



# **BUILDING BETTER PERCUSSIONISTS: A CURRICULUM TO ADVANCE YOUR PERCUSSION SECTION MUSICALLY AND TECHNICALLY YEAR BY YEAR: PART TWO**

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## **PREFACE**

In my time as a percussion specialist in public school programs, a private lesson teacher, and as a member of the music faculty at the College of Southern Idaho, I have found that it can be difficult to organize an approach to the vast array of instruments, skills and techniques that it is necessary for student percussionists to master. In this series of articles, I will put forward an idea of curricular programming from year 1 of a percussionist's involvement with a school band program through graduation. The concept of this program of study is to organize the percussion education curriculum in a way that focuses deliberately on a small group of techniques at any one time. By focusing on technique first, and then picking music that reinforces the that focus, this curriculum will produce percussionists who:

- know all of the standard rudiments before high school and all of the modern hybrid rudiments before college
- master all of their major scales before high school and all minor scales before college
- are well rounded and technically proficient on all of the instruments in the percussion family
- can play suitably advanced repertoire on each of the major solo percussion instruments at each grade level
- listen to their fellow musicians and make music connected to their ears and breath
- continue to grow and learn more about their instrument every year
- become lifelong performers of the instrument.

## **7<sup>TH</sup> GRADE (YEAR 2)**

### **SNARE DRUM**

Having spent the first year of your students' study focused on becoming comfortable with the mechanics and application of the full stroke, your students are certainly ready to move on and expand their 'tool box' of techniques. It is important to continue to pursue the full stroke and double bounce 'stroke rolls.' As you progress through the year it is a good time to introduce

new techniques, and to increase the challenge level on the techniques already in the student's hands. This can be accomplished by increasing tempo demands, control over dynamics, or hand/limb independence.

In the second year two new stick control techniques, the down stroke and the up stroke, can be introduced. Once again, an approach focused on these simple techniques and how they relate to specific rudiment families will allow your students to make tremendous progress. Here are some thoughts on curricular planning for the second-year percussion student.

#### Building further on the full stroke and double stroke

Increasing demand on the techniques learned during the first year is a great way to review a little bit, and build on the confidence established early on. At the beginning of the second year, it is a good idea to continue to increase tempo expectations for the stroke rolls and the long roll. It is also a perfect opportunity to introduce another rudiment to your students: the single stroke roll.

The single stroke roll is exactly what it sounds like, a rapid succession of hand to hand single strokes. Students will feel comfortable with learning this rudiment, because they now have the concept of a relaxed full stroke in their minds and hands, and they are comfortable with the concept of practicing a rudiment by establishing a tempo with the metronome and gradually increasing speed. It is important to emphasize that students maintain a controlled relaxed approach to the drum while working on this rudiment, and avoid tense 'twitch' movements to get uncontrolled rapid notes. Students can work on this technique for just a few minutes at the beginning of class each day. An added advantage to using this as an early warm up is that it acts as a good 'stretching' exercise for your student's arms and fingers. After working on their single full strokes with increasing tempo for a few minutes they will have loose relaxed arms and be ready to play whatever music you put in front of them during that class period.

#### More demand on the stroke rolls

Now that students are comfortable with the stroke rolls and can play them at relatively quick tempi, a fun element to add to the challenge of these rudiments is a kick bass drum. If you have a drum set in your class room, allow students to play quarter notes on the bass drum while they work on their stroke rolls. This is exciting for students because they feel they are finally getting to play at the drum set. It is beneficial to them because they are adding a more concrete sense of timing to their performance of the rudiments. Physically feeling pulse in the body will also produce much more confident and musical percussionists. This practice will also begin to introduce some of the ideas of limb independence to your percussionists which will have great positive effect on your school's jazz program later on.

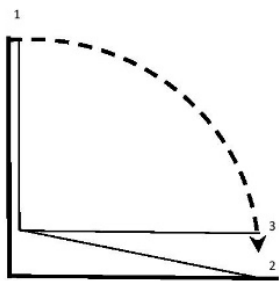
#### What are "down" strokes and "up" strokes?

Just like the “full stroke” whose name is derived from its full range of motion (from high to low and back to high again), down strokes and up strokes are named to describe the motion involved in their execution.

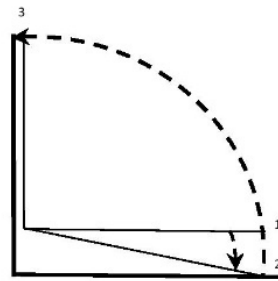
A down stroke begins with the stick perpendicular to the drum head, just like a full stroke. The fingers should be in contact with the stick, but open and away from the palm slightly. From here the stick is motivated by closing the fingers, and dropping the full weight of the forearm towards the drum head. Once contact is made with the stick and the drum head, the fingers remain closed around the stick, the wrist remains straight, and the elbow remains still as well. All of this will allow the stick to stay close to the drum head. It is not necessary for the player to ‘squeeze’ the stick tightly to keep it from rebounding. Quite simply, your percussionists’ arms have much more mass than their sticks do. If their arms don’t move back up, the stick won’t move back up. There is no reason to clench the muscles to try and force the stick to stay down. In order to avoid this unnecessary tension at first, students should play one down stroke, evaluate it, then play one with the opposite hand, evaluate it, then reset and try again.

