

DEVELOPING EAR CHOPS

Paul Buyer

As a director, do you ever wish your percussionists had better listening skills? Do you find they spend most of their time and effort developing their hands, forgetting to develop their ears?

The emphasis on technique—whether on snare drum, marimba, timpani, quads, or drumset—has become all-consuming for today’s young player. With endless examples of incredible virtuosity online for students to see and emulate, many lack the listening skills they need to be successful musicians.

According to James O’Brien in *The Listening Experience*, “We simply do not listen attentively to the sounds around us. Listening to music...has become a peripheral and casual activity. Listening to music is an acquired skill—the result of cultivation and practice.”

To address this challenging issue, I would like to introduce a new term to our musical vocabulary—a term that identifies a missing competency in many of our percussion students today: *ear chops*. This article offers some ideas

and specific techniques you can use to develop and improve ear chops in your percussionists.

What are Ear Chops?

Ear chops are the skills needed to listen to music and other musicians. “Chops” is a term often used in percussion referring to technique—specifically speed and control. Brass players refer to chops when discussing their range and endurance. Basketball players refer to chops when describing their dribbling and ball handling skills. As music educators, doesn’t it make sense to teach our percussionists not only to develop their hands, but also to develop their ears?

Watching versus Listening

Many years ago, my professor at the University of Arizona, Gary Cook, told me a great story about how people experience live music. “One of my students came up to me and said, ‘Professor Cook, did you see that concert last night?’ ‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘and I *heard* it too!’ ” It was obvious from this exchange that the student *watched* the

performance but did not *listen* to the music. He was not aware of balance, blend, and intonation. He did not pay attention to precision, alignment, and execution. He did not notice interpretation, phrasing, and expression. Instead, he got swept away *watching* the ensemble perform. While there is certainly a lot to watch during a concert such as the conductor's gestures, the musicians' body language, and the ensemble's choreography, the essence of attending a concert is about *listening* to the music.

People Listen with Their Eyes

Professor Cook also had a quote he liked to share: "People listen with their eyes." I used this quote to play with more expression, touch, sensitivity, choreography, and showmanship, since the audience—like the student above—tends to listen with their eyes. However, although we are a visual society, music—at its essence—is an *auditory* art form—something we hear. The challenge lies in balancing the visual nature of percussion performance with the ear chops needed to excel as musicians.

How Do You Sound?

One of my guiding philosophies is, "It's not what you play, but *how you sound* that's most important." Young percussionists often gravitate to the difficulty level of a piece of music rather than focus on how they sound when they play. This attraction to musical difficulty, in part, results from watching videos online, from the latest DCI drum feature to solos on drummerworld.com.

(Drummerworld.com is an outstanding drumset resource but I often have to call my students' attention to the "Sounds" tab, which is a collection of audio recordings, rather than going to the "Videos" tab which is their default response). While there is no debate that the explosion of videos and DVDs has enhanced percussion education and pedagogy, it can be argued that the onslaught of *watching* percussionists perform has diminished our skills and ability to listen to them. We must always remember that as a musician, nothing is more important than how we sound.

Let's take a look at some musical examples of where and how you can develop ear chops in your students.

Ear Chops in Concert Band

Percussionists must develop the skills and ability to listen to other sections of the concert band so they can play together as an ensemble. Far too often, young percussionists are unaware when bells line up with flutes, snare drum outlines trumpets, and timpani support low brass.

Students must be able to not only play their parts correctly, but watch the conductor and listen to what is going on around them. In addition, dynamics are often relative when playing percussion, especially in a concert band setting. A forte on crash cymbals and a forte on vibraphone produce far different volumes, so players must make adjustments based on what they hear, not on what their sheet music says.

As a director, a good way to develop ear chops in the concert band is to first give students permission to use their ears and explain that the dynamic markings written in their parts are not set in stone. You can then rehearse percussion and wind parts that align and enhance one another to raise ensemble awareness, develop listening skills, and increase sensitivity, touch, and musicianship.

Ear Chops in Jazz Ensemble

Developing ear chops is also critical in a jazz ensemble setting. While chart reading is a critical skill for jazz drummers to learn, it is important they do not bury their head in the chart. A drum chart is only a (visual) guide and not intended to be performed like a snare drum solo. Your drummer must listen to the band at all times—especially the rhythm section—and be the consummate ensemble player.

According to drumset artist and educator Ed Soph, “All kinds of materials are used to educate young jazz drummers except the music they are learning to play. Instruction is visual, not aural. The reality of the situation is that everyone can read but not everyone can hear. Musical big band drummers learn to play the music by listening to it. Listen for [concepts] that make a big band drummer musical. Listen for them in the playing of artists [like] Chick Webb, Buddy Rich, Joe Jones, Butch Miles, and Mel Lewis. You won’t ‘hear’ these concepts in a book.”

