CONSISTENCY MATTERS:
Developing a Shared Vernacular for Beginning Percussion and Wind Students in a Heterogeneous Classroom

by Dr. Erik M. Forst

In order to overcome this language barrier, it is important that the educator first accept a simple premise: all students in the instrumental classroom should receive the same musical education. The first mistake that many educators make with their beginning percussionists is assuming that certain musical concepts and skills do not apply to them because their importance is not immediately apparent. Many directors do not involve their percussionists in conversations about embouchure, air support, or articulation, even though many of those concepts are readily adaptable to the percussion world. In addition, percussion students are often left out of conversations about tone quality, intonation, and melodic development, especially those playing non-pitched fixed-resonance instruments, such as snare drum. On the other hand, many directors assume that their percussionists require a higher rhythmic vocabulary than their wind counterparts, mainly due to the higher importance placed on it in the young band repertoire and beginning band method books. In making these assumptions, the director places an imaginary wall between the percussion section and the rest of the ensemble, as certain parts of the rehearsal are seen by both the students and the educator as being "not for them." However, if the director accepts the above premise as true right from the outset, they may be encouraged to look for the similarities between the sections of the ensemble rather than the differences, which in turn, can help to foster a more inclusive rehearsal experience for all involved.

EMBOUCHURE = GRIP

One way in which educators can begin to include percussionists into their conversations with wind students is to recognize the similarities between embouchure and the way a percussionist holds their implements (sticks, mallets, etc.), otherwise known as grip. In fact, there are so many similarities between embouchure and grip that it is not outside the realm of possibility that the educator may dispense with the word "grip" entirely and simply refer to how the percussionist holds the sticks as their "embouchure." As the common denominator between the two is vibration, many of the sound issues resulting from a poorly formed embouchure are also readily apparent in a young percussionist with a poorly formed grip. A young trumpet player that applies too much pressure to their mouthpiece finds themselves having the same issues in sound production that a young snare drummer has when putting too much pressure on the stick. Just as the mouthpiece in this scenario does not allow the lips to vibrate freely, the hand does not allow the stick to move and vibrate, and the result in both situations is a pinched, non-resonant sound. On

the other hand, both students may suffer from too little pressure on the mouthpiece/stick, which results in a thin and unfocused sound in both instruments. The ideal for both sets of students is finding a balance between applying too much or too little pressure. The trumpet player must keep the corners of their mouths firm while allowing their lips to vibrate freely, while the percussionist must keep a small amount of pressure on the stick for control without sacrificing the stick's ability to rebound.

Another embouchure problem commonly found in young players is incorrect mouthpiece placement. Young brass students commonly place the mouthpiece too far to the left or right on their lips or engage too much bottom or top lip, resulting in a distorted and uncharacteristic sound. The correlation for the percussionist can be found in the amount of stick in the hand, as well as the orientation of the wrists. Young percussion students often have too much or too little stick in their hands, which directly affects the amount of rebound and resonance generated by the stick. In addition, a student whose hands are turned too much to the outside will often find their sticks approach the drum at an angle (what percussionists call a "slice"). Much like the trumpet student with the mouthpiece off-center, this slice results in a thinner sound, as the air inside the instrument, whether it is a drum or a keyboard instrument, is not fully activated and the resonating chamber is not fully engaged. Understanding that issues of embouchure and grip often result in the same type of sound discrepancies in both the winds and percussion sections can allow the educator to speak to their percussionists with a vernacular with which they are comfortable and the percussionist to feel as if class conversations about embouchure have a direct and tangible relation to their own playing, thereby incorporating them more fully into the rehearsal.

AIR = STROKE

For obvious reasons, most instrumental educators spend a great deal of time discussing the principles of air speed and support with their wind students without giving due consideration for how those conversations directly relate to their percussionists. While some directors may choose to require their percussionists to participate in the band's daily breathing exercises, this often misses the more direct relationship found between a wind player's air usage and a percussionist's stroke. Indeed, both air and stroke serve as the "fuel" for sound in both wind instruments and percussion instruments, respectively. As such, both are subject to the same tone-production issues derived from problems of consistency and support, and both can be addressed in a parallel manner within the instrumental classroom.

