



The PAS Educators' Companion

A Helpful Resource of the
PERCUSSIVE ARTS SOCIETY
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

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Mission Statement:

The PAS Educators' Companion is a publication of the Percussive Arts Society focusing on providing percussion education resources to the music education community.

Welcome Statement:

Welcome to the newest edition of the PAS Educator's Companion! We are excited to offer this resource to music educators everywhere. This issue focuses on snare drum basics and the percussion classroom. In the following pages, you'll find articles from prominent educators covering tips for creating a homogenous percussion class in your program, ideas for developing a wider dynamic range, and a complete warm up routine for the classroom setting. Additionally, you'll find a "From the Archives" reprint and a bibliography of related resources that can be found in Percussive Notes, the journal of the Percussive Arts Society.

Stay tuned for the next issue, which will focus on keyboard percussion, coming in the spring of 2027!

—Educators' Companion Sub-Committee of the PAS Education Committee

STARTING STRONG WITH STAND-ALONE PERCUSSION CLASSES

by Matthew Kilby and Nathan Woods

BENEFITS OF STAND-ALONE PERCUSSION CLASSES

This article is designed to help you (the band teacher, and specifically the non-percussionist band teacher) create your own percussion-only class. The benefits of doing so are immeasurable for the students, teacher, and even for the wind and brass students. Tailoring instruction more directly to percussionists and non-percussionists is much more efficient than splitting groups by number or grade level. It may feel overwhelming to begin implementing percussion-specific techniques into your curriculum, but we are here to help! The pedagogical strategies and needs of percussionists differ from those for wind and brass students. We hope that by creating a percus-



sion-only class you will be able to focus more effectively on these two groups of students. Even administrators can benefit by learning more about the needs of their students as seen in the following quote.

As a Middle School Principal, supporting performing arts programs goes beyond attending events; it requires building schedules that align with program needs and involving teacher input. Administrators must balance class sizes to promote equity, maximize learning, minimize behavior issues, and justify teacher allocations. In band programs, this means creating opportunities for teachers to lead larger classes while providing small-group, instrument-specific instruction—in this case, in percussion. Working with band directors to build class rosters helps me understand program needs and support teachers in providing quality, individualized instruction. While percussion class sizes may initially seem too small, beginning with foundational techniques is crucial for advancing skills and fostering interest. As leaders, our role is to find creative ways to grow all facets of our programs, including percussion, to enhance learning for all students involved.

—Bentli Lewis, Principal at Oakbrook Middle School

RE-STARTING OAKBROOK MIDDLE SCHOOL'S PERCUSSION CLASS

The following article shares the initial steps of a school that re-started its percussion-only classes with the arrival of two new teachers. The ideal approach to working with percussionists in any context will depend on the teacher's assessment of the community's readiness, current investment and commitment to music education, and the program's relationship with co-teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders. There may be no one-size-fits-all for music education in any context, and the authors chose to reflect on the experience at this middle school to give a realistic picture and to hopefully inspire others to consider the benefits of a stand-alone percussion class.

For their first year, one of two band directors ran the percussion class with the help of a percussion specialist who came weekly to check-in. Percussionists were started at an atypically advanced age (8th grade) to generate appropriate numbers at the high school level. One of the two directors, Nathan Woods, took charge of the percussion program. His background is playing clarinet, but he also has DCI experience playing mellophone. In the following article, he shares valuable insights and experiences from his position as a non-percussionist percussion educator. He offers tips for starting points, material selection, and strategies in the first year.

Defining Stroke Types and their Roles in Tone Production

Defining the four-stroke types is one of the most fundamental aspects of teaching a beginning percussion class. Defining each stroke type (full, down, tap, up) creates a foundation for moving efficiently and creating desired sounds. For younger percussionists, stroke-type exercises should be employed daily or on a very frequent basis. Nathan used the exercises from the Michael Huestis Percussion Solutions text. Here is another example of an exercise I frequently use:

Full Down Tap Up



Keyboard Sightreading Method

NW: Every time we sightread on keyboard instruments, we always follow the same procedure:

1. Count and clap the rhythm
2. Say the note names to yourself out of time
3. Say the note names in rhythm
4. Say the note names and touch the key with your finger
5. Say the note names and air-play – focus on moving from one note to the next
6. Play

Having a consistent routine and a step-by-step method for every sightreading example helps beginners and middle school students find success. I also repeatedly say to look at the music while only glancing at the keyboard. Students will begin to understand that the music will change while the keyboard will never change and that we use technique time to memorize how the keyboard is laid out.

The Benefits of Frequent Keyboard Sightreading

- Builds confidence
- Builds resilience and community support
- Builds technique in context (focusing on piston stroke and moving from one note to the next)
- Builds musical literacy

NW: I've found success with routines and a step-by-step method. Middle school students especially appreciate knowing what's coming next in each class period and love participating in a lesson that logically goes from A to B. Every class starts with the same fundamental skills and may alternate between snare and mallet days. On snare days, we have a packet we work through and finish with a rhythm randomizer (free digital tool linked below) before moving on to music. On mallet days, we play scale patterns, then the seven South Carolina Band Directors' Association junior scales, and sightread. Because sight-reading may be a common area of deficiency for middle school percussionists, we generally follow a six-step procedure when sight-reading on mallets. Generally, in each class, we'll read an easier example with the six-step procedure and three additional examples. Two of appropriate difficulty (two-thirds of the class can successfully sight read) and then a challenging one that the class can read after working on it for a bit.

Percussion Ensemble:

NW: I appreciate percussion ensemble music as a way to differentiate instruction. The percussion ensemble pieces we play reinforce what we learn in fundamentals. We're working through *Festival of the New Sun*¹ (Tap-space) in 7th grade to reinforce what we're learning in Tap Pyramid and Bucks (Generic Exercises found in the Percussion Solutions Handbook) and reading 16th note combinations. We're also working through *Candlesticks*² (Tap-space) in the 8th grade to reinforce sightreading procedures directly. Kids who are ready for a challenge can get put on a more independent part, and kids who need more support can double parts.

Repertoire

NW: Because we started 8th graders, the overall trajectory of the year was similar to a beginning band class. The Holiday concert was challenging to put together, the Concert Performance Assessment was a little less challenging, and the Spring Concert was the most successful. Little wins and assigning parts based on ability level for

each student were key to building momentum. Right now, I'm getting a lot of benefits from doing a percussion ensemble and putting the weaker kids on the harder parts to build their skills.