You can develop ear chops in your jazz ensemble members by offering a steady diet of listening assignments on the legendary big bands and jazz greats. This aural instruction, as Soph states, provides an inspirational model for how to swing, play, and improvise. You can also remind your students that jazz ensemble members who do not listen to jazz are like authors who do not read books.

Ear Chops in Percussion Ensemble

In a concert percussion ensemble, students sometimes develop a negative attitude toward playing concert bass drum, crash cymbals, triangle, or other accessories. These instruments, deemed easy, boring, or uncool, are not respected and valued the way they should be. As a director, one way you can change this attitude is to explain that if an instrument was not important, the composer would not have written for it. Whether your students feel their parts are easy, difficult, challenging, boring, or awesome is not the point. It is not about them, it is about the ensemble. More so, it is about the music and how the music sounds when performed.

To develop ear chops, schedule time for sectionals and try different set-ups. Move players around to create a new listening environment. Provide recordings so your students can hear their parts performed at a high level and in context. Finally, experiment with different mallets, instruments, techniques, and timbres throughout the

rehearsal process. This will instill creativity and ownership in your percussion ensemble members and give them the opportunity to find the right sound after exploring many options.

Susan Powell, Percussion Professor at The Ohio State University, identified “The Elements of Strong Ensemble Skills.” In addition to visual elements such as matching motions, cueing, eye contact, and choreography, auditory elements listed were listening, breathing, balance, and blend, which she defined as, “playing *within* each other’s sound.” What a beautiful definition, and certainly one that requires ear chops to execute.

Ear Chops in Drumline

In a drumline, technique rules the day. From inverted inverts and pings on snare, to scrapes and crosses on quads, to forearm rotation and muffling on bass drum, to the myriad of timbres available on cymbals, marching percussion technique has become a world unto itself. While tone, sound, and listening are definitely taught—and taught well—they are often overshadowed by heights, playing zones, visuals, and uniformity.

As mentioned earlier, one of my guiding philosophies is, “It’s not what you play, but *how you sound* that’s most important.” Marching percussionists tend to think in technical terms and are often attracted to difficult writing, whether they can play it or not. Unfortunately, this attraction is narrow-minded and does not allow students

to appreciate the big picture of the entire marching percussion ensemble or band arrangement. I often ask my students, “Have you ever seen a marching band or drum corps with a snare line only?” After chuckling at first, they soon realize that all sections—snare, quads, basses, cymbals, and front ensemble—are critical voices in the marching percussion ensemble.

In marching percussion, excellence means clean. To develop ear chops in your drumline, teach them to hear the difference between clean and dirty playing. This can be done by recording them and listening to parts of the show that demonstrate excellence and mediocrity. Students must also develop the ability to hear their parts align with other sections of the drumline. When parts align, communicate to them that timing, rhythmic accuracy, and clarity are strong. When parts are not aligned, identify which ensemble skills need to be improved. Recording them and listening to ensemble precision and alignment issues will help develop ear chops in each individual drumline member.

Ear Chops in Private Lessons

Private lessons are a great place to develop ear chops, as the teacher can tailor specific strategies to each individual student and record them. Similar to developing an exercise routine for 4-mallet marimba, snare drum, or timpani, ear chops can be addressed as a supplement to any percussion technique program.

NOTE: It is important for students to become comfortable singing in their lesson. I often tell students who may be apprehensive, “Good, now this time, sing *out loud!*”

Marimba

On marimba, ear chops consist of matching pitch (playing a note and singing it back) and playing tunes “by ear.” By ear tunes, such as *Happy Birthday*, *Silent Night*, and *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, can be practiced using the following 5 step process. Thank you to Gary Cook for teaching me this many years ago.

1. Pick a familiar tune you know by ear and choose a key (you can review the key by playing the major scale or arpeggio).
2. Sing the tune to determine the starting pitch. Then play the first note.
3. Determine if the next note goes up or down and if it moves by step (small interval) or by leap (large interval).
4. Play the note and adjust based on what you hear. Avoid “hunting and pecking.” Hear the next note in your head before playing.
5. After playing the whole tune by ear, transpose and play in other keys.

