

ARRANGEMENTS IN A PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE SETTING: THEIR PERFORMANCE AND PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS AND FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN ARRANGING COMPOSITIONS

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The Western percussion world reached an important milestone at the end of the twentieth century. Percussion performers, pedagogues, ensembles, and compositions came to be recognized as a genuine presence within the vast worlds of academic and classical music. The years just before the new millennium brought with them a dramatic increase in worthwhile percussion solo and ensemble repertoire, new advances in the production of quality percussion instruments, and innovative techniques in percussion pedagogy. These developments, which some may consider long overdue, have had a positive impact on both professional musicians and the general public. Though advances have been made, much work remains when compared with other instrumental and vocal music.

There are far fewer quality compositions for percussion instruments than for other solo and chamber ensembles. The library was not firmly established until the first half of the 20th century, when several notable composers created works for "Western" percussion ensemble. These composers include George Antheil (*Ballet Mécanique*, 1924), Edgard Varèse (*Ionisation*, 1931), Henry Cowell (*Ostinato Pianissimo*, 1934), John Cage (*First Construction in Metal*, 1939) and Carlos Chavez (*Toccata*, 1942). These works have become staples in the repertoire, much like Haydn's string quartets or Mozart's wind quintets have for those respective ensembles. Our compositional output is still in its infancy, and this presents a disadvantage not only from a performance standpoint but from a pedagogical one as well.

While the repertoire from the mid-1920s through the mid-1960s was diverse in many ways, it did not expand in sheer quantity and variety of aesthetic styles until the late 1960s onward. One particularly effective method of bolstering the available repertoire has been to adapt and arrange music written for other instrumentation. Several notable percussionists added both original compositions and transcriptions to the budding library. Some were percussionists who were fascinated with mallet-keyboard instruments during the Vaudeville era, such as George Hamilton Green, Joe Green and Harry Breuer. Clair Omar Musser devoted his energies towards the development of the marimba and the solo and ensemble repertory for that instrument.

As mallet-keyboard and percussion ensembles grow in popularity, so do the number of original compositions for the medium. However, arrangements still comprise a significant percent of the available repertoire. There are many percussion programs at all levels that take advantage of these works. However, some collegiate and professional percussion groups do not make use of arrangements, either for performance or pedagogical purposes. It is my belief that arrangements play a vital role in a percussion curriculum. This article will discuss the performance and pedagogical benefits of arrangements, offer an analysis of two published arrangements, and propose methods for choosing which works to arrange and what compositional techniques to employ.

Before continuing, it is important to discuss terminology. People often use the terms “transcribe,” “arrange,” and “adapt” interchangeably when discussing a composition that has been altered from its original form. Inversely, there are those who have adamant beliefs about each word’s perceived meaning. A brief dictionary search¹ provides the following definitions:

Transcribe	1. To arrange a composition for a medium other than that for which it was originally written. 2. To represent sound (music) in written symbols (notation).
Arrange	To adapt a composition for a particular style of performance by voices or instruments.
Adapt	To make suitable to requirements or conditions; adjust or modify fittingly.

It’s interesting to note that the definition for “transcribe” uses the word *arrange*; and the definition for “arrange” uses the word *adapt*. One would assume this makes the words synonyms, despite the fact that many musicians have their own specific definitions for all three terms. In her article *What Do You Mean by ‘Transcribe?’*, Vida Chenoweth introduces an additional term that may make its way into our lexicon: *reassignment*². Chenoweth defines reassignment as the performance of a score, as written, on an instrument other than the one intended by the composer. For example, a performance of a Bach cello suite played on a 5-octave marimba with no edits or alterations from the original music. While the term reassignment is useful, it too suffers from a lack of standardized designation within the musical world. For simplicity’s sake, I will use *arrangements*.

