

YOUR YOUNG PERCUSSIONISTS CRAVE ATTENTION: ADVICE AND TIPS ON INSTRUCTING YOUNG PERCUSSIONISTS.

by Jessica Williams

Band directors have the tools necessary to instruct their wind players, molding them into efficient musicians within their first few years of instruction. However, percussionists, more often than not, require more specialized training and instruction. The most crucial time for instruction for a percussionist begins in middle school, usually around the 6th grade. At the start of the semester, they come into the band room eager to learn and excited to play. These students walk in toting their newly bought sticks and mallets. After observing several sessions of instrument assignments for the rest of the band, young percussionists are eager to put their new equipment to use and learn. However, outside of scales and exercises in band method books, percussion students hardly take part in other band exercises such as breathing, posture, intonation, balance and blending.

Instruction in percussion is often overlooked which puts those students at a serious disadvantage. Percussion instruments produce immediate feedback when struck. Once a student has been shown how to hold sticks and strike the instrument, it immediately generates the sound and does not need any further work to produce notes. With wind players, there is more to consider when trying to execute and note. Therefore, the band director will spend a considerable amount of time working with them to create quality sounds. Young percussionists need instruction on what mallets or sticks should be used, dynamics, blending, tuning, and more. Having identified that there are holes in the education of young percussionists that revolve around students not receiving any guidance during full band rehearsals or extra instruction, how can we best assure young percussionists are getting equal and quality instruction to prepare them on their future musical endeavors?

INVEST IN YOUR PERCUSSION EQUIPMENT

The condition of your percussion equipment is important. Equipment that is broken or not available can interfere with the progression of your percussionists' education. Purchase decent equipment for your percussion section. A typical middle and high school percussion section contains at least the following:

| MALLET PERCUSSION | DRUMS AND CYMBALS | AUXILIARY PERCUSSION |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Marimba (4-Octave) | Snare Drum w/stand | 5"-6" Triangle w/ beaters and clips |
| Xylophone | Bass Drum w/stand | Tambourine |
| Vibraphone | Timpani (29" and 26") | Claves |
| Glockenspiel/Orchestra Bells w/stand | 18" Suspended Cymbal w/stand | Woodblock |
| Chimes | Pair of 18" Crash Cymbals | Cabasa |
| | Tam-Tam w/stand | Wind Chimes w/stand |

If you can, avoid acquiring basic or low-end equipment, such as student, starter, or practice models for your section. These instruments are great for practicing and for students to have at home to work on their music. Nonetheless, these models may not withstand the daily wear and tear that comes with consistent play from several band students, compared to one student who plays for at least two hours a day. Practice keyboard percussion models are often sold with no resonators, a part of the instrument that is responsible for amplification and sustain of notes. This makes it an ideal instrument for private practice at home, but not for ensemble performance. Instead, look for models that are for band and orchestra. Contact your local instrument shops and online retailers for assistance in ordering equipment. There is also the option of purchasing demo and used equipment. This can be done by calling local music shops and researching online on websites such as:

- www.steveweissmusic.com
- www.percussionsource.com
- www.reverb.com
- www.malletshop.com
- www.wbw.com
- www.ebay.com (from reputable sellers)

These websites list open box, used and demo gear for sale. The advantages of purchasing used equipment is gaining high-quality equipment for a fraction of the original price. These instruments will be able to withstand daily use from students. Be sure to check the condition of used equipment and that you are not acquiring equipment that requires additional maintenance or restoration.

In addition to purchasing quality instruments for your percussion section, invest in a classroom set of sticks and mallets. It is typical for directors to have a variety of woodwind reeds, valve/slide oil, cork grease and sometimes spare mouthpieces which is essential for their wind players. Sticks, mallets, replacement heads and cord to restring mallet instruments as well as replacement straps for crash cymbals and beaters for triangles are essential to maintaining the equipment necessary for a full percussion section of instruments. Innovative Percussion provides an excellent middle school and high school purchase lists (Fig 1 and 2). These lists recommend mallets that should be required for bass drum, gong, timpani, and keyboard percussion. They also have a suggestion of “nice to own” mallets for the aforementioned instruments, as well as providing mallet pack suggestions for students to purchase.

Furthermore, band directors should do routine checks and maintenance on equipment. Replace heads regularly, check the strings and bars on mallet instruments, and make sure students are using the correct stick or mallet on instruments which will help avoid expensive repairs and purchases. If one is not privy to percussion maintenance, you can take your equipment to music shops for repairs or network with local percussionists who specialize in traveling to schools for maintenance (such as replacing timpani heads).

