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Percussion Clinic

Percussion Tips For Better Sound

By Gene Fambrough

There are a number of reasons why professional percussion players get a better sound than beginners using the same equipment. Here are a few ways to improve the sound of your percussion section.

Tuning

Tune all drum membranes, including snare, bass, tom toms, and timpani. An out-of-tune drum will not function at its best. Most wind instruments are designed to sound A=440 at a temperature of 72°, and temperature and humidity affect the pitch of most drums as well. Heads will stretch in heat and high humidity and the pitch will become flat. Conversely, they will contract in cold or dry conditions and become sharp. Plastic heads are much more consistent than calfskin heads, but there are still variations.

Check that the drumhead is evenly tightened by listening to the pitch of all tension rods when lightly tapping the edge of the head at each lug. If you have trouble hearing a difference, loosen one rod and tighten it back to the original position. Some people place a small muffle, such as a wallet or hand, in the center of the drum as a way to isolate the pitch, but this is a matter of personal preference.

To produce a natural sounding ring, it is unnecessary to tune heads to any specific pitch. However, drums have a pitch center at which they are the most resonant. If heads are tuned above this point, the drum sounds choked and muffled. Students who play snare drum in a marching band tend to tune concert snares too tightly.

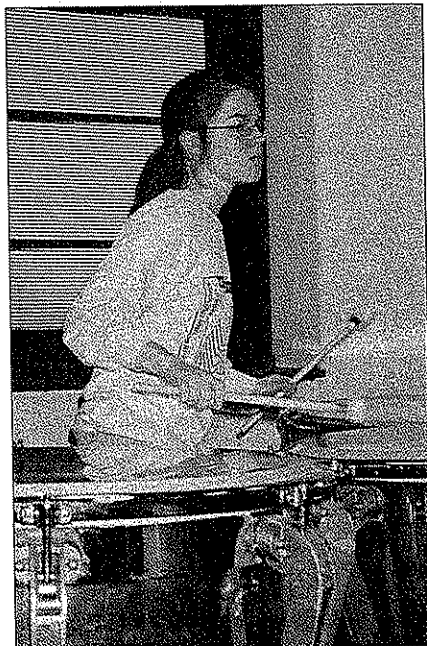
Take time at the beginning of the year to teach percussionists how to tune the timpani. These players should be able to use a piano as a reference and sing the pitches of each timpani tuning. I prefer to have one skilled band member play timpani on all selections instead of rotating students. This way the timpanist gains more experience and confidence. Avoid assigning the marching quad player on timpani simply because he can navigate multiple drums at lightning speed. A timpanist should be able to recognize such intervals as perfect fourths, fifths, and octaves by sight and should be able to sing them. Sometimes the timbre of the drums up close can be misleading, so continued tuning practice is important.

Silent Crash

A common mistake made by young percussionists on crash cymbals is the vacuum crash, the unfortunate sound that occurs if all sides of the cymbals make contact simultaneously. The correct crash technique is similar to playing a flam rudiment: the leading edges of the cymbals touch first. Specific hand and cymbal position is not important, and there are several acceptable ways to hold the cymbals. Students can become consistent cymbal players with as little practice as two or three minutes before each rehearsal.

Striking Distance

Timpani should be played much closer to the edge than many students and directors realize. The best sounding area of the timpani is the zone one inch from the rim to one third of the way to the center; this is true for all sizes of timpani. This ideal playing area is smaller on small timpani, and consequently many students play these drums too close to the center.



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The timpani sound will be dull and die quickly if the drum is hit closer than one third of the way to the center.

The bass drum and tam tam are most resonant when struck slightly off-center. Hitting these instruments in the center cancels out many of the frequencies that produce a characteristic sound. When a bass drum produces a thud, it was struck too close to the center. A shallow, thin sound indicates that the drum was hit too close to the edge.

Muffling

Many percussionists muffle the concert bass drum to make it sound like the bass drum on a drumset, but the concert bass drum sound should ring and fill the room when played by itself, even at a low volume; a soft and swelling roll should sound like thunder. Muffling should mirror the sound of the rest of the ensemble, especially the tuba part. On standard marches hand muffling can be used on quarter notes through most of the piece, and longer durations and accents can be unmuffled. It is possible to adjust the amount of muffling by adding or taking away fingers on the drumhead.

