

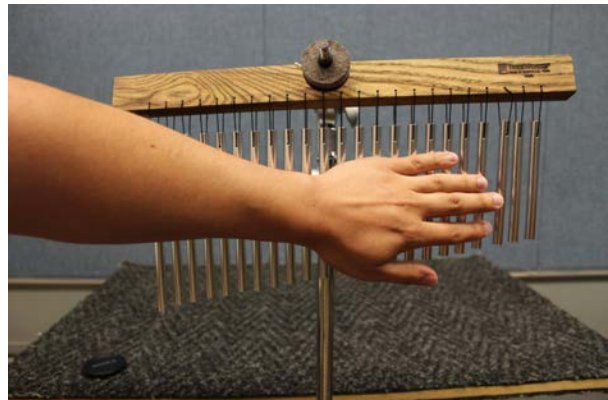
THE LAND OF MISFIT TOYS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND LINE OF ACCESSORY PERCUSSION

Benjamin Fraley

The world of percussion is vast in its many instruments and techniques. Remaining current with every percussion instrument is part of the challenge and fun of being a well-rounded percussionist. Excluding the immense and diverse amount of percussion found in non-western studies (world music), the standard western classical percussion family is in itself, an eclectic mix of instruments and techniques to be mastered. Typically, within this genre, there is more of a focus on solo oriented instruments including snare drum, mallet instruments and timpani. Accessory instruments such as bass drum, cymbals, tambourine and triangle are often studied less by students. Furthermore, there is a second line of accessory percussion instruments that are often misunderstood, misinterpreted or unknown to both students and conductors alike. This article will shed light on these “misfit toys” that are not typically discussed in terms of performance or details and should prove a valuable resource for the conductor in working with these instruments and their performers from the podium.

Mark Tree

A mark tree is often mislabeled as wind chimes. Wind chimes are arranged in a circle formation and are more likely found on someone’s front porch rather than in a percussion section. A mark tree is made of graduated metal cylinders that are hung from a single piece of wood. Companies that make mark trees have various models. However, any model that is between the size of 12” – 16” would be adequate. Mark trees are played by moving one’s hand through the cylinders in a fluid motion. The desired sound is reminiscent of a dream or magical occurrences.



Bell Tree

The bell tree is another instrument in which the name can easily cause resemblance to a different instrument altogether. The best way to remember what a bell tree looks like is to remember that all the graduated bells fit together in a frame that looks like a tree. A bell tree produces a similar scaled effect as the mark tree, but the timbre is different and played with an acrylic or metal beater as opposed to the hand. The bell tree can be played either vertically or horizontally; whichever is easiest for the student.



Claves

Claves are not only an instrument but refer to a specific rhythm. Here, we will discuss claves as an instrument being two cylindrical pieces of wood (usually rosewood) that create a clear resonant sound when struck against each other. The important thing to note about claves is that they will sound the best when they are not muffled. This means the claves should make as little contact as possible with the player's hands. The clave that will do the striking is held basically like a drum stick (matched grip), but make sure that the clave is held with the fingers and note against the palm. The clave that is being struck is held in a cradle fashion in the opposite hand. The fingers are curled in towards the palm in order to make a resonating chamber and to support the clave. Strike the clave in the middle with the edge of the clave in your striking hand. The sound should be clear, resonant, and bright.



Wood Blocks

Wood blocks made of real New England Rock Maple wood are often overlooked for more durable, plastic versions. Real wood blocks however can be just as durable and in most classical orchestral or wind band situations, have a superior sound and musical impact when performed with the proper technique.

Recommend mallets for use on wood blocks are rubber, plastic, or hard cord (tightly wrapped yarn) mallets. The opening of the wood block should face towards the audience when possible. The most common beating spot is just off center of the middle of the wood block towards the opening in order to create the most resonant, desired sound. This means that there has to be space underneath the wood block so that it does not sound muffled. Avoid putting wood blocks on a trap stand with thick carpet or towels. Instead, when possible, hold the woodblock up, as you might when playing tambourine and/or triangle. If you have to place the wood block on a trap stand, use a piece of foam to place the woodblock on.



