

Percussion for the Non-Percussionist Band Director

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This article is intended as a helpful pedagogical tool for the general improvement of percussion education and percussion sections, primarily those at the middle-school and secondary-school. It is based on the premise that non-percussionist band directors will have taken a class in percussion pedagogy. As directors, we all know that a great percussion section is an enhancement to the overall sound of the band. Unfortunately, the converse is true as well. A poor percussion section is at best limiting, and at worst a severe distraction from the overall ensemble. This article will first discuss a few philosophical points concerning percussion education, and then speak directly to some everyday issues that percussionists face.

What follows are a few basic facts that may provide some insight into the nature of the issues faced by percussionists.

1. Unless they are in a marching band, percussionists are constantly playing solos. Most wind players become very nervous when they see the word “solo” above their part in band, particularly in the middle years and high school. For percussionists, it is a matter of course.

2. Percussionists are not in direct contact with their instruments. With the exception of hand drums (i.e. congas, etc.), percussionists do not directly touch their instrument, nor do they hold it. Their sense of touch and feel must come through the medium of the stick or mallet. This is akin to a clarinetist blowing into a device which then blows into the clarinet! Percussionists must possess great kinesthetic awareness, or awareness of their body position in space, particularly if there are multiple playing surfaces involved, such as on the timpani, keyboards, or even multiple tom-toms. A corollary to this particular point is that since there is physical motion over a large area occurring for a percussion entrance, in the preparation and execution of the stroke, cues from the conductor must be timely and perhaps even

better prepared than those given to winds.

3. There is a great deal of forethought that must be given to effective percussion playing, mostly in the nature of the set-up. There is no such thing as “show up and play” for the percussion section. Even if there is a basic set-up present in the band room, the students will need to modify it according to the specific work being rehearsed, and their particular part in that work. Percussionists often need to play three, four, or more instruments on any one part, so the art of creating a set-up which allows them to get to every instrument they need when they need it, in time to play, is an important skill.

When these points are considered, one can see that the percussion section needs a different sort of attention than the winds do. One of the best ways of describing what a percussion section needs from its director is the phrase “put them in a position to succeed.” When you assign parts, assist your players in coming up with a set-up that works, and make sure that they have all of the sticks and mallets that they may need.

It is true that percussionists do not face many of the challenges that wind players do e.g., hitting the correct partial, fingering, intonation, breath support, etc. Upon consideration of the challenges and issues presented above, we can see that a good percussionist will have a great deal of confidence (to deal with always playing solo), will either be a natural planner or will learn to plan ahead (for set-up), and will possess great body awareness for hitting various things spaced out around him or her without necessarily looking at them.

In addition, I would assert that percussionists need a fine musical ear if they are going to be successful in the long term. The whole idea of playing a musical cymbal crash, or triangle note, or snare drum roll, must be introduced from the beginning and reinforced constantly. The player should always be aware of who s/he is playing with, not only from a loud/soft point of view, but timbrally as well. They must be taught to discern how their part fits with others, and how to achieve that effect. Listening to the

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ensemble, and knowing what to do with the information, makes musical percussionists.

Working with your percussionists

In daily rehearsal, the band director should not treat percussionists differently than any other instrumentalist. Although they do not deal with a wind instrument, percussionists do deal with pitched instruments – mallet keyboards and timpani. Even a snare drum has a “pitch,” although only one. They play notes that look the same as everyone else’s, and are just as capable of understanding “loud” or “soft,” “staccato” or “legato,” as any other instrumentalist.

The musical and rehearsal language that the conductor uses should not be any different when dealing with percussionists, nor should the expectations. I would also assert that in my experience, 99% of the problems that arise in rehearsal concerning percussionists involve set-up and covering parts. Both of these issues – set-up and part assignment – should not be left to the players, but should be done by the director, at least initially. The players should also be taught how to assign parts, and how to figure out a set-up, so that over time, the director can pass that responsibility on to grade 11 and 12 students with full confidence that the job will be done, and done correctly. We will discuss those issues specifically a bit later.