Triangle Tips

If a good selection of triangle beaters is unavailable students will use anything they can find, including tension rods, drumsticks, and wrenches, to play the instrument. It takes wrist control to play a *pianissimo* passage, not the smallest available beater. Conversely, *fortissimo* passages do not always require the largest hammer in the bag. The dinner-bell style roll should be avoided; the best sound is produced when the triangle is held in one hand and played with the other. This eliminates sympathetic vibrations from the music stand. If it is impossible to hold the triangle because the written part has passages that take both hands to play, the instrument should be suspended at two corners and played with two matching beaters on the horizontal edge. Playing complicated passages on the inner edges of the instrument will cause it to move or spin.

Ring Tones

Ringing is part of the characteristic sound of metal instruments, but many students are bashful about letting the instruments ring for a long time. Cymbals, triangles, tam tams, bells, chimes, and vibraphone all sound best when undampened, although notes should be dampened to match the note lengths of the ensemble.

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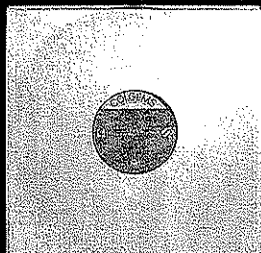
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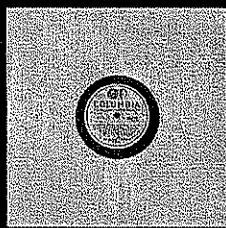
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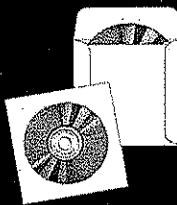
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Although cymbals, gongs, and triangles usually project well through the ensemble, chimes sound louder to the person playing them than they are to the audience. Encourage the chime player to play strongly and place the chimes at the outside of the percussion setup at the very edge of the stage for maximum projection. If the discs inside the resonator tubes of the vibraphone are horizontal they will block the tubes and the sound of the instrument will be greatly dampened. These discs should be moved to a 45° angle with the fingers.

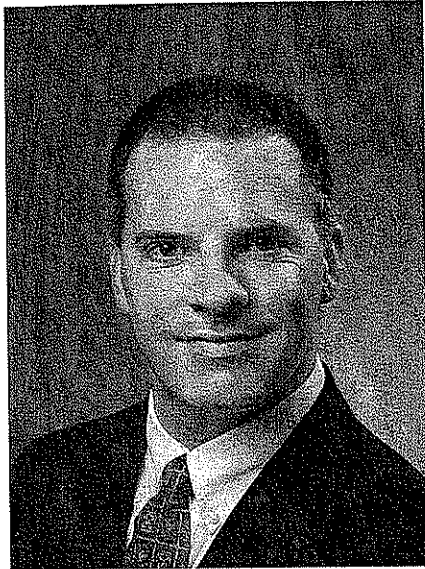
Accessories

For some reason many younger students feel embarrassed or ashamed when assigned to play accessory instruments. Assure students that all percussion parts are important, and ask accessory players to emphasize the visual performance of these instruments, which add more to the ensemble than many people realize. All hand-held percussion instruments, including tambourine, triangle, guiro, and claves should be held at shoulder level to help the sound project over the ensemble and so the audience can see who is playing which instrument. This height will feel uncomfortable initially, and students will need to be reminded to hold the instruments high during rehearsal. Triangle players should be able to look at the conductor through the triangle. Height is especially important for rolls that crescendo or decrescendo on the tambourine; a crescendo can start with the instrument held low and then raised high, and a decrescendo can start high and end low.

Woodblocks and temple blocks will have the warmest and most characteristic sound when played with medium rubber mallets. Occasionally a part

may indicate that they are to be played with a stick, but a general-purpose mallet should be used most of the time. To make castanet parts sound more authentic, add grace notes to all accented notes to create a flam. Finger cymbals on a glockenspiel make good substitutes for crotales.

Snare sticks should be matched. To check whether they match hold the



sticks next to one ear and lightly tap each one. Any difference in pitch will be amplified when played on the snare drum. It is also possible to check pitch by dropping one stick at a time on a tile floor.

Bass drum and tam tam beaters are not interchangeable; tam tam and gong beaters are much heavier than bass drum beaters.

Paying attention to these details can greatly improve the sound of the percussion section. A good-sounding percussion section will improve the quality of the entire ensemble. □

Gene Fambrough is assistant director of bands and percussion instructor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He received degrees from the University of Georgia, East Carolina University, and the University of Alabama. He directs the University of Alabama percussion ensemble, steel band, electro-acoustic percussion group, and is a percussion arranger and instructor for the Marching Blazers. A published composer, he has written works for solo marimba, percussion ensemble, and rudimental percussion.

Carl Fischer Publications

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