

Hammerax Hybrid Instruments

>> Funny Names... Unique Sounds

by Rick Van Horn

Hammerax pieces are as much sculpture as they are musical instruments.

KEY NOTES

- Totally original looks and sounds
- Each instrument is hand-made and unique
- High-quality components maximize durability
- Dustbowl tends to slide on top of cymbals

On rare occasions, a new percussion instrument comes along that's just too cool for words. For an entire *line* of instruments to fit that description is rarer still.

And when we say "too cool for words," we mean it literally, because the standard vocabulary that drummers use to describe cymbal and other metallic percussion sounds just doesn't lend itself to the unique sounds created by Hammerax's "hand-hammered stick-playable hybrid instruments."

Suffice it to say, when the Hammerax instruments sent to *MD* for review arrived, they caused a sensation. Even the non-drumming staff members found them visually and aurally fascinating. That's high praise indeed, considering that these same people are often driven crazy by the testing of other products that goes on in our office.

Hammerax instruments are made of bronze alloys that are cast, rolled, and hammered by hand. Each one is the work of an individual artist, and although there are "models" within the Hammerax line, no two of these models are exactly alike. Most come mounted on a polished wood bar, suspended by what Hammerax calls Spectra cord. They claim that it's ten times stronger than piano wire, yet has a low mass that allows the high frequencies of the various instruments to shimmer.

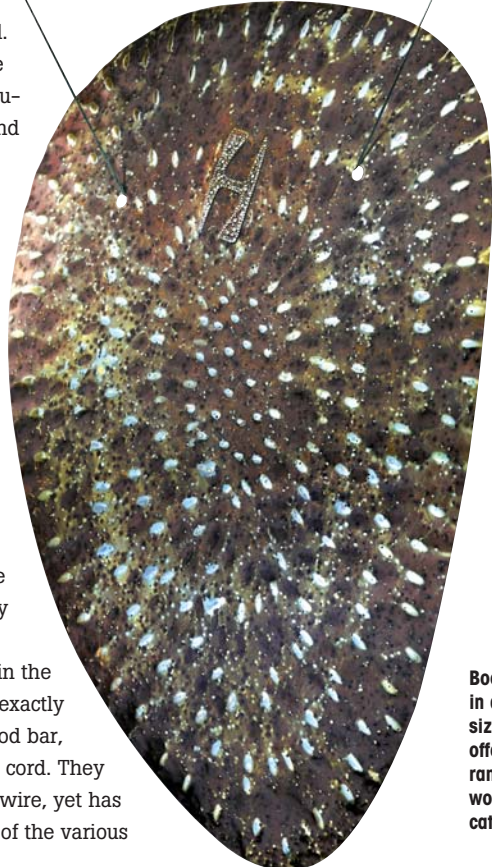
We weren't sent the entire Hammerax line. You'll need to go to the manufacturer's Web site to explore the full range of offerings. What we *were* sent was a large selection of Boomywangs, as well as one Culebra and one Dustbowl. Okay, the names read like Dr. Seuss meets *Star Wars*. But the *sounds*....

Boomywangs

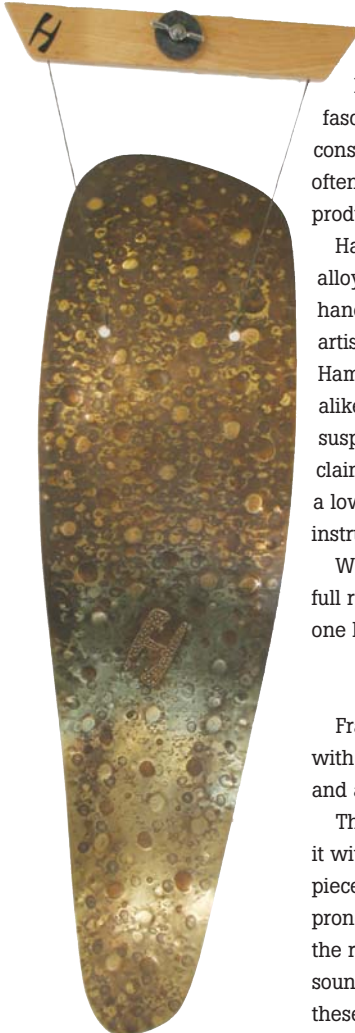
Frankly speaking, the Boomywangs knocked us out. They have a sort of inverted-teardrop/leaf shape, with a natural curve built in. We were sent a selection of Boomywangs that included a wide range of sizes and a couple of variations on the basic theme.

The sound of a Boomywang alters radically depending on how big it is, where you hit it, and what you hit it with. When the larger models were hit in the middle with a fist (or with a large, soft mallet), the whole piece vibrated, producing a deep, sonorous rumble reminiscent of symphonic "thunder sheets"—but with a pronounced and appealing "wobble." When we hit the same piece with a drumstick more toward the edge, the result was a satisfying crash sound that had less vibrato. It also had more wash and a lighter overall sound than that of a traditional crash cymbal. And there were lots of other sonic possibilities in between these two.

