

Percussion is Plural

By Paul Buyer

Several years ago, my good friend and colleague Johnny Lee Lane—longtime Professor of Percussion at Eastern Illinois University, 2007 PAS Lifetime Achievement in Education Award winner, and current Director of Education for Remo—shared a transformational quote with me that I have never forgotten: “*Percussion is plural, not singular.*” We were talking about why it was important for high school percussionists to be well-rounded and the dangers of developing a narrow mindset and attitude about what percussion instrument(s) they play or are willing to play.

More than a quote, “percussion is plural, not singular” is a philosophy—a philosophy many percussion educators share in our profession. However, there remains a “disconnect” among many young students who have not been taught this philosophy, choosing instead to focus their time and effort on a small sampling of what the percussive arts have to offer.

ENLISTING PERCUSSIONISTS

A few months ago, I attended our state music educator’s conference and had a conversation with a high school band director friend of mine. He had a dilemma and asked for my advice on teaching his percussionists and communicating with a band parent. He told me this story: “I believe my percussionists should all learn how to play mallets, so my staff and I started teaching them. Soon after, one of my band parents said their son signed up to play drums and not percussion. The student [even] asked me why I didn’t make trumpet players play clarinet.”

What was my advice? Percussion is plural, not singular. When students sign up to play percussion, they need to understand and buy into what that entails. Percussion, by nature, is plural, meaning percussionists are not only expected—but have a responsibility—to learn, study, and play multiple instruments within the percussion family and become well-rounded.

WHY BEING WELL-ROUNDED IS IMPORTANT

Being a well-rounded percussionist is important for many reasons, especially in the early years of study. First, it provides students with opportunities. New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick said, “The more you can do, the more you can do.” Belichick has achieved Hall of Fame success by winning four

Super Bowls and insists that his players become versatile and develop the skills necessary to play multiple positions. In percussion, his quote simply means that the more well-rounded you are, the more opportunities you will have when applying for internships, graduate school, and jobs. The quote also works the other way: “The less you can do, the less you can do.”

Second, being well-rounded is important for preparing students for college auditions and scholarship auditions, which often require a high level of performance on a variety of percussion instruments. In addition, students who are interested (or required to play) in percussion ensemble, wind ensemble, and orchestra will be more prepared if they are well-rounded percussionists.

Third, becoming well-rounded is important in teaching. As teachers, we cannot give what we do not have. In other words, if I do not play drumset, I cannot teach drumset. If I do not play vibraphone, I cannot teach vibraphone. Being well-rounded also puts students in a position to say *yes* to paying gigs. “Can you teach my front ensemble at band camp?” or “Can you play timpani for my church?” are opportunities to play and teach professionally and earn some money. It is important for percussionists not to limit themselves and be able to say *yes* to paying gigs. In essence, “teaching percussion” should, in fact, mean teaching *percussion*.

IDENTITY CRISIS

Many young percussionists enter college with a singular mindset or identity of who they are based on their musical background and experience. For example, marching percussion instructors often encounter the “snare or bust” mindset during auditions. The snare-or-bust player says, “I’m auditioning for the snare line, and if I don’t make it, I’m out of here. I have no interest in playing quads, bass drum, cymbals, or front ensemble.”

Another marching example is the player who introduces himself as “top bass” or “bottom bass” and associates his entire identity with a particular drum. Not only does he fail to think of himself as a musician who has the skills and technique to play *any* bass drum, but he also fails to think of himself as a percussionist who happens to play bass drum during the marching season.

Then there is the quad player who plays scrapes on timpani, or the concert snare drummer who brings his sticks in after playing a

Cirone etude. I have even seen a percussion ensemble play the concert bass drum on both heads, ringing to the heavens. When I asked the player if he played bass drum in his marching band, my suspicions were confirmed!

Several years ago one of my colleagues guest conducted an all-county band and told me this story about the percussionists: “During the traditional three-hour rehearsal to begin the weekend, I discovered that several of the percussionists could not read music. Not only were they unable to read rhythms, they failed to come in after multi-measure rests. Even with giving them exaggerated cues, parts went by in silence. These were supposed to be the best players in the county—recommended and selected by their band directors. During our first break, the percussionists took out practice pads and marching sticks from their backpacks. For the next few minutes, they started ramming notes from their fall marching show, chops galore. What they were playing was impressive, obviously memorized, and most likely learned by rote. When I noticed how the students were spending their break, I decided to walk back there and have a talk with them.”

