

HELPING PERCUSSIONISTS BE MORE COMPETITIVE IN HONOR BAND AUDITIONS

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Throughout my time as a university student and professional educator, I have judged quite a few All-State and other honor band percussion auditions and none of them have left me thinking that the state of percussion education is going in a good direction. The more I judge these events, the quicker and easier I get irritated at students for their poor level of preparation and lack of pride in what they are doing. Don't get me wrong, there are always some gems out there that play very well, but these students are becoming fewer and farther between. In addition, the quality of these students seems to declining as well. There are obviously many causes of this, some of which we cannot avoid, but I have a feeling that a big cause for this dip in quality is because more and more band directors think they cannot do much of anything to help these students with the advanced topics covered in honor band auditions because they are not a percussion specialist. They then either wait for a percussionist to come work with their students, or they say "we can't afford to have anyone come in" and that is the end of it. This is a valid reason for why a lot of percussion students are failing at these auditions, but it is not as valid of a reason as we want it to be. There will **always** be issues that percussion students really need a percussion specialist to help them with, but

there are also plenty of things that non-percussionists can do with their percussion students to help them be more competitive in auditions. I am going to give some suggestions that should help you help your students be more competitive in their auditions without going into too much detail about percussion related topics. My hope is that this article will give you some extra tricks to help your students have better auditions regardless of your level of knowledge regarding percussion performance. For the purposes of this article, I am going to focus most of my observations on All-State Auditions, but the content discussed here are applicable to any audition environment.

My first suggestion (and maybe the most obvious) is to start the preparations much earlier. When I was in school, most of the students who were successful at these auditions started preparing the repertoire around the beginning of January, when school got back in session from winter break. While this might be okay for most intelligent wind players, it typically does not work out well for percussionists because they have at least one more etude to learn on triple the number of instruments. This concept holds true for marching band as well: many successful marching band programs have a dedicated "percussion

camp” that takes place one or two weeks before the rest of the band shows up. Percussionists really need that extra time in order to digest all of the material they are being asked to handle in middle and high school band. So what are we supposed to do about this- do we hand out all state materials on the first day of school and hope that the kids don’t get sick of the music before November? I don’t think the situation is that critical yet, but that does not mean we shouldn’t be preparing students for these auditions throughout the year leading up to audition days. One of the best ways to do this is to break the audition up into three parts and spend the beginning of the fall semester working on part one, while you can start on parts 2 and 3 after marching season ends and after Christmas Break. Please see Figure 1 below for an example of what I think these three parts should be.

I believe that approaching preparation this way does two very important things: first, it will reinforce the importance of scales, rudiments, and ear training. More importantly, it makes the audition seem like less of an overwhelming task because you are taking the entire audition and boiling it down to a few manageable goals throughout a longer period of time. If you can help your students start to think this way, you have potential to help them get into better habits for things like concert preparation and even other academic pursuits

across the curriculum as well (which as an educator should make you very happy). The most important thing educators need to do is establish a positive work ethic in their students. If we can do that, the rest of the pieces will fall into place much easier.

The second suggestion I have to offer is to make sure your percussionists do not leave any potential points on the table, the biggest example of this being to make sure that they can play **all** of their scales, not just the minimum requirement to pass through the scale room. While this may sound like common sense, every all state audition that I have ever judged has always had some sort of meeting about pushing students through the scale room. Under the scoring model that is being used for All State Auditions at the time of this article, just the scales account for 32 out of 500 possible points a percussionist can receive in their auditions (which is just above 6%). To put this in perspective, the amount of points a student receives for completing all of their scales can absolutely be the difference in making either All State Band or District Honor Band, or the difference between making District Honor Band or not. I know that learning all twelve scales sounds like a tall order for younger students, but something to think about is that there is very little technical and musical skill involved to play scales on a mallet instrument. Since there aren’t any fingerings to memorize or anything like that, most

