ACCESSORIES

by Michael Huestis

"Variety is the very spice of life. That gives it all its flavor". William Cowper, The Task (1785). Accessory percussion instruments create a variety of sounds and colors in a musical ensemble; you might call them the spice in the percussion family. The style and flavor of music is often best communicated with the use of a tambourine, triangle, maracas, cymbals, or woodblocks. We couldn't imagine Dvorak's *Carnival Overture* or Tchaikovsky's *Trepak* from *The Nutcracker Suite*, without the tambourine. The same can be said regarding the castanet part in *Capriccio Espagnol* by Rimsky-Korsakov, the crash cymbals in *Night on Bald Mountain* by Mussorgsky, or the triangle part in *Carmen Suite* by Bizet. The spice that gives this music its style are those wonderful instruments that we label as accessory, but would be more appropriately labeled as necessary.

Accessory instruments are often neglected during the beginning of a percussionist's education. Young performers don't always have an awareness of the many possible sounds these instruments can create. Learning proper technique is an important aspect of developing and creating the desired sounds. Often times, the first experiences a young percussionist has with accessory instruments is when they are assigned a tambourine or triangle part in their band class. This scenario often leads to anxiety in the young percussionist's performance, and frustration for the conductor on the podium. A minimal investment in time, early in the training of young percussionists, will pay off in subsequent musical endeavors.