An up stroke begins with the stick low and parallel to the drum head. From here, the fingers squeeze the stick to allow it to move to the head. It is important that the stick only move down from the starting position. There should be no preparatory motion upward before the stick comes down. This is something that many students struggle with when first learning the up stroke technique, and should be watched for as they begin to work on it. Once the stick contacts the head, the fingers should relax to allow the stick to rebound on the fulcrum, similar to the rebound of a full stroke. If a student accomplishes this well, their sticks will end in an ‘up’ position, ready to play a full stroke or down stroke.

Down Stroke



Up Stroke



A simple exercise to work on the mechanical similarities and differences between the three stroke types the student is now working on is to play one of each on each hand, like so:

*(in this article, stickings will be listed as R [right] or L [left] and directly under the notes. Under that stroke types will be listed as D [down], U [up], and F [full])*

R		L		R		L
F		F		D		D
				U		U

## Rudiments

The first place to start with new rudiments after gaining comfort with the down and up strokes is the family of paradiddles. I find it best to teach them in this order:

### 1. Single Paradiddle:

Musical notation for Single Paradiddle on a five-line staff. It consists of six groups of notes, each starting with an accent (>). The first two groups are quarter notes, the next two are eighth notes, and the last two are sixteenth notes. Below the staff, the corresponding drum strokes are listed: R D, L U, R R, L L, R L, R L, R L, L L, R L, R R, L R, L L, R L, R R, L R, L L.

R L R R L R L L R L R R L R L L R L R R L R L L  
D U D U D U D U D U D U

### 2. Double Paradiddle:

Musical notation for Double Paradiddle on a five-line staff. It consists of six groups of notes, each starting with an accent (>). The first two groups are quarter notes, the next two are eighth notes, and the last two are sixteenth notes. Below the staff, the corresponding drum strokes are listed: R D, L U, R L, R L, R L, L L, R L, R L, R L, L L, R L, R L, R L, R L, R L, R L, L L, R L, R L, R L, R L, L L.

R L R L R R L R L L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L L  
D U D U D U D U D U D U D U D U D U D U

### 3. Paradiddle-diddle:

Musical notation for Paradiddle-diddle on a five-line staff. It consists of six groups of notes, each starting with an accent (>). The first two groups are quarter notes, the next two are eighth notes, and the last two are sixteenth notes. Below the staff, the corresponding drum strokes are listed: R D, L U, R L, R L, R L, L L, R L, R L, R L, L L, R L, R L, R L, R L, L L, R L, R L, R L, L L.

R L R L R R R L R L R R R L R L R R  
L R L R L L L R L R L L L R L R L L  
D U D U D U D U D U D U

The paradiddle family combines the newly learned down and up strokes with the already comfortable full stroke, or double bounce stroke (depending on the tempo of performance). Thus, students will be given an opportunity through these rudiments to focus on the new techniques being asked of them in isolation. Keeping the information they are working on simple like this will allow them to master the new stroke types and to gain facility with them in a rudimental context. With these new rudiments, it is again appropriate to begin very slowly, with each note equaling about 60bpm, and increase in small increments of 1 – 2 bpm as the playing becomes comfortable.

Once students are relatively comfortable with the paradiddle family, it is appropriate to move on to flam rudiments. Flams by themselves are simply a combination of a down stroke and up stroke performed simultaneously. The difference in starting height of these two different strokes will create the difference in timing necessary for the 'flam' sound. The finishing position of each of the strokes will leave the student prepared to play the next flam (if the right hand plays a down stroke, it ends in position to play the next up stroke. If the left hand plays an up stroke, it will end in position to play the next down stroke.) This thoughtful approach to the flam rudiment will allow your students to easily play flams with both hands.