At PASIC 2006, I moderated a panel discussion titled “The Drumline Experience: How Much is Too Much?” During the Q & A portion of the panel, the father of a high school percussionist asked, “This fall my son is playing marimba for the entire halftime show. I am concerned that not only is he playing one instrument, he is learning to play the show rather than learning to play the marimba. Do you have any advice for him?”

The theme and advice from the panel that day was, “In the hands of a good teacher, the student will succeed.” According to panelist Dennis DeLucia, “My viewpoint is very simple. In the hands of a good teacher—and by that I mean one who can inspire confidence in kids psychologically; one who teaches from a perspective, technically, that can be used and not abused and can be applied elsewhere to concert percussion and drumset percussion; one who is a good writer, meaning one who writes musically and idiomatically; one who conducts quality rehearsals and knows how to do that, knows how to organize; one who teaches the importance of teamwork, meaning the ensemble, which is ultimately the paramount for percussionists and all musicians; one who uses competition as a motivational device rather than the end-all (the idea’s not to beat that

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group, it's to get the most out of yourself that you possibly can using competition as the motivator); and one who encourages the appreciation of all styles of music—I would say in the hands of that person, there's absolutely nothing wrong with it whatsoever."

THE BIG FOUR

The "big four," as they are sometimes called, are the four percussion instruments that are the foundation of a traditional percussion curriculum: snare drum, mallet keyboard, timpani, and drumset. The big four can be broken down further into rudimental and concert snare drum; marimba, vibraphone, xylophone, and bells; timpani; and drumset including a variety of musical styles.

In addition to focusing on the big four, percussionists are responsible for learning how to play crash cymbals, suspended cymbal, concert bass drum, tam-tam, chimes, tambourine, triangle, and other "accessories" such as woodblocks, temple blocks, castanets, finger cymbals, shakers, claves, maracas, guiro, and cowbells. Since these instruments are commonly used in concert band, orchestra, and percussion ensemble repertoire, percussionists must be taught how to play them properly to

achieve a good sound. Though there is certainly not just one right way to play these instruments, there are standard techniques that every student should know in order to execute a part and produce a good sound. After all, it is not what you play, but how you sound that is most important.

Another area where percussionists have a responsibility to learn, study, and practice is world percussion. Though more prominent at the college level, percussionists can begin by learning the fundamentals of playing bongos, congas, and djembe. As we know, world music ensembles such as steel bands, African drumming ensembles, Brazilian ensembles, Taiko ensembles, and even Indonesian gamelans have become staples of many college percussion programs.

LIKING EVERYTHING

You do not have to like everything. But as a percussionist in a school music program, you should learn, study, and practice everything. It is what you signed up for. If you are not passionate about playing keyboard or timpani, that's okay, but you should study them nonetheless. Odds are the more time you invest in learning an instrument, the more enjoyment

you will get back. Not a fan of jazz drumming? Listen to it. Read about it. Watch videos on drummerworld.com. Buy some books and take lessons. Attend concerts. Audition for your jazz band. Play with other musicians.

Dr. Julia Gaines, Percussion Professor at the University of Missouri, says, "I guess if a kid doesn't want to be in an educational music situation, then just learning [one instrument] is fine. However, if someone actually wants to be in the band program at a school, learning to be a percussionist is essential. I'd hate to get too hoity-toity and say that anyone that ever learns to hit a drum should play mallets; there are too many real-world scenarios that would contradict that. However, when a student wants to study music through the means of percussion within a school program, it is essential."

THE SINGULAR MINDSET

From my experience, a singular mindset can originate in four places. The first is in the marching percussion activity. With many students participating in marching percussion ensembles in the fall, spring, and summer, it is easy for a player to become stereotyped, pigeonholed, and identified with playing only one instrument.

Make no mistake: I *love* marching percussion and have been a member of the Star of Indiana Drum and Bugle Corps, a staff member for the Dutchboy Drum and Bugle Corps, and Director and Arranger for the University of Arizona and Clemson University Drumlines in addition to serving on the PAS Marching Committee and writing a book on how college marching bands and drumlines achieve excellence. However, I have known students to play only one instrument in marching band, DCI, and WGI and not only develop a singular mindset, but completely burn themselves out. Without question, a more well-rounded experience and plu-

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ral mindset in their percussion studies would have served them well.

The second place a singular mindset can originate is during a mediocre concert band experience. When repertoire is not challenging, part assignments are not organized, and conductors fail to communicate with their percussionists, apathy and indifference are sure to result. When students feel disengaged, deflated, or bored with their concert band experience, you can bet there will be a quick mental shift to the marching activity to reignite their passion for percussion.