MALLETS FOR THE MIDDLE SCHOOL BAND

-REQUIRED:

- Bass Drum**
F13 or CL-BD2 general bass drum mallet
- Gong**
CG-2 small gong mallet
- Timpani**
GT-3 general mallets
- Keyboards**
Bell: IP904 hard
Xylophone: IP902 medium soft
Vibraphone: R530C medium hard (Cord wrapped)
Marimba: IP2004 hard
Chimes: CC-2 chime mallet



-NICE TO OWN:

- Bass Drum**
Second F13 or CL-BD2 general bass drum mallet
CB-5 bass drum rollers
- Gong**
Second CG-2 small gong mallet
- Timpani**
GT-1 soft/legato mallets
GT-4 hard/staccato mallets
- Keyboards**
Bell: IP903 dark/IP907 small brass
Xylophone: IP901 soft/CL-X7 medium wood
Vibraphone: AA20 medium soft
Marimba: IP2003 medium
Chimes: second CC-2 chime mallet
Brushes: BR-1 (snare/drumset)
Stick/Mallet bag: MB-1
- Student Supplies**
FP-2 fundamental pack
Snare: IP-1 or IP-LD
Keyboard: IP902 (Bell/Xylo), IP240 (Marimba)
Timpani: GT-3 General
SB-3 stick bag



Special thank you to Emily Tannert Patterson for compiling this list.
ETPercussion www.emilytannert.com

Fig. 1: Recommendation List for Middle School

-REQUIRED:

- Bass Drum**
CB-3 hard bass drum mallet
CB-5 bass drum rollers
- Gong**
CG-2 small gong mallet x 2
- Timpani**
BT-4 general mallets
- Keyboards**
Bell: IP904 hard
Xylophone: IP902 medium soft
Vibraphone: R530C medium hard (Cord wrapped)
Marimba: IP2004 hard
Chimes: CC-1 chime mallet



-NICE TO OWN:

- Bass Drum**
Second CB-3 hard bass drum mallet
CB-2 soft bass drum mallet
- Timpani**
BT-1 soft/legato (roller) mallets
BT-6 hard/staccato mallets
- Keyboards**
Bell: IP903 dark/IP907 small brass
Xylophone: IP901 soft/CL-X7 medium wood
Vibraphone: AA20 medium soft
Marimba: IP2003 medium
Chimes: Second CC-2 chime mallet
Brushes: BR-1 (snare/drumset)
Stick/Mallet bag: MB-1
- Student Supplies**
FP-3 college primer pack
Snare: IP-1 or IP-LD
Keyboard: IP902 (Bell/Xylo), IP240 (Marimba) (set of four)
AA25 or R530 (vibraphone)(set of four)
Timpani: GT-3 General, GT-4 staccato
MB-1 mallet bag



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Fig. 2: Recommendation List for High School

PRIVATE LESSONS

Most percussionists do not receive formal instruction until beginning band in middle or school. Encourage your students to take private lessons. Taking private lessons gives the student one-on-one time with an instructor. There, the skill level of the student can be assessed, and the instructor can set a course of instruction for the student. In private lessons, students can be instructed on the kinesiology that comes with percussion performance--how the body moves, the proficient way to hold the sticks, and how to execute correct techniques. One can find a percussion teacher by going to local guitar and drum shops, asking for recommendations on social media, and seeking instruction from local college students who can provide private lessons. With the help of technology, students can take virtual lessons online or instructive media that can be researched on platforms like YouTube and www.vicfirth.com.

If your students lack resources to take private lessons or are having difficulty receiving instruction from videos online, encourage them to practice with the more experienced students, as well as dedicating some time to work with them. It is important for directors to be well-versed in the instruction of percussion. Directors could consider taking private instruction, themselves, to become proficient in percussion. This will help give you a start in building a strong percussion section and maintaining that strength. Attending conferences and conventions can broaden your knowledge of percussion literature, as well.

Some of the conferences you can attend are:

- Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC)
- Day of Percussion events hosted by your local Percussive Arts Society chapters
- Midwest Clinic International Band, Orchestra and Music Conference
- Regional music education conferences

I recommend directors and instructors, along with their students, attend Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC). This is one of the largest drum and percussion event in the world where there are concerts, clinics and presentations given by artists from all over the world. PASIC exhibits all areas of percussion from marching and keyboards, to symphonic and education. There are clinics for professional development, as well as interactive masterclasses for student percussionists, non-percussion band/orchestra directors, and for anyone looking a refresher on teaching and performing ideas and techniques. Also at these gatherings, you can network with colleges and independent musicians who may provide the opportunity for you to provide lessons to your students and work with your section during rehearsals.

