



Music education topics of interest to stimulate motivate and inspire...

It is the mission of Conn-Selmer, Inc. to provide an educational center, ongoing reference source, and support network for the professional growth of music educators. Communication between music educators is vital for the expansion of new ideas and techniques. By providing resources and opportunities that enhance the classroom experience, we hope to provide music educators with more time to focus on performance, more positive outcomes for teachers and student, and overall growth in music education opportunities.

Blazing a Trail by Donald DeRoche

Music students learn more than music - they learn of life and self-worth. You are a valuable person in the lives of your students. "Don't under-estimate the importance of your work or the responsibility that your job demands; enjoy it"

In many of the school-band rehearsals I attend, I see a real disconnect between the percussion players and the rest of the band. It is true that there are bands in which the members of the percussion section are focused and really feel a part of the music making. However, it is more often the case that they are only a marginal part of the group and typically aren't asked to bring the same musical and technical standards to the ensemble.

We can think of our percussion students as falling into three categories: Some are drummers, some are percussionists, and the best are musicians who play percussion instruments. Our task as conductors and teachers is to help them progress from being a drummer to becoming a musician who plays percussion.

What is a drummer?

Being a drummer is a good thing. All percussionists who become musicians start out as drummers. Drummers learn to read rhythms, proper stick grips and strokes, where to strike the head and much technical information about their instruments. They learn the difference between a snare and a batter head, how to interpret dynamics, various rolls and rudiments, how to set up equipment and so forth. The instruments they learn tend to be non-pitched and include such things as snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tom-toms, various marching drums, temple blocks and toys.

While drummers can develop a high degree of skill, their musical opportunities are limited and most of the tasks at this stage are technical.

What is a percussionist?

A percussionist thinks of the wider world of instruments and styles available while adding to the knowledge and skills of the drummer. As they learn timpani, percussionists develop the ability to read treble and bass clefs. They also become able to hear, read and sing intervals and relate the pitches to their drums. They learn to sight-read and to develop skills playing both melody (two mallets) and chords (four mallets) while adding marimba, xylophone, vibes and chimes to their repertoire. Skills used in the performance of multiple percussion parts are learned, as are various mallet types and the situations in which to use them.

Percussionists become part of the ensemble, developing a sense of group time and learning that playing the right rhythms is not quite the same as playing rhythmically.

What is a musician?

A musician is a player who uses his or her skills in the service of making the musical product a viable experience for an audience. A musician performs in such a way that the listener is drawn to the music rather than the playing. At this level, the percussionist is very involved with the balances needed to make the music work. Care is taken with dynamics, articulation and the colors drawn from the instruments, as well as attention to phrase and the composition's structure. In short, at this level the percussionist contributes to the making of a complete and full rendition of the music. The ability to think musically is critical in all areas of performance, certainly in classical ensembles like band and orchestra, but also in jazz and in marching units.

Percussion classes

Because percussionists must have skills in a variety of instrumental areas, they need a particularly well-conceived plan for developing those skills. If at all possible, arrange to have a separate percussion class for young players or those who haven't yet had time to develop skill in all areas. Dropping students into the back of the band and hoping they will pick up what they need simply doesn't work. Nurturing the development from drummer to musician can begin with systematically teaching rhythm and non-pitched drum skills. The key word here is *systematically*. Start with developing a sense of regular pulse, then move to subdivision of the beat and various time signatures. Then focus on the skills involved in playing the bass drum, cymbals and accessory instruments, and include the variety of sticks and mallets, various cymbal types, and different styles of playing the instruments. After spending a semester on these fundamentals, move on to timpani and mallets together in the second semester. Instrument availability and my concern that students will lose a skill if they don't use it regularly are why I suggest covering these two areas together. Split the students into groups and work with timpani and mallets on alternating days.

It is important with timpani that you teach the playing and singing of scales in both treble and bass clefs, while helping students develop a strategy for setting pitches on the drums. This involves the variety of sticks available and how they are used, where to hit the drumhead and the practical ranges of the drums. Maintain a systematic approach when teaching how to check for pitch, adjust the drums and so forth. Using a pianist to play the mallet parts in band is not a long-term answer, so you must teach the keyboard, the names of notes and how to read. Give specific *étude*, solo and ensemble assignments, and give playing tests. Put mallet instruments in practice rooms so students can practice during free periods or before and after school.

Percussion ensemble

In addition to percussion classes, it is a good idea to start a percussion ensemble — even meeting one night a week can pump up the enthusiasm of your players. Have the students play a variety of instruments and perhaps even make some of their own. A good percussion ensemble creates a place and an identity that helps your students understand who they are while becoming more at ease with modern band and orchestral percussion parts. As you can see, turning your drummers and percussionists into musicians is not a simple process. Taking the necessary steps to improve the experiences for your percussion students will take planning, time and effort. Even so, the rewards, both individually and for the group, are well worth it.

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