Figure 1

Preparation Cycle	Material to Learn	When
Preparation Pt. 1	Scales, Rudiments, Interval Tuning (Everything that is not centered around a prepared pieces)	First half of the semester before auditions
Preparation Pt. 2	Prepared pieces, Sight Reading Practice	Second half of the semester before auditions
Preparation Pt. 3	Final Preparations and Mock Auditions	Semester of auditions

percussionists have the technical skill required to play all twelve major scales with arpeggios as soon as they know all of the note names and where to find them on the keyboard. To make things easier on students, I try to have them learn one scale per week once they have reached this milestone. It usually takes about five minutes for me to teach one scale and maybe another ten minutes to review it and practice it with them. Once or twice a month I take some time out of lessons to call out a scale name to a student, and they tell me how many sharps or flats are in the scale and what they are. If I am skeptical about whether or not the student lucked out and guessed right, I have them spell the scale for me. The best thing about making sure your students know all of their scales at an early age is that once they know how many sharps or flats a scale has and can spell them out for you, they will never have to learn them again- brush them off maybe, but they won't ever have to learn them from scratch again.

The next piece of advice I can give is to not be afraid to listen to your percussionists play for you, and do not be afraid to offer criticism on things that you hear according to the written music. While you might never be able to correctly demonstrate the correct way to hold four marimba mallets, you can recognize the difference between what is written and what is being played. More often than not, the biggest glaring issues I hear during auditions are ones that are musical, not percussion specific. Though it might sound like common sense, here is a list of things that I constantly hear going wrong when students play audition etudes for me: rhythmic accuracy, note accuracy, dynamic contrast, tempo control, interval quality (timpani) and phrasing. All music educators

should be able to look at a piece of music and talk about whether or not these issues are being addressed- you do not need a percussion specialist to do this for you. If for nothing else, having your students play through audition repertoire for you will put the student in a situation where they are playing for someone while in the spot light. Most of the time marching or concert band rehearsals end with a run through of whatever the band just finished working on to cap off the day's objectives. They do this to make sure the day's objectives were actually met, and to help establish new objectives for the next rehearsal. This type of preparation is some of the most vital to the success of the student yet it is so often overlooked in the interest of saving time.

My last and most important piece of advice is to try and help your students practice everything to make your students stand out in a good way, while simultaneously working to eliminate the things that make your students stand out in a bad way. In my experience, this is also one of those areas that is vastly overlooked, and I can see why. Under the current scoring system, "Professionalism" is not a category on which students are scored. Students are not scored on how well they speak, or how they carry themselves during the audition. I am not saying they should be judged on these things, but what I am saying is that in order for students to have a better chance at success, they need to present themselves in such a way that says "I am prepared to play and be a professional human being". Again, this is something that can help bridge the gap between music and other curriculum that will help students become better inside and outside of the music curriculum. To help get this started, I first like to go over every aspect of the audition that does not involve

playing such as: what they are going to wear to the audition, walking in and out of the audition room, setting up and tearing down equipment, what to (and NOT to) say to judges and when to say it, moving from instrument to instrument, and every other little thing that you do in the process of an audition that does not involve playing. Working on this aspect of auditions with your students will help them to realize that these auditions (and other things in non-musical life) are not all about your particular set of skills, they are just as much about how you carry yourself and how well you interact and work with others.

After you have gone over the aspects of the audition that are not based on playing, do your best to ensure that whatever equipment the student is responsible for bringing is in GOOD working order. This includes but is not limited to the snare drum, stands, pitch pipes, tuners, etc. Let's be honest; good playing on an instrument that sounds bad still sounds bad. With that in mind, your students need to have GOOD sticks and mallets and more importantly CORRECT sticks and mallets for the instruments they will be playing on. Just this past year I judged an honor band audition where a student walked in to the audition room and wanted to play timpani with marimba mallets. I am fully aware that this might have been all she could afford on her own, but we as educators need to at least attempt to make sure the student has all of the materials they need, especially when they are representing your school, and you by extension.

In conclusion, I would like to offer some encouragement. If your percussionists are auditioning and genuinely trying their best to become better musicians, then you are doing the right things. The goal from that

point should be to try and help every student reach higher levels than they thought possible, even if you have little to no idea about what is actually going on in the percussion world. Through honor band auditions, students get to experience a little piece of what happens in life after scholastic music, and the more that we can do to help them succeed now, the better off the student will be when it is time to be self-sufficient. It is my sincere hope that the material discussed in this article will help you help them achieve this goal.

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