Flams (broken down):

L      R                  R      L                  LR      RL  
 U      D                  U      D                  UD      UD

It is possible that as students become more comfortable with learning rudiments over time, they will learn them more quickly. Because of this, it may be reasonable to arrive at this point by the mid-year break of the second year of percussion study. This makes a good stopping point, allowing students to master the mechanics of the flam over the break. Then upon returning they can dig into the rest of the flam family of rudiments. A strong sequence to teaching these rudiments is:

1. Flam Tap

LR      R      RL      L      LR      R      RL      L      LR      RRL      L  
 UD              UD              UD              UD              UD              UD              UD              UD

2. Flam Accent number 2

LR                  R      RL                  L      LR                  R      RL                  L  
 UD                      UD                      UD                      UD

3. Flam Accent number 1

LR      L      R      RL      R      L      LR      L      R      RL      R      L  
 D      U              D      U              D      U              D      U

4. Flam Paradiddle

LR      L      R      R      RL      R      L      L      LR      L      R      R      L      R      L      L  
 D      U              D      U              D      U              D      U

5. Flam Double Paradiddle

LR      L      R      L      R      RR      L      R      L      R      L      L      LR      L      R      L      R      R      L      R      L      L      L  
 D              U              D              U              D              U              D              U



## 6. Flam Paradiddle-diddle

L R    L    R    R    L    L  
 R L    R    L    L    R    R  
 D            U            D

It is advisable to teach flam accent number 2 before flam accent number 1 because of its similarity to the flam tap. Likewise, flam accent 1 leads naturally to the flam paradiddle because the first simply adds 2 strokes following the flam, and the second adds a third. In this progression students move from a single flam, to flams with 1 additional stroke, to flams with 2 additional strokes, then 3 additional strokes. It is also notable that the group of flam paradiddles are the first group of rudiments students have learned that require them to play one hand three times in a row. It is nice to build up the conceptual and technical ideas of combining flams with other stroke before adding the additional challenge of playing a rudiment that requires three strokes with 1 hand.

If there is still time in the year after accomplishing these rudiments, the final member of the flam family is:

## 7. Flamaque:

L R    L    R    L    L R  
 R L    R    L    R    R L  
 U            D            U

This is the most advanced of the flam rudiments combining upstrokes and down strokes in such a way to phrase away from the down beat, and into the second note of the pattern. If you get to this with your students they can exit their second year of study having learned all of their stroke rolls, all paradiddle rudiments, and all of their flam rudiments, leaving only the family of drag rudiments for the third year. Surely this is a great accomplishment for any student.

## Repertoire

As your students begin to gain mastery over a wide variety of new rudiments, a wider range of repertoire becomes available to them. *The All-American Drummer* by Charlie Wilcoxon is an excellent next step. This book contains 150 solos for snare drum that largely contain the rudiments covered to this point. The majority of the solos in this book are quite short – half a page each. This allows students to feel the accomplishment of completing a solo and moving on in a timely manner which helps maintain the student’s motivation. The solos in the book are not exactly progressive from simplest to most difficult, some may involve rudiments the students have not yet begun to work on. The instructor should choose pieces that most

closely apply to the work being done in class, not necessarily move directly through the book from start to finish.

The Village Vanguard fife and drum corps has an online library of traditional rudimental music as well. It can be found on their website at: <http://vvfdc.org/sheetmusic.php>. These pieces also tend to be shorter and thus more attainable. They also combine the rudiments being worked on to this point, but may involve other rudiments not yet covered. As with the collection above, the instructor should select from this library pieces that most closely apply to the work being done with the students. The pieces in this library carry the added benefit of historic significance to drumming and American music.

## **MALLETS**

As with the first-year curriculum, it is essential to find connections between the work being done on the snare drum and mallets. Continuing to make these connections will create more powerful learning for your students, and will demystify whichever part of the percussion family your students find least comfortable.

### Hand technique and rolls

To this end it is worthwhile to draw connection between the emphasis on the single stroke roll discussed in the snare drum section and some technique building in mallets. In the first year of study, students worked on a rhythmic approach to playing rolls. They maxed out by playing 16<sup>th</sup> notes. begin by having your percussionists play 16<sup>th</sup> note triplets, and eventually 32<sup>nd</sup> notes to build on the momentum from the previous year. This exercise can be done while your wind players play long tones at the beginning of class. To make sure your students are building arm strength, it is important that they play these rolls at a full forte dynamic. I like to encourage my students to play this exercise once per day:



Just as long tones build core strength and breath support for your wind players, this exercise will build arm strength and ultimately a full, dark quality of sound across all instruments for your percussionists.

### Scales

In terms of scales, it may be necessary to review the four scales emphasized in the first year of study (C, G, F, and Bb). Because there is some familiarity with these scales, it is worthwhile to use them as a tool to build agility in moving up and down the keyboard. Using the technique of establishing a tempo with the metronome and increasing speed by 1 – 2 bpm at a time. Using this technique, it may be reasonable to ask your students to increase their tempo for these 4 scales as much as 25 beats per minute each month of instruction. Thus, having left off

playing these scales in eighth notes at quarter note = 90 at the end of year one, students may expect to reach tempos of 105, 130, 155, and 170 for these four scales by the mid-year break. If this is difficult to accomplish during class time, it is possible to assign these tempo goals to students as practicing homework, and to check in with them in class only periodically.