¹ www.dictionary.com

² Chenoweth, “What Do You Mean by Transcribe?”, *Percussive Notes* 44/1, Feb. 2006, pg. 36

PERFORMANCE AND PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS

Percussion ensembles continue to grow in popularity. In addition to professional percussion groups, universities and colleges as well as many middle and high schools are incorporating percussion chamber music into their curriculum. This is a positive trend that affords students and concert audiences an opportunity to experience how vibrant and exciting this type of ensemble can be. There are several reasons for a percussion ensemble director to integrate arrangements into the ensemble's repertoire, regardless of the age range or experience level of the group.

First, it's an opportunity to familiarize students with music from other genres. A timpanist playing a Mozart overture with an orchestra is involved with the music, but not to the same degree as the strings and winds. Percussionists rarely have the opportunity to be responsible for all melodic and harmonic aspects of a work, particularly with music composed before the 20th century. An arrangement of a classical or romantic composition offers percussionists precisely that opportunity. This same overture arranged for mallet-keyboard ensemble allows students to experience Mozart's use of melody, harmony, phrasing and texture more completely.

Second, mallet-keyboard arrangements can bring balance to a percussion-heavy concert program. The catalog of mallet-keyboard and percussion ensemble compositions grows every day. Yet it still pales in comparison to those of more established performance ensembles. Arrangements offer solutions to the problems many directors face, including the desire to program concerts having a wide range of genres and instrumentation. Arrangements also increase the options available when directors are programming for a specified number of students with potentially differing levels of experience. They are also helpful when directors are looking for something to perform outside normal expectations. One example is Dan Armstrong's arrangement *Samba Macabre*, which takes Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre* and presents it in an entirely unexpected way by combining a classical composition and Brazilian instruments and rhythms.

Including arrangements of well-known classical and popular works allows casual music enthusiasts an easy transition into a new medium, and thus, an easier achieved sense of gratification. This can be accomplished using either a specific work, or a familiar genre. On the whole, percussionists are eager for the percussion ensemble to attain the resplendence of other performing ensembles. This is entirely possible; and it begins with concert attendance.

Audiences may be comprised not only of parents and friends of the performers, but also school board members and administrators. Within the confines of K-12 education, the arts have always struggled to defend their perceived worthiness. Many school administrators recognize the vital role that arts education plays in the mental and physical development of students. But, many school districts across the nation have already cut the arts from their

curricula. Using arrangements helps introduce percussion ensembles to the general public, and could have a positive effect.

There are also pedagogical benefits to making arrangements a part of the percussion program. As mentioned earlier, these arrangements give percussionists the chance to be responsible for the melodic and harmonic aspects of a composition. Solo exercises and etudes may help students with phrasing, as well as building a sense of musical line. Performing a composition with a chamber ensemble is an even more effective way to reinforce those skills while working on melody and harmony.

Due to the nature of percussion instruments, students often study rhythmic aspects of music more so than the melodic and harmonic aspects of the score. Percussionists are often seen as rhythmically astute rather than as possessing a gifted or well-developed musical ear. It is the ensemble director's responsibility to make sure the percussion students are building the same musical concepts and skills as any other instrumentalist. Mallet-keyboard arrangements can be very useful teaching aids for students of all ages and ability levels. Even a simple arrangement of "Twinkle, Twinkle" could enhance lesson topics such as phrasing, melody and accompaniment, V-I cadences, as well as key and time signature discussions.

There are entire musical eras vastly under-represented in percussion literature. There exists some original keyboard-mallet ensemble repertoire written in a classical or baroque style. However, no keyboard-mallet ensemble music exists from those specific time periods. This is primarily because most of the melodic percussion instruments in use today either had not yet been invented, or were not yet available in Europe. As a result, composers prior to the mid-1920s did not write for keyboard-mallet or percussion ensemble. Had the concert marimba been available in 18th century Leipzig, Bach very well may have written exquisite music for it! The fact that original music does not exist from this time period should not preclude percussionists from being exposed to it. Through arrangements, students can learn about music's most famous composers and the eras in which they lived. Music students need a strong working knowledge of the role music has played throughout history. This is especially pertinent to a K-12 setting, where a cross-curricular teaching approach is encouraged. Having an opportunity to perform original music from these eras help students gain a better understanding of a given time period.