The largest Boomywang that we were sent (24" long) had a circular pattern of holes cut out of its center. These reduced the overall mass, interfered with the linear nature of the sound waves, and generally light-



Boomywangs come in a wide variety of sizes, and they offer sounds that range from a deep wobble to a delicate flutter.



The volume and projection of the Culebra rivals that of most Chinas—with its own distinct character.

ened and quickened the response.

On the other side of the coin, a 20" Boomywang came with a TurboCup welded on toward the bottom. The TurboCup is, in essence, a little cup-shaped bell. The tonalities of the TurboCup and the Boomywang worked together to add an unusual vibrato to the bell sound. And, when the wobbly sound of the Boomywang body faded out, the bell kept ringing. In fact, a very cool effect could be achieved by whacking the Boomywang to set it crashing, and then grabbing it quickly to mute its sound, allowing the bell to sustain on its own (which it did for quite a while).

As the Boomywangs got smaller and lighter, their vibrations got faster and their pitches got higher. The 10" and 12" models produced less of a "wobble" and more of a rapid "flutter." In fact, they sounded best not when hit with a stick, but when poked in their middles with a single finger. (But they still handled stick impact just fine, thank you.)

We venture to say that there are few drumset players who couldn't find a use for one or more Boomywangs on their kits. And we can see multi-percussionists using several, in a small-to-large range that would offer literally hundreds of available sounds.

Culebra

A Culebra is a 30"-long, tapering strip that's formed into a compound curve. It can be struck in different places to focus on higher or lower frequencies, but its overall response is to produce vibratos from either end that create a loud, almost "gurgling" sound as they crash into each other.

Hammerax says that Culebras are among their loudest instruments, and they suggest them as alternatives to Chinas or other effects cymbals. The one we played certainly had an explosive sound with lots of projection. Its length made it a little tricky to mount, since it needs to be far enough away from whatever stand it's on that it doesn't bump into that stand when hit. Mounting the Culebra on the end of a long counterweighted cymbal boom arm worked best for us.

Dustbowl

The Dustbowl is the simplest-looking of all Hammerax instruments. Basically, it's a 12" circle, with a bowed contour similar to that of a cymbal. But instead of having a bell at its center, it has a 5" hole.

The Dustbowl's shape lets it do multiple duties. When suspended by its cord, it produces two distinctly different sounds. Hit it directly on the edge of the inside circle, and it sounds like a light bell or pure-toned gong. Hit it on the top surface toward the outside edge, and it responds more like a tam-tam or a China crash cymbal.

The Dustbowl can also be dropped directly atop another cymbal to create an aggressive crasher sound. According to Hammerax, the large hole in the center allows the cymbal bell below to come through for playing short bell sounds, while the body of your main cymbal will also ring with a complex sizzle. They especially recommend the Dustbowl for use on hi-hats, suggesting that the design of the instrument could let it be switched from a hanging position to a crasher quickly and easily enough to be done in mid-song.

Our experiments using the Dustbowl as a crasher produced mixed results. It sounded great, and it could certainly be "installed" quickly. However, the 5" hole was too big to keep the Dustbowl centered on



The Dustbowl can be played suspended for gongy sounds, or placed atop a cymbal or drumhead for a white-noise effect.

the bell of any cymbal we put it on—especially a tilted ride or crash. Even on a flat hi-hat the Dustbowl quickly slipped off to one side as we played. So the ability to use the Dustbowl as a crasher would depend largely on where it ultimately wound up atop the cymbal it was placed on. As long as it didn't impede your playing, it'd provide a very cool effect.

Hammerax also suggests putting a Dustbowl onto a tom or snare, to create an almost electronic sound. In this situation, we found that the large hole proved to be an advantage. When we played a snare drum with the Dustbowl in place, we could easily move between hitting the drumhead itself through the hole (getting a more or less "normal" drum sound) and hitting the Dustbowl for the crashy sound. Instantaneous sonic variation!

Conclusion

Like we said at the beginning, the Hammerax instruments we tested proved to be too cool for words. They're attractive, they're unique, and they provide tonal colors that simply haven't existed before. They're also hand-made, so they're not cheap. But their prices compare favorably with those of professional cymbals, and they offer a unique acoustic palette.

We predict that Hammerax instruments will be the next "gotta have" items showing up on everybody's kits. You might want to get on the bandwagon early.

THE NUMBERS

Boomywangs

10" Paper-Thin	.....	\$74
12" Extra-Thin	.....	\$112
15" Extra-Thin	.....	\$150
18" Extra-Thin	.....	\$178
20" Thin	.....	\$298
20" Thin with TurboCup	.....	\$370
24" Thin with center holes	.....	\$410
Culebra, 30" Medium	.....	\$298
Dustbowl, 12" Medium	.....	\$144

Price list shown is for reviewed items only, and does not reflect the entire Hammerax model range.

www.hammerax.com