


INCORPORATING YOUR PERCUSSIONIST IN CHAMBER MUSIC WITH NON-PERCUSSIONISTS

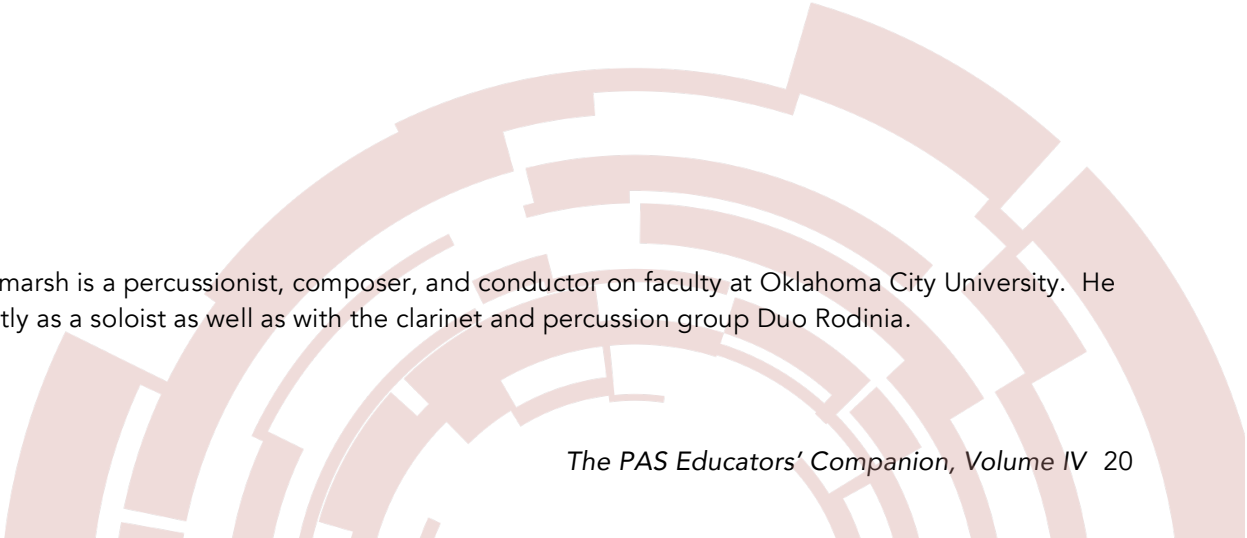
Jamie Wind Whitmarsh

Percussionists have a large body of repertoire that involves performing with other percussionists. There are few things better than locking in a groove and connecting moving parts; we love it! However, if one considers the skills wind and string players develop when performing chamber music—breathing together, eye contact, moments of uncertainty followed by everyone magically playing together—it becomes clear that these skills are not emphasized by pieces written only for percussionists (especially at the high-school level; performers in professional percussion groups have likely already developed these skills by engaging with non-percussionists). Percussion instruments are so attack-driven (that is, if we are not exactly together it shows enormously) that we must prepare our entrances with precision to ensure that our performance does not sound sloppy. This can remove much of the—for lack of a better term—“chamber-ness” that gives music its life. This skill is emphasized in other instruments, so why not percussion? It can only lead to a section that is more capable of performing with vitality and confidence.

There are several avenues by which the chronically over-worked band director may enhance these skills within their percussion section. The easiest way to help students develop these skills is to assign them to perform with one instrumentalist of another type. This could be for a solo and ensemble contest, or perhaps a chamber music concert. The holiday season, in particular, affords many opportunities for students to perform within the community. Just think how a vibraphone/bassoon duet could increase your program's visibility, while providing a service for the community and developing chamber music skills in your students! Another method might be to replace existing instruments within a traditional setting with a percussionist. Perhaps you want to program a woodwind quintet, but don't have an oboist – assign one of your percussionists to perform on marimba instead. This approach is certainly unorthodox, but the benefits can outweigh the skeptical looks you will receive. It may seem strange, but this can teach your students so much about music and communication. This method can also help develop skills in your non-percussionists, particularly rhythmic accuracy. (I do not recommend replacing transposing instruments; better to limit substitutions for flute, oboe, bassoon, trombone, and tuba.)



If you can find the time and the repertoire to make this sort of project happen for your students, I believe that you will see a difference in their playing. Percussionists who engage musically with non-percussionists will have their minds opened up to a new way of hearing and feeling music. High school students in general need more chamber music experience, but percussionists especially need to be exposed to different ways of feeling time and phrasing. Performing with musicians who create sound in a completely different manner can help. •



Jamie Wind Whitmarsh is a percussionist, composer, and conductor on faculty at Oklahoma City University. He performs frequently as a soloist as well as with the clarinet and percussion group Duo Rodinia.