing a basic groove.

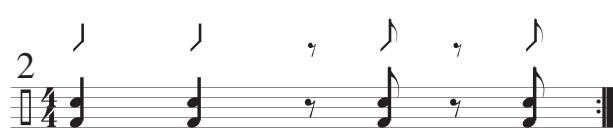
Basic Unisons

One very important skill for every drummer is the ability to play certain instruments of the kit at exactly the same time, so we'll begin there, focusing on unison rhythms between the snare and bass drum. When playing with the hands crossed, it's much more difficult to get the kick and snare to land together precisely, since you have to align rhythms between opposite sides of the body (left hand on the snare, right foot on the bass drum). In an open-handed position, the right hand (on the snare) and the right foot play together, which will usually feel a lot easier. Check out the following exercise.

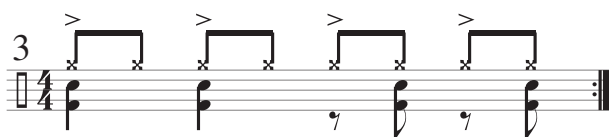
Example 1 is a simple 8th-note ostinato (repeated pattern) played on the hi-hat with the left hand. Example 2 is a rhythm to be played on the kick and snare—no flams!

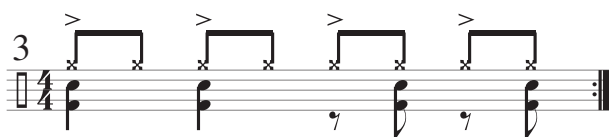


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Melding both patterns into one phrase will look like this:



3 

Although it's a simple pattern, if you were to play it using crossed hands, you would run into some serious challenges, because there's not enough room for both hands to move together comfortably, especially in the second half of the

measure. The open-handed position removes that obstacle. Here are three more snare/kick patterns to try against the 8th-note hi-hat ostinato.



4 

5 

6 

Now play the following eight bars in the same manner, with the snare and bass drum phrasing the rhythms exactly together against the hi-hat ostinato.



7 

As you're practicing these examples, start slowly, make sure to accent the quarter-note pulse on the hi-hat, and pay close attention to the quality of the sound on each instrument. The goals are to avoid flams and to achieve a consistent volume level for all kick and snare notes.

Once you've mastered the examples as notated, try moving the snare part to the toms or other sound sources. You can also practice the figures with shuffled 8th notes, and you can replace the hi-hat ostinato with any repeated pattern. Use different reading texts or improvise new snare and kick parts against whichever hi-hat pattern you use.

Separating the Kick and Snare

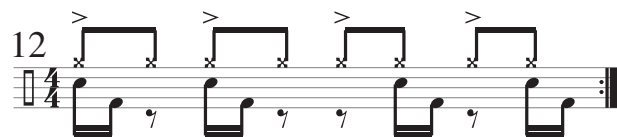
Now let's look at some variations of the preliminary exercises in which the bass drum is played one 16th note after the snare. The basic rhythms above the staff are the same as before, but the interpretation changes.



8 



Combining our basic 8th-note hi-hat pattern with Example 8 results in the following. Do the same thing with the remaining examples.



You can also practice Examples 8–11 using shuffled 16th notes, and you can switch the position of the bass drum and snare so that the snare plays the second 16th note. After you've mastered those variations, try moving the snare notes to toms, cowbells, or any other sounds on your kit. This will create nice fills and interactive-sounding grooves, all of which will be much more comfortable to play in an open-handed position than with the hands crossed.

One last suggestion: Playing open-handed is usually more comfortable when you lower your hi-hat to be almost level with your snare. This helps you avoid strange positions of the arms and shoulders. You want your arms, shoulders, and elbows to be as relaxed as possible.

I've created a play-along track for you to practice with in order to apply some of these open-handed ideas in a musical situation. You can check out the chart and an MP3 on the Education page at moderndrummer.com or in the *Modern Drummer* Digital Edition. Have fun, and enjoy the journey!



Claus Hessler, who is based in Germany, is an in-demand drummer in Europe. His book, *Open-Handed Playing Vol. 1*, is available through Alfred Publishing. For more info, visit claushessler.de.



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