



ADDRESSING YOUR PERCUSSIONISTS' NEEDS: ON AND OFF THE PODIUM

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The knowledge expected and required of music educators goes far beyond what meets the eye. Elementary and secondary school band and orchestra directors must display a thorough understanding of how each instrument works and sounds, while being able to assess and correct issues in a moment's notice. This can be difficult because podium time is sacred and all too limited, necessitating an approach that reaches the most students in the least amount of time.

During a set amount of time, it is not always possible to address all of the issues within each section of the ensemble. Because of this, the percussion section can often be found counting rests or suffering through the inevitable, "Tacet Rehearsal." Having experienced this both in the ensemble and on the podium, I have constructed a few thoughts that may be helpful when addressing the percussion section in future rehearsals.

Podium Demeanor

Verbal Communication

"Use a harder mallet" is a phrase familiar to all percussionists and directors. This phrase, although sometimes correct, can be interpreted in various ways. When I am asked this, my first thought is; "Do they mean louder? Brighter? Darker? Warmer? Piercing? Articulate? Or maybe, just deafening?! I have come to ask these subconscious questions after years of performing in various ensembles and under many directors. But for a middle or high school student, they might just see it as "Great! I'm going to get this 2x4 with a brick on the end and hit this xylophone until it breaks." As directors and teachers, we know that this is not outside the realm of possibility for an enthusiastic fourteen year old.

A more specific, descriptive phrase in place of this abovementioned statement can transform this moment into a great teaching tool for your student. For example, if during your ensemble's rehearsal you feel that the xylophone player needs to match the volume and timbre of the flute section—instead of asking, "can you use a harder mallet?"—consider asking the percussionist to listen over to the flute section and think about using a brighter, more articulate mallet. Now, the percussionist is aware of their role in supporting a melodic line and is encouraged

to make conscious decisions on how their sound will fit into the overall texture of the ensemble. Likewise, with the incorporation of terms like brighter, warmer, darker, lighter, and heavier, you are slowly exposing the student to a heightened level of musical thought.

Rehearsal Technique

Directors know how critical it is to incorporate as many sections as possible during a rehearsal to maintain focus and progress. However, it can be difficult to keep the percussionists as engaged as other sections because they are not usually part of the intonation, harmony, or melody discussions. In fact, percussionists often get relegated to keeping time on the snare drum while the director addresses a rhythmic issue within another section. While this is a useful substitute for a metronome, asking the percussionist to do this only perpetuates the stereotype that we are just “time-keepers” and prevents the section from thinking they are an integral part of the ensemble.

Having dealt with this stereotype, I propose another option. Instead of asking the percussionist to keep quarter notes on the snare drum, why not try asking another section (trumpets, oboes, tubas) to clap or count out loud? While the focus needs to be on addressing the initial issue, this could present a situation where the new clappers recognize the importance of developing a strong sense of pulse, and everyone, not just the percussionists, feels responsible for maintaining the beat. Then, after you address the initial issue, you now have the impetus for another important musical lesson about pulse.

Rehearsal Scheduling

After a discussion with fellow percussionists, Benjamin Fraley and Jamie Wind Whitmarsh, a thought about rehearsal scheduling arose. Directors know the percussion section always needs time to setup for rehearsals and that the length of time varies depending on the programmed repertoire. This can pose a challenge when a piece has a particularly large or complex percussion section. I am by no means saying we don't enjoy playing Maslanka's *Symphony No. 5* or Bernstein's *Westside Story*. However, if your program includes these two pieces, maybe consider scheduling them on different rehearsal days. This would eliminate the loss of valuable rehearsal time to setup changes, thereby increasing the amount of rehearsal time for each piece. Most importantly, this allows the percussion section to focus on the issues specific to that setup and to strategically plan the logistics for the upcoming performance.

Logistics are a constant concern for percussionists. When programming a concert, it is imperative to consider the instrumentation, available space, and setup time for the section. As in rehearsal scheduling, programming multiple works with large setups can present challenges in performance. I can guarantee your percussionists will greatly appreciate having an intermission between pieces with large setup changes. Changing a fifteen-piece drum setup in two minutes is both mentally and physically taxing, especially when added to the stress of performing. However, strategic programming and appropriate intermission placement can help to both eliminate setup mistakes and to put your percussionists into a position to focus on their performance rather than a frantic struggle with equipment.

Gear Thoughts: Before You Break The Bank

“Additional funds.” Two words directors love to hear. However, the reality is that purchasing percussion gear is expensive. Thus, the concluding paragraphs are geared towards exposing ways for you to get more for your percussionists without the high price tag.

Referring back to the “use a harder mallet” comment above, having the ability to change the timbre of an instrument can eliminate the need to purchase an additional one. Before you purchase a \$3000-\$12,000 instrument, consider spending a few hundred dollars on five to ten pairs of mallets for the keyboard instruments and timpani.

There are many mallet options and each can produce drastic differences in the color and timbre of the instrument. For example, a soft rubber xylophone mallet will produce a quieter, warmer sound, while a hard plastic xylophone mallet will produce a brighter, more articulate sound. Likewise, a large, cartwheel-style timpani mallet will produce a full, rounded sound while a smaller, wooden-ball mallet will produce a powerful, direct sound on the instrument.

While purchasing various mallets and drumheads can be beneficial, there is no substitute for purchasing additional cymbals and auxiliary instruments to round out your percussion inventory. That being said, knowing where and when to search can save you hundreds of dollars.

Online stores such as eBay and Craigslist, and percussion distributors like Steve Weiss Music, Percussion Source, and Lone Star Percussion are excellent starting points. However, there are also Facebook Group Pages now being used to sell extra or unwanted instruments. Facebook Pages like *Timpani and Percussion Swap Shop*, *Orchestral Percussion Talk*, *University Percussion Teachers*, *Timpani Shop Talk*, and *Mallet Enthusiasts* are a hotbed of professional percussionists who post ads for selling gear and provide current information regarding percussion performance. Groups like these are a great resource for understanding the inner workings of the twenty-first century percussionist.

Knowing when to search these sites can also prove beneficial. I have found that the beginnings and ends of semesters are prime time for purchasing gear. At the start of the semester you will find many online stores cutting prices and giving “back-to-school” discounts. Likewise, the end of the semester is a great time to monitor eBay, Craigslist, and Facebook Pages. It is a sad day when a percussionist leaves the family.

However, it does mean that you’ll find students selling their instruments and mallets, which means you can expect lower prices.

I hope you have found these thoughts to be helpful. To supplement this article, please visit www.tommydobbsp percussion.com for additional links, articles, and comments. •

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