Both classes were formatted as mallet day/snare day (once the 8th-grade students were strong enough to do more than 20 minutes on each instrument). We did about 20 minutes of fundamentals (tone production, scales, sight reading/working through a fundamentals packet), and then for the rest of the class, we worked on a percussion ensemble piece or something for the combined band. Once we got to a month before the concert, we did 10 minutes of fundamentals and 30 on music, then shifted to spending most of the time on concert music two weeks before the concert.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR

1st Quarter

NW: We began with a few weeks of just pads. We played various rhythm charts from Teaching Rhythm Logically³ with all full strokes. Gradually, we expanded to more advanced rhythms and used Bucks (a simple accent-tap exercise) to teach the four stroke types. After a few weeks, we introduced keyboard instruments through the Mark Wessels Fresh Approach to Mallet Percussion book. We only played a few pages before moving on to the Huestis 30 Progressive Mallet Etudes. I treated the Fresh Approach books as a beginning band method book and always read three examples from the 30 progressive etudes using our sight-reading procedure. We continued this process until it was time to assemble the Winter concert in the 2nd 9 weeks.

2nd Quarter

We continued daily sightreading on both pads and keyboards. The percussionists combined with the winds class for the first time for the winter concert to mixed success. We played a grade 1.5 piece of music, which was beyond what the beginning percussion class could technically do. I did my best to work around this by giving stronger students more difficult or independent parts and doubling parts for students who needed more help. Learning this piece and the others of similar difficulty took much time because they weren't technically ready to do what the music called for. Moving into the 3rd 9 weeks, I continued using the same protocol for class by sightreading as much as possible and spending a great deal of time to reinforce technique.

3rd Quarter

We began the semester with about a month of just technique and sightreading time daily until it was time to prepare music for assessment. I wanted the percussionists to play with the Honor band going to our assessment to experience polishing festival music and being in the sightreading room. We prepared the music quickly due to the percussionists' strong foundation in technique and reading and previous experience with the winter concert. We began to prepare *Begin Transmission*, an easy percussion ensemble piece, but it became apparent that we would not have adequate time to get it concert-ready.

At this point, I noticed that it had become far easier to balance the percussionists with the band due to their strong technique. Having a percussion class has shown me that most middle school percussion balance issues are due to poor technique and that overcoming these issues can only be fixed by consistent, focused work.

4th Quarter

I stayed the course and sightread and reinforced technique as much as possible. For the Spring Concert, we prepared a Tapspace easy percussion ensemble piece, *Candlesticks*, because the students were much more musi-

cally literate and quickly learned their concert music. At the concert, we had a student with a critical part absent, which was an opportunity to stress to all the students that every person is valuable and needed.

Building a Community in the Classroom and the Expectation of Continuing Band in High School

NW: Creating a sense of community in the classroom starts with strong relationships with students and ensuring every student feels successful each day. Giving tools in technique time and showing students how to apply these tools to appropriate sightreading or repertoire is crucial for inspiring student self-efficacy. Having a good personal rapport with each student can be a stepping stone for letting go of strict management and allowing students to interact, chat, and get to know each other during each lesson.

To encourage student to continue with band after 8th Grade, I use “when” instead of “if” when I talk about the high school, and I make sure Matthew is as involved as possible when in the room. I will say, “**When** you’re doing marching band next year, you’ll need to be able to do XYZ,” or “**When** you audition for region band in high school, doing X will help you Y.”

Because the high school percussion director was in the room once a week helping teach the class, recruitment went very well, and 2/3rds of the class ended up continuing band in high school. Despite many students having only one year of experience, because of the time spent working on fundamentals, these students are now huge assets to the high school percussion program.

CREATING SUSTAINABLE COLLABORATION

If you are a band director who is not a percussionist, I hope you can use this information to feel confident about starting a percussion only class all on your own. You can do it! However, some school budgets will have the luxury of hiring a percussion specialist to teach the percussion class. Bringing up a strong percussion section requires all teachers to have clear and compassionate expectations for their students and each other. If you do not have a percussion specialist nearby, the information above will help you create a percussion only class that is successful and gives your percussionists a strong start. If possible, consider enlisting the help of a local university student or emailing a trusted colleague. Little can replicate the advantages of having instrument-specific teachers or one-on-one instruction. For percussion specialists and band directors, the most important priority is supporting the other. Tactfully navigating differences in vision, philosophy, and implementation will create sustainable and high-level student experiences. The relationship between the two teachers is more important to maintain than the tedium of the pedagogy or sequencing. Compromise will be necessary! To address any problem that may arise, percussionists and band directors alike may have to reframe their mindsets:

To Percussionist Teachers: Band directors are responsible for a wide variety of instrumentalists. Percussion has the most modern development in the band family of instruments (think of the changes in the last 10, 20, or 50 years compared to the other band instruments!) Because of the nature of common teacher training systems, percussion is less frequently taught and deeply understood by those outside the percussion niche. Be forgiving of whatever situation you walk into and be part of a sustainable solution. Advise without being condescending or judgmental to benefit overall programs and understand that giving percussionists solid fundamentals is extremely challenging in a heterogeneous classroom. Set up systems to help band directors. The cardinal rules of instrument care, mallet selection, and appropriate repertoire you learned may not be as universally understood as you assume. Being an ambassador for your craft without creating unreasonable expectations for your colleagues will bring sustainable results.

To Band Directors: Having a baseline knowledge of percussion instruments will create more buy-in from your students, who will be assured that you value their time and intellect as musicians with the same passion as other instrumentalists. Avoid perpetuated stereotypes that percussionists are more ill-behaved or less musically capable than other instrumentalists. Percussionists simply require different types of planning, procedure, and instruction to be successful. The procedures for students who consistently play one instrument seated will not work for students who play multiple instruments standing. Sight-reading procedures for students who maintain bodily contact with their instrument will not work for students whose instruments require more hand-eye coordination and are separated from the student's body by an implement (stick or mallet). A percussion class or pullouts for percussionists will be hugely beneficial. Percussionists need the same caliber of detail and attention in making their first sounds in the 6th-grade band as their wind-playing counterparts. If creating a percussion class is impossible in your scenario, I'd highly recommend using the PAS archives to meaningfully include percussionists in group warm-ups, lessons, repertoire, and activities.

