

# Diving In: Starting an Electronic Percussion Program

BY GENE FAMBROUGH

**E**lectronic percussion has been around for roughly 25 years, but has yet to find a prevalent, permanent home in many areas of percussion. Drumset artists utilizing MIDI technology are still few and far between, public schools struggle to afford basic acoustic instruments, and colleges with MIDI percussion ensembles are seen as fortunate, if not groundbreaking.

This current age of technology gives us the Internet, cell phones, mp3 files, the iPod, the Blackberry, and the laptop computer on which this article is written—so why haven't we embraced technology more in our profession? Is it fear of the unknown? Possibly. Is it lack of funds? Most certainly. Although there are may be other reasons, these are the greatest obstacles facing many of us. This article seeks to address these issues and to guide the college percussion teacher in ways to overcome them.

## APPLICATIONS

What are the benefits of electronic percussion? Even a single mallet controller can be utilized in many ensembles within a typical university setting. Some examples include: wind symphony or wind ensemble (to cover celeste, harp, or piano parts), percussion ensemble (as an extra keyboard instrument as well as choir or synthesizer effects), and even with an indoor drumline or marching band. It could even find a place in an opera production, since many orchestra pits do not provide adequate room for chimes and timpani.

The quality of sounds from today's instruments is truly remarkable, making concerns of ensemble blend a non-issue. For the same amount of money as a new vibraphone, literally hundreds of instruments could be added to your ensemble.

As teachers, we are always looking for ways to broaden our students' range of experiences to help them become complete

musicians. One of the ways we can do this is by encouraging growth in all areas of musical literacy: sight-reading, applied performance, and composition. Compare these aspects to the facets that make humans literate in language—reading, speaking, and writing—and you can see the importance of this balance.

With the development of an electronic percussion ensemble, you can provide students with an outlet for developing composing and arranging skills, since there is no practical body of existing literature for this type of ensemble.

## FINANCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

Within the first semester of my arrival on campus at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), a perfect opportunity presented itself. The School of Arts and Humanities was soliciting proposals for "mini-grant" funding. The purpose of these grants was to support the integration of new technologies into the curriculum and was primarily aimed at junior faculty. This was my chance to "dive in" to the world of electronic percussion.

Although your particular school may not offer this type of specific program, there are certainly grant programs at every institution, and it may just take some time to research where the money is available. Check into research-type grants that will allow you to utilize the relative "newness" of these instruments. Community and state arts organizations exist

all over the country, and regularly request submissions for new proposals. To be sure, they don't receive requests for electronic percussion very often! Another potential source might come from a contemporary music organization in your community looking for a new and different addition to its concert presentations.



MIDI studio



Stage

If these avenues are not available, you can always try to request an instrument purchase from your dean or chair. It may take some begging and pleading, but if they see the potential benefits it may be worthwhile.

### DEVELOPING AN ENSEMBLE

It is best to start small and address inexperience first. The primary goal can be to obtain a mallet controller to use in various ensembles. Students (and teacher) can learn the instrument in applied lessons and apply these skills in ensemble settings. At UAB, our initial request stated the eventual goal of creating a performance ensemble utilizing electronic percussion instruments. As each request was successful, another was submitted the following year. The following timeline shows the instrument purchases that formed our current “electro-acoustic” percussion ensemble.

*Year One: Alternate Mode MalletKAT controller (three octave), Roland KC-550 keyboard amplifier.* A great way to get started in electronic percussion; it is relatively easy to learn and the playing technique carries over from traditional keyboard instruments with little transition time. It can be purchased “with sounds,” eliminating the need for an additional synthesizer or sound source and easing the transition for the non-technically oriented (such as myself).

*Year Two: Alternate Mode DrumKAT MIDI controller (Turbo, version 4.5).* Although the MalletKAT is a great instrument to start with, it only scratches the surface in terms of the power and flexibility of MIDI percussion. A DrumKAT was the next logical step in developing an electronic studio. The DrumKAT Turbo is essentially a powerful computer inside a casing that provides ten playing surfaces. Many students are surprised that it is more powerful than the MalletKAT. As I tell them, the hardest part is deciding *what* you want the instrument to do, because the possibilities are almost limitless.

