

# A Survey of Percussion Ensemble Programming

By Gene Fambrough

**A**lthough I enjoy the rehearsal process of the percussion ensemble (and certainly enjoy the concerts), at the end of each semester I eagerly dive into the process of selecting literature for the next concert. I have determined that I enjoy this so much because, quite literally, anything and everything is possible. In programming my own concerts I began to wonder how others approach programming; are pieces selected for their own merit or are concerts arranged to fit a formula (“old, new, borrowed, and blue”)?

As a result, percussion professors at several large universities were contacted and posed a series of questions relating to the subject. The survey respondents were: Ken Broadway (University of Florida), Steve Hemphill (Northern Arizona University), Scott Herring (University of South Carolina), Tony McCutchen (then at University of Georgia; now at Jacksonville State University), Jonathan Wacker (East Carolina University), and Brian West (Texas Christian University).

These programs were chosen in order to reflect situations where instrumentation and/or personnel would generally not need to be taken into account during the planning process. These institutions also have secondary percussion groups, either a freshman-level percussion ensemble, steel band, marimba ensemble, or some type of world ensemble. The typical size of the percussion ensemble at each school surveyed is between 12 and 16 students. There is an average of 2.5 percussion ensembles of various types at each school, generally reflecting a large pool of students involved in the program.

**Fambrough:** *Do you try to use a certain framework when programming your percussion ensemble concerts?*

**Broadway:** I try to program a variety of works, including large works, chamber pieces, marimba ensemble, and student soloists with the ensemble.

**Hemphill:** I have found that students and audiences both seem to enjoy eclectic concerts, those with a wide variance in style, size, and timbral construction. However, I often look for a “centerpiece” of some kind for the concert—sometimes a large, demanding work, or a featured guest soloist. An important aspect of my program planning is to view a four- to five-year cycle of potential student experiences within the percussion ensemble genre.

**Herring:** I try to maintain a balance between historical works and newer works, listenable vs. esoteric works, as well as finding a way to involve all the members on at least two works.

**McCutchen:** Occasionally, one concert might feature a certain aspect, such as marimba orchestra, world music, or Ragtime solos.

**Wacker:** I plan my concerts so that the works included represent a wide range of styles, will challenge each student on a variety of instruments, and will provide an enjoyable experience for the audience. In this way, I think we are fulfilling our responsibility of teaching the students how to play their instrument in as many styles as possible, while still presenting a concert that the audience will come back to hear again.

**West:** In the past I would try to blend various types of pieces—large ensemble, keyboard

ensembles, smaller chamber-type pieces (usually uncondacted), “drummy” pieces (utilizing primarily drums), etc. However, now that our program has grown, we are performing mainly large ensemble works with Percussion Ensemble I and utilizing the above referenced types of pieces in Percussion Ensemble II.

**Fambrough:** *How do logistical concerns affect your decisions?*

**Broadway:** We only own two 5-octave marimbas, which affects programming of newer works. Also, due to rehearsal-space issues, we only rehearse once a week in a three-hour block.

**Hemphill:** Primary concerns include specific instrumentation, sophistication of required technology if any, depth of technical difficulty across all parts, and setup time requirements



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in relation to rehearsal time. Other logistical questions revolve around the potential on-stage use of platforms (risers), sound shells, pianos, special lighting, sound reinforcement or sound playback, use of special theatre effects or fire, firearm effects, sound shields, dance floors or space, video/image projection, use of in-audience performance space, use of stairs-to-stage access, etc.

**Herring:** This is extremely important in my programming as we have a very small stage; from front to back the stage is approximately 15 feet deep. Because of this, I must think about works that use smaller forces and smaller inventories of instruments.

**McCutchen:** We have to be able to go from piece to piece during the performance without much delay. We try to set up the pieces and program the order to accommodate this.

