Playing Area

There are numerous approaches to what is an ideal playing area, all of which should be determined by the desired timbre. On the one hand, a drum set player playing multiple bounce rolls in a New Orleans second-line groove, may play with the stick tips 8-10" apart nearer the edge of the head, with looser snare tension. On the other hand, a symphonic player may choose to play a multiple bounce roll with the stick tips one-half inch apart, for the consistency of sound produced from such proximity. Further, many symphonic players play directly over the snares for maximum snare response while others play 90 degrees away from the snares for a more resonant sound. All of these are all useful sounds and you should be aware of the character of each position and know when each is appropriate.

As a basic approach to snare technique, I teach a student to play directly over the snares, which produces maximum snare response, especially at softer dynamics. I have beginning and intermediate students play all dynamics in one playing area – halfway between the center and the edge. Once this is mastered, we begin to explore different playing areas for different dynamics and timbres. Unfortunately, various playing areas are often introduced too early, preventing the student from fully developing their dynamics via stroke height and velocity.

Generally, many orchestral percussionists prefer the tone quality generated from playing several inches off center - usually about halfway between the center and the edge. For many percussionists, playing area is primarily determined by dynamics - closer to the center for louder and closer to the edge for softer. In addition, the relative timbres of the different playing spots should be considered: nearer the center produces a fuller timbre (more fundamental pitch and fewer overtones) and nearer the edge produces a thinner timbre (less fundamental pitch and more overtones. The center of the head creates a dark, thick, closed sound. It does not produce the most resonant tone (because it is a nodal point) and produces poor rebound response. For example, the most musical choice in a given situation may be to play pianissimo with a very full timbre - which is opposite the typical approach.

When using rough coated batter heads in orchestral situations, it is beneficial to lightly sand the playing area to reduce the abrasion caused by the drumhead coating on the stick tips.