

Title: Belly Dance with Zils  
Instructor: Elsa Leandros & Raquy Danziger  
Level: Beginner to Intermediate Belly dancers

I started learning to play the finger cymbals after I'd been dancing for about a year. I can remember being so frustrated that these tiny musical instruments were so challenging (yet I was determined to learn them as they were so beautiful and such an integral part of Middle Eastern dance). This would have been a great DVD to have back then, as Elsa does a great job of presenting the information so that zil novices can not only understand how to play but can also be comfortable while doing so. She works at speeds that are reasonable and easy to follow, presenting information so that those new to zils are not overwhelmed. This DVD is great for those who've never played zils before and for those dancers familiar with doumbek rhythms who would like to learn some new patterns that will complement, but not mimic, the doumbek's sound.

Here's what you'll find on this DVD:

“Bellydance Rhythms: Zils and Doumbek:” The DVD begins with drummers Raquy Danziger and Brian Carter joining Elsa for a brief introduction to Middle Eastern rhythms. Together, they offer a very educational mini-class on the differences between the various rhythms and the way they are played on doumbek as opposed to zils. For those of us who are used to playing the doumbek rhythm of dums and teks on our zils, this is a great opportunity to understand new ways to play the patterns.

“Tips and Technique:” When a dancer first slips zils onto her (or his!) fingers, they can feel unwieldy and alien. We are taught to move our hands with grace and ease, but the addition of these instruments can quickly lead to frustration as a dancer must now learn to hold them and wear them properly. In the “tips and technique” section of the DVD, Elsa shares some wonderful secrets that will make the addition of zils far less daunting. For the novice dancer, this section is invaluable as Elsa covers everything from how to wear the zils and what type of elastic to use to the different sizes and materials of zils. For finger cymbal veterans, this serves as an excellent refresher course and will definitely have a few new ideas, too. She also explains her technique and philosophy, offering an bit of a different perspective on how to play the finger cymbals. This was a nice addition, as it really helps viewers who are familiar with zils (but new to the idea of switching hands and alternating instead of using a leading hand) to understand the method to the various patterns featured later on the DVD.

**Rhythm Sections:**

After the Tips and Technique section, the DVD moves on to the instructional portion where viewers will learn how to play a variety of Middle Eastern rhythms using finger cymbals. A total of seven rhythms are covered with variations on many of these standard favorites; patterns to accompany Baladi, Maksoum, Saidi, Ciftitelli Masmoudi, Rumba, and Karsilama are offered.

Elsa first describes the rhythm and often explains a bit about its history and/or use in Middle Eastern music. The rhythm is then broken down according to counts (Baladi Triples, for example, are described as the familiar: 123 123 123) and Elsa demonstrates it very slowly. Viewers have the opportunity to practice along with her, following first to numbers that appear on the screen and then just with her playing. There's plenty of time to play, too – Elsa doesn't simply demonstrate and then move on. During each rhythm there is between 2 and 4 minutes of just slow, steady playing to use as practice time. This provides an excellent opportunity to focus just on getting used to the rhythm.

During the various pattern sections Elsa provides several short zil drills. For nearly every rhythm Elsa demonstrates a section for “arms and hands,” simple yet elegant arm movements that can be used with the zil pattern. For those dancers new to finger cymbals, this is an invaluable time to slowly practice the rhythm while integrating movement. It is critical for dancers to not simply sit and play – one must \*move\* while practicing in order to prepare for dancing while playing and this section will certainly provide both those new to zils and the veterans with drills to accomplish this goal.

There are also demonstrations of “basic steps” for many of the included rhythms. These are meant to simply give viewers an idea of some (of the many) movements that might be performed with the rhythms – the real focus, of course, is on playing the zils and learning the various patterns. The steps are not broken down in too much detail, allowing viewers to focus on the zils and not worry, necessarily, about what is going on with the movement. However, the explanations are clear enough for the viewer to understand each suggestion.

After presenting viewers with the opportunity to practice the patterns with music and then to slowly layer in arms and basic movements, Elsa ups the ante with a series of combinations. The inclusion of the combinations benefits intermediate dancers who, up until this point, may have found the DVD a bit easy. The combinations utilize steps that are a bit more difficult, such as Soheir Zaki drops and traveling hip bumps and pushes with interesting body angles and layers. For each rhythm there are usually at least 2 combinations to try.

“Practice with Music:” Are you ready to just jam with the music? Also included on the DVD is a section of music for each rhythm. From Baladi to Karshima, Elsa has carefully selected a song that viewers can play along with while viewing the pattern (and the accompanying counts for it) on the screen. Nice touches include the inclusion of the title, artist, and album of each song as well as a website vendor for each. A great surprise in this section was the addition of a drum solo by Raquy and Brian Carter which, of course, viewers can play along with or just simply enjoy.

There are also several performances on the DVD. In the first, Elsa dances to an “Arabic mix;” a standard recorded music track. Her zil playing is superb – she really uses the finger cymbals as instruments and it was wonderful to see a dancer perform like that. Listening to her use of zils to interpret and enhance the music will certainly inspire

novices and pros alike! The second performance is a lively drum solo with accompaniment by Raquay and Brian. While some may teach that zils should not be played during a drum solo, Elsa does a wonderful job of showing viewers how wonderful the addition of zils at the right time, working along with the drummers, can make a drum solo even more entertaining.

What worked for me:

- I really liked Elsa's technique of switching hands and playing the zils in a different manner to a drummer's interpretation of rhythms on a doumbek. The introduction where Raquay played the rhythm on the doumbek, and then Elsa contrasted it with the same rhythm on the zils, was wonderful to see. I found it challenging at first to switch and play in her style, but it was a refreshingly new way to play and a nice style to add to my repertoire.
- Elsa jumps right in to help students become comfortable moving while playing zils. It was wonderful to see the inclusion of different moves for each pattern. While she recommends students first familiarize themselves with just playing, Elsa spends a great deal of time demonstrating how students can work their way up from playing, to playing while moving just the arms, and then incorporating a full repertoire of movements while zilling.
- The practice with music section was great – I loved being able to play along while having the pattern on the screen in case I forgot where I was with it!
- I have to say I was really, really impressed with Elsa's performance. Regardless of whether or not you like her style of dancing, her zil playing is absolutely superb. Not only can she play incredibly fast and complicated rhythms cleanly but she actually uses the finger cymbals as instruments and plays to compliment and interpret the music as opposed to simply playing along or repeating a memorized rhythm.
- This DVD was a FABULOUS production! The overall look of the DVD's menus was just beautiful. WDNY has added lovely transitions from the main menu to the various sections, too.

What might not work for you:

- Elsa's style of playing without a leading hand might take a bit of time to get used to. If you're just starting with the zils, however, you should be able to pick it up fairly quickly. If you're used to always beginning with a certain hand this might not work for you.
- This is not a "rhythm" type video, exactly – while Middle Eastern rhythms are indeed covered on the DVD they are not broken down into great deal. There is no in-depth explanation, here, of "dums" and "teks" beyond a very basic introduction. It is intended for dancers who are going to play zils while dancing who may not need to know the drum pattern breakdown or want to play a contrasting pattern to that which is being played upon the drum. The rhythms on the zils are explained in terms of counts so if you're looking for a video that describes rhythms in more detail you may need to look elsewhere.

- The steps used in the combinations assume a familiarity with basic belly dance movements. Elsa does not always go into a great amount of detail with these steps, too, although they are clearly demonstrated.