**Wacker:** Unfortunately, we all have to deal with the reality of logistical limitations. Our stage is medium sized, so I can program most of the standard literature. Occasionally I find that I need a larger venue for one piece or another. Another concern is instruments; usually we have most instruments that are called for, but sometimes we have to rent or borrow. I hate to let instrument availability influence whether or not we perform a piece, but sometimes it has to.

**West:** Occasionally, for example, we may have to reset the stage for steel band after percussion ensemble, or we may put the steel band on the floor to avoid a time lapse, or put a piece in the back of the stage on risers. I feel it is important to have a flow to a concert, without large set changes between pieces.

**Fambrough:** *Do you have to consider the performance hall or stage when programming?*

**Broadway:** Our stage is not designed with acoustics in mind, so we have to consider mallet choice in rehearsals (dry room) as opposed to concerts (very inarticulate hall).

## CONSIDERATIONS

The ensemble directors were asked to rate the importance of the following factors in their decision to program individual selections (1: very important, 5: not important):

Audience reaction (i.e., humor, jazz/rock)  
Average response = 2.5

Exposure to students (i.e., staples in the repertoire)  
Average response = 2.16

Personal feelings (i.e., old favorites or exciting new pieces)  
Average response = 2.6

**Hemphill:** It is important in my academic environment to communicate a minimum of one month out using facility forms (including check-off boxes regarding specific needs) and diagrams of setup. While some programming issues are more intricate or daunting than others, experience now dictates the difference between what is actually necessary for the performance and what would be “nice” for an enhanced performance.

**McCutchen:** Yes, but only to a certain extent.

**Wacker:** Not usually. Aside from making sure that it will fit on the stage, I try to make sure that it will work acoustically, that it won't be too soft for the audience to hear well, or too loud for them to want to hear—although that is rare.

**West:** Not usually at TCU, only when we're on tour away from home.

**Fambrough:** *Have you done a theme concert? If so, what was the theme?*

**Broadway:** We have done a concert of the music of Ney Rosauero, and a concert featuring smaller chamber works.

**Hemphill:** On occasion, we have utilized a variety or series of small groups (quartets, as an example) as a quasi-theme. We once presented “A Tribute to George Hamilton Green”

with a 5–10 minute PowerPoint presentation in the middle of the program to highlight historical and educational program aspects. We also have constructed a soundtrack for a silent film (*a la Nexus*), with the primary use of a marimba band, rotating xylophone soloists, quasi-drumset, and two sound-effects percussionists.

**Herring:** Yes, on two occasions. One concert was Mallets vs. Drums. The works alternated between works exclusively for mallets and exclusively for drums. We also had the Pendulum Percussion Duo (Susan Powell and Joseph Krygier) as guest artists and did a concert of works that were written or arranged by them.

**McCutchen:** Yes, Brazilian music, and a large segment of one concert was Ragtime with silent film.

**Wacker:** I have a strong interest in Afro-Cuban music and I feel that it is important for contemporary percussion students to be well versed in those instruments, so I have prepared a few concerts made up of pieces exclusively in that genre.

**West:** Rarely, but yes. We have a Latin American Arts Festival every other year and we usually program works only by Latin American artists on that concert. I have also done a “timeline” concert starting with “Ionisation” (old) and progressing to a recently commissioned piece (new).

**Fambrough:** *Do you ever solicit or take student suggestions?*

**Broadway:** Yes. Most of the student soloists select their own works, and often rehearse them on their own if a conductor is not needed.

**Hemphill:** Over the years, our ensemble has benefited from student suggestions, both solicited and not, but not all that often. Sometimes, I wish students would be more active in the planning stages—those stages can occur a significant time beforehand—but my experience is that a student's input can be “late in the game” for the real requirements of planning.

**Herring:** Yes, on several occasions students have asked about doing certain works and I have tried to incorporate their suggestions to the best of my ability.

**McCutchen:** Yes, we did a student arrangement



University of South Carolina

of music from the video game *Halo*. He conducted, also.

