

PERFECT PART ASSIGNMENTS - ACHIEVING THE IMPOSSIBLE

by Dr. Joshua J. Knight

From keyboards and timpani to hand drums and accessories, the percussion section in school bands and orchestras is increasingly multi-faceted. Because of this, it is vitally important to strategize how parts are assigned to the percussion section. Poorly executed part assignments, over time, will result in the under-development of young percussionists by limiting their exposure to certain instruments and allowing avoidance of challenges. Furthermore, this will negatively affect ensemble quality, from beginning band to the collegiate level. Oftentimes, the concert band setting is the only place that percussionists gain experience on timpani, bass drum, and a variety of small instruments. Therefore careful consideration when assigning parts will also greatly improve your percussionists' technical and musical ability.

The considerations below will help you better organize percussion part assignments, avoid embarrassing adjustments, and ensure that you will assign the perfect part the first time, every time!

1. KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

Understanding the percussionists' ability and confidence on each instrument is critical to achieving the perfect part assignments. As we know, percussionists have lots of instruments to contend with, even in beginning band, and many may be attempting to perform on small instruments such as cymbals, and large instruments such as chimes, for the very first time. Before assigning a student to play an instrument, consider whether or not they have played that instrument in the past, or received basic instruction on that instrument, particularly if it is not keyboard or snare drum. If you feel that all of your students have received adequate training on each instrument required by a certain piece of music, then consider whether or not a certain instrument presents additional challenges to specific students. If you are unsure, never be afraid to ask. Consider your students' abilities, their preferences, their individual willingness, and keep in mind earlier instruction.

2. SET PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES

Although the primary objective for any performance will undoubtedly consist of similar qualitative goals, these may shift slightly from one performance to the next, i.e., contest, holiday concert, recording session, etc. This context will also inform your strategy, as you may need to rely on your strongest players to cover difficult parts in some cases while allowing for a more challenging experience in others. For example, just as you may want 1st-chair-trumpet to remain on the 1st trumpet part, you may want your best snare drummer on the toughest snare drum parts, etc. However, when the time is right, challenge players to attempt parts which are outside of their comfortable range, technique, etc. This same approach can apply to your percussion section, too.

3. CONSIDER STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Although a recording or contest situation might necessitate students remain on certain instruments, it is generally beneficial to have your students rotate to various instruments throughout a performance. However, because this needs to be achieved while maintaining excellence in the section, study the parts so that each player touches a snare drum, keyboard, accessories, etc., while assigning them the perfect part that can be executed well. For example, an excellent snare drummer will almost always gravitate to that instrument, especially if they do not see themselves as a confident mallet player. You can challenge them by finding the perfect mallet part that is engaging, but within their ability level. Be careful to avoid the potential for embarrassing moments that might be a set-back for the student. There is a perfect part for everyone and the idea of focusing on each student's strengths while improving weakness is the best way to keep your percussionists engaged, help your program grow, and prepare students for a variety of future performance requirements.

4. KEEP EVERYONE PLAYING

Especially from beginning band through high school, it is strongly encouraged to keep your percussionists playing on every piece whenever possible. Fortunately, many grade 1 and 2 pieces now feature a variety of percussion parts to keep your students engaged! However, this is not always the case and it may be necessary to double or triple some parts. The most common method by which to add percussion parts is to double existing mallet or drum parts, but there are certain limitations and considerations. For example, if a mallet part is doubled or tripled, consider having the additional players use marimbas, or xylophones with soft mallets, vs multiple glockenspiels. If using multiple snare drummers, understand that in order to achieve togetherness and/or soft dynamics that adjustments may be necessary throughout the piece, i.e., only one snare drummer at specific times. Additionally, some pieces might sound great with two crash cymbal parts, or two tambourines. Whatever the case, listen carefully for the inherent problems that may be created, adjust parts in a respectful and constructive way, and prevent your students from having idle hands!

5. SET-UP REQUIREMENTS

Although you have probably checked that you have the inventory required to perform a given piece, it is also necessary to consider the instrument set-up when assigning parts as well. For example, contemporary band repertoire often uses the 'Percussion 1,' 'Percussion 2,' etc., part delineation. While it may seem that Percussion 1 should be more difficult than Percussion 2, this is not necessarily the case. Many times these parts require the percussionist to set-up, organize, and execute on several instruments which requires additional ability, time, and attention to detail. An understanding of how difficult a multi-instrument part is to set up will also help you game-plan rehearsals and performances in order to avoid delays.

6. POST IT!

Always make a spreadsheet of part assignments and post it somewhere that is easily seen by the section during rehearsals. As a professional performer, I too like to check back at the part assignments to recall the instruments, mallets, etc., needed for the next piece during rehearsal. This simple step will not only save time and avoid stoppages during rehearsal, but also help the section be more proactive and confident.

7. EXAMPLES

Below I have assigned parts for two Grade 1-2 pieces. These contrasting compositions utilize different percussion instrumentation and present various assignment challenges. For this example we have 8 percussionists listed in chair order and each player is equally confident on pitched and non-pitched instruments.

1. ARMORY BY RANDALL D. STRANDRIDGE

The musical score for 'Armory' is written in 4/4 time and features five staves of percussion parts. The top staff is for Bells, with a melody of eighth notes and a dynamic marking of *f*. The second staff is for Timpani, with a bass line of eighth notes and a dynamic marking of *f*, including a note marked *(A,C,D)*. The third staff is for Percussion 1, which includes Snare Drum, Bass Drum, and Brake Drum, with a complex rhythmic pattern and a dynamic marking of *f*. The fourth staff is for Percussion 2, which includes Brake Drum, Tambourine, and Sleigh Bells, with a rhythmic pattern and a dynamic marking of *f*. The fifth staff is for Percussion 3, which includes a Suspended China Crash, with a rhythmic pattern and a dynamic marking of *f*. The score is marked with accents (>) and dynamic markings (*f*) throughout.