Percussionists are aware of their stereotypical reputation, and are usually either resigned to it or very sensitive about it. They realise that all of the wind players share a commonality that they do not, and the implication of their musical inferiority is often noticeable to them from the very first day. The director must combat that in the only possible way: treat them no differently from anyone else.

A way in which these negative stereotypes are sometimes reinforced, although it is completely unintentional, is in having a flutist (or other wind player) play mallet parts. The message sent is, “you guys can’t do it, so I’ll get a real musician to do it.” Although it may be quite painful, it is in the long-term best interest of the band, the student, and the band director to make a percussionist learn the part, even if you have to listen to some awful notes for a few days, or for one whole concert.

Pedagogical Issues

One of the first issues which should be addressed in the discussion of percussion pedagogy involves the multiple techniques required of a percussionist. Whereas a trumpeter, for example, has to only learn one embouchure and fingering set, percussionists need to be fluent with snare drum and drums in general, drumset, timpani, and mallet keyboards, not to mention tambourine, triangle, and a host of other small instruments with specific techniques. One way to approach teaching percussion is to have all of your techniques relate to one central technique. I call this the “holistic approach” to teaching percussion. This is how I teach private students, and I have found it extremely effective.

The central technique is that of the basic stroke. The playing of most percussion instruments involves the raising and lowering of a stick or mallet — the stroke — to produce sound. Therefore, a fundamental stroke type that is then modified for the specific instrument will create a strong fundamental technique.

Snare drum technique is the place to begin percussion instruction, as there is only one playing surface, which frees the student to focus only on the central technique of the stroke. The hand should be flat, palm facing the floor, and all fingers curled around the stick. The snare stick should be an extension of the wrist, so whatever the wrist does, the stick does. The stroke is executed with the wrist, and the fingers are firm but not locked, allowing some sympathetic motion of the stick. The player should be as relaxed as possible – check for tension in the shoulders, back, and arms (there should be little or none). The general feeling of the stroke is like that of dribbling a basketball. The hand pushes the stick down, and allows the stick to push the hand back up into position for another stroke.



If this initial snare drum technique is introduced by itself for the first month or so, perhaps even the first semester, the students can get a real grasp of the technique, and ingrain it in their minds as muscle memory. There are many wonderful beginning band books available, but I am so often disappointed to find even in the best methods that the snare-drum roll is introduced along with the long tone in the winds. The level of technique needed for the execution of a snare drum roll is several orders of magnitude

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greater than that needed for long tones on a clarinet or flute or trombone. So, allow your players the time to establish this technique before moving on to others.

Once the snare drum grip and stroke are really ingrained, instruction is simplified, in that you can always revert back to “how is this grip different from the snare drum?” to explain new techniques. For example, a mallet keyboard grip for marimba or xylophone is different in that the end of the stick exits the back of the hand at a different angle, and the players cannot rely on the instrument to provide the rebound, but must manage the rebound themselves.



A good basic timpani grip differs from the snare drum not at all, except that the hands are moved to a vertical position, with the thumbs on top:



Now that we have discussed the holistic approach to percussion technique, the related issues to consider are what instruments to introduce when, in what sequence, and how quickly. These questions are a bit thorny, because as directors we are trying to serve the educational needs of our students while also preparing for concerts, and having all percussionists playing the snare drum simply will not work. Obviously, from the above discussion I feel that it is essential to start every student on the snare drum or practice pad, in order to allow the student to focus on fundamental technique. The next instrument group should be the mallet percussion (glockenspiel or marimba are the usual instruments for study) to get percussionists reading melody. This will also remove the need to use flutists on mallet parts!

In a middle school-band, if you can possibly afford to do so, I would suggest allowing all new students to spend the entire first semester on snare drum. In the second semester, I would move them to mallets, and in the third, timpani. I personally feel that the whole issue of drumset should be either avoided or used as a “carrot” to motivate students. I have not met very many percussionists who do not like playing drumset, particularly young ones, but I have met some who do not like playing the mallets (actually they might like it, they are just afraid of them). If the promise of a drumset lesson gets them to practice mallets, fine! Use it. Most percussionists are going to experiment with drumset on their own without any encouragement from you anyway.