Snare Drum

Asking the question, “How do you sound” during a lesson will immediately focus attention on listening as well as grip, stroke, beating spot, tone, precision, roll quality, dynamics, phrasing, and musicianship. Far too

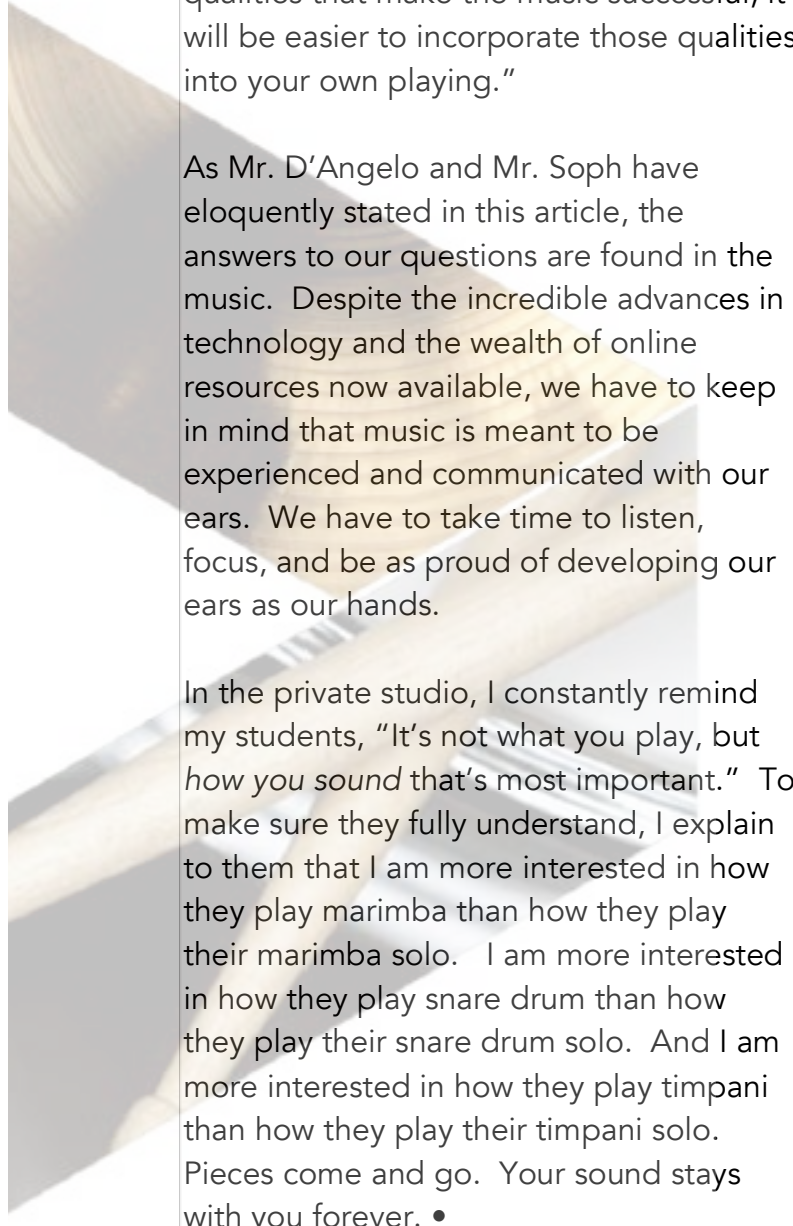
often, the end goal for young snare drummers is to play their music *correctly* with right notes and rhythms. While this is certainly important, this approach focuses on visual elements (notation) and not auditory elements (sound).

Timpani

Ear chops on timpani involve tuning, singing, and matching pitch in addition to playing in an ensemble. Often, young timpanists become dependent on the tuning gauges and fail to develop their ears. In short, tuning should be done by ear, not by eye. Students must understand intervals and scales, hear notes as sharp or flat, and adjust accordingly. While there are certainly many physical techniques that are required to become a good timpanist such as legato strokes, muffling, shifting, and rolling, nothing is more important—and necessary—than having a good ear. To improve ear chops on timpani, taking a music theory course is recommended, as well as visiting helpful websites such as www.good-ear.com, www.earbeater.com, and www.basicmusictheory.com.

Conclusion

According to Michael D'Angelo, Lecturer in Jazz Studies at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, “The best resource for any musician is the music itself. The more you listen to the music you want to create, the more it will become a part of you, and of course you have a model for your own development...By recognizing the



qualities that make the music successful, it will be easier to incorporate those qualities into your own playing.”

As Mr. D’Angelo and Mr. Soph have eloquently stated in this article, the answers to our questions are found in the music. Despite the incredible advances in technology and the wealth of online resources now available, we have to keep in mind that music is meant to be experienced and communicated with our ears. We have to take time to listen, focus, and be as proud of developing our ears as our hands.

In the private studio, I constantly remind my students, “It’s not what you play, but *how you sound* that’s most important.” To make sure they fully understand, I explain to them that I am more interested in how they play marimba than how they play their marimba solo. I am more interested in how they play snare drum than how they play their snare drum solo. And I am more interested in how they play timpani than how they play their timpani solo. Pieces come and go. Your sound stays with you forever. •

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