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED ARRANGEMENTS

I will present analyses for two arrangements – Dvorak's Symphony No. 9, "New World," and Stravinsky's *Histoire du Soldat*. Both original compositions were written within 25 years of each other, and are renowned works. They are written in distinctly different styles, and present different opportunities that are advantageous to the arranger. I also chose these

arrangements based on instrumentation. The works are written for mallet-keyboard ensemble and full percussion ensemble, respectively. These examples clearly illustrate the versatility arrangements can offer.

Largo from “New World” Symphony – Antonin Dvorak, arr. C.O. Musser, ed. Dan Armstrong
Clair Omar Musser arranged many compositions for his marimba orchestra, of which only a few remain in publication. Perhaps the most popular arrangement commercially available is the Largo from Dvorak’s Symphony No. 9. This edition, published by C. Alan Publications, has been updated by Dan Armstrong to incorporate a contrabass part. This provides a more substantial harmonic foundation in conjunction with the originally transcribed parts. This arrangement consists of five separate marimba parts, with Marimba One serving as the primary melodic voice. All parts call for two mallets, with the exception of four measures in the Marimba Two part that requires three mallets. Musser altered the original key from D flat Major to C Major in order to accommodate the range of the marimba of that era, (C3 – C7). This arrangement is not technically difficult but requires players who are sensitive to phrasing and musical expression.

Musser’s arrangement focuses solely on the first motive of the movement, which is characterized by the well-known English horn solo. The *poco piu mosso* section in the middle of the movement is omitted. This could be for any number of reasons. Musser may have wanted to focus on the more austere and nostalgic primary theme, thus keeping the orchestration simple and sparse. He also may have thought that the middle section of the movement would not lend itself well to performance by a marimba orchestra. Perhaps pragmatically, he may have had a compositional deadline or a set length for this arrangement in mind. Regardless, Musser’s arrangement is true to Dvorak’s original composition in terms of maintaining the relationship between melody and harmony.

This arrangement is readily accessible, both technically and musically, to ensembles of all ages. It can serve as a good teaching tool for younger ensembles. It can be used to work on phrasing, musicality, and ensemble cohesiveness. At the same time, it introduces students to an important classical composition. This arrangement would also be appropriate for college-level ensembles looking to develop the intricacies and nuances within composition. The performers could identify the instrument their parts represent, determine its place within the orchestration, finally demonstrating that understanding through performance. I think it was wise of Musser to arrange the *Largo* movement as it is, of course, a famous movement from an iconic symphony. The popularity of classical music in the 1940s suggests that the work may have been even more popular in Musser’s time than it is today. A benefit to choosing this movement is its sparse orchestration, which often features a single melodic line over a held chord. This utilizes the marimba’s resonance and sonorous tone qualities, of which Musser was keenly aware. In a marimba orchestra, fifteen to twenty people may be playing

the same part. The sustained quality of the sound would then be uninterrupted and immensely resounding. Surely, this is what Musser was hoping to achieve.

When writing for a large number of players, as Musser did, there will undoubtedly be varying ability levels within the ensemble. Various parts, particularly the inner marimba voices, would be playable by amateur players. This arrangement offers high musical reward despite a low difficulty level, making it a wonderful programming option for ensemble directors at any performance level.