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Armory utilizes a variety of percussion instruments, which presents both challenges and opportunities. Additionally, it appears that Armory requires only 6 percussionists, therefore it will be necessary to either double parts, or breakdown each part a bit further than the composer intended. Further examination reveals that several instruments may need to be introduced, with basic technique demonstrated, before having the full ensemble attempt the piece. This includes tambourine, sleigh bells, break drum, and china cymbal. Now we need to decide how to assign the parts. I sometimes will begin by deciding what part 1st chair should take, while other times I first decide what part 8th player should take. Also, consider which parts appear to be thematic, project easily over the ensemble, or provide tempo. In this case, snare drum and brake drum have similar rhythms that will certainly project and be an important driver of the tempo and ensemble togetherness. However, because the snare drum part is simple, not requiring rolls or flams, and in a simple meter, this may be a good opportunity for the 3rd or 4th chair percussionist. The timpani part is also rather simple presenting another opportunity for a lower chair to fill that role. Analyze each part in this way and decide what challenges it does, or does not, present before assigning it. Perc 2 and Perc 3 are multi-instrument parts that provide opportunities to have additional percussionists involved. In this case, a quick look through the score reveals how to evenly separate these parts so that each player is comparably engaged. Again, in achieving the goal of having everyone play also consider strengths, weaknesses, and any potential challenges regarding set-up and new instruments.

2. BUNKER HILL BY KARL L. KING/ARR. BY JAMES SWEARINGEN

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Bunker Hill'. It consists of four staves: Bells (treble clef), Timp. (bass clef), S.D./B.D. (snare and bass drum, common time), and Cr. Cymbals (common time). The score is in 6/8 time and features various rhythmic patterns, including rolls and accents.

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A quick glance at Bunker Hill reveals different challenges, including 6/8 time signature, a snare drum part utilizing rolls, and a more thematic bell part. Like our last piece, Bunker Hill does not utilize all 8 percussionists. Because this snare drum part features additional challenges, the 1st chair percussionist would most likely be perfect. Additionally, because 1st chair played bells on Armory we have additional reason to consider assigning them the snare drum part on Bunker Hill. Also, because the snare drum will be a natural choice for doubling, in this case, we want to assign another player to snare drum as well providing an opportunity for a lower chair. It is advantageous to choose a student that feels confident because togetherness is going to be an exacting endeavor. Like snare drum, the bell part is also a natural choice for adding players, and we still have two “extra” students. I suggest having at least one of your top three players anchor the group of mallet players. After deciding which students should play certain parts, double check that no student is unintentionally playing the same instrument on both pieces. This is very important during the concert season especially if the marching season kept your students on the same instrument for 3-4 months.

Given the various considerations above, and the challenges presented with each composition, below are the suggested part assignments; additional pieces will naturally make the process more challenging.

Personnel	Armory	Bunker Hill
Chair 1	Bells	Snare Drum
2	Perc 2 (Break Drum)	Crash Cymbals
3	Perc 1 (Snare Drum)	Bells
4	Perc 2 (Tambourine/Sleigh Bells)	Timpani
5	Perc 1 (Bass Drum)	Snare Drum
6	Timpani	Bells
7	Perc 3 (China/Suspended)	Bass Drum
8	Perc 1 (Snare Drum)	Bells

Careful consideration of the suggestions in this article will result in a more substantive and positive ensemble experience for your percussionists who will be able to advance through this conscious effort to challenge their abilities and require improvement. This approach will also reinforce a comprehensive rubric that is necessary for success as students advance to competitions and auditions. Achieving the perfect part assignments is not impossible, after all.

AUTHOR BIO

Dr. Joshua Knight currently serves as Instructor of Percussion at Missouri Western State University. He holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Oklahoma, and earned his Master of Music and Bachelor of Music degrees from the University of Central Arkansas. An active clinician, Knight has presented and performed at regional and international events such as the Percussive Arts Society International Convention, National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy, Texas Music Educators Association conference, College Music Society regional conference, and numerous state percussion festivals including the Arkansas Day of Percussion, Oklahoma Day of Percussion, Missouri Day of Percussion, and the University of Central Arkansas Percussion Festival. As an active performer Knight appears regularly with the Fountain City Brass Band and St. Joseph Symphony Orchestra, and has also performed with the Abilene Philharmonic, Fort Smith Symphony, Oklahoma City Philharmonic, Lawton Philharmonic, Pine Bluff Symphony, and Conway Symphony orchestras. Knight is also active in commissioning new works for percussion that include *Inside The Shining Stone* by Blake Tyson, published by blaketysonmusic, *Shattered* by Cody Criswell, published by C-Alan Publications, *Halcyon Days* by Nathan Daughtrey, published by C- Alan Publications, and most recently, *The Wind That Turns The World* by Blake Tyson, published by blaketysonmusic. Knight's article, *Trends and Developments Through Thirty Prominent Snare Drum Method Books* is a featured cover story in *Percussive Notes*, the official research journal of the Percussive Arts Society. Additionally, he serves on the Education Committee and Ed Companion SubCommittee for PAS, and is a member of the Board of Advisors for the National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy. Knight is an artist endorser for Vic Firth sticks and mallets and Yamaha percussion instruments. For more information about Dr. Knight please visit www.knightpercussion.com, or email joshknight2@gmail.com.