

A PLAN FOR PERCUSSION SECTION SUCCESS

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Success in the contemporary band/orchestra percussion section depends on four equally important areas: skilled percussionists, well-maintained and sufficient instruments, quality and appropriate repertoire, and a structured approach to organizing the percussion section. It is the latter skill that is rarely taught, yet is crucial to the success of the percussionist and the ensemble as a whole.

Initial Considerations

Planning part assignments, instrument set-ups and ensuring all the necessary instruments, sticks, mallets, and music make it to the concert hall requires a student leader with careful attention to detail. The instrumental director can train responsible individuals for this task while building organizational skills necessary for success in future ensembles. Often the best percussionist also serves as the section leader; however there may be other options to consider. The “first chair” player may not be the most organized, while the most organized student may not be the best player. Consider pairing the two with representative titles, principal and section leader, delineated based on responsibilities. It may be beneficial to involve both in the part assigning process. The principal

percussionist may make musical decisions within the section and answer to the conductor. The section leader may be responsible for keeping the section organized, parts assigned, and instruments maintained.

Personnel and Philosophy

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the students in the percussion section? How does your philosophy of education influence part assigning? Should each student have the opportunity to play challenging parts? Are all percussionists required to play keyboard percussion parts? Is the educational value of students learning new instruments as important as the final product at the performance? Once these pertinent “big picture” questions are answered, assess the percussion parts. An ideal situation would be for the percussionists, on any given concert, to play the snare drum, timpani, keyboard percussion, as well as triangle, tambourine, crash cymbals, and other accessory instruments. These accessory instruments are just as important as any other instrument, and typically utilize techniques requiring serious study.

Additionally, the contemporary repertoire often requires a single percussionist to play multiple instruments throughout the course of the same composition. This requires a well-rounded percussionist, capable of moving quickly and quietly from instrument to instrument while changing sticks and mallets with comfort and ease.

The Repertoire

What level of musicianship does the repertoire require? Take a look at the parts and assess the difficulty of various sections within the music. Consider the editor/publishers do not necessarily make part assignments. Even though the part may say "Percussion I," there could be moments in which three percussionists are required to cover the part. Similarly, published parts may suggest six percussionists, but in all actuality, only four are needed. A well-organized percussion section is capable of moving from one part to the next within the same piece in order to cover all parts. A percussionist may need to play xylophone on "Percussion I" for eight measures, then crash cymbals on "Percussion III" before settling on snare drum and temple blocks on "Percussion II" for the remainder of the piece. Make note of the tempos, fermatas, and other details that will determine the amount of time the percussionist will have to change parts. Read through the parts and the score to determine how many players are actually needed. Notate the number of percussionists needed and compare to the number available in the ensemble. If too few percussionists are available or there are fewer parts to play than percussionists, more difficult choices must be made.

Philosophical points to consider include adding parts, determining which parts to leave out, or searching for new repertoire.

Instrumentation

Make a list of instruments needed for the entire program. Does the repertoire require instruments that are not part of the standard instrument inventory? Do instruments need to be purchased, borrowed, or are there common substitutions (see attachment A)? Be sure to read through each part and notate the required instruments in the upper left-hand corner. Not all publishers print the entire list of instruments on the parts, and the instrumentation printed in the score may be vague. Reading the notation may be required to determine the actual instrument intentions of the composer. For example, the score may read "cymbals" but the part notates soft rolls, indicative of suspended cymbal. Once all of the instruments are determined, add the list directly to the packing sheet (see attachment B). This will prevent last minute problems on the day of the performance.