BRING IN A SPECIALIST

Bringing in a professional or an advanced college student majoring in percussion can influence the way your section performs and can greatly assist your young percussionists in their instruction. It is important that your students have someone demonstrate how to perform in the way they should. This will provide a reference for them in their learning. The instructor will have the skill set to teach your students correct technique, posture, and balance within the section and the entire band. Having a specialist also means your students get the attention that they need for an extended amount of time rather than for a few minutes. The band director might spend a few minutes working with the percussion section compared to an entire class session with the rest of the band. Generally, those few minutes will involve tempo, dynamics or some other issue which drew the attention of the band director to correct. There are some percussionists who specialize instructing middle and high school percussion programs. Some work exclusively with marching percussion either with both the drumline and the front ensemble or with just one section. Others may work year-round with a program to ensure that the program is also proficient in concert percussion. To maximize instruction while the director is working with the winds, the percussion section can move into sectionals where they can work on band repertoire, as well as percussion ensemble works with the specialist. During sectionals, issues with reading, technique, balance, etc. can be addressed. During full-band rehearsals, the percussion section can play with whichever section is being reviewed regardless of what part is being rehearsed. This will keep the percussionists involved and engaged in the rehearsal and also gives the rest of the ensemble the opportunity to hear the percussion parts for reference. The specialist can direct the students on balancing and blending with the band and ensuring proper technique is being used. Network with your local college and music shop for a percussion instructor who can dedicate a few hours or days a week to come work with your students. If your school is fortunate to have two band directors, considering hiring a percussionist as one of the directors.

INCLUSION OF PERCUSSIONISTS IN BAND EXERCISES

What are some ways that a band director can include their percussionists in band exercises, as well as instructing them in melodic reading instead of potentially just being a time-keeping section? Keeping time is important to musicians, but so is breathing, blending, and balance which is often overlooked in the instruction of young percussionists. Reading melodically is just as important to a percussionist as reading rhythmically, as well. Include your percussionists in band activities and exercises that revolve around these techniques.

Breathing helps relax the body and reduce tension. Being relaxed is key in percussion to performing rudiments and complex rhythms, and holding your breath induces tension in the body which makes it harder to play. Tension can be reflected in a student's playing, sounding choked and harsh. Staying relaxed and breathing help tremendously to keep good time and playing complex rhythms, as well as playing a role in phrasing and the quality of their tone. Set aside some time for breathing exercises with your percussionists before and while they are playing.

With blending and balance, challenge you students to find sticks and mallets that will blend with what the band is playing, such as finding articulate mallets for a fast, rapid section or mallets that produce a warm tone during legato parts. You do not want your percussion section to overpower the rest of the band or have the band overpower them. Making sure your students have the correct stick or mallet for that instrument, that they are using correct technique, they are standing correctly behind their instruments and balancing with the rest of the ensemble will help them greatly.

There are a number of issues a band director may encounter with percussionists not being able to read melodically. Percussionists can become proficient in reading rhythms but lack the ability to read pitches. There are a few issues as to why a young percussionist may lack the necessary skill to read melodically:

- No instruction on the different types of mallet instruments (marimba, xylophone, glockenspiel, vibraphone, chimes and crotales), mallet selections, correct grip, and techniques.
- Percussionists should be rotated to different instruments. When students are not moved around in the percussion section, they can get comfortable behind the instrument they were initially assigned. This will establish "designated players" to certain instruments, meaning they will decide to only perform on a specific instrument(s) and not switch to others. Students could choose to work on the instrument that they chose or were given to them, potentially not exploring the opportunity to learn others. Rotating your percussionists gives them the chance to receive instruction on all instruments, making them well-rounded musicians.
- Students who solely play on unpitched instruments will not receive instruction in melodic reading, while those remaining behind keyboard percussion may lack skills in unpitched percussion instruments.

