Improving Percussion Sound Quality

By Gene Fambrough

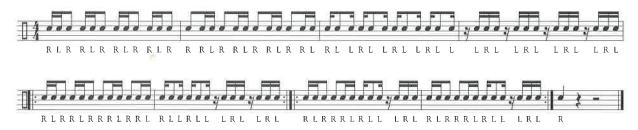
ne of the most important aspects of percussion performance is producing the perfect sound. This is true for all instruments, but with percussion there seems to be an element of mystery involved to it, as though playing a drum makes the ideal sound more difficult to achieve. It seems easy enough, but anyone who has tried to teach a percussionist to improve his sound will realize how frustrating it can be. Here are some new avenues for improving quality of sound in percussionists.

Time and sound are the two main aspects of percussion playing to analyze. My interpretation of time is whether the rhythms are spaced evenly and correctly proportioned, and whether there is the correct amount of space between each note. This can be interpreted as either rushing or dragging, or playing unevenly within the correct tempo; either one of these can negatively affect time. It is important to remember that all tempo problems can be reduced to a simple question: too early or too late?

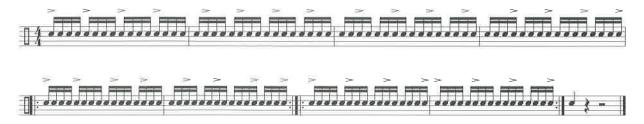
Rating sound consists of determining whether the right and left hands (the sound generated by the sticks or mallets) sound the same. Assuming a student has a matched pair of sticks, there are only three variables that will cause the hands to be unmatched: stick heights, beating spots, and stroke velocity. Believe it or not, all issues of left to right imbalance fall into one of those categories. Of note is that the first two of these aspects are visually based; they can be corrected simply by visual observation and feedback. This

Basic Exercises

This exercise helps students work on playing 16th notes in steady time.



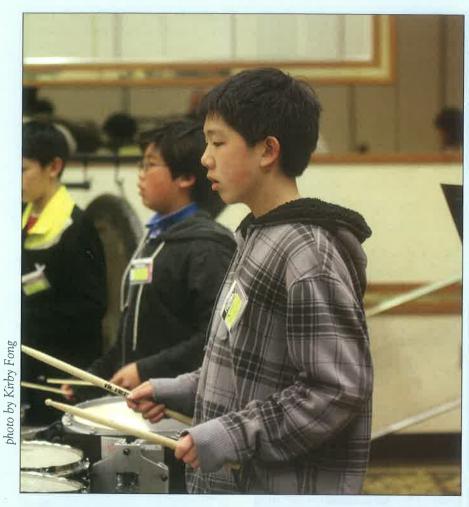
The challenge of this exercise is playing both accented and unaccented notes consistently.



Students can work on single and double stroke transition by using variations on the standard paradiddle sticking pattern,



RRIRLIRIRRI RIRRIRIIRIR RRIRIRRIR RRIRLIRRIR R



is important, as it provides more reason to play from memory when possible, allowing full focus on the sound quality.

The first exercise that I use with my students when addressing sound quali-



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ty is something I call the Four-Bar Blues. It is a simple exercise in concept - four measures of 16th notes with absolutely no change in sound - but students are often surprised at the difficulty. Once the student gets past the initial surprise of how difficult this is, the point then becomes one of correction during performance and how to make these adjustments quickly.

The additional exercises on the previous page are just a starting point for many percussionists but can be used with experienced players for practice in paying attention to sound quality and timing. The same concepts can be applied to triplets for additional variety. As students practice, the focus should always be on sound quality, using the aspects of sound and time to make decisions on what needs to be corrected. After playing I have students answer questions: What grade would you give yourself? What was worse (or better), sound or time? What can you do to improve?

Using the parameters of sound and time, percussionists can start to hone in on their quality of sound. Once a solid level of awareness is reached, student improvement should improve dramatically.

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