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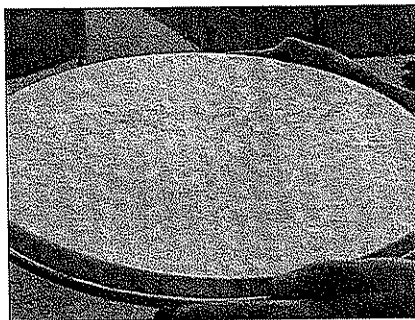
Percussion on a Budget

By Gene Fambrough

Although many band directors have a limited budget and rarely buy new percussion equipment, a few relatively minor purchases will dramatically improve how the section sounds.

New Drumheads

All snare, bass, tom, and timpani drumheads should be replaced at least every other year, or annually if possible, but concert bass drumheads should last longer. Just as old reeds diminish clarinet and saxophone tone, a worn-out head reduces percussion sound quality. If drumheads look worn in the center or have dents or pitted areas,



they should be replaced. Snare drums may also have rips or holes in the bottom head. Normal wear to drumheads occurs from sticks or beaters striking these surfaces, and as the area struck becomes weaker, inconsistencies develop in the sound, especially with coated drumheads.

Cymbals

Suspended and crash cymbals are used regularly and should be of the highest quality a program can afford. A true suspended cymbal is actually a crash cymbal hanging from a gooseneck stand. Some schools buy identical pairs of crash cymbals so that a suspended cymbal roll going into a crash will have the same timbre. It helps to have several sizes of suspended cymbals available to select the bright or dark timbre that best suits each passage. Pairs of crash cymbals used as suspended cymbals can be spread out in the section so that whatever player is free could cover the cymbal part. Avoid using marching cymbals in the concert band. Marching cymbals are designed so the sound cuts through the

ensemble, but the sound of concert-type cymbals blends better. The tell-tale sign that cymbals are made for marching is grommets in the strap holes, which are designed to reduce wear on the straps.

Auxiliary Instruments

A high-quality triangle with beaters and clips, tambourine, and woodblocks will greatly improve the percussion sound. The difference between poor instruments played incorrectly and top-notch instruments played tastefully may not be noticeable to an audience, but contest judges will listen for a clean sound. Some triangles produce strong overtones while others have a pure tone; both sounds are acceptable and selecting the best depends upon personal taste. Tambourines come with jingles made of silver, copper, bronze, or combinations of these. Each has a distinct timbre, and again the choice is personal. Beware of an old triangle suspended by a shoestring with matching eye bolt as a beater or a tambourine with missing jingles or a plastic head. A cracked woodblock will sound like a piece of wood being struck, and should be replaced.

Mallets

A single pair of marimba mallets will rarely be the best choice for every marimba part. Crisp articulations take hard mallets, but soft mallets sound better for legato passages. In addition, mallet weight affects the prominence of the fundamental note of each bar; if sticks are too light overtones will dominate. This is especially noticeable on the lowest notes on marimba and vibraphone. Encourage each student to buy different brands of snare sticks and timpani, yarn, and plastic mallets. If all students buy the same mallets from the same company sound choices are limited. A few different models (at least three) of timpani mallets from the same manufacturer will cover most applications, and the same is true for all types of keyboard mallets. Some companies also make two-sided chime mallets with one side suitable for loud passages and the other for soft passages. These are an obvious choice if the mallets in the percussion cabinets are old and made of rawhide. Bass drum and timpani mallets with frayed felt often

produce an uneven sound, and mallets with felt heads will last longer if stored in plastic bags. The excess material should be trimmed off with scissors.

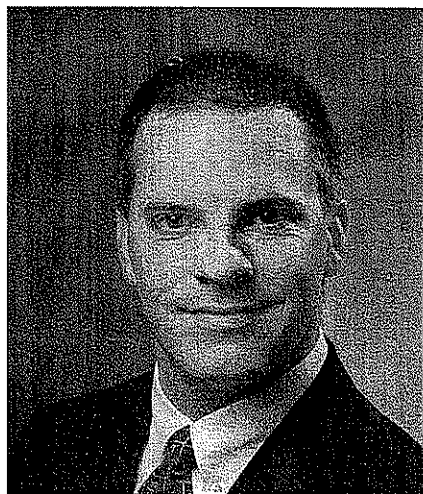
Towels

To avoid having drum sticks click when picked up and put down, try placing a black hand towel on a horizontal music stand. There are more expensive options for accessory trays, but I have found black towels to be effective and inexpensive.

Snare Drums

Directors can often discover good drum models by attending band and orchestra concerts. If a particular drum sounds good, take a few minutes to investigate the percussion section after the performance to see which brand of drum and heads this group uses.

These purchases can be made on a limited budget and will produce noticeable improvements in the sound of your percussion section.



Gene Flambrough is assistant director of bands and percussion instructor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where he directs the percussion ensemble, steel band, and electro-acoustic percussion group and is percussion arranger and instructor for the marching band. He earned degrees from the University of Georgia, East Carolina University, and the University of Alabama and has published compositions for solo marimba, percussion ensemble, and rudimental percussion.

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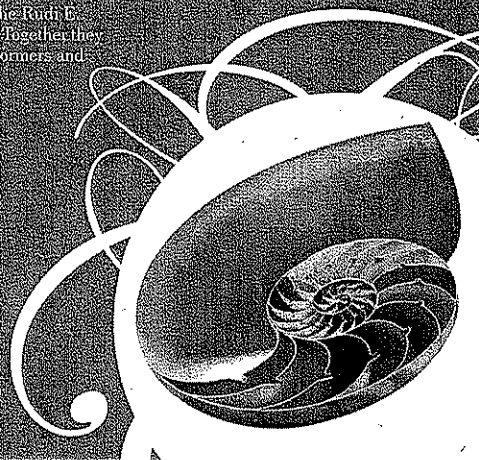
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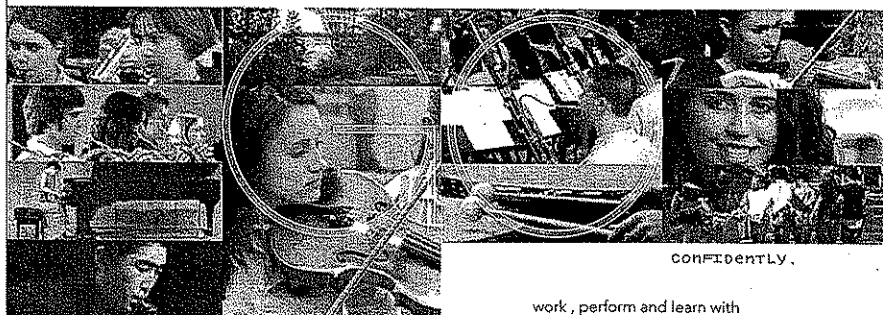
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