**Wacker:** Absolutely! Some of the best pieces I have performed with my ensembles have come from student suggestions.

**West:** Sometimes, but only within the overall context of what I am trying to accomplish pedagogically with the group.

**Fambrough:** *If your school has a second percussion group (steel band, marimba ensemble, world percussion ensemble, etc.), do they have separate concerts or are they integrated into the primary percussion ensemble concert?*

**Broadway:** Our steel bands perform with the percussion ensemble on the fall concert, but play a separate concert, usually featuring a guest artist, in the spring. The other world music ensembles have their own concerts.

**Hemphill:** We do not have separate ensembles other than the club's pan group. Brazilian drumming, African drumming, and steel band are programmed on our main percussion ensemble concerts on a rotating or occasional basis, but they are rehearsed as part of the percussion ensemble program.

**McCutchen:** We have two steel bands and a salsa band. The steel bands usually do a stand-alone concert, separate from the percussion ensemble. The salsa band might perform either with the steel band or the jazz band.

**Wacker:** We do both, depending upon how much time we have to prepare a concert and whether the second ensemble is conducted by a faculty member or a graduate student.

**West:** We have done both. Unfortunately some of these decisions revolve around concert hall logistics/reservations and not program considerations. Recently, we have been doing two shorter concerts each semester, one with PE I/Steel I and one with PE II/Steel II. We are finding that our audiences are enjoying shorter concerts instead of the "marathon" concerts. Of course, there is more involved with doing multiple concerts, but we have found that the challenges are worth it in order to give our students more performance time on stage.

**Fambrough:** *How important is new repertoire to you? How do you find new pieces to perform?*

**Broadway:** I try to program newer works on every concert. I hear them at PASIC or get recommendations from colleagues.

**Hemphill:** New repertoire is important to me. I rely on four resources, typically, for new ideas and new repertoire: PASIC and state PAS performances, communicating with friends and colleagues in collegiate programs, CD listening, and occasional e-mail solicitation/announcements of new works and/or recordings that come my way.

**Herring:** I enjoy new repertoire, but don't find it necessary to have a new piece on every concert. I search the programs area of the PAS Website, get many works from composers,

and find new pieces at percussion ensemble concerts at PASIC.

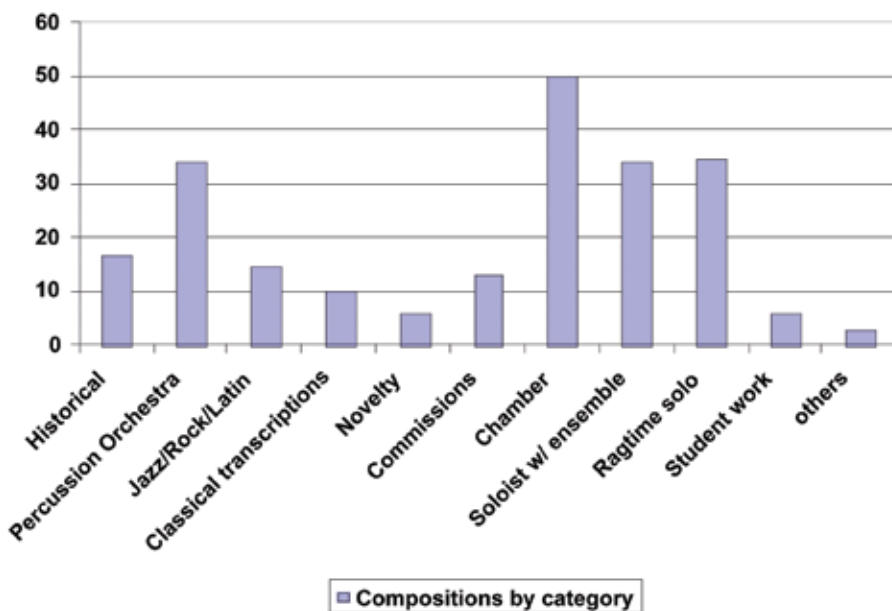
**McCutchen:** Very important. We always have

some new literature, often mixed with some older "standards." The new repertoire comes from a variety of sources: personal research,