It should be noted that the DrumKAT is a MIDI controller, and that it does not contain any sounds on board. In order to function fully, an external sound source is needed (drum machine, synthesizer, etc.). As part of our Music Technology degree, we have a Computer Music Ensemble for students in that program. Fortunately, an extra rack-mount synthesizer (Roland SC-880) was available as a sound source for our DrumKAT. This has proven to be a fortunate opportunity, as both are 32-channel MIDI. This means that they can produce 32 different sounds (timbres) simultaneously—literally a full orchestra, wind symphony, or percussion ensemble.

*Year Three: Roland SPD-s sampling pad, Roland HandSonic controller, two Roland KC-550 keyboard amplifiers.* These purchases allowed the formation of our first electro-acoustic ensemble. There were three primary reasons for starting as an “electro-acoustic” ensemble: 1. the lack of a significant number of electronic instruments, 2. the lack of student experience with these instruments, and 3. the experimental nature of the group. On this basis, our first semester was to conclude in a “Demonstration/Performance” instead of a full length, formal concert.

### ENSEMBLE CURRICULUM

Time is a precious commodity at any level, especially in higher education. When forming a new ensemble, many problems became evident. There was no open time in my teaching schedule, student schedules were already full, and room sched-

uling was never easy. The logical solution was to create a summer ensemble specifically for electronic percussion.

Another issue was finding a rehearsal/studio space. The moving of electronic equipment before and after rehearsal can be quite extensive due to the amount of cables and power connections. Although it can be done, it is easier to keep the instruments “wired up” and in one location, which also allows student access outside of rehearsal.

Our course runs for two months (June and July), meeting twice weekly for two hours each day. Extra rehearsals are usually scheduled closer to the concert date and students practice and collaborate together outside of class time. Enrollment for this ensemble has consistently been four students; a five-person group (including myself) has proven to be the ideal size.

Each student is required to provide a composition for the ensemble; this can be an original composition, an arrangement or transcription, or guidelines for improvisation. As the instructor, I provide several compositions, but also teach the students about the instruments and guide them through the composition process. This process usually takes several weeks at the beginning of the semester. The remainder of the term is left for rehearsals and preparing sound patches.

Since the group is “electro-acoustic,” it is not limited to electronic instruments. We use an acoustic drumset and any other percussion instrument the student may desire. Some students have utilized LP turntables within their compositions to capitalize on their DJ experience. This can be an interesting (and unexpected) addition to a college-level ensemble.

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After World War II, Gibbs toured with Buddy Rich, Woody Herman, Louie Bellson, Benny Goodman and formed his own band for the Mel Torme television show. Gibbs led his own bands in the 50's and in 1957 formed the critically acclaimed big band "The Dream Band". Throughout his career he has enjoyed world acclaim playing with jazz luminaries, Buddy DeFranco, Charlie Parker, Dizzie Gillespie, Horace Silver, Max Roach, Art Blakey, Elvin Jones and Tito Puente.

Terry Gibbs is a Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame member with 65 albums to his credit, winner of three major jazz polls and creator of over 300 compositions. This scholarship is in honor of the indelible mark Gibbs has left on the world of vibes.

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**Application Materials:** All applicants must submit a completed application, a letter of recommendation verifying age and school attendance, and a DVD/video.

**Criteria:** The DVD should be no longer than ten minutes in length. Additional time will not be considered and may negatively affect evaluation of the application.

The selection(s) within the DVD should represent live jazz vibraphone performance and not be edited.

The applicant must be visible throughout the submitted performance(s).

The ability of the applicant to perform on additional percussion or other instruments is not a consideration for this scholarship.

Download and application: [www.pas.org/news/contests/index.cfm](http://www.pas.org/news/contests/index.cfm)

Deadline: All materials must be received in the PAS offices no later than March 15, 2007

For More Information Contact Percussive Arts Society 580.353.1455

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## EXPANDING THE ENSEMBLE

Successive grant requests have fortunately all been approved, leading to a fairly complete MIDI percussion studio. The ensemble inventory has expanded to allow for greater expression through additional controllers, synthesizer, and amplifier.

*Year Four: Alternate Mode MalletKAT Express (two octave).* An additional keyboard controller was needed to allow greater harmonic and melodic capabilities. In the second year of the ensemble, the inclusion of a bass guitar player was a crucial step in our development. With two mallet controllers in addition to the DrumKAT and bass guitar, rich textures and more complex harmonic material were now attainable.