In terms of adding new material to the repertoire of scales at your students' disposal, it is worthwhile to add four more this year: D, A, Eb, and Ab major. Take the opportunity to reinforce, or repeat lessons about patterns of whole and half steps while teaching these scales. Remember to reinforce stick position on the bars of the instrument, and the concept of rebounding up and over from one bar to the next, so that the stick always moves only straight down towards the bar being struck. Because students are already comfortable with the concept of the pattern of a major scale, it is reasonable to expect that students will be able to learn these four new scales in the first semester of the year.

After the mid-year break, students should be ready to add new concepts to this base. Using the concept of counting half step and whole step patterns, students can easily learn the arpeggios for the 8 major scales they know. Advancing through arpeggios so early on is possible for percussion students because they do not need to worry about the issues of 'hearing' the pitches, manipulating an embouchure, or adjusting air speed to produce leaps in pitch. A good technique to practicing these scales and arpeggios which will help in reading skills is to play each one three times. The first time, have students look directly at the natural bars. The second time, students should look at the accidental bars. The third time they should look past the instrument at the music stand, or director. This practice will enable students to expand their peripheral vision.

It is important as students work on their scales and arpeggios that they play them in 2 octaves as much as possible. Because they have odd numbers of pitches, if the student begins a given scale or arpeggio with the right hand, the second octave will begin with the left. Thus, playing in two octaves will allow the student equal strength in playing these exercises with both the left and right hand.

*(example of 2-octave sticking of major scale and arpeggio)*

R | r | r | r | r | r | L | r | r | r | r | r | R | r | r | r | r | r | L | r | r | r | r | R | r | r | L | r | R | r | L | r | R

### Reading and repertoire

Building upon the foundation from the previous year, design or select reading exercises considering the following ideas:




1. Keep the material mostly linear still. Begin to introduce leaps methodically with octaves first. The octave leap allows students to practice moving large distances on the keyboard visually. It also reinforces the recognition of pitch classes as a concept across the instrument, rather than just a note in a single place. This type of leap might not be as common in the literature available to younger wind players, because they have different demands in producing the interval. It is relatively easy for percussion students to simply strike two bars far apart from each other, however.
2. Begin to increase rhythm from slower rhythms (whole, half, or quarter notes) to faster rhythms including 8<sup>th</sup> notes, triplets, and 16<sup>th</sup> notes. Octave leaps should be introduced with slower rhythms like whole and half notes, allowing students time to recognize the leap and to prepare for it.
3. Begin to prepare for and introduce rolls. As you increase the speed of rhythms, playing 16<sup>th</sup> notes on a single pitch is good preparation for playing rolls. Begin to introduce rolls first with longer rolls that begin and end on the same pitch. This allows students to focus on recognizing the roll without having to deal with the technical challenge of releasing the roll onto a different note. Towards the end of the year, it makes sense to have them release rolls onto the next note up or down the keyboard.
4. Continue to consider having your students sing the note names, either before they actually play the exercise, or as they are playing it. The act of singing the note names will increase visual recognition of the notes on the staff. It will also continue to connect musical phrasing to the length of a breath in a way that percussionists may not intrinsically understand without singing being part of their curriculum.

In terms of repertoire, students should continue to progress through the etudes of Morris Goldenberg's *Modern School for Xylophone, Marimba, and Vibraphone*, as well as whatever repertoire you are working on in your beginning band books. That combined with some carefully selected reading exercises will keep your students on track to gaining significant strength on mallet instruments.

## CONCLUSION

Following this layout for second-year percussionists allows them to continue to build on the strong technical and music foundation from their first year of study. By continuing to focus on one or two simple techniques and methodically applying them to the different instruments of the percussion section, you will have students who advance more quickly through your program, and who are well on their way to mastering all of the standard rudiments, their major scales, and can approach many technical challenges in any music put in front of them. On top of this, you also begin to teach your students that though percussion is a complex



family of instruments, they can and will reach high levels of accomplishment by focusing on growing foundational techniques little by little.

**Scott Farkas** is an assistant professor of music, and director of athletic bands at the College of Southern Idaho where he coordinates the percussion department. He has worked in public school systems teaching percussion to students from grades 5 – 12 in many contexts throughout his career. He has also served as a member of the percussion staff for the RAIDERS Drum and Bugle Corps. He is committed to expanding the community of percussionists by maintaining an active performance schedule, commissioning and creating new pieces of music for percussion, and engaging with local communities to expose them to the possibilities of percussion music. To this end, he curates, composes for and performs in the experimental “Stage Door Series” of performances at the College of Southern Idaho. As a founding member and the current vice president of the Idaho Bandmasters’ Association, Mr. Farkas is also dedicated to expanding and enhancing access to music education across the state of Idaho.