Temple Blocks

In keeping with our *Sleigh Ride* theme, let's discuss temple blocks. Temple blocks are graduated cousins of woodblocks, having changed very little from their original forms and use in temples. Almost all temple blocks are made of wood or a synthetic plastic and are set on a frame. Wood temple blocks will produce the most characteristic sound and when performed with the proper technique, are as durable as plastic. Temple blocks are akin to woodblocks in that the beating spot and mallet choice used are similar. However, the openings of the temple blocks should face the player for the easiest playing.



Log Drums

Log drums are also known as split drums. Log drums are so named because the earliest form of these instruments were literally logs. Log drums are enclosed wooden boxes in which the beating spots or tongues have been cut. There are usually two tongues per log drum but some may have more. Log drums are played with rubber mallets towards the edges of each tongue. The desired sound is a resonant, hollow sound.



Anvils and Brake Drums

If you are a conductor of either a band or orchestra, there is a good chance that at some point you will program Gustav Holst's *Second Suite in F* or Giuseppe Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. In that case, you will need to know a thing or two about anvils and brake drums. Some percussion companies actually make a musical instrument called an anvil. The purpose of having a "musical" anvil is to specify the sound of the instrument and to minimize the need for an actual anvil. These anvils generally come with a special mallet specific for that instrument in order to get the desired sound.

In place of an anvil, a brake drum is an acceptable substitute. Brake drums are parts from literal cars. They are not sold by music stores or music instrument manufacturers and are best acquired by visiting a junk-yard. Regardless, they are musical instruments and are used widely through the percussion repertoire. They are typically struck with metal beaters (NOT your good triangle beaters). Metal beaters are played on the inner circle of the brake drum and produce a piercing metal sound.

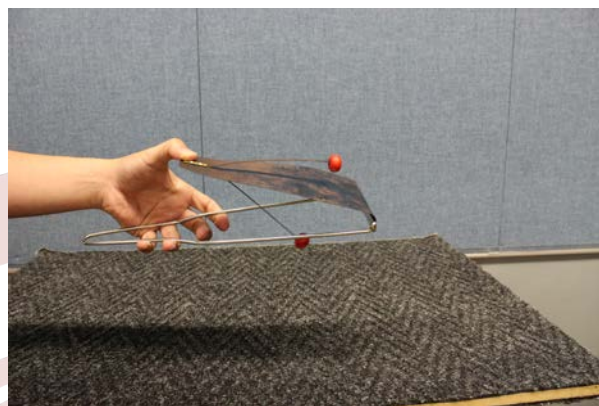


Finger Cymbals

Finger cymbals ARE cymbals; just not played like crash cymbals. Traditionally, finger cymbals are attached to the index finger and thumb and played in a manner reminiscent of Arabic music and dance. For classical percussion use, the finger cymbals will be held parallel to the floor. While suspending one cymbal in one hand, strike with the other by dropping one edge of one cymbal into the other. The sound you want to achieve is bright and articulate.

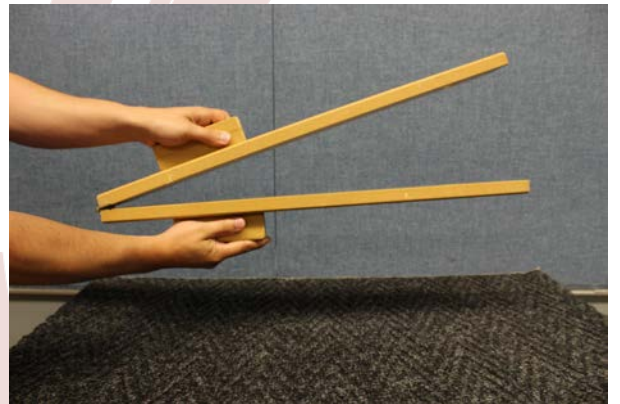
Flexatone

The flexatone is another example of an instrument that originated as a "foley instrument". The flexatone behaves very similar to a musical saw. The more tension there is in the bow of the metal, the higher the pitch will be. The flexatone is played by holding the instrument in your dominant hand with your fingers beneath the frame and your thumb at the edge of the metal sheet. As you shake the instrument back and forth causing the wooden beaters to strike