## GENRES

Of the 223 total works performed by the six schools surveyed between fall 2007 and spring 2009, the breakdown according to "genres" is as follows:

|   |    |       |
|---|----|-------|
| Historical ("Ionisation," "Pulse," etc.):   | 17 | 7.5%  |
| Percussion orchestra ("Past Midnight," "Stained Glass," "Houston Strokes," etc.): | 34 | 15.2% |
| Jazz/rock/Latin (original or transcription):                                      | 15 | 6.7%  |
| Classical transcriptions:   | 10 | 4.4%  |
| Novelty ("Head Talk," "Crispy Critters," "Short Circuits," etc.):                 | 6  | 2.8%  |
| Commissioned works or premieres (any category):                                   | 13 | 5.8%  |
| Small ensembles (trios, quartet, or quintet), either drum, keyboard, or mix:      | 50 | 22.4% |
| Soloist (student or guest artist) w/ensemble:                                     | 34 | 15.2% |
| Ragtime solos:  | 35 | 15.6% |
| Student composition or arrangement:   | 6  | 2.8%  |
| Pieces not included in any of the above categories                                | 3  | 1.4%  |



The most interesting aspect of the survey is the breakdown of concert literature. The types of literature being performed most frequently are: chamber ensemble (22.4%), ragtime solos (15.6%), soloist w/ensemble (15.2%), and percussion orchestra (15.2%). The next most common genre is historical works, but only at 7.5%. Combining that figure with Ragtime solos (similar genres in many respects), the total is approximately the same as the chamber works (23.1%). At only 4.4% of works programmed, classical transcriptions need to be explored further as a means of exposing students to different literature. Novelty works seem to be falling out of frequent rotation at just under 3% of all pieces programmed.

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conference concerts (PASIC, etc.), colleagues, graduate students, etc.

**Wacker:** I try to include a fair selection of recently composed music on each concert. However, it is more important to me that the selection challenges the students and exposes them to a wide range of styles, than when it was composed. For new pieces, I surf the Websites of percussion publishers, visit Websites of composers for their “works” link, and visit the booths at PASIC. The PAS Website offers ideas on many pieces also.

**West:** New repertoire is extremely important to me. Percussion ensemble is still a relatively new art form and we must continually search for new repertoire and reach out to composers to write for this great medium. Although historical works and the “staples” are important, we have to continue to develop our literature

for the generations to come. I find the best source for new repertoire is commissioning composers. Although this process has its chal-

lenges, I find it to be quite rewarding. A close second to commissioning is simply word of mouth. A great way to find literature ideas is by talking with colleagues about what they have tried and what they liked and disliked.

**Fambrough:** Any additional thoughts on programming percussion ensemble concerts?

**Hemphill:** I try to balance the students’ exposure to quality works—well crafted, with a depth of musical content; expressive qualities—with the provision of a variety of performance experiences—various instruments, styles, genres, individual exposure—and with a smaller mix of appropriately needed knowledge/experiences; e.g., music education majors needing familiarity with quality high school literature incorporating a variety of styles, including commercial/novelty literature.

**McCutchen:** Programming for a balance of audience appeal with student exposure to staples and cutting edge literature is important.

**West:** I don’t think about “audience reaction” in terms of a humorous piece, etc., but in terms of the quality of the literature. A good piece of music, regardless of the type of music, will appeal to wider variety of audience members.

**Gene Fambrough, DMA,** is Assistant Director of Bands and Assistant Professor of Percussion at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He directs the UAB Percussion Ensemble, Steel Band, Marching Blazers Drumline, and the Electro-Acoustic Percussion Group. He holds degrees from the University of Georgia, East Carolina University, and the University of Alabama. PN



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