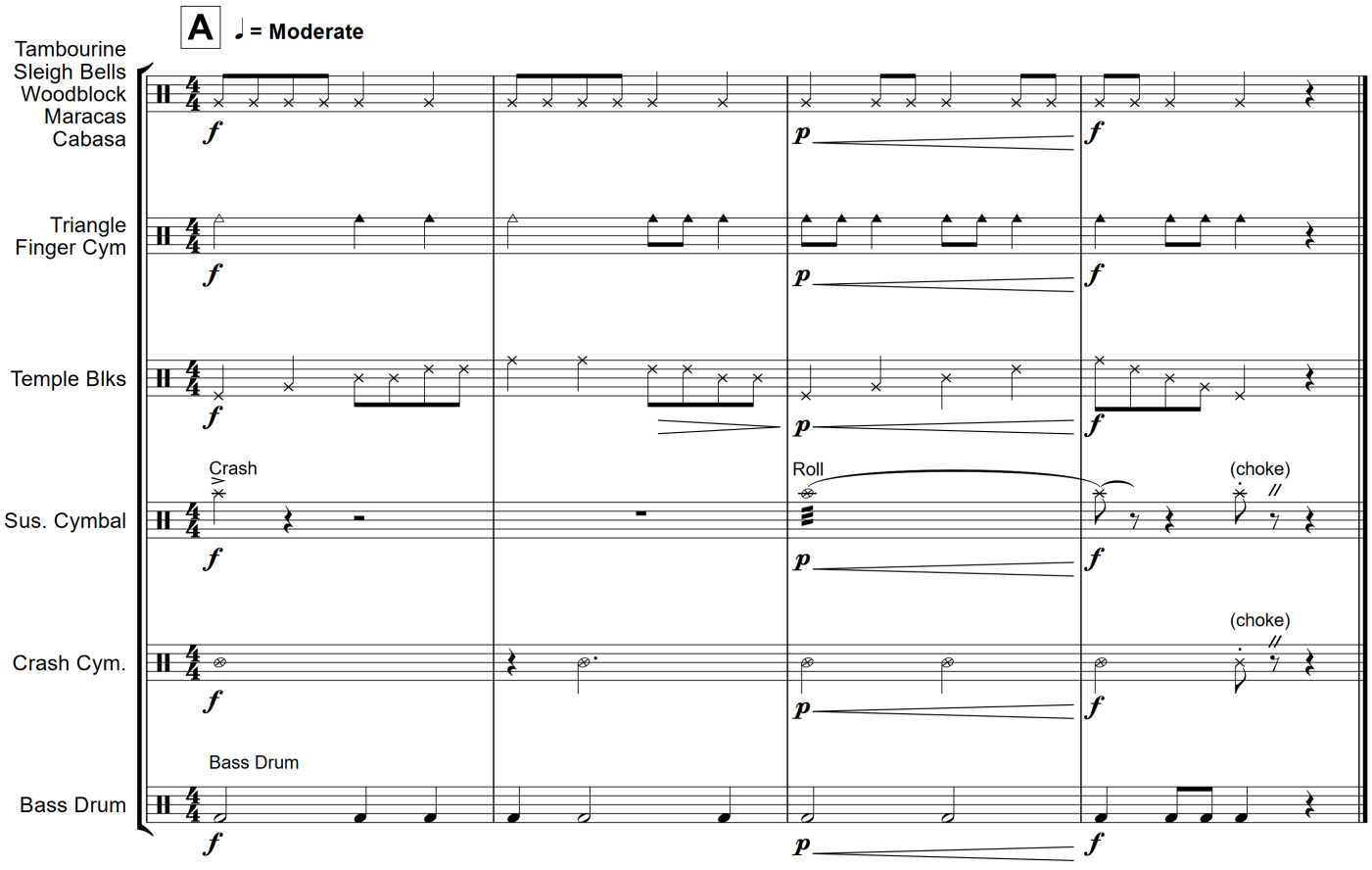
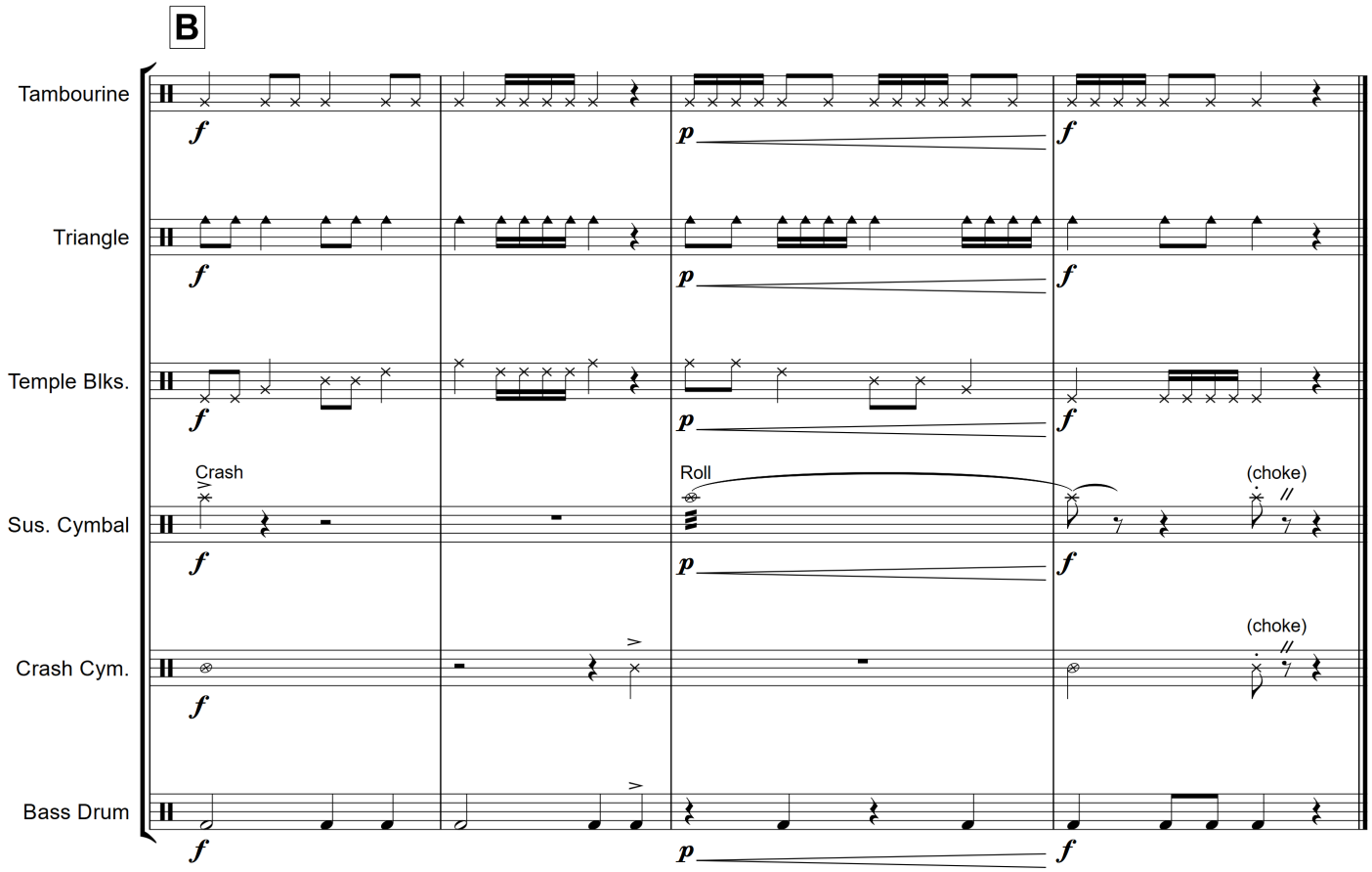
HOW TO INTRODUCE ACCESSORY INSTRUMENTS INTO BEGINNING PERCUSSION CLASS