One common way educators work on consistency of air speed in the classroom is through "long tones" exercises. These exercises offer the wind student the opportunity to hear the direct relation between air support and their sound as they strive to achieve what many directors refer to as a "block of sound," or a consistent sound from beginning to end. While many directors may choose to have their percussionists play single stroke rolls on keyboard instruments during these exercises (a perfectly logical and worthwhile endeavor), a more direct relationship exists between long tones and what percussionists call "full strokes," two-part strokes that consist of a downstroke and an upstroke that move at the same velocity (also known as a "piston" stroke). These are the fundamental strokes used on any percussion instrument, and their proper execution is essential to creating a consistent sound. In fact, percussion educators will often ask their students to play these strokes in a legato fashion, in this case referring to the stroke being as smooth and connected as possible in order to achieve a fuller, more resonant sound. Full stroke exercises, such as the ubiquitous "8-on-a-hand" and its subsequent variants, can be incorporated in a legato fashion on any instrument (or practice pad) into a long tone sequence in the classroom and be used to accomplish the same results in both the wind and percussion sections. In both cases, the educator is asking the students to achieve a consistent sound. For the winds, this entails keeping the air support constant from the beginning to the end of each sound; for the percussionist, this means a consistency of stroke (height, velocity, head placement) from the first note to the last. In each case, the educator is asking for a "block of sound" from their students, and it is entirely appropriate to use

this terminology with a percussion section, so long as it is explained that the percussionists' "block" entails every note being consistent from beginning to end, rather than a single note in the winds.

The educator will also find that many of the issues that young wind students exhibit will also be found in the percussion section. Just as a young wind student may put too much air at the beginning of a sound and run out of air by the end, young percussionists typically over-emphasize the first note on each hand of "8-on-a-hand" and bring the stick lower towards the end in preparation for the hand change. For the wind student, this results in a sound that tapers off at the end and often descends in pitch due to lack of air support. For the percussionist, the result is the same tapering off of the sound, sometimes coupled with a descent in tempo as the stick loses energy as it gets lower. Both issues are deviations from the "block of sound" concept, and the educator that remembers that stroke and air are one and the same will be able to address the issue using familiar terminology.

ARTICULATION

Instrumental directors find that teaching articulation to their wind students is particularly challenging, as students often develop habits such as using the wrong part of the tongue or often no tongue at all. While educators spend a great deal of time with their wind students developing the proper vowel shape using syllables such as "ti" and "toh," it is rare for a director to have conversations about articulation with their young percussionists outside of the obvious discussions of mallet or stick choice. A percussionist is capable of several different types of articulations with one pair of sticks or mallets, mostly dependent on the stroke type, or manner in which the instrument is struck. That being said, the use of syllables can be an invaluable tool for describing the type of articulation that is required of a percussionist in a particular passage. Doing so emphasizes a "sound first" mentality with the student, in which the desired sound leads to the stroke type needed to achieve that sound. In fact, the use of syllables to teach different percussion articulations and tones is so helpful that it actually forms the basis of percussion education in many cultures throughout the world, such as West Africa and India.

For example, a young student playing marimba with medium yarn mallets may be asked by a composer to perform a melodic line in a legato fashion, usually notated with a phrase marking encompassing the line. This is difficult on a percussion instrument, as the fixed length of each note does not easily lend itself to legato playing. However, if the director describes the sound to the student using syllables that begin with "d," such as "doh" or "dah," it immediately creates a frame of reference for the student as to what type of sound is required. The educator can then describe for the student the type of stroke necessary to achieve that syllable, although many times the student will find their way to that stroke just from hearing the syllable. In this case, a legato stroke is required, which is a stroke of slower velocity (both down and up) that will produce a more rounded sound, as the bar is mostly actuated by the yarn of the mallet, not the core. However, if the same passage was asked to be played staccato, the educator can describe the sound using a shorter "ti" sound. This would require a more "staccato" stroke, in which the mallet moves with much more velocity (again, in both directions), thereby allowing the core to "bite" through the yarn more and yield a brighter, more separated sound. This approach is also relevant for any percussion instrument; for example, cymbal crashes are often best described as sounding like "cha," and a good basic timpani sound is often described as "pah." By employing appropriate syllables to describe articulations, a director can develop a wide range of sound possibilities in their students without ever having to change an implement.

The above examples represent just a few of the ways that the non-percussionist band director can build upon the educational vernacular they have already developed and use it to provide a more inclusive learning experience for their percussionists. Doing so encourages the young percussionist to feel as if they are a more present part of the learning experience, as their needs are being constantly interwoven into the needs of the rest of the band. For the director, these examples will hopefully serve to alleviate some of the trepidation often experienced by feeling as if they do not know enough "drum-speak" to adequately instruct their percussion students. Remembering that they are music students worthy of the same education as the rest of the band will set them on the path to becoming musicians, rather than the technicians they so often become.

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