It would be nice if we could assume that once players get to high school, they can play all of the instruments, having received good, thorough, and systematic instruction in their previous band. Alas, this is most often not so. It is certainly not the fault of the earlier teacher, for even if the above plan were followed, concepts will need to be reinforced, additional skills learned, and other skills refined once the player reaches high school.

For the high-school director, the issue of percussion pedagogy must necessarily become one that is more based upon the needs of the individual student. Everyone learns at a different rate, and remembers certain things that others forget, and so forth. Generally, however, the director can rely upon the students needing a refresher on the basics, as well as further instruction. Instrument-specific techniques for tambourine, triangle, castanets, cymbals, and so on will need to be taught and reinforced, as well.

Part Assignment and Section Set-Up

Let us look at a concrete example of how to approach instrument set-up and part assignment. W. Francis McBeth’s *Chant and Jubilo* is a well-known example which provides an excellent forum for this discussion.

In examining the score, we find that there are seven percussion instruments called for in total: Timpani, Glockenspiel, Snare Drum, Bass Drum, Triangle, Suspended Cymbal, and Crash Cymbals. Ideally, seven players would be needed for this work to have full percussion parts. However, a closer look at the score reveals that a smaller number can work, as well. The crash cymbals do not enter until after the triangle is fully finished for the entire work. Therefore, the triangle player could also certainly double on the crash cymbal part. Furthermore, in the opening Chant section, triangle and suspended cymbal play together. However, they do not play intricate patterns, but rather single notes. With only one really difficult spot, logistically speaking, occurring around measure 26 and 27 with the suspended cymbal roll, the three instruments of triangle, suspended cymbal, and crash cymbals can all be covered by one person. The other parts which can be combined in this manner are the glockenspiel and bass drum, as the glockenspiel plays only in the Chant portion,

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2 **CHANT AND JUBILO** W. Francis McBeth

Percussion
Glockenspiel, Snare Drums,
Bass Drums, Triangle,
Suspended and Crash Cymbals

5710 $MM \text{ } \frac{3}{4} = 72$ Triangle pp Suspended Cymbal one large roll or Triangle bass pp

5711 mf S. Cym. with Triangles (1st) mf

5712 $rit.$ mf S. Cym. back to snare bass mf

5713 mf S. Cym. back to snare bass mf

5714 mf S. Cym. back to snare bass mf

with the bass drum not entering until the Jubilo.

To summarize, we have found that a percussion section with seven distinct parts can be covered by just four players – probably not any less than four for full coverage, but with four the feat is certainly manageable. Additionally, the combining of these parts will make the piece a lot more challenging and fun to play for the students, as they will have more to do and think about, rather than playing in the first thirty measures and then sitting down.

Part assignment must be done before section set-up because you will want to arrange the section differently if you have seven separate players, as opposed to only four covering seven parts. To begin the section set-up in a logical way, one should always remember the dictum that the timpani should be placed directly behind the Tubas. This helps to focus the bass sound of the group, and the timpanist and tubas will often play together, so it helps them to hear each other. There are two basic formats for a general percussion section set-up. One is to have the timpani be the far edge of the section, usually the furthest back in the band, and have the other percussion around the back, either to the right or left side:

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5715 mf S. Cym. mf

5716 mf S. Cym. mf

5717 mf S. Cym. mf

5718 mf S. Cym. mf

5719 mf S. Cym. back to snare bass mf (to 571)

Musical excerpts used with permission.



The other way to set up the percussion, which I personally prefer, is to have both the tubas and timpani in the centre of the back, rather than to one side or the other. Battery percussion then goes to the conductor's right side of the timpani, and mallet instruments to the left:



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It is generally accepted that the drums and cymbals, having great sound-projection ability, should be placed farther back in the band, and the mallets, having less projection power, should be placed closer to the audience.

