



What's Wrong With This Picture?

An Extreme Makeover for Your Percussion Section

By Julie Hill

When asked to critique middle and high school concert band or wind ensemble performances, I am constantly reminded of the caveats of the concert percussion section. We have evolved so dramatically as an instrument family and with regards to vocabulary in speaking to the players in the percussion section as musicians capable of making great musical choices. Still, old habits must die hard as I hear so many unwanted sounds and can actually see, in many cases, the undesirable sound almost raising its hand in anticipation of being heard. This common scene caused me and my colleague James Campbell, to come up with a “do and don’t” list that could serve as a quick reference guide for band directors in giving guidance to the musicians in their concert percussion sections.

Develop a Pre-Shot Routine

Gain a professional approach to every instrument and musical situation that occurs.

1.) Problem: The hand cymbal player is too far from the bass drummer and finds it difficult to play unison figures.

- *Solution:* Move the cymbal player next to the bass drummer (especially for marches). It will be easier for the percussionists to communicate timing, phrasing, and blend if they are next to each other and can maintain both audio and visual contact.

2.) Problem: There is too much extraneous noise made when accessory instruments are handled because they are on a shelf, table, or chair.

- *Solution:* Make an effort to silently pick-up and set-down instruments like tambourine and sleigh bells. Keep these and other accessory instruments on stands and tables close to the performer and think about which technique is required for the next entrance; plan and set-up the instrument’s orientation.

3.) Problem: Mallets are kept on the music stand or on the instrument and make noise when they are handled.

- *Solution:* Most percussionists would benefit from having a black face towel draped over a flattened music stand for a silent exchange of mallets.

4.) Problem: Suspended cymbal mallets are left crossed and resting on the cymbal bell.

- *Solution:* Place the mallets on a padded surface, when they are not being used, to accommodate silent mallet changes.

5.) Problem: Players often run across the stage to reach an instrument that has a traditional position and arrive late to play their passage.

- *Solution:* Re-position the instruments between pieces to accommodate the players for each selection.

6.) Problem: Snare 'rattle' due to sympathetic vibration from other instruments.

- *Solution:* Disengage the snare throw-off switch during rests and silently turn them on again before playing.

7.) Problem: The Bass Drum sounds thin and weak.

- *Solution:* Position the body 'behind' the bass drum and play with a stroke that is generated from the arm rather than the wrist.

8.) Problem: Several percussionists are often crowded around one copy of the music.

- *Solution:* Ensure that there are enough parts for each percussionist to have their own copy and make them responsible for their own music folder. Players shouldn't walk from one setup to another with a piece of music. Have enough stands for each player at each instrument. The conductor should always be in the player's sight line (mallet players should keep the music stand low to see the keyboard and use peripheral vision to see the conductor).

9.) Problem: Percussionists often have large reaches across multiple instrument setups.

- *Solution:* Design a logical percussion 'workstation' for each multi-percussion setup. It takes an investment in time and space to accommodate a contemporary percussion section.

Accessorize Your Accessories

You only sound as good as your equipment. All the components need to be addressed to achieve good sound production, especially on accessories such as triangle, cymbals, and tambourine.

10.) Problem: The snares are often too loose on the snare drum to create a characteristic sound. There is a lack of definition and clarity when the snares are slack.

- *Solution:* Tap-tune the snares and back-off the tension knob just after the snares start to 'choke' the bottom head.

11.) Problem: Triangles are often suspended from clips by a shoe string (it's convenient and strong) that is 6" or longer! This results in a spinning target that is difficult to chase and it sounds dull.

- *Solution:* The loop on a triangle clip should be no longer than 1” of fishing line. Learn to hold the clip or mount it so that the triangle is held above the music stand for projection and clarity.

12.) Problem: A suspended cymbal is clamped to the cymbal stand with a wing nut - so tight that it restricts vibration.

- *Solution:* The suspended cymbal should hang freely for maximum response.

13.) Problem: The cymbal sound is often distorted because the performer’s hand/pad is making too much contact with the cymbals.

- *Solution:* The concert cymbal grip should be different than the marching cymbal grip. With the concert grip, the hand stays outside of the leather strap and grips the strap at the base of the cymbal bell - like one grips a key when they start a car. Any use of cymbal pads should provide minimum contact with the plates.

Avoid “Paint By Number” of Your Sonic Picture

Make intelligent musical decisions by using creativity and imagination in producing sound.

14.) Problem: Hand cymbals are often choked (to sound like a hi-hat) at the end of a standard concert march.

- *Solution:* When a staccato mark or the term “choke” appears above a note in the cymbal part, it should be played as a full-bodied crash and immediately dampened by bringing the plates into the upper body.

15.) Problem: A brittle sound occurs when the bells and xylophone are played with the hardest mallets available.

- *Solution:* Experiment with mallets that blend well with the rest of the ensemble; match the timbre and orchestration.

16.) Problem: The bass drum is often over-muffled or under-muffled.

- *Solution:* The bass drummer should use muffling that can easily be adjusted. The bass drum needs the flexibility to change from short and long note durations (and notes in-between) several times during each phrase. The bass drummer should listen to the parts that they are supporting (often low brass/strings) and match the articulation and sustain. Too much dampening leaves the bass drum sounding like a cardboard box.

17.) Problem: Hand cymbals are often too big for the music (i.e. a 22” pair for a concert march).

- *Solution:* Match the size and weight of the cymbal to the music. A typical festival concert often requires at least 3 different pairs of hand cymbals to be the most effective.

18.) Problem: A timpani roll sounds very dull and thin.

- *Solution:* A single-stroke roll should be used on the timpani to avoid stifling the resonance. Spread the mallets for rolls and bring them close together for articulate passages.

19.) Problem: Sustained passages sound tense and noisy.

- *Solution:* Slow down the roll speed on suspended cymbals, timpani, and mallet keyboard instruments to accommodate the natural resonance and sustain of the instrument.

20.) Problem: Snare drum rolls often sound uneven or 'pulsed'.

- *Solution:* Develop a concept of a 'roll base' to create smoother sounding rolls.

21.) Problem: 'Easy' accessory instruments are not played with equal artistic consideration as the 'harder' percussion instruments.

- *Solution:* Take every instrument seriously and find the 'sweet spot' on each instrument you play; even marking the instrument to achieve a consistent beating spot that produces the best tone.