The third place a singular mindset can originate is when a concert percussion ensemble does not exist to serve as a laboratory for students to learn and experiment with technical, musical, and organizational concepts. In some cases, when a school *does* have a percussion ensemble class, it is often used for marching percussion rehearsals instead.

Finally, since some percussion instructors have a singular mindset and background themselves, it stands to reason their students will as well. Therefore, it is important to hire well-rounded percussionists to teach percussion in our school music programs so students will be prepared for whatever opportunities lie ahead.

WISDOM FROM THE COMMUNITY

I recently asked my colleagues on the University Percussion Teachers Facebook page to share their experiences on this topic.

Jim Corcoran, University of the Cumberlands: "I always try to teach my students that percussion is a community. We are the only instrument family that shares because we will use the same instruments, music, and implements. No other instrument that I know of has the same level of sharing that we do. Sometimes we even share instruments in the same tune. We are a team. We will even watch each other for attacks and share listening responsibilities."

Chad Floyd, Campbellsville University: "In my first year teaching high school, I was met with some resistance from certain students, particularly males, who did not appreciate having to learn scales on keyboard instruments. Their attitude was that keyboard instruments should be played by the girls and that they were only interested in the drumming aspect. Through consistent exposure to the keyboards, their attitudes slowly changed during that school year, and by the next year they were more receptive."

Tim Heath, University of Alabama: "My wife had many sixth-grade students sign up for band, and their parents were not happy when they had to buy mallets to play something other than a drum. As a high school director I inherited several students who only could play drums. They did not have any training in other areas of percussion."

Carlos Johnson, Austin Peay State University: "I was contacted by a parent of a 7th grader

who wanted the child to take lessons because the band director said the child was "behind" and "needed help finding the beat." I began to question the parent on types of mallets/sticks the child had and said that I require all my beginning students to learn snare drum, mallet percussion, and timpani. The parent replied, "What's a mallet? I just want my kid to find the beat!"

Ted Rounds, Kent State University: "I teach a percussion methods course for Music Education majors. One thing I always ask is what instruments they remember being part of the percussion section in high school, middle school, and elementary school. Most of them never even noticed or remembered percussion other than snare, bass, cymbals, glockenspiel, or timpani until they were almost finished with high school. When I ask them when they think kids should begin learning keyboards or timpani, most of them just shrug and wait for me to tell them."

Norman Weinberg, University of Arizona: "To me, we are teaching and playing music. It really does not matter what instrument/device/technology you use to create music. So by having more exposure and skills with different instruments, you are becoming a better musician. For the parent, I would say, 'This is our policy to educate your child. If you do not want to follow our policy, band is an elective. Your child is free to leave the program.'"

Tracy Wiggins, University of North Alabama at Pembroke: "I have had students put down bass drum as their principal instrument on their music major application."

Dustin Woodard, Houghton College: "Tommy Iggoe said it best in a Vic Firth interview. He was talking about drumset players learning how to play a little piano. Essentially he stated that if you want to be a drummer and not learn notes and the basics of pitched music, then that is all you will be: a drummer. If you want to be a musician and actually participate in the music-making process, then knowing how to play piano is essential."

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, a singular mindset develops as a result of a leadership issue. To respond, we need a leadership movement. We need PAS members—first and foremost—to stand up and say it is not okay for young percussionists to have a singular mindset. We need to rally people around the idea that, as percussion educators, we have a responsibility to train our students to be well-rounded percussionists. We have a responsibility to instill the mindset that percussion is plural.

Like a general education curriculum in college, students are required to take certain classes to make them well-rounded human beings. Although they may never use some of these classes directly in their chosen career, it is believed to be in their best interests to take

them. Percussionists should also have a general education curriculum. In my mind, high school students are far too young to decide what instrument they want to focus on, specialize, and have a singular mindset. We are doing them a great disservice by allowing this to happen.

According to author Mike Myatt in his excellent book *Hacking Leadership*, "It's time for a leadership movement. We must bring the best leadership minds together...those open to challenging what is considered 'normal' with a goal of shattering outdated thinking. We must dialog and debate, but most of all, we must listen, learn, and act. We must focus on what's wrong with leadership and fix it. I ask you to become a better leader and awaken those around you to the dire need we have for a movement of leadership. Rally around this newfound shared purpose, and go change the world."

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