



STEEL BAND: TECHNIQUE THROUGH WARM-UPS

Lucas Bernier

The engaging sound of the steel pan and its rich cultural history has led to the increased popularity of school steel bands. Today, it is not uncommon to find steel bands in universities, high schools, and even middle schools. With the inclusion of steel bands in high school and middle school programs, directors may walk into a situation where they are now responsible for maintaining or building the school's steel band regardless of their previous experience in such an ensemble. The following will provide a basic approach to warm-up exercises that will increase technique and performance ability for the steel band.

Warm-up Exercises

Large ensembles in an academic setting tend to start rehearsals with warm-ups. Steel band rehearsals will benefit greatly from the same practice. I find that regardless of the musical background of the students, utilizing warm-ups can be a great way to teach musical concepts to the entire ensemble and to develop your band's overall sound and technique. While some members of these ensembles have musical ability, often they have not had previous experience playing the steel pan. These warm-ups are especially beneficial for the non-percussionist beginner and novice pan player. In my experience, by starting rehearsals with warm-ups and scale exercises, the band learns more repertoire and more difficult repertoire in a shorter amount of time and can develop music proficiency at a faster rate.

I have found the following exercises successful in middle school through collegiate ensembles. These warm-ups will aid in the development of technique, help teach scales and arpeggios, and allow the student to become familiar with the pan.

Tone

Always strive for a good sound from the pans. It is easy to overplay the instrument, so take the necessary time to demonstrate a proper sound. Show students the difference between a clear, pure, and beautiful tone utilizing a light touch and good technique versus a distorted and "barking" sound caused by overplaying. Emphasizing tone during warm-ups and rehearsal has several benefits. The first benefit is the development of overall sound

quality. Band, choir, and orchestra directors often spend considerable time with blend, balance, and tone color from their ensembles; steel band should be no different. The second benefit is less instrument maintenance. Constant overplaying will knock the pans out of tune faster. By encouraging a pleasing tone, you are not just playing with better sound, you are preserving the life of the instruments and teaching your students to do the same.

Basic Scale Warm-up

I typically begin each semester with whole-note rolls up and down the scales followed by subsequent faster rhythmic subdivisions. Typically whole-notes are needed only for a rehearsal or two as students begin to recognize notes on the pan. While holding the long roll, have students search for the next note. This helps students identify where to move next. Arpeggiations are a great closer for the scales, which will help identify chords and can lead into further discussions about improvisation. Example 1 illustrates this basic scale exercise beginning with half-note rolls.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a steel band. The first system shows the initial half-note rolls for the Tenor, OBL. ENDS, CELLO, and BASS parts, with a Drum Set part below. The second system shows the continuation of the exercise with faster rhythmic subdivisions for all parts. The notation includes clefs, time signatures, and various note values and rests.

Example 1, Basic Scale Warm-up

Adding Rhythm

Applying typical calypso/soca strumming patterns is an effective way to teach rhythm to the steel band. By adding these rhythms to scale patterns, we are helping students develop comfort with syncopated rhythms (commonly found in calypso and soca music). Example 2 shows typical calypso/soca rhythmic patterns and Example 3 expands upon and illustrates Strumming Pattern B as part of an exercise. Be sure to have your band move as they play to help internalize the beat to develop rhythmic integrity. This can be as simple as walking in place similar to 'marking time' in a drumline. Keep it fun and dancelike.

Example 2, Strumming Patterns

Example 3, Scale Warm-up Incorporating Strumming Patterns

Extra Considerations

Be sure to vary dynamics, adding crescendos and decrescendos, etc. Add a variety of scales/modes as your band progresses. As your students develop, replace the upper tonic pitch with the 7th during arpeggio exercises. To keep the energy up during scale exercises, always include the engine room. Assign the drummer basic styles (calypso, soca, samba, funk, mambo, etc.) to play during the exercises. This keeps the engine room engaged while simultaneously working their grooves. Have the engine room cycle through a variety of styles during warm-ups. More advanced pan players can harmonize in 3rds or play the relative major/minor while the beginners work regular scales. Lower pans may need to jump octaves depending on the range of the instrument. Tailor exercises to meet the band's needs. If the majority of the ensemble members are beginning pan players, start simple and progress from there.

Summary

Take the time to treat steel band rehearsals as an opportunity to teach much more than just a piece of music. Use it as an opportunity to train the next generation of pan players. By applying simple, but focused warm-ups, your players will become proficient on their instrument by learning scales and arpeggios, they will become more rhythmically competent, and learn music at a faster rate. Use warm-ups as a means to develop your band's own sound. Be creative, allow students to get involved in creating exercises, and have fun with your steel band! •

Dr. Lucas Bernier is currently an Assistant Professor of Music and the Director of Percussion Studies at the University of Mary in Bismarck, ND where he directs the Percussion Ensemble and Steel Band. He works throughout the Midwest as a performer, adjudicator, and clinician. Dr. Bernier embraces a diverse range of musical settings including contemporary, classical, jazz, and world music. He has directed steel bands at St. Mary's Central High School (Bismarck, ND), the University of Iowa, and the Percussion in the Valley Summer Camp (Palmer, AK). He is the Principal Percussionist with the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony and leads various groups including a jazz combo and steel pan quintet. He holds degrees from The University of Iowa and Minnesota State University Moorhead. Dr. Bernier is proud to be a Yamaha Performing Artist and endorses Innovative Percussion and Sabian Cymbals.