“The Devil’s Dance” from *Histoire du Soldat* – Igor Stravinsky, arr. James Ancona
Stravinsky’s *Histoire du Soldat* is a well-known and important work for percussionists. Stravinsky utilized an innovative grouping of percussion instruments in the original work, which calls for several different mallets and beaters. This helped establish percussion as a viable and vibrant solo instrument. Given its history, an arrangement of “The Devil’s Dance” for percussion ensemble seems fitting. Ancona has created a faithful arrangement, keeping entirely within the original form and harmonic structure. Ancona became famous for his work with Drum Corps International (DCI), and this arrangement would be effective as a front ensemble showpiece or in a concert percussion ensemble program. The instrumentation calls for the following: glockenspiel, xylophone, two vibraphones, two 4.3 marimbas, five timpani and a multi-percussion setup of a snare drum, field drum, tambourine, and concert bass drum. Ancona transposes the work up a major second to accommodate instrument range. The arrangement is a mere 1:20 minutes long, but the parts are technically challenging at the listed performance tempo of quarter note = 144. Both marimba players will need 4 mallets. Because the timpani part follows the double bass line, extensive pedaling is required.

The original composition uses only seven players, and is exceptionally dense. There isn’t a single beat of silence until nearly the end of the work. There is always an eighth- or sixteenth-note pulse, even underneath the more drawn out melodic lines. This results in a high-energy and insistent feel, which is deftly realized in the percussion arrangement. The mallet-keyboard parts are often doubled, either melodically or rhythmically. Playing these lines together requires a high level of technical precision. A positive benefit of unison parts is the sense of cohesion and camaraderie that often forms within the ensemble. Trust among ensemble members, and the knowledge that they are depending on one another, instills interpersonal life skills. This arrangement also allows the ensemble members to work on other aspects of musicality, such as building rhythmic accuracy, reading over-the-barline ostinati in mixed meters, and building a sense of primary and secondary voicing.

This arrangement, while difficult, would be appropriate for an advanced high school, or college-level ensemble. As with the *Largo* from the “New World” Symphony, this work would be an excellent way to introduce students to important compositions that they might not have been exposed to otherwise. However, due to its short performance time, a director might

also want to consider arranging the 'Tango', 'Valse', and 'Ragtime' dances from *Histoire du Soldat* as well, thus creating a suite from this monumental work. This would prove an excellent exercise in arranging, since working with the limited instrumentation would be less daunting than arranging a full orchestral score. It also lends itself to developing more of a story arc that builds up to the Devil's Dance, rather than starting there abruptly. Utilizing Ancona's arrangement as a model would be advantageous to anyone looking to enhance his or her own arranging skills.

CHOOSING A WORK TO ARRANGE, AND TECHNIQUES TO EMPLOY

An average mallet-keyboard catalog is likely to list many arrangements of varying genres, difficulty levels, and instrumentations. While many arranged works are readily available, ensemble directors should not limit themselves to those works. Arranging works for one's own ensemble is an easy and exciting way to incorporate different music of any genre into the repertoire. Deciding what and how to arrange can be difficult, but these guidelines may prove helpful.

First, consider the ultimate goal. Is it more important to arrange a work that is a favorite of the students, a favorite of the arranger or a favorite of the anticipated audience? Perhaps it is most important to arrange a work that fits a particular genre or time period needed for the concert program, or to arrange a work whose rehearsal and performance would offer students the highest degree of musical growth? These are only a few worthy considerations. Often, the ultimate goal will involve more than one objective. As educators, we all want our students to be exposed to a wide range of musical genres – an experience that is better imparted through performance than lecturing.

Next, it is vital to ensure that the ensemble and the director both share a general consensus about the composition to be arranged. If a work is favored by the ensemble director but not the students (or vice versa), it may be more difficult to achieve positive results. However, no work should be immediately dismissed by either student or teacher. Through practice and perseverance, one can often develop appreciation for a composition initially perceived as uninspiring. Just as the director may want to arrange a Haydn string quartet or a Rossini overture, the students may want to arrange a current popular song or more obscure work. Those options all have value, both musically and educationally. One possibility would be for the students to create their own arrangements. This would be a wonderful way for them to learn about the inner workings of music in the context of a work that they enjoy. Concert programs featuring student arrangements are highly rewarding for both student and teacher, and can be an excellent means of encouragement.