To increase inclusion across the ensemble and increase the melodic reading capabilities of young percussion students, arranging simple chorales in 4 part texture (such as Bach chorales) can give percussionists the opportunity to work on reading both treble and bass clef music. This may also prove beneficial as a warm-up routine for just the percussion section. Each student would be able to play one part and the switch it with another student. Any other exercises involved with reading music outside of scales and band method books that does not have a part written for percussion, the director can transcribe parts from instruments in concert pitch (i.e., flute, oboe, bassoon, tuba, etc.). Using parts from low brass instruments will assist in becoming proficient in reading bass clef, a skill that many percussionists are deficient at. Be sure to assign these parts to each percussionist and rotate them on mallet percussion.

DEVELOP A PERCUSSION CLASS OR ENSEMBLE

If possible, reserve some time in your schedule to have a percussion class or ensemble for your young percussionists as well as time for private instruction. Focusing solely on percussion, with no interference from other instruments, will motivate your students in learning their instrument. Percussion class and percussion ensemble have their similarities; however, they approach the subject of percussion is different:

- Percussion Class:
 - A lecture-based course in which the students are given instruction in more of a classroom setting rather than a rehearsal setting.
 - Here, students can learn the history of percussion, go over standard repertoire (solos, ensembles, and excerpts), and have discussions.
 - Students can learn more about how percussion became part of larger ensembles, as well as how percussion ensembles started.
 - Students can acquire a deeper understanding the role of each instrument and how they function as both solo instrument and part of an ensemble.
- Percussion Ensemble:
 - A performance-based course in which students are given instruction in a rehearsal setting rather than a classroom setting.
 - Students can develop and apply their technique, where to strike on the instrument, which beater sounds best on a triangle or bass drum, or which cymbal sounds best for specific pieces.
 - Students develop the necessary skills in blending and performing in a group environment.
 - Students have an ensemble where the focus is on them the entire rehearsal with no interference from other instruments.

As mentioned before, both classes have their similarities. For example, focus on auxiliary and world percussion can be given during both percussion class and ensemble. The approach will be slightly different in how instruction is given; however, students can still participate in learning how to play these instruments. Generally, students will receive a considerable amount of training on snare drum, mallet percussion and timpani during band rehearsals and in band method books, but because so much emphasis is placed on these instruments, auxiliary and world percussion (such as triangle, claves, and bongos) marginalized. Students may be hastily given a crash course in how to play these instruments during rehearsals, or they may have to seek out more experienced students to train them. In both of these classes, students will receive proper instruction on what classifies as auxiliary or world percussion. Otherwise, students can develop bad playing habits which will cost them later.

During the first few weeks of band rehearsals, percussion instruction can be minimal with percussionists sometimes left on their own while other instruments are getting attention. Once young percussionists have been taught how to hold sticks and mallets, they are left to their own accord since they do not have to worry about pitch or intonation. Like everyone else, percussion students should be instructed on good percussion technique from the first day to avoid improper technique. To prevent bad playing habits from developing, provide private instruction from either yourself or a specialist, involve your students in all band exercises during full band rehearsal, make sure your equipment is in working condition, and create a percussion class and/or ensemble. Getting them involved in band exercises and activities, as well as devoting time to their instruction is crucial in a young percussionist's education.

AUTHOR BIO

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Ms. Williams has performed with the Grammy award-winning quartet, Third Coast Percussion in a production of John Luther Adams' Inuksuit at the Fayetteville Botanical Gardens in Fayetteville, Arkansas. She has performed with the Prizm Chamber Orchestra in Memphis, TN, the Contemporary Chamber Players, the University of Memphis Wind Ensemble, the University of Memphis Symphony Orchestra, and the University of Memphis Percussion Ensemble. Ms. Williams has also performed as a percussionist for the Little Mermaid and Newsies at the Desoto Family Theatre in Southaven, Mississippi. She collaborated with Dr. William Shaltis, Assistant Professor of Percussion at the University of Memphis, to have a performance of Inuksuit on April 22, 2018 at Shelby Farms in Memphis, TN. Ms. Williams currently performs with the Montgomery Symphony Orchestra in Montgomery, Alabama.

Ms. Williams is currently pursuing a Doctorate in Percussion Performance with a cognate in Wind Conducting at the University of Memphis. She is currently working on her dissertation, which will focus on the steel pan music of Andy Akiho with an emphasis on his Synesthesia Suite, his experience with synesthesia and the historical significance of the steel pan. She has received her Master of Music Performance from the University of Florida and her Bachelor of Music Education and a Bachelor of Music Performance from Alabama State University. Ms. Williams is sponsored by Sabian Cymbals and Tama-Bergerault Percussion.