Part Assignments

With the growth of available instrumentation in the percussion section and composers' willingness to exploit the instruments, the expectations of the percussion section are constantly evolving. When assigning parts, consider your educational philosophy and begin pairing players with parts. This process is akin to making battle plans! A large workspace is recommended so that each part can be compared carefully and simultaneously. The flow of percussionists covering parts is a dance that should appear smooth, systematic, and effortless. Consider percussionists may need to move from one part to another, from music stand to music stand, change instruments frequently, occasionally hand another percussionist

a mallet and even turn pages for other players. The section leader and/or principal may wish to list the required instruments in the upper left-hand corner and suggested sticks and mallets in the upper right-hand corner. If the section leader can notate as many of these considerations as possible, the first rehearsal will progress smoothly. Sometimes additional parts need to be acquired prior to rehearsal due to quick changes from instrument to instrument. Check with the publisher regarding the acquisition of additional parts or consult copyright policy regarding photocopies.

Setting Up the Section

How is your rehearsal room set up? Does it reflect the set-up of the performance venue? This is very important to avoid last minute confusion and difficulty performing at the actual concert venue. With the list of instruments for the upcoming concert, part assignments and instrument placement can be determined before the first rehearsal. Create a sketch of the percussion section layout that requires minimal resets of instruments between pieces. Be sure to include mallet stands and trap tables in the sketch. It may be useful to take digital photos to keep on file for future reference. There are numerous generic set-ups of the percussion section, such as placing the timpani near the low brass or the concert bass drum in the middle, but variations may be necessary depending on the repertoire. Also, if an additional suspended cymbal positioned on the opposite side of the setup prevents a percussionist from running across the stage or a time-consuming move between works, it is well worth the minimal addition of a cymbal. The goal of the percussion section should be to flow smoothly from part to part and piece

to piece. With a pre-planned flow, the musicians can focus on the execution of the parts and the musical experience as a whole.

Sharing Information

Post the part assignments in the percussion section, place a copy with the conductor's score, and make folders for each member of the percussion section with their marked parts and part assignment sheet. The suggested set-up of the percussion section should also be posted in the percussion section and placed in folders. Another consideration is for each player to have a specific task as part of the setup process. Give each student a job, such as uncover and arrange keyboard instruments, and post the assignments. With this information readily available to all, individual responsibility is nurtured and rehearsal flow is achievable. Personal responsibility will be fostered and the percussionists can focus on playing soon after entering the rehearsal.

Additional Considerations

- Posting the rehearsal schedule in advance will allow the percussion section to set-up prior to the beginning of rehearsal. By writing the rehearsal order on the board prior to class, the percussionists will share a common goal immediately upon arrival.
- Establish the expectation that no one plays or warms up before the entire section is set up will expedite the process while fostering teamwork.
- At the last rehearsal before the concert, pack the parts into folders by stand position and in concert order. Name each stand position and folder (ex. xylophone folder/xylophone stand) and

transport the music together. Pack all instruments, required sticks/mallets, and music stands carefully and ensure everything travels as a unit. Requiring the entire percussion section to accomplish this process as a group is highly recommended.

- All percussionists should be a part of set-up and teardown for every rehearsal and performance. A culture of teamwork enhances the attitude of a section and ultimately their ability to perform together. Organizing the set-up/teardown on the packing sheet will clarify individual tasks and shorten the time needed for these activities.

Conclusion

The musical success of the percussion section, and ultimately the ensemble, is reliant on the skills of the individuals, the quality of instruments, the selected repertoire, and how these aspects are organized into a whole. The best percussion sections play well together, work well together, and stay organized. Developing the skillset of organization is an essential aspect of the learning process and prepares students for future experiences at the collegiate and professional level. By utilizing the above steps- the part assignment sheet, common substitutions, and the packing sheet- a higher degree of organization in the percussion section is possible. A strong sense of organization, from the first rehearsal through the teardown of the concert, will allow the talents, training, and spirit of the percussion section to shine through in every performance. •

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Before accepting his position at ASU, James served as principal percussionist with the Air Force Band of the Golden West where he spent six years touring, recording, and performing throughout the western United States, while maintaining an active freelancing schedule in the San Francisco Bay area. A native of St. Louis, Missouri, James earned a bachelor's degree in music education from the University of Central Missouri, a master's degree in percussion performance from Louisiana State University, and is pursuing a Doctorate of Musical Arts from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.