*Year Five: Zendrum MIDI controller, Kurzweil PC2R synthesizer, Roland KC-550 keyboard amplifier.* As the inventory of instruments grew, it became necessary to obtain an additional amplifier for performances. A new rack-mount synthesizer was added for a new sound palette—notably from a different manufacturer than our first sound module. The Roland SC-880 synthesizer has two MIDI-in ports; therefore we use it as a sound source for both the Zendrum and DrumKAT.

As our ensemble has almost outgrown our rehearsal studio, future purchases will be less “gear-oriented” and focused on increasing our capabilities. Octave expanders, software upgrades, pedals, and cables will be the next tools of growth. Eventually, a sound system will be needed, with instruments linked via mixing board and computer.

## CONCLUSION

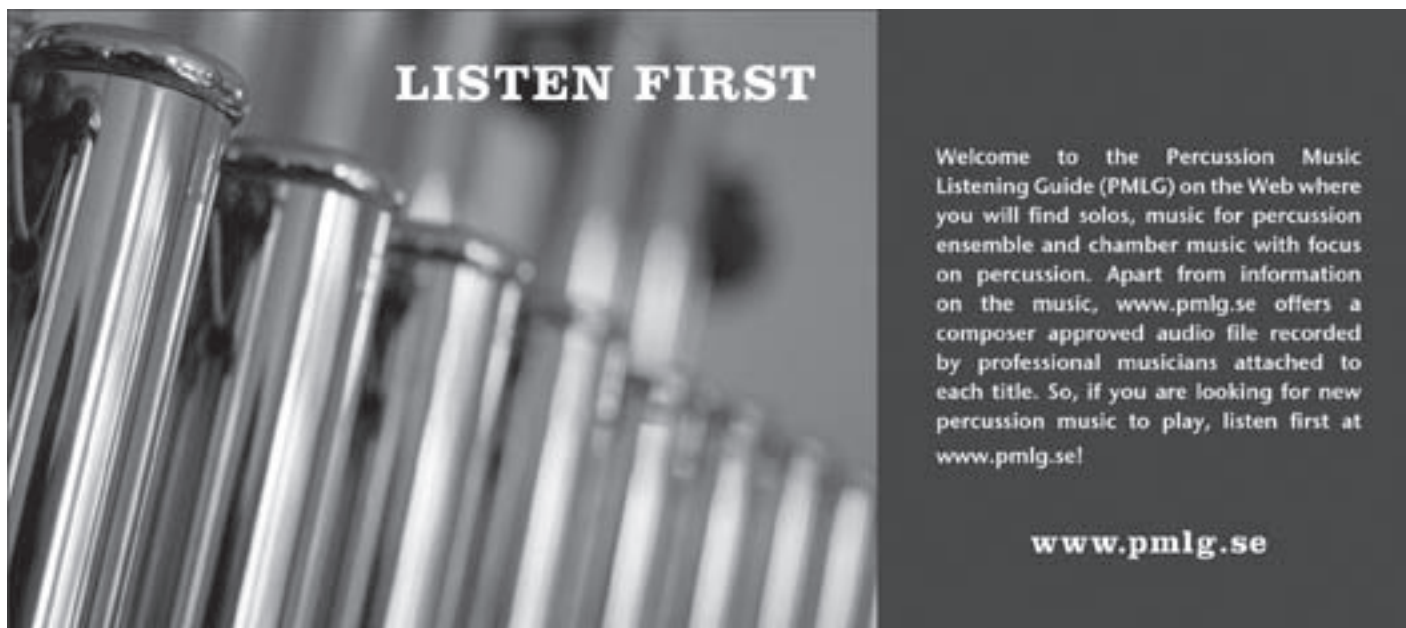
The advantages of this type of ensemble are numerous: access to an incredible amount of new sounds, new technology to attract today's student, a new creative outlet for students that otherwise may not have the initiative or opportunity, and increased involvement with technology always supports the new “buzzword” of higher education accreditation standards. Experimentation in programming our newest instruments has also proved that the thrill is still quite rewarding.

With a little research, you may be able to uncover a great source to enable the beginning of a MIDI percussion program. Grant funding programs are common at colleges and universities, and many states have arts councils that award monetary support to artists and educational programs. Many programs will match dollars from another source, so if you can get your chair or dean onboard, you may be able to “dive in” yourself.

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