CLOSING THOUGHTS REGARDING ADMINISTRATION

While moving percussionists into their own class may create sections with lower numbers, if administrators are unhappy with a split that puts 8 students (percussionists) in one class and 45 wind players in another, another strategy could be to create a large class with two teachers and then have several sub-configurations for splitting those classes into two separate spaces.

Hopefully, your administrators encourage collaboration between middle school and high teachers for the betterment of all. It can be particularly useful to have the high school percussion specialist come and work with middle school percussionists. Our principal commented:

As a veteran principal with experience leading middle and high schools, I have come to understand that almost all of what we do in middle school, especially in the performing arts, is to prepare students for high school. In our world of instant gratification, the time and dedication required to become a proficient instrumentalist is a great challenge for many students. But with great challenges come great rewards! By explicitly encouraging and supporting collaboration between high school and middle school music educators, the opportunity to grow the strength of both programs comes to fruition. Building a relationship with the future directors and having those high school directors' expertise to assist in the classroom pays dividends in the rich musical and social experiences our middle school musicians experience. These deeper relationships and heightened teaching and performing experiences are critical to elevating the experience for the musicians and our school community.

—Tripp Alderege, Principal at Fort Dorchester High School

MATERIALS

Start-Up Kit

NW: We didn't use a startup kit this year, but next year, beginning percussionists will get nice Marimba and Xylophone mallets, a stick bag, Vic Firth SD1s, and a practice pad.

This last year, we used all school instruments, mallets, and sticks borrowed from the high school or left over from previous students. Fortunately, there was already a class set in decent condition. I appreciated the chance to show kids which mallets were appropriate for which instruments and why, though they saw way more wear and tear than you'd usually see. In the future, I'm setting a goal to have at least 2/3rds of the kids have their own mallets and sticks to encourage practice and inspire individual ownership.

Instructional Texts/Websites

Teaching Rhythm Logically - Darcy Williams

A Fresh Approach to Mallet Percussion - Mark Wessels

Percussion Solutions for Band Directors Textbook (Available through the Facebook Group linked below)

30 Progressive Mallet Etudes - Michael Huestis

Percussion Solution for Band Directors Warm-ups - Michael Huestis

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/569570536997988>

Randomized Note Name Worksheets (musictheory.net note naming exercises)

Rhythm Randomizer (On class display, often used to support what we worked on in Teaching Rhythm Logically)

<https://www.rhythmrandomizer.com/>

Sight-Reading Factory (On class display)

<https://www.sightreadingfactory.com/>

Percussion Ensemble Repertoire

Candlesticks by Brian Slawson (Tapspace)

Festival of the New Sun by Alan Keown (Tapspace)

Begin Transmission by John Herndon (Tapspace)

ENDNOTES

[1] <https://www.tapspace.com/percussion-ensemble/festival-of-the-new-sun>

[2] <https://www.tapspace.com/percussion-ensemble/candlesticks>

[3] <https://teachingrhythmlogically.com/>

AUTHOR BIOS

Matthew Kilby is a percussionist and educator based in Summerville, SC. Prior to joining Wando High School as Associate Band Director (Percussion/Jazz), he spent seven years at Fort Dorchester High School, where he was named Rookie Teacher of the Year and received a Citation of Excellence from the National Band Association. During his tenure, the percussion ensemble performed at the 2024 SCMEA Conference, and in 2024, the marching band became a 5A state finalist for the first time in school history.

Matthew holds degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (BM, with Honors) and Indiana University (MM), and is currently completing his DMA at Boston University. His primary teachers include Michael Spiro, Kevin Bobo, John Tafoya, and Juan Álamo.

An active member of the Percussive Arts Society Education Committee, Matthew has contributed to *Percussive Notes* and *PAS Classroom*. His compositions, published by C. Alan Publications and TapSpace, have been performed by university and high school percussion ensembles, marching bands, the TMEA All-State Percussion Ensemble, and by professional percussion ensembles. He remains an active performer, appearing regularly with various ensembles and Latin Jazz groups in the Charleston area.

Nathan Woods is one of the band directors at Oakbrook Middle School in Summerville, SC. This will be his third year at the school. In that short time, he and his co-director, Marlin Ketter, have doubled the band size, received the Outstanding Performance Award, the highest distinction offered to member bands of the South Carolina Band Directors Association, and begun the 7th and 8th grade percussion classes. Oakbrook Middle School primarily feeds into Fort Dorchester High School, where Nathan assisted the marching band in making the 6A state finals for the first time in school history.

Nathan holds a Bachelor’s degree in Music with an emphasis in Music Education from the University of South Carolina and is currently pursuing his Master’s degree in Music Education at the American Band College through Central Washington University. He is also a proud alumnus of The Cavaliers and Carolina Crown.

RELATED ARTICLES

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by Matthew Kilby

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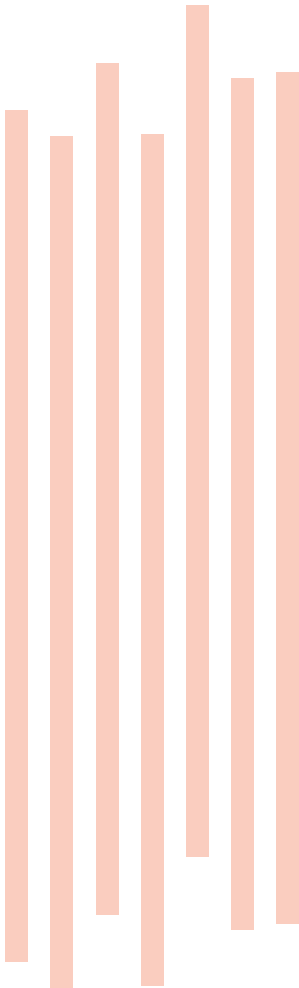
Volume 61 No. 6 December 2023

Inclusive Strategies for the Music Classroom

by Amy Smith with the Education Subcommittee of the PAS Diversity Alliance

Percussive Notes

Volume 62 No. 1 February 2024



TIPS FOR A WIDER DYNAMIC RANGE ON CONCERT SNARE DRUM

by Robert Clayson

I have spent a lot of time throughout my teaching career telling my students that they need to work on what I call the “extreme” dynamic levels. In no other instrument is this more prevalent than the concert snare drum. While my comments are generally geared more towards the extreme soft dynamics, there are occasions where I find myself asking my students for more aggression when it comes time to play anything louder than *forte*. I must admit I have become incredibly frustrated as an educator because it seems like I have to give the “play with a wider range of dynamics” speech with every new piece of music. In this article, I hope to take a look at why playing at extreme dynamic levels is so difficult and share some of the methods that I have developed to help my students think and play more musically. While this article is written with the concert snare drum in mind, I hope that some of the things I share will cross over to other percussion instruments as well.

