

Preparing Your Percussion Section for Instrumental Music Adjudication

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Percussion Clinic

Preparing Percussion for Adjudication

By Mark Lortz

A major task each year is preparing an ensemble for instrumental music adjudication. Directors often focus upon assessment captions (tone quality, intonation, precision, technique, balance, blend, and musicality) for wind and string students but neglect the percussion section because of time constraints or lack of understanding of percussion techniques. Here are some practical solutions for percussion concerns, especially as applied to assessment criteria.

Tone Quality

Whether playing a pitched or non-pitched percussion instrument, tone quality is key in enriching the ensemble's sound and creating a characteristic timbre for each instrument. Assessment of the sounds of each player, the section, and the entire ensemble will occur, so each student must attain an aural representation of preferred tone quality. Percussion tone quality is defined by choice of implement, technique, and playing area.

Wind and string players often define their tones with such descriptors as dark, round, warm, or light. Percussionists can replicