



TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR BEGINNER STEELBAND: FIRST STEPS

CJ Menge

School steel pan ensembles, both curricular and extra-curricular, continue to grow in popularity at all academic levels, as well as in community music settings throughout the United States. Largely due to the increased prevalence of university level steelbands, more and more percussionists are now entering the teaching profession with some amount of steel pan experience. There are, however, many new directors who take on the responsibility of leading steelbands with very little to no personal experience playing or teaching the instrument, including a significant number of steel bands being taught by directors who play a primary instrument other than percussion. The following suggestions are designed to serve as a guide for directors, with the purpose of providing some important first steps to consider at the start of a new school semester or session of community classes when teaching a beginner level steelband.

Tone and touch

The acoustic tonal qualities that make a

steel pan beautiful and resonant can quickly disappear when the instrument is played with too much force. A steel pan that is struck too hard can quickly go out of tune and/or suffer irreparable damage. It is important to teach students to focus on developing a light touch when playing a steel pan. Strive for a warm, resonant tone. The starting hand position for all voices of the steel orchestra should be low, close to the playing surface of the pan. Tenor pan (also referred to as lead pan), double tenor and double seconds players should especially work to keep their starting hand position inside the bowl of the instrument, directly over the next note being played. Teach your students to approach each attack as a low tap stroke, initiating the motion from the wrist forward, rather than a full stroke that initiates from the arm. Encourage your students to be thoughtful about where they are striking each note to create the most consistent, resonant tone possible.

Regarding specific hand position, students should develop a secure fulcrum between the thumb and index

finger, with the remaining fingers supporting the mallet in a relaxed fashion. Due to the shorter length of tenor/lead, double tenor and double second mallets, players will likely have their pinky finger positioned off of the end of the mallets in order to achieve a good center of balance at the fulcrum point, which in turn contributes to a warm tone and enables the student to develop comfortable dexterity in their playing. The starting hand position will generally rotate from a thumb up position (comparable to French grip) to overhand position (German grip), depending on the angle at which each note must be struck.

Teaching Philosophy - Rote Versus Musical Literacy

Trinidadian steel pan orchestras have historically conducted rehearsals using the rote teaching method. Today, while more and more steel pan players in Trinidad are musically literate, bands still often run their rehearsals using the rote method. There is tremendous value in exposing your students to the rote method, especially at the start of a semester. Teaching scale exercises, roll technique and key rhythmic patterns, as well as at least the first song of the semester, completely by rote allows students the opportunity to more quickly learn and internalize the layout of their particular voice of steel pan.

There are many thriving steelband programs in US schools that primarily use the rote method for the majority of

their instruction. My personal pedagogical priority, however, is to teach musical literacy and sound music theory-based fundamentals to all of the programs that I work with, especially if the ensemble exists as a curricular course that is offered as a part of the school day. These skills equip your students with transferable knowledge that they will be able to take into other school ensembles, as well as music settings outside of school. Ultimately, a valuable guide in this area is to align your steelband teaching objectives with the foundational pedagogical goals that your music program prioritizes in all of your ensembles. This consistency in teaching styles will benefit both you and your students.

The First Week

The unique challenge for beginning steel pan players is learning the non-linear note layout of the pan, which additionally varies from voice to voice in the ensemble. Practicing scale exercises at a slow tempo and playing easy, repetitive songs will help students to begin to learn the unique layout of their specific instrument. My primary goal with each beginning ensemble I work with is to help students develop a mental picture of their note layout as early in the semester as possible, freeing them up to focus on other aspects of music making. I also make sure to teach the band a simple composition (or at least a portion of one) during their first hands-on session, so that they have fun making music together right away, and understand what they will

be working towards throughout the year.

Teaching Sequence: *Eleven*

Eleven (Example 1) is the score of a beginner level piece I wrote with this purpose in mind. A reference video can be found here:

https://youtu.be/v12TPjSQS0s?list=PLIDw8ZigKjFRCKTzLPp-u6wXBmTpAb_yI

The key center of *Eleven* is A minor. Rather than teaching the entire scale at the outset, start by guiding your students through the first five notes of the scale. Keeping in mind that this is the first time for your students to play a steel pan, instruct them to find one note at a time (A up to E). Have the full ensemble, in unison, play four quarter notes, followed by four quarter note rests, a few times on each of the five pitches (typically quarter note=110). Maintain a soft dynamic throughout. This initial focus on soft dynamics will help your ensemble to develop an overall wider range of dynamic capabilities as the semester progresses.

Next, using the same rhythmic pattern, have the students play up and down the five note scale, adding a whole note roll after the final A (Example 2). Steel pan rolls are executed in single stroke fashion (no buzz or bounce rolls), best achieved with the same low starting hand position emphasized earlier. Strive for smooth, even rolls, with no accent at the beginning of the roll.

After completing the quarter note scale

pattern, take the rhythm found in the first measure of *Eleven* and apply it to the five note scale sequence (Example 3). Finally, before beginning to teach the tune, notice where you will need to take time to introduce the last two notes of the A minor scale as needed. The G# first appears in section one, while the F appears in section two. Use the same quarter note/rest pattern initially used when learning the location of the first five scale tones. To be clear, simply introduce the G# and F individually, rather than using more class time to place them into a longer scale exercise.

Referring back to Example 1, *Eleven* consists of three sections. Play each section four times before moving to the next section. Teach one section of *Eleven* at a time, all by rote. Repeat each section enough for the majority of your band members to feel comfortable playing the phrase. Continue to remind your students to play with a light touch even as the dynamic level in the group will start to get a little bit louder. Starting hand positions are still staying low to the instrument. Only add the calypso drum set pattern once the pan players are playing each section with confidence.

Although it is important to train student drum set players in your ensemble, I suggest that, if possible, the director plays drum set for this first piece, so each student is learning a steel pan part. For directors that do not play drum set, I recommend that you play time on a cowbell, beginning with quarter notes and then progressing to a steady half

and then progressing to a steady half note pattern as the tempo increases. Also consider using prerecorded play-along drum set tracks at the outset, which will begin to give your students an understanding of key steelband styles. Calypso or Soca drum set tracks will work well with *Eleven*.

Teaching Double Stops

Less experienced steel pan students often find that learning to switch smoothly from one double stop hand position to the next can be quite challenging (section three of *Eleven* includes double stop chord changes). Consider using the frozen hands technique when practicing new chord movements. When learning double stops, teach your students to freeze their hands directly over the two chord tones they just played. With the hands in this frozen position, instruct your students to find the next set of chord tones with their eyes before shifting their hands, and then move directly to the new chord portion in one unified motion, to effectively ingrain proper muscle memory. This exercise should initially be done out of metered time, allowing the students enough time to go through the thought process required for a sequence of chord shifts. Teach your students to avoid moving each hand separately when playing double stops sequences. Once you see the majority of your students moving both hands comfortably from one chord to the next in this fashion, repeat the same exercise using the

using the correct rhythms (in slow, steady time) from the song you are learning.

Primary and Secondary Steel Pan Assignments

If rehearsal time permits (or in the next class), have your students switch instruments and repeat the same instructional sequence, beginning with the scale exercise found in Example 2, continuing with Example 3, and then teaching at least the first section of *Eleven*. This gives you and your students a chance to see if a particular steel pan voice and/or clef will better suit each player for their primary instrument placement in the ensemble. Tenor/lead, double tenor and double second pan parts are notated in treble clef, while cello/guitar, tenor bass and bass pan parts are notated in bass clef. While steelband directors have varying approaches to instrument assignments, I find that beginners, after the initial introductory classes, benefit from being assigned to one primary instrument for the entire school year or community session. If the dynamic of the band allows for students to rotate to other steel pan voices later in the year, I would only do so after learning several tunes with everyone playing on their primary pans.

The Engine Room

The auxiliary percussion section of a steelband is referred to as the engine room, a term that originated in Trinidad. One standard instrumentation for a beginner level steelband engine room playing calypso or soca tunes includes

playing calypso or soca tunes includes iron, cowbell, congas and shaker. The iron is a resonant car brake drum, and is the most important instrument in the engine room. The iron is usually played with metal beaters. Matched triangle beaters can work well for this purpose. Calypso and soca conga parts are traditionally played with rubber tipped mallets rather than with your hands. The cello/guitar steel pan mallets work well for these parts. As previously mentioned, I suggest having all of the students learn steel pan parts at the beginning of a semester. As you assign students to drum set parts, also plan to assign students to engine room parts. Seek out resources for standard calypso and soca engine room rhythms as an initial guide. Some beginner level steelband charts also include engine room rhythm sheets.

Build Consistent Habits

As you and your students settle into a rehearsal routine, continue to use some portion of each class to teach fundamental skills. Major scale and chromatic scale exercises will continue to help your beginners to develop confidence in learning the note layout of their specific pan. Use your music fundamental instructional time to teach essential syncopated rhythms, proper roll technique and other techniques that are unique to steelband. Have your students practice playing scales and shorter note sequences without watching their hands. One effective verbal cue is to remind them to lift their chins and use their peripheral vision to track hand

placement. This technique prepares students to be able to confidently develop sight reading skills on the instrument. Also consider having your students play short note sequences with their eyes closed, encouraging them to visualize the specific note layout of the instrument in their mind. Work to connect all of your scale and warmup exercises directly to the songs you are learning. I also especially encourage curricular steelband directors to incorporate sight reading exercises into each class.

Be intentional in programming beginner level charts in key signatures related to the scales being practiced. Easy Calypso and Soca tunes are preferred in the beginning, in order to teach important syncopated rhythmic strumming patterns, in addition to making the cultural connection for your students to the steel pan tradition of Trinidad and Tobago. Avoid practicing scales that are unrelated to material you are learning, or will learn in the near future. Look for good beginner level charts in C, F and G major at the outset, then continue to expand your repertoire to include D and Bb major (and relative minor keys), and so on. Naturally, as your band progresses, you will want to diversify your programming and include many other musical styles in addition to Calypso and Soca.

When working with younger students (elementary and younger middle school bands), I look for pieces that have a mix of full band unison sections and only two different rhythms happening at once in

different rhythms happening at once in a given musical passage. *Eleven* again serves as a good example. Older students generally are capable of learning beginner charts with up to four different rhythms occurring at once.

Kiwi (Example 4) is an example of one of the first pieces I often teach to older middle school, high school or adult community students using sheet music at the beginning of the semester.

A reference video can be found here: https://youtu.be/BuW_kSkB8KM?t=2813

The piece starts with a portion of the chromatic scale being played in unison and then sets up an easy Soca chord progression in G major. When teaching *Kiwi*, I will begin the rehearsal with a G major scale exercise, then teach a chromatic scale exercise that starts on G, using the unison rhythm found in measure one of the piece. As the band learns each section of the piece, I will take additional time to teach other essential fundamentals, in particular the two different rhythmic strumming patterns found in the double seconds and cello voices. These fundamental skills will of course carry over into subsequent charts that you teach your band.

I hope these suggestions will help to set you and your students on a path to steel pan success. The ultimate goal is to create a fun learning environment where students get to experience the joy and sense of accomplishment that comes from seeing their skills develop on a new instrument. All the best in your musical endeavors!

CJ Menge is the founder and Executive Director of Inside Out Steelband, a nonprofit organization based in Austin, Texas, and is active nationally as a steel pan educator, composer and performer. Menge has held long-term artist-in-residence or director positions with many curricular school programs in Austin and Central Texas, including Covington Middle School (2000-2011), KIPP Austin College Prep and Collegiate (2009-2011, 2017-2019), James Bowie High School (1997-present), McCallum High School and Fine Arts Academy (1998-present), Sam Houston High School (San Antonio ISD) (2012-present) and the University of Texas at Austin (1999). Menge has composed and arranged over 150 works for steelband or solo steel pan, many of which are published by Boxfish Music Publishing, Inc. Professional affiliations include the Texas Music Educators Association, the National Society of Steel Band Educators and the Percussive Arts Society. Menge served as a member of the PAS World Music Committee from 2013-2019.

Eleven

♩ = 180

CJ Menge

1 4x Total

Tenor

Double Second

Cello/Guitar

Bass

Drum Set

5 2 4x Total

Tenor

Dbl 2nd

Cello

Bass

Drums

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2

9

3

4x Total • No Rolls

Eleven

Musical score for Tenor, Dbl 2nd, Cello, Bass, and Drums. The score is divided into measures by a double bar line. The Tenor part is in treble clef, Dbl 2nd in treble clef, Cello in bass clef, Bass in bass clef, and Drums in a simplified notation. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

♩ = 110

Example 2

The musical score for Example 2 is presented in two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 9, and the second system contains measures 10 through 13. The score is written for four instruments: Tenor Pan, Double Seconds, Guitar/Cello, and Bass. The time signature is 4/4, and the tempo is marked as ♩ = 110. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The Tenor Pan part features a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes. The Double Seconds part provides a harmonic accompaniment with eighth and quarter notes. The Guitar/Cello part plays a steady eighth-note rhythm. The Bass part provides a low-frequency accompaniment with eighth and quarter notes. The score concludes with a double bar line at the end of measure 13.

Tenor Pan

Double Seconds

Guitar/Cello

Bass

10

Tenor

Doubles

Guitar

Bass

♩ = 110

Example 3

Tenor Pan

Double Seconds

Guitar/Cello

Bass



7

Tenor

Doubles

Guitar

Bass



13

Tenor

Doubles

Guitar

Bass



Kiwi

CJ Menge

Soca ♩ = 120

Lead

Double Seconds

Cello/Guitar

Bass

Drum Set

p *cresc.*

5

To Coda

Lead

Dbl 2nd

Guitar

Bass

Drums

f

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Lead

Dbl 2nd

Guitar

Bass

Drums