Tip #1: Address “Why” Extreme Dynamics are Challenging

I think that the biggest challenge of playing extremely loud and soft dynamic levels is that any inconsistency in technical aspects like bead placement, hand-to-hand velocity, and stick angles are magnified. To help fix these problems at extreme dynamic levels, we must help our students have exceptional technique at normal dynamic levels. While a magical “get good quick plan” for snare drum doesn’t exist, I can give you some ideas to help your students’ general snare drum technique:

Beating Spots:

To help with consistent beating spots, consider having students practice for five minutes a day on something incredibly small such as a 20-ounce soda bottle cap. The idea behind this is that it does not matter what they practice on this bottle cap, as long as they are spending time aiming for a target that is much smaller than the normal snare drum. Once your students are comfortable with playing on the bottle cap, they can move to a small practice pad with the outline of the bottle cap drawn onto it.



Hand to Hand Velocity:

Many students, especially younger students, experience difficulties with trying to play with even hand to hand velocity. Usually, the student's dominant hand tends to play louder, but it can be the opposite in some cases. I struggled with this a lot as a student and the thing that helped me correct it was playing a bar of sixteenth notes with alternate sticking, but intentionally accenting the weaker hand. If your students struggle with playing sixteenth notes, this method can be easily adapted for eighth notes instead. Once your students become comfortable forcing their weaker hand to play louder, they will have to think about it less and less when they are playing. Eventually, the problem will all but solve itself.

Stick Angles:

Playing with an incorrect stick angle can lead to comfort issues, which can make playing extreme dynamic levels even harder than it has to be. While the optimal stick angle will vary slightly from player to player, it is generally accepted that a stick angle anywhere between 70 and 80 degrees works well for playing concert snare drum. With that in mind, I like to put towels on the snare drum at this angle and tell my students to keep their sticks right next to the edge of the towels as they play (see picture below). The more time the students spend visualizing where exactly the stick angle should be, the less they will need to rely on having the towels on the drum and it will start to become engraved into their muscle memory.



We as educators need to help our students understand that these problems do not magically fix themselves overnight. It is *okay* if they don't notice much change from day to day as long as they work the process. What is more, these skills must be maintained from time to time to keep our playing in good shape. With consistent and prolonged practice, your students will start to improve their snare drumming technique and this will be the kickstart for improving extreme dynamic level playing.

Tip #2: Practice Everything as Softly and as Loudly as can Comfortably be Played

Once your students' technique at the normal dynamic levels is progressing, you can start to hone in on the extreme dynamic levels. There is no magical method here, your students just need to spend time playing anything and everything they can get their hands on both very loudly and very softly. Are your students playing eighth-note studies in their method books during warm-up time? Are your percussion students learning a new rudiment? Is there a fun snare drum part in one of your concert band pieces? All of these situations can be used to explore dynamic extremes!

Have your students play all their music at each dynamic level, not just at what the music or the method book dictates. Place a heavy focus on the extremely quiet and the extremely loud dynamics. To make things simpler, I would recommend omitting things such as articulations, crescendos, and decrescendos **for now**. Leave those for when your students have achieved great sound quality at extreme dynamic levels consistently.

Working Extreme Dynamics Within Written Music

EXAMPLE OF WRITTEN MUSIC



EDITED TO WORK ON EXTREME DYNAMIC LEVELS



EDITED TO WORK ON EXTREME DYNAMIC LEVELS



Tip #3: Practice Extreme Dynamic Changes

Once your students have become proficient in getting to the extreme dynamic levels, it is time to help them work out how they are supposed to get to and from those dynamic levels. Early on in my teaching career, I came up with a method to help students work on extreme dynamics and dynamic shifts at the same time. The idea behind this exercise is that you take a musical figure of your choice and start by playing it at four distinct dynamic levels: as loud as possible, mezzo forte, piano, and as softly as possible. This can be customized with different rhythmic patterns, rudiments, or short excerpts of challenging rhythms in your concert band music. For example, here is the exercise with a short rhythmic pattern of four sixteenth notes and a quarter note:



Possible customization #1: reverse the dynamic changes so that it starts as softly as possible.



Possible customization #2: mix the order of dynamics so that it is not sequential.



Possible customization #3: add in things like crescendos and decrescendos to the individual rhythmic figures.



-or-



Possible customization #4: include both crescendos and decrescendos in the exercise.



A short video demonstration of this exercise can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1pRM2zI-Clo&t=1s>

Conclusion:

I'd like to end by offering some encouragement. There are very few players who are naturally proficient with the extreme levels of dynamic contrast demonstrated by world-class musicians. If a lot of professionals were honest with themselves, they would probably admit that they are not as proficient with extreme dynamic levels as they should be. The good news for us educators is that you do not have to work on extreme dynamics for an extreme amount of time every day. As long as you are dedicating some time to it consistently each practice session, these dynamic levels will naturally become easier and easier until they are second nature.

AUTHOR BIO

Robert Clayson currently serves as a Lecturer of Music for the Troy University John M. Long School of Music. His duties at Troy University include teaching the marching percussion section for the Troy University "Sound of the South" marching band, teaching private lessons, and teaching music theory and aural skills classes. Mr. Clayson earned his Bachelor's Degree in Music Education from Troy University in 2015 and his Master's Degree in Percussion Performance from Indiana University in 2017.

As a performer, Mr. Clayson is an active member of several regional orchestras across the Southeastern United States, including the LaGrange Symphony Orchestra and the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra. In 2012, Mr. Clayson performed with the Troy University Percussion Ensemble at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention as a member of the winning ensemble in the International Percussion Ensemble Competition. Mr. Clayson is an award-winning percussionist whose solo performances have been recognized and across the nation. In 2013, he received first place in the Percussive Arts Society Marching Festival Individual Collegiate Keyboard Competition, and he received first place in the 2017 Indiana Day of Percussion Collegiate Solo Marimba Competition. In addition to these honors, he was selected as a semi-finalist in the Great Plains International Marimba Competition in both 2014 and 2017.