Presenting students with good quality playing examples is one of the best things an educator can do when introducing accessory instruments. Playing short audio recordings or videos of outstanding percussionists playing these instruments will make young students eager to learn. Not only will this demonstrate the proper techniques and get the best sounds in their ears, it will motivate them to want to play the accessory parts. Research band and orchestra literature, find some exciting accessory parts, and use those as the first impression when introducing these instruments.

One of the easiest ways to get beginning percussion students started with accessory instruments is to have them play tambourine, triangle, finger cymbals, castanets, woodblock, sleigh bells, or claves after their weekly "snare test". Generally, those initial snare tests are simple quarter notes and rests; they can easily be performed on accessory instruments. Students can learn to properly hold the instruments and perform the techniques while reinforcing their counting. When playing repetitions of a snare drum etude, have students pass the tambourine, triangle, etc. around the room, giving each person a chance to perform.

Another method to introduce these instruments into your classroom is to have an “accessory day” once a week. Students spend a portion of class time watching a short instructional video of the instrument, and then participate in hands-on performing. There are many wonderful instructional videos available through both YouTube, and percussion manufacturer websites. If your school has only one of each accessory instrument, set up “accessory stations” in each corner of the room. Send a small group of students to each station and have them do a recording session with a phone or tablet. One student can perform a short four measure etude while another student counts the rhythms out loud and a third student films. They each take turns with those responsibilities and then after five minutes, students switch stations.

CREATE SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS TO ENGAGE AND REINFORCE STUDENT LEARNING

Writing a short etude for each accessory instrument is another way to get students working on basic accessory techniques. In the examples below, each accessory instrument is given a four (4) measure etude. The etudes can be performed separately or as a miniature ensemble. Begin by having students practice their part individually. Then once they feel confident, have them get a partner and perform the etudes as a duet. When students reach an acceptable level of achievement as a duet, they can partner with another pair of students to form a quartet, and so on. This is a fun way to engage students and get them working together as a classroom community.