Now that generalities are in place, let us look specifically at McBeth's work. If the piece is being performed with four percussionists, as outlined above, then the instruments for the person playing the combined parts must be in close proximity to each other. In other words, the glockenspiel and bass drum should be within easy reach of each other, at most a step or two apart.

For the triangle/suspended cymbal/crash cymbals player, the set-up is even more critical. If these parts are executed by one player, that person must be able to play the triangle and suspended cymbal at the same time. The triangle should be suspended from the music stand, and the crash and suspended cymbals arranged behind the stand. In terms of stage location, I would place the bass drum/glockenspiel next to the snare drummer, and from the outside of the section, the set-up would read: cymbal-triangle set-up, snare drum, bass drum/glockenspiel, and timpani:



In a timpani-centred set-up, all of the percussion would go on the right side of the timpani, in the order: cymbal-triangle set-up, snare drum, and bass drum/glockenspiel:



This way, the bass drum and snare drum play as a unit, along with the occasional addition of the cymbals. In this instance the glockenspiel is a relatively small part, and the only mallet part in the piece, so it makes the most sense not to break up the proximity of the "battery" percussion (bass drum, snare drum, cymbals) and to bring the glockenspiel over to the bass drum. The other option would be to position the bass drum on the outside of the set-up, near the traditional glockenspiel location. This is not the best choice for the unity of pulse that is achieved by having the "battery" instruments next to each other. Moreover, the bass drum will constantly be too loud, and will need to be muffled or played at a lower dynamic throughout (or both).

In addition to the above set-up, both the players covering more than one part will need a mallet tray arranged within easy reach, so that they can quickly drop or pick up appropriate mallets or beaters. An excellent mallet tray is created by tipping the rack of a Manhasset or Wenger music stand parallel to the floor and placing either a towel or rubber mesh on top to cushion the sticks and prevent excess noise.

If seven players are being used, I would arrange them in the following manner: glockenspiel to the outside of the set-up, followed by triangle, cymbals, snare drum, bass drum, and timpani:



In a centred-timpani arrangement, I would simply place the battery to the right of the timpani, and the glockenspiel to the left: Now that we have applied the part assignment and set-up



arrangement to a single work, the next task would be to work out a “universal” set-up which can be set for the duration of the concert, and which requires minimal movement of instruments during the concert. Any time a percussion instrument is moved during a concert, there is the potential for dropping, or otherwise harming the instrument. Taking the time to plan the most advantageous set-up that requires the least movement of instruments throughout the concert is the best way to minimize such problems.

Some final thoughts about set-up and percussion part assignments are as follows: First is that any time players must switch music stands, they should take their music with them. This “traveling of the music” will prevent them from not having the part when needed, or having someone else’s music left on top of theirs at a critical moment. Second, in every set-up a percussionist should always make sure that his or her body, the instrument, and the music stand are all in a line pointing directly at the conductor. Often players will stand to the side of the bass drum rather than behind the instrument, which is the proper playing position. And the music stand should always be positioned in such a way that it requires only a slight movement of the eyes to move from the music to the conductor.

Percussion is an integral part of the wind band. The issues faced by percussionists are of a fundamentally different nature than those faced by winds. Yet the musicality and general musical expectations coming from the director must be the same for percussionists as they are for the woodwinds and brass. The most effective method for teaching beginners is to use a holistic method which relates all grips and strokes back to one fundamental stroke. Finally, percussion part-assignment and section setup are issues which must be planned for ahead of time, and are best dealt with by the director until senior students feel ready for the undertaking. 

Appended to this article is a select list of percussion method books and teaching books, broken down by category for easy reference. General method books can be a great resource to help directors refresh themselves with percussion techniques, and the instrument-specific teaching books can either be purchased for group usage and sign-out by the students, or recommended to students for their private purchase and study.

