

What they are:

Middle Eastern dancers often play hand held percussive instruments called "finger cymbals." They are a very important part of this dance because Middle Eastern dancers are not only dancers but they are musician as well. We do this in a similar manner to flamenco dancers who sometimes play castanets or to tap dancers who use the taps on their shoes to convey variants in the rhythm. Finger cymbals are powerful tools for keeping and feeling the rhythm. Unfortunately, they are less often used in Egypt than in past years. In the United States, you must be able to play zills. You will be judged by your proficiency with them.

Finger cymbals are called different names:

In the United States and Europe they are often called "finger cymbals" or by the Turkish name for them which is "zills." The Arabic word is "sil sil." The Persian expression in Farsi is "salasih." Egyptians call them "sagat."

The origins:

There are ancient origins to finger cymbals. In ancient Egypt, the dancers and musicians sometimes played wooden or ivory clappers that were rectangular or crescent shaped. There are engravings in ancient Mesopotamia of finger cymbals that could have been used in dance, with religious music, for magical purposes or in times of victory. Ancient Greeks played metal finger cymbals, either one held in each hand or two in each hand. In Turkey, as early as the the 15th century, dancers were playing metal finger cymbals or wooden clappers. Today, people play metal finger cymbals and sometimes wooden spoons called kasiklar (pronounced kashik lar).

Popularity of finger cymbal playing:

Finger cymbal playing is falling out of fashion in Egypt. Dancers may play them for one song but they will not play them throughout their entire show. The Egyptian dancers regard finger cymbals as "provincial." They have large orchestras in the good cabarets and there are percussionists who play the finger cymbals for the dancers. This is unfortunate because the art of finger cymbal playing has a long and respected history. There are numerous drawings and photographs of dancers in Egypt and Turkey playing finger cymbals. It is interesting to note that sometimes in these illustrations, they play them attached to the index finger and the thumb rather than the middle finger and the thumb.

Dancers in Turkey typically play very good finger cymbals. This is changing now due to their imitation of what they think of as Egyptian style dance. In the United States most of the dancers play finger cymbals. They recognize that they are an important and empowering component of our dance. Middle Eastern dancers are unique from many other dance forms because we are musicians at the same time that we are dancers. We are percussionists and should play our finger cymbals like the musical instruments that they are. The American tribal dancers are insisting that their students play finger cymbals. This is encouraging because this art is in danger of disappearing. I was quite shocked to see that at the wonderful International Conference on Middle Eastern Dance, there were three evenings of concerts and only two dancers played finger cymbals out of all three evenings.

Up until very recently, dancers were judged by their ability to play finger cymbals. If a dancer danced well but could not play her finger cymbals, she was regarded as someone who "did not pay her dues" or as someone who was "cheating." We all know that it is difficult to learn to play finger cymbals. The longer you wait to learn to play them, the more difficult it is. I have found that if you wait to teach finger cymbals until the students have danced for many months, they will be resentful of the finger cymbals. They will think that the dance is easier than it is and will be annoyed at the new "complication."

The attitude of the teacher will be passed on to the students. If you regard finger cymbals as a "necessary evil" your students will dislike them before they even try. I tell my students "You have a unique opportunity to learn two art forms. You will be dancers and musicians at the same time. If you dislike them it will be more difficult for you to learn. You do not have to like them but you have to play them. You have to become at least 'adequate' and if you dislike them, the best you can hope for is to become 'adequate.' It is better to 'make friends' with

them. If you like them, you can become 'good' players. If you love them, you can become a 'great' player. It takes years to be a really good cymbal player but eventually, you can accomplish this. It is very liberating to get to the point where you no longer think about them but they are a natural component of your dance. I feel 'naked' dancing without them."