

About Basic Sagat (Zill) Patterns for Middle Eastern Dance-- The Big Ideas

by NICOLA, updated February 2010

Called *sagat* in Arabic and *zill* in Turkish--terms used interchangeably by dancers in North America-- the finger cymbals are a staple of every serious dancer's repertoire. Cymbals are actually small, open bells worn on the thumb and middle finger of each hand (4 total). They serve the purposes of exciting the audience, accompanying the band or music, and drawing attention to elements of the music or your movements. They can be challenging for some to learn, and should be practiced a little bit daily to acquire the muscle memory needed to play them effortlessly and well. The idea behind daily practice is that you normalize the feel, technique, and sound, so both your brain and body accept the cymbals as part of your every day life.

First, don't waste your money on what look like cymbals. So-called "student" cymbals and ones made in India are not typically suited for belly dance. They will either be an inferior product that results in an unpleasant sound, or, will not be balanced and constructed to sit on the fingers well. Look for cymbals that have 2 slots, not 1 hole, to hold the flat (not round) elastic. **Saroyan** and **Turquoise** make the best zills available on the Internet. Expect to pay \$25 and up for a good pair, but remember, you are buying a musical instrument. Buy name-brand zills once, and you won't have to ever buy them again.

Second, learn the most basic, *longa* patterns well before you try to work on harder ones, or before you attempt to dance and play them in a performance setting. (The *longa* patterns are those typically taught with the Jamila Salimpour method, which is what most North American dancers have been taught and are in turn teaching.) There's nothing worse than watching a dancer who can't play the cymbals. It's painful for everyone, especially you.

Third, remember that it doesn't really matter if you start on the right or left hand. Typically, patterns start on the right. Just remember that your starting hand is odd numbers and your following hand is the even.

1.) Doubles or Runs: Play 1212121212... continuously with no break. Used for spins, entrances, and finales with fast rhythms like *malruf* or *maksoum*. This can be played also with one cymbal striking inside the other.

2.) Threes, Triplets, or Gallop: 123, 123, 123, 123... Three strikes in a row with a small break in between the sets. Used most commonly. Alternately, you can play the 3 strikes with the 2 major sounds, ring and clack/clap, so that it sounds like RRR CCC RRR CCC. Technically, these are not true musical triplets, but are the equivalent of 3 sixteenth notes followed by a rest. Some dancers will also say that the true gallop is played as rightrightleft rightrightleft rightrightleft rightrightleft. Using Roula Said's method, this is "I love shoes".

3.) Sevens: 1234567, 1234567. Again, like 3's, you are playing over an even count rhythm, so you need the break between sets to complete the measure. Two sets to a count of 4 beats. Roula Said's method= "I love really slutty shoes." (or comfy, shiny, studded, etc.)

4.) Beledi/Baladi: There are a few versions of this. The one I learned first and play is 123, 1, 123, 1, 123 over and over (**3-1-3-1-3**). This is the more standard and common one. Another version I know is 1,1, 123, 1, 123. I was told recently that this is not actually the *baladi* pattern, but you can try it out anyway. The hard part is returning to the start hand over and over without switching. Works

wonderfully with any 4 count rhythm. Make sure you rest between sets so that you are not fighting the beat. Using Roula's method you are chanting, "I love shoes, yes, I love shoes, yes, I love shoes."

The truer forms of *baladi* on cymbals is either RR CCC R CCC CC or CC RRR C RRR RR. (R=ring, C=clack). Roula Said argues that the former is better, as the ring mimics the open tone of *dum* on the drum.

5.) Fives + 3's: 12345, 12345, 123; 12345, 12345, 123... an uncommon combination. Not for everyone. Not my favourite. More typical to play **3-5-1-3** or **3-1-3-5**. Using Roula's method, 5's are "I love shiny (slutty, etc.) shoes".

6.) Combining Threes, Fives and Sevens to make sets: 123, 1234567, 123; OR 123, 12345, 12345; OR 1234567, 123, 123 etc. Make sure they fit the measure, and finish a set before you change to a different combination. **3-3-7**, **3-7-3**, and **3-5-5** are the most common.

7.) Fours--play 1234, 1234, 1234 very quickly so that you get all 4 in ONE beat of the music. This is an ADVANCED pattern. May be combined with 1, 3, 5 strikes to make very complex patterns., e.g. 1234, 12345, 1, 1234 (**4-5-1-4**). Typically the 4's are swapped for 3's.

Video recommendations:

-**Hadia's** Volume 3 of her original video series, where she explains how to dance to the basic rhythms. She plays the zills throughout, and while she does not spend much time breaking down the patterns on the cymbals, you are provided with close-ups and repetition.

-I have heard good things about Mesmera's and Ansuya's instructional videos for zills (I am not a fan of their dancing) but can't recommend them myself. Aziza is a great player,

-as is **Cassandra Shore**--her performance videos demonstrate how to do it well, when to stop, and when to begin again, how to accent the music with the zills.

-**Momo Kaddous** also has an instructional DVD. He plays and teaches the cymbal techniques as a drummer or native Egyptian would play it.

-The dancer's own websites or **Dahlal Internationale** at <www.dahlal.com> are sources for ordering. Remember to take note of style of dance for the dancer--don't buy an American Tribal video if you want to dance Orientale, or vice versa.

Music for practice:

I have heard a number of dancers recommend Gypsy Caravan CDs for practice. Sirocco's "Country Dance" from Sirocco Volume 1 is a great, 16-minute piece with speed and rhythm changes that is great to practice to. Hossam Ramzy's Baladi Plus is a good album as well, as zills are featured in a number of the pieces. Uncle Mafufo's Zills and Drums CD has also been recommended to me. Anything medium tempo, at least 5 minutes long, and very repetitive, will make good practice music, e.g. Hossam Ramzy's "Men El Bourkan" from Source of Fire. The old school, "Amerabic" music by Eddie the Sheik Kochak and George Abdo typically have a dancer playing cymbals on the tracks, so you can follow along.