Slap Stick

Slapsticks are also known as whips or whip cracks. The slapstick is a prime example of an instrument that originated as a “folly instrument” from vaudeville shows becoming a staple in the percussion section. The slapstick is required for many pieces in the musical repertoire, but is most famous in Leroy Anderson’s *Sleigh Ride*. The slapstick comes in two forms: one with a hinge that connects the two pieces of wood that are played with both hands (slapstick), and another that has a spring loaded hinged meant to be played with just one hand (more of a whip action). Either is acceptable. However, the two handed slapstick is typically easier to operate more accurately.



Sleigh Bells

Sleigh Bells are another *Sleigh Ride* favorite instrument. Conventional sleigh bells are made today by attaching “jingle” bells to a piece of wood with a handle. The most common technique is to hold the sleigh bells in your non-striking hand with the butt of the handle facing upward. Your striking hand will then strike the butt end of the handle in order to perform the rhythms. Especially in a piece like *Sleigh Ride*, the goal of the percussionist playing is to articulate the rhythm accurately.



Vibraslap

The vibraslap is the modern take on an instrument known as a quijada. A quijada is literally a donkey's jaw bone (the jaw bone is dried and separate from the body of the deceased animal). When the jaw bone is held at the "chin" and struck at the joint, the remaining teeth in the jaw rattle. The vibraslap behaves in a similar way. The vibraslap is held in the non-striking hand at the middle point between the two ends of the instrument. The sphere is struck with sound. The goal is allow the instrument to vibrate / resonate as freely as possible.



Maracas

Maracas are rattles from Central and South America. Small gourds are dried and filled with grains or beads and attached to a handle in order to create maracas. Simple in construction, maracas can be extremely virtuosic instruments if played correctly. *Joropo* music is an excellent example of virtuosic maraca playing. The important thing to keep in mind about playing maracas is that the rhythms should be articulate. This idea is very much dependent on what the gourds are

made of and what materials are used inside the gourd. Maracas can be held in a match grip fashion as if they were snare drum sticks. Articulation is best achieved by snapping the wrist in order to get a fast reaction from the materials inside. Practicing beginning to intermediate snare drum etudes and/or exercises is a great way to start learning maraca technique.

Castanets

Castanets, like the finger cymbals, have a traditional usage in music and dance (Think Bizet's *Carmen*). Classically, they have myths pertaining to how they are performed. Castanets are either fixed to a castanet machine or to handles. Both have tension adjustment built in so that the action can be tight or loose depending on player preferences. Performing with the castanets held is always preferred. This will give a more characteristic sound and style. The castanet machine is used for fast changes when there is not



time to pick up castanets. Striking the castanets on top in an articulated fashion is all that is required to play the castanet machine correctly. Castanets that are fixed to handles are held in a match grip type fashion with the index fingers lightly held on top. The castanets are then struck against the top of the thigh near the knee. A chair can be used to raise the knee in order to make this technique more comfortable. Stylistically, the “flam” is used when playing single note passages. •



Benjamin Fraley is a percussionist, composer, and educator currently finishing his doctoral studies at The Florida State University, and a lecturer of percussion at Troy University in Troy, AL. A veteran of many musical genres and percussion disciplines, Mr. Fraley has performed and trained in Portugal, Canada, Ireland, Switzerland, Germany, Ghana, Austria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, as well as the United States. He has also been a frequent performer at PASIC, the Midwest Band and Orchestra clinic, the College Band Directors National Association Conference, the American Bandmasters Association, the Percussion Festival at the Escola Superior de Musica de Lisboa, the National Flute Association Conference, the Chosen Vale International Percussion Seminar, and MusicX, Grandin, Cincinnati Fringe, and Bang on a Can festivals. Mr. Fraley is a percussionist with the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra and the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra. He is a member of the Percussive Arts Society and is chair of the University Committee. Benjamin Fraley is a proud endorser of Innovative Percussion, Grover Pro Percussion, and Remo Inc.