Mr. Clayson is a member of the Blackswamp Percussion Educator Network, an Innovative Percussion Artist, and a Remo Artist. His compositions are available through C-Alan Publications, Excelcia Music Publishing, Row-Loff Productions, Studio 4 Music, Tapspace Publications, and Wildlight Publications.

RELATED ARTICLE

[Seven Steps to Achieving a Great Snare Drum Sound](#)

by William M. Shaltis

Percussive Notes

Volume 56, No. 3, July 2018

A GUIDE TO BALANCED BUZZ ROLLS

by Drew Talley

General Philosophy

Buzz rolls are an essential rudiment that every percussionist will encounter in their music career. To be clear, the term “buzz roll” has several variants: multiple bounce, closed roll, triple bounce, pressure strokes, pressed roll, and crushed roll. In the grand scheme, these are all describing the same thing with slight differences in approach.

Each describes a sustaining tone, like any string or woodwind instrument. Snare drum is one of the most articulate instruments. Therefore, one must create the illusion of sustain by overlapping multiple strokes for each individual hand motion. In creating this illusion, the stick will have a different feel within the hand. This feel change is due to the stick staying in contact with the drumhead longer than typical single strokes.

To develop a consistent buzz sound, the player must have an equal number of bounces occurring in each hand motion. Developing an equal number of bounces requires the player to understand the balance of pressure between the thumb and first finger, downward stroke speed, and the touch needed from the middle finger making contact on the stick.

Roll density, or how many bounces per hand motion, is a highly debated subject within the percussion community. The minimum is three bounces per hand (triple bounce roll), as two bounces would be a double-stroke roll, and one bounce would be a single-stroke roll. However, depending on the dynamic level and the intensity of the desired roll, players could have five or more bounces per hand motion.

Buzz Notation

Notation for buzz rolls can be tricky. Frequently, composers use the same notation for both double-stroke rolls and buzz rolls. Therefore, the player must consider the background or context of the music. Generally, if it is not in a marching style or alluding to militaristic undertones, rolls in a band/orchestra/percussion ensemble are performed as buzz rolls. However, there are exceptions to this rule, one must always use their ears and best judgement. In more modern literature, composers will use a Z symbol on a note stem to indicate a buzz versus slashes on the stem (tremolo notation).

Another aspect of buzz rolls that is unclear is how to “fill up” the printed note duration of a roll to create the sustain illusion. There are two schools of thought on this subject: metered rolls, and unmetered rolls. Most percussionists agree that for shorter roll lengths, the player should have a prescribed rhythmic base with added buzz

strokes. This is known as a roll-base or skeleton-rhythm, as it is the framework. For example, quarter-note length buzz rolls at 120 BPM will work well played as four 16th notes in each quarter-space duration. This is a metered roll. However, a fermata-roll, or other types of long extended note values, should be felt and filled up by ear to make it sound full and smooth, hence the unmetred roll. Of course one could mathematically determine a rhythm to maintain throughout, but most professionals are not as concerned in those contexts.

As mentioned previously, the roll-base is the underlying pulse of any roll. However, rarely is the roll-base written in the music. Percussionists must determine what rhythm is appropriate to fill up the printed note length. First consider the tempo, then be mindful of the dynamic needed. For example, when playing a whole note buzz roll at 160 BPM at a pianissimo dynamic, one should not use a 16th-note roll-base. A better solution would be to experiment with eighth notes as the underlying rhythm. This allows the hands to stay relaxed and is a smoother motion to control at that volume.

Generally, quiet dynamics will necessitate a slower roll-base versus louder dynamics. When altering dynamics, such as drying a *crescendo* or *diminuendo*, try modulating the roll-base to help achieve a silky sound void of tension. For novice percussionists, limit roll-bases to eighth notes, triplets, sixteenth notes, then expand to more advanced, odd-numbered, note groupings.

Physical Technique

It is helpful to think of the fulcrum to be in-between thumb and middle finger. This reduces unnecessary tension between the thumb and index finger. The index finger acts as a wall resisting the thumb pressure. The middle finger has a slight inward pull while making contact on the stick. This point of contact should be close to the finger-pad of the middle finger, as it helps counterbalance the thumb's inward squeeze. The back fingers, ring and pinky, have minor supporting roles in comparison to the other three. Think of them as a cave, in which the stick can freely move.



One common ailment of rolls is the lack of finger support on the stick. While finger support is essential, avoid white knuckles or fingernails from over-squeezing in the grip. Think of how much pressure one would use while holding a toothbrush brushing their teeth. Being more relaxed than tight is an ideal starting point regardless of the dynamic.

While players can develop a smooth roll using a combination of different muscle mechanics, this author recommends an arm-motion approach. The forearms smooth out and blend the sound from each hand motion. Generate the initial stick motion from the elbows, while the wrists remain in a fixed position. Ensure that the drum stand is at a proper height to allow the arms to have a slight downward angle.



The downward stroke velocity has a direct correlation to the desired dynamic. An aggressive buzz roll will have a faster stroke speed than one at a quieter dynamic. Experiment with different rates of downward stroke momentum to see how it changes the stick interacting with the drumhead.

Getting Started

At first, strive for as many bounces as possible by allowing the stick to dribble out until it rests stagnant on the drumhead. The moment right before the stick stops moving on the head, you will notice a flurry of fast rapid bounces. This is the ideal buzz sound and should occur with a very relaxed grip on the stick. Lift off quicker from the drum to lessen the number of overall bounces. Then increase the downward stroke speed, as this feeling of forearm weight behind the stroke condenses the bounces tighter to one another thus recreating the buzz sound. As a reminder, the middle finger and thumb can add or reduce the number of bounces by adjusting the amount of squeeze. This process takes time, experimentation, patience, and muscle internalization as it is a balancing act.

Go slowly to clearly hear how many bounces each hand is achieving. If a player can match the number of bounces and get them to sound identical, the roll will sound balanced as the hand motion continues to get faster. To

understand what is happening as the speed increases, recording a video in slow mo is a great tool. As the player progresses, they should aim for an identical feeling and motion from each hand.

Exercises

Students usually lack the awareness to know how to approach their roll development woes. Frequently one or two exercises are looped ad nauseam in hopes that it improves. The following exercises give students a variety of options, with clear intent, to help perfect their buzz roll. Exploring the recommended variations will add an extra challenge, even for an experienced player.

“Lift-Off” works the physical motion of the buzz stroke. Generate the motion from the elbow and allow the stick to bounce to the full note length. As the note length reduces, the player will have a faster downward stroke velocity as well as a faster lift, thus eliminating some bounces and compacting the others. Keep the fulcrum free from unnecessary tension to allow stick motion. As you gain awareness on how to control the bounces, strive to keep an equal number of bounces throughout the entire exercise. Listen for consistency within one hand then across the hands. For an added challenge, reduce rests between strokes.

“Three’s Builder” isolates the feeling of a triple bounce roll by working three note groupings. The player should feel more finger engagement in the slower sextuplet rhythm, while the forearm and elbow drive the nine-lets. The hand modulation helps blur the bounces into a realistic roll sustain. Remember, memorize the feeling of a triple bounce more than trying to count strokes. Often this exercise helps a roll open up from being too dense.

“Pressure Gauge” helps develop a deeper understanding of the touch sensitivity needed within the fulcrum, alongside with the weight of the downward stroke. Start from a tight dead stroke and gradually allow the buzz to breathe and transform into an open diddle-like buzz. In knowing the extremes of the buzz-roll spectrum, the player can find the middle ground easier.

“Buzz 8’s” works on the core elements of a roll. Look for consistent hand motion, consistent sound quality, and connected buzzes when the hands begin to alternate. This works well for novice percussionists or to quickly teach by rote. Experiment with different dynamic levels or by extending measures.

“Buzz Time Table” progresses a roll slow to fast by modulating through different rhythmic groupings. While the exercise can be overwhelming, it is important for students to become aware of the more elastic rhythms that are not as easily divisible against the beat or measure. Often these are the best roll-bases for a smooth sustain. At first, allow the stick to get as many bounces as possible until it rests on the drumhead. Wait to lift the resting hand until playing the next stroke. As the rhythm advances, each stroke needs fewer bounces, so the rate of lift will increase. Listen for consistency in the number of bounces and how fast or slow they occur. Experiment with this exercise in reverse or play without a metronome.

“16th & Triplet Roll Builders” expand upon constant buzz stroke groupings. One of the biggest benefits of this exercise is eliminating accented starts or ends of a roll. Since these groupings end with a buzz stroke, they are considered untied-buzz rolls. Avoid interrupting the stick motion as more strokes are added. Try the same exercise with five-lets and seven-lets as rhythmic bases.

“Isolated Buzz 16th & Triplets” merges the ability to morph single strokes into buzz stroke combinations with different roll-bases. Practice wrist strokes into forearm strokes without buzzes to isolate the mechanical motion needed. This exercise benefits from repetition as opposed to reading straight through. Use a subdivision on a metronome for timing accountability throughout the transitions.

“Dynamic Chicken & a Roll” is a revamp of a classic double-stroke roll exercise. The player must be able to transition between the single strokes and different roll lengths, in addition to the dynamic shading. Avoid accented starts or releases and resist physical grip changes as the dynamic shifts. Even for louder dynamics, keep the overall height of the roll low, use weight and downward velocity to increase the volume. Try with more moderate dynamics to work on consistency of dynamic control.

“Doug’s Challenge” is a conceptual exercise in which the player must develop the ability to control unmetred rolls, along with pushing their dynamic control to the limit. Create new levels of expression from experimenting with roll density, hand speed, and beating spot placement. Doug Howard, retired Principal Percussionist of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, inspired this exercise.

Beyond the Technique

Here are a few additional tips to promote buzz development. Mirrors help ensure that the player lifts straight up and down, as well as having identical motions across the body. The author recommends dense, large-bead concert sticks over drumset-style, lighter small-bead sticks. Double check that the playing zone is directly over the snare wires to maximize snare response. While practicing, turn off the snare wires and dampen the drum for a better understanding of tone quality. For inexperienced players, playing near the rim can be easier to facilitate buzzes because the drum head is slightly more tense compared with the center.

Final Thoughts

Perfecting a buzz roll is a lifetime pursuit. Consistent practice, from a variety of exercises, will help achieve a balanced roll. Have a clear vision of the buzz sound before playing so that the hands can match the aural image. Go slow and internalize the feeling with regulated breathing. Playing metered and unmetred rolls and developing control over roll density at a variety of dynamics are essential elements. While there is no universal way to play buzz rolls, these techniques will guide the transformation of a buzz roll into a silky smooth sustain.

Videos

Buzz 8s: <https://vimeo.com/1229160165/16d8f78a66?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

Buzz Time Table: <https://vimeo.com/1229161854/ff1c7ae3b2?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

Doug’s Challenge: <https://vimeo.com/1229162874/38bbc5ce6c?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

Isolated Buzz 16ths: <https://vimeo.com/1229167122/0e568c08a4?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

Three’s Builder: <https://vimeo.com/1229169828/aeefcc0fd5?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

Triple Roll Builder: <https://vimeo.com/1229173053/4e6dd98f84?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

A Guide to Balanced Buzz Rolls

Lift-Off

Lift sticks on each rest

The musical score for 'Lift-Off' is written in 4/4 time and consists of five staves. The first staff begins with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It features a series of rests and notes, with a '1' indicating a first lift. The second staff continues the pattern, with a '2' indicating a second lift. The third staff shows a more complex rhythmic pattern with eighth notes and rests, and a '2' indicating a second lift. The fourth staff features a series of eighth notes and rests, with a '2' indicating a second lift. The fifth staff concludes the piece with a final rest and a '2' indicating a second lift. The title 'Lift-Off' is centered above the staves, and the instruction 'Lift sticks on each rest' is written to the right of the staves.

Three's Builder

RRRLLL
LLLRRR

3
6

5
6

6
9

7
9

8
9

9

R R R
L L L
R L R
L R L

Pressure Gauge

3

5

7

9

11

Buzz 8's

R R R R R R R R L L L L L L L L B B B B B B B B R L R L
L L L L L L L L R R R R R R R R L R L R

Buzz Time Table

R
L
B

L
R
B

The musical notation for 'Buzz Time Table' is written in 4/4 time. It consists of a series of measures, each containing a specific rhythmic pattern. The notation includes various note values (quarter, eighth, sixteenth, and thirty-second notes), rests, and articulations (accents, slurs, and ties). The patterns are organized into groups, with some measures containing multiple groups of notes. The notation is presented in a single staff, with the time signature 4/4 at the beginning. The piece is divided into measures by bar lines, and some measures contain repeat signs. The notation is written in a standard musical notation style, with notes on a five-line staff and a key signature of one sharp (F#).

5

9

12

16

20

22

24

26

28

29

16th Roll Builder

R	R	R	R
L	L	L	L
R	L	R	L
L	R	L	R

5

9

13

17

21

Triplet Roll Builder

5

9

13

17

21

Isolated Buzz 16ths

R L R L
L R L R

Repeat each measure 4x

3

5

7

9

11

13

15

17

19

Isolated Buzz Triplets

Repeat each measure 4x

4

7

10

13

16

19

R L R L
L R L R
R R R R
L L L L

Dynamic Chicken & a Roll

Reverse Cresc./Decresc. on repeats

3 *f*

5

7 *f*

9

11

13

15

17

19

21

23 *f*

fp

The score consists of 23 measures of music in 4/4 time. It features a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The piece starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic and includes several repeat signs. The final measure is marked *fp* (fortissimo piano).

Doug's Challenge

Start at *mf* crescendo until FFFF

R
L

4/4

mp

p

pp

ppp

pppp

The score is a single line of music in 4/4 time, consisting of five measures. Each measure contains a half note with a fermata. The dynamics are marked as *mp*, *p*, *pp*, *ppp*, and *pppp* respectively, indicating a crescendo. Above the first measure, the letters 'R' and 'L' are written vertically.

AUTHOR BIO

Drew Talley is an active music educator across the Dallas Fort Worth Metroplex. He's been the Assistant Director of Percussion at Wylie HS, Flower Mound HS, and currently teaches within Allen ISD. As a Percussion Director, he led his students to Bronze and Gold medals at the UIL 6A State Marching Championship, in addition to being named Grand Champions at the BOA San Antonio Super-Regional. His lesson students have placed in the All-Region/Area Bands, including the TMEA All-State Band, as well as into competitive collegiate music programs. Mr. Talley has presented at East Texas A&M University's Percussion Director Symposium, Southern California School Band and Orchestra Conference, and the National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy.

As a professional musician, Mr. Talley has experience performing orchestral, chamber, operatic, musical theater, and commercial music across the United States. He's shared the stage with major artists on radio and national television. Former percussionist for entertainment companies; such as Disney, Six Flags Over Texas, and Busch Gardens-Williamsburg. Mr. Talley holds a M.M. in Performance from Carnegie Mellon University and a B.A. in Music Performance from UT-Arlington. Connect with him directly through his website, www.Talley-percussion.com.

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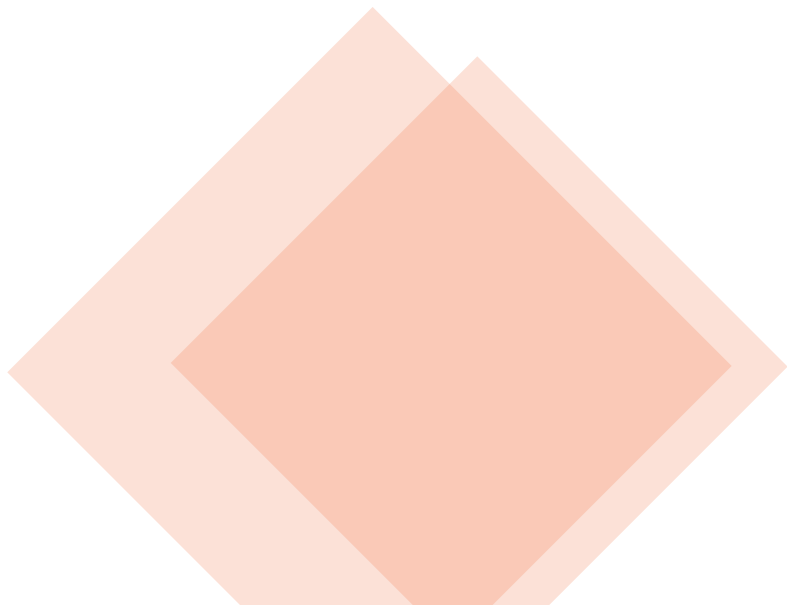
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BACK ISSUE REPRINT

PERCUSSION PROBLEMS FROM THE PODIUM

by Robert Snider

EDITOR'S NOTE: It gives me great pleasure to introduce Robert C. Snider, a new member of the PAS Education Committee. Robert Snider is a percussionist with the United States Navy Band in Washington, D.C. Bob attended Wichita State University studying percussion with Dr. J. C. Combs. He then transferred to the University of Nebraska where he studied with Albert Rometo and earned a bachelor's degree in music education. Continuing his education, Bob attended Indiana University of Pennsylvania where he studied with Gary Olmstead. After receiving his master's degree in performance, Mr. Snider was employed as assistant director of bands and percussion instructor at the University of Wisconsin in Green Bay.

"If I could just get my section together for a few rehearsals, they'd play so much better and I wouldn't have so many problems with them during full band."

How many times have we thought: if only... For every much needed percussion sectional, up pop the conflicts: track meet, orthodontist appointment, soccer practice; the list is endless. But many problems can be solved during rehearsal without it becoming a "get with it, drummers!" horror story.

Step one is to organize your section into five areas, or "stations": I. Timpani, II. Bass Drum – Cymbals; III. Snare Drum; IV. Miscellaneous Percussion; and V. Mallet Percussion. Divide the music into the corresponding folders, write the folder number on the part and they'll always be at the appropriate station. This should instantly halt the problem of "lost" music and more than six players reading off the same stand.

Step two is to provide carpet squares or towels that are placed on leveled music stands to be used at each station for trap tables. Noise and commotion from dropped sticks and instruments and the use of the floor as a trap table should be eliminated by using this step.