Certain works will be more suited to arrangement and concert performance than others. One obvious issue to consider is what instruments are available to the ensemble. It would be frustrating to arrange a work that is ultimately unplayable due to instrument constraints. Both

keyboard-mallet and full percussion ensemble arrangements are beneficial. Arrangements for full percussion ensembles normally allow for more personnel. This particularly is an important issue for younger ensembles, where keeping everyone involved with every work is expected. Maintaining everyone's participation in a younger ensemble gives them a chance to bond as a section and assures no one feels left out or unimportant. Also, on a concert program that features many works for a smaller number of players, many high school and collegiate directors choose to close with a work that features the entire ensemble.

The use of non-melodic percussion instruments in conjunction with keyboard-mallet instruments is another advantage of arranging for full percussion ensemble. This is particularly true if the original composition makes extensive use of those instruments. Imagine an arrangement of Bolero without using a snare drum, or an arrangement of *Blue Rondo a la Turk* without a drum set. While they technically might work, they would not be as stimulating for performers or audience members. Still, it is important to consider the orchestration of the arrangement. If there are too many percussive instruments in an ensemble and too few keyboard-mallet instruments, the melodic content of the arrangement will most likely be drowned out.

Arranging for keyboard-mallet instruments alone is a wonderful option when considering compositions that either do not feature percussion prominently, or whose melodic and harmonic content carry the work by itself. Student percussionists, specifically those in K-12 settings, are typically less comfortable on keyboard-mallet instruments than on non-melodic instruments. Thankfully, this is a trend being addressed by many music educators. Despite the forward progress, students rarely have an opportunity to perform music featuring only keyboard-mallet instruments. These arrangements help students develop vital aspects of musicality. This includes phrasing as well as the interaction and hierarchy between melody, countermelody, and harmony. These are obviously areas that any teacher would want students to develop as part of basic musical training. These facets of musicianship can be developed even further with college-aged students who need these skills in order to consider their music education truly complete.

When choosing a work to arrange, one should also consider its musical properties. Is the work very dense, or lighter in texture? Is there a clear sense of melody and harmony, or is the tonal structure more complex? The answers to these questions should not, in and of themselves, provide grounds for or against arranging the work. But they may help lead to a decision. The texture of a composition or arrangement encourages students to focus on aspects such as ensemble balance, voice hierarchy, and ear development. Playing compositions with both lighter and denser textures ensures these skills are developed to their full potential.

When considering the tonal structure of a composition, the same logic applies. Both a clearly defined tonal work, and one that has a vaguer tonal center each have some positive attributes. Melody and harmony are relatively simple concepts for students to grasp, particularly when they are perceived in compositions already familiar to the ear. It is much easier to sing along to a typical melody from the classical era than to music from a post-tonal school such as the Second Viennese School. Music with straightforward melodic and harmonic content is easier to rehearse and is generally more accessible. However, this should not be taken to mean that this music is more worthwhile than post-tonal or atonal music. Introducing twelve-tone and/or highly chromatic or atonal music in a performance can be a useful teaching tool for the performers and the audience. People are not as familiar with music of that sort, and tend to base their opinions on either infrequent listening or on the opinions of others. Arranging these works will require a conscientious approach to rehearsals and performance from the students, and a more scrupulous approach to listening from an audience. The reward, however, is worth the effort if it inspires new appreciation for music previously thought disagreeable.

In conclusion, there are numerous positive reasons to make use of arrangements in both mallet-keyboard and full percussion ensemble settings. They offset the scarcity of music written for the medium from earlier periods, and they can be used to teach students about history in a musical context. The director can also use arrangements to help educate and reinforce vital aspects of musicality for the students. Arrangements can be a means for audiences to learn about musical genres previously unfamiliar to them; and they can help add variety to a concert program. Arrangements give ensemble directors options in addition to the current idiomatic repertoire. The percussion ensemble has emerged as an integrated component of music programs around the world. As that popularity grows, so will the repertoire. Utilizing arrangements as a practical and valuable supplement will serve to stimulate this growth further.

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