General Percussion Methods

1. Cook, Gary. *Teaching Percussion*. California: Schirmer Books, 1997. 499 pages.

An excellent overview of percussion pedagogy. Covers all aspects, including Snare Drum, Keyboards, Timpani, Accessories, Latin, Drumset, Marching, and Orchestral Excerpts. A good book for a percussion class, and foundational to the reference library.

2. Bartlett, Harry and Holloway, Roland. *Percussion Ensemble Method: Beginning Class Instruction*. Iowa: William C. Brown & Co., 1972. 164 pages.

Class method book designed to teach the instruments through a graded progression of small percussion-ensemble works, contained within the textbook. An excellent book if you have a beginner percussion class, separate from the winds.

Snare Drum

3. Goldenberg, Morris. *Snare Drum for Beginners*. New York: Chappell & Co., 1970. 51 pages.

Begins with quarter notes in 2/4 time. Excellent introductory book. Deals mostly with counting and sticking, no rolls. Flams introduced towards the end. Contains etudes and duets for the teacher and student.

4. Stone, George Lawrence. *Stick Control*. Randolph: George B. Stone & Son, Inc, 1935. 46 pages.

The most important foundation exercise book for every percussionist. Teaches various stickings and evenness of hands through simple exercises. Excellent for young players to develop technique, and as a calisthenic for more advanced players.

5. Burns, Roy. *Elementary Drum Method*. New York: Belwin, 1966. 81 pages.

Another excellent beginner’s book. Begins with counting exercises and quarter and eighth notes. Introduces the rudiments, including flams, accents, and rolls.

6. Burns, Roy and Feldstein, Sandy. *Intermediate Drum Method*. New York: Belwin, 1967. 80 pages.

Companion volume to the Elementary Drum Method. Continues the development of single strokes, double strokes, accents, flams, and rolls. Introduces the drag and ruff. Excellent etudes and solos.

7. Morello, Joe. *Master Studies*. Wisconsin: Hal Leonard, 1983. 95 pages.

The title is somewhat deceptive, although this book is more advanced than the Burns books. A better title would be “mastery studies,” as the exercises in this book are designed to develop conceptual mastery. Includes hand independence, various subdivisions, and drumset applications.

8. Whaley, Garwood. *Musical Studies for the Intermediate Snare Drummer*. Florida: Joel Rothman, 1971. 32 pages.

An étude book for the snare drum. Includes closed rolls, flams, drags, and ruffs.

9. Goldenberg, Morris. *Modern School for Snare Drum*. New York: Chappell, 1955. 184 pages.

Designed as a comprehensive, one-book course for the snare drum. Also explores orchestral repertoire - not only for snare, but other percussion instruments, as well.

Mallet Keyboards

10. Green, George Hamilton. *Instruction Course for Xylophone*. Florida: Meredith Music, 1984. 160 pages.

Again, a deceptive title. This "Instruction Course" can be applied to any mallet instrument. Divided into fifty lessons, each lesson in a different key, this book is designed to give the student a firm grounding in the major and minor keys, and complete mastery of the mallets. Excellent, foundational choice.

11. Goldenberg, Morris. *Modern School for Xylophone, Marimba, Vibraphone*. New York: Chappell & Co., 1950. 131 pages.

Companion volume to Goldenberg's "*Modern School for Snare Drum*," for the mallet instruments. Also designed as a comprehensive, one-volume instruction course. Includes orchestral excerpts.

Timpani

12. Goodman, Saul. *Modern Method for Tympani*. New York: Mills Music, 1948. 132 pages.

Comprehensive timpani instruction book. Includes tuning, holding the sticks, rolling, numerous etudes, and orchestral excerpts.



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A percussion instrument is a musical instrument that is sounded by being struck or scraped by a beater including attached or enclosed beaters or rattles struck, scraped or rubbed by hand or struck against another similar instrument. The percussion family is believed to include the oldest musical instruments, following the human voice. The percussion section of an orchestra most commonly contains instruments such as the timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, triangle and tambourine. However, the