Step three is to have your percussionists position hand held instruments (triangle, tambourine, etc.) at a height so that they can see the instrument, music and conductor all in the same line of vision. Besides helping the players to focus their concentration on the instrument, the audience is given a chance to see and hear the instruments being performed.

Step four is up to you. By using your eyes and ears and the following hints, you can solve many of your percussion problems from the podium.

PROBLEM	IS CAUSED BY	WHAT TO DO
Simple tambourine rhythms are cluttered with extra jingle sounds	Swinging the tambourine outward before moving it inward to strike against the other hand	Hold the tambourine still in one hand at about a 30° angle and strike with the fingertips or knuckles of the other hand
Tambourine shake rolls fail to have a definite start and/or stop	Rolls are played with just a simple shake	Start and stop each shake roll with a light tap at the indicated dynamic for a precise attack and release
Tambourine jingles ring on after a tap or roll	Tambourine is being held in a vertical position allowing the jingles to ring freely	End the tap or shake with the tambourine in a horizontal position so the jingles lie flat
Calfskin tambourine sounds “flat”	Worn out head or high humidity	Place tambourine over a music stand light before and in between passages or tighten head while playing by squeezing head tighter between thumb and fingers of the holding hand
Triangle has a metallic buzz while played from a music stand	Sympathetic vibrations of the stand from the triangle via the triangle clip	Hold triangle from hand, if it must be hung from stand; place a cloth between the clip and stand to insulate
Triangle sound is more <i>clang</i> than “ding”	Striking hard on the center of one of the triangle sides	Play closer to the closed corners with lighter touch
Triangle has a woody or clickish sound	The old notorious “hit the triangle with the drumstick” trick	Have suitable triangle beaters near the instrument at all times
When quickly dampened, a “whoop” sound comes from the triangle	Muffling the triangle too quickly	Let the triangle “speak” its initial sound, then dampen by quickly rolling the fingers of the holding hand onto the instrument
Triangle roll sounds rhythmic or too agitated	Roll too slow if a rhythm is audible and too fast if very agitated	Play roll from either closed corner at a speed just fast enough to not produce an audible rhythm
Claves have a dead sound	Improper grip	Hold clave in left hand like the traditional right hand snare drum grip. Turn hand over and slide out clave. Slightly lower finger tips closer to palm. Place clave over opening on top of the thumb and fingers. Strike with other clave.
Latin guiro parts lack that proper “Latin Feel”	Playing all notes as short scrapes	Read the given rhythms as is by playing quarter notes with a long scrape towards the player and eighth notes as short scrapes away from the player
Wood block has a bright but thin note	Playing with tips of wood snare drum sticks	Play wood blocks (and temple blocks) with a hard rubber mallet such as a Musser M-3

PROBLEM	IS CAUSED BY	WHAT TO DO
Floppy hand castanets	Loose or stretched clapper cords	Tighten and retie as soon as possible, but for a quick fix pull the knot toward you with the first finger and play normally
With motor off, vibraphone tone seems muffled	Resonator disks are in a horizontal position	With the fingers, move disks to a vertical position
Suspended cymbal stand rattles during rolls	Top section of stand is rattling inside middle section	Extend the top section out of the middle as far as possible and adjust the stand height between the middle and lower sections
Suspended cymbal "crashes" sound thin and pingy	Striking the cymbal with the tip of a drum stick between the edge and crown	Strike the edge of the cymbal at about 45° angle with the shoulder or butt end of the drum stick
Suspended cymbal roll sounds duttered	1) Mallets too hard or too soft 2) Rolling too close to the crown 3) Rolling too fast or with double bounce or buzz strokes	1) Try a medium yam mallet like a Musser M-5 2) Play at the edges with the left stick at "9:00" and the right at "3:00" 3) Use a single stroke "roll" just fast enough so that a rhythm isn't noticeable
Bass drum rolls sound thin	Using lightweight timpani sticks for rolls	Use two bass drum beaters of similar size and weight or a pair of factory matched bass drum beaters
Uneven bass drum rolls	1) One handed roll with a double ball beater (heads are different sizes) 2) Beaters not hitting in the same head area 3) Double bounce bass drum rolls	1) See above 2) Play rolls with the beaters making contact with the head the same distance from the rim 3) Use a single stroke "roll" method with the stroke speed just fast enough to not produce a rhythmic pulse
Snare drummer producing uneven sounds from the drum	1) One stick hitting near the center and the other hitting near the edge of the drum heads 2) One hand playing from a different stick height than the other 3) Cracked and/or taped-up sticks	1) Align the drum so the snare strainer faces your belt buckle and play "over the snares" with the sticks the same distance from the edge and striking within a half inch of each other 2) The stick height of both sticks should be the same unless accents or embellishments are performed 3) Replace sticks
Snares buzzing when drum is not being played	Snares left on during periods of rest	Release snares whenever possible to avoid the sympathetic vibrations
Thin sound coming from a well tuned snare drum	Sticks too light and thin	Use a snare drum stick of a "SA" weight or more for general performance

PROBLEM	IS CAUSED BY	WHAT TO DO
Mallet parts are being played but are not heard clearly	Mallets used are too soft or light	Try the following types: Bells: hard plastic (Musser M-5) Xylophone: hard plastic or hard rubber (M-5 or M-4) Marimba: semi-hard yam (M-7) Vibes: hard yam (M-6)
Chimes don't cut through a full band passage	Chimes sounding much louder near the player and not projecting to the audience	In any passage above a mezzo forte, suggest the player perform the part at least one dynamic stronger
Mallet part being well played with correct mallets but tones are inconsistent	Striking the bar over the nodal points (over the "strings")	Strike near the center of the bars and/or at the extreme near edge of the "black keys"
Crash cymbals and bass drum parts don't enhance a full ensemble entrance	Dampening the sounds before the ensemble release often due to incorrectly notated parts	Encourage players to match the attack and release of the ensemble regardless of what the written note values are
Certain percussion instruments lack their characteristic sound	Students don't have a concept of the sounds some percussion instruments produce	Imitate the following sounds: Bass drum: booom (not thud) Cymbals: crrash (not pow) Triangle: dting (not clang) Tambourine: wild folk dancers Xylophone: dancing skeletons Bells: church handbells Chimes: huge church bells

Reference to mallets by brand name is made only as an example of a type of mallet recommended. The author acknowledges that many suitable mallets are available from different companies and encourages you to try them.)