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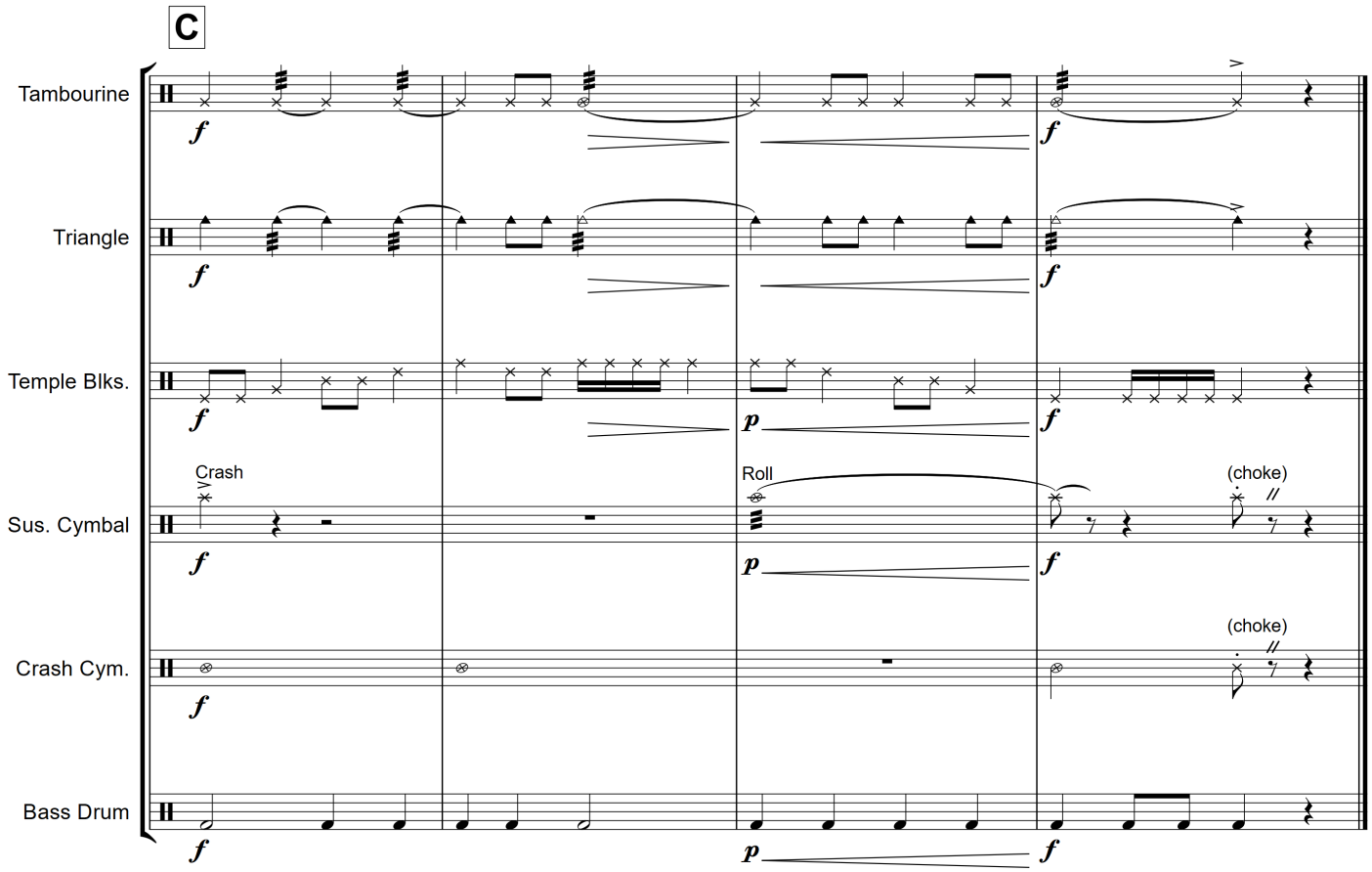
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USE MUSICAL PASSAGES FROM EXISTING BAND LITERATURE TO EXPAND ACCESSORY TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

After students have their initial introduction to accessory playing, there are a few ways for band directors to reinforce and expand those techniques. Use short passages the percussion section can perform repetitively while the winds do their "daily drill" exercises. The percussion students are often neglected while the winds are engaged in long tones or lip slurs. Utilizing the percussion section as the time keepers during these drills will engage the percussion section, give the winds a listening focus for tempo, and allow the percussionists to practice following the conductor while performing these patterns. Short musical passages from the concert band music can also be used in this way. This practice will reinforce skills and create an opportunity for percussion students to get more repetitions on their festival music.

When time is invested in the training of accessory percussion instruments, students will have the opportunity to learn required skills, and with that, begin to achieve a level of success. As students start to improve, they realize how much fun it is to perform these instruments and thus, they are willing to spend more time working on those skills. This cycle of "training – achievement – enjoyment" is a wonderful goal and blueprint for future learning.

AUTHOR BIO

Michael Huestis is the Director of Percussion at Prosper High School in Prosper, TX. Michael serves as the assistant director of the Music for All, Sandy Feldstein National Percussion Festival and as the P.A.S. Texas Chapter Secretary. He is the author of the percussion method book series, "Developing the Percussionist-Musician" as well as a composer of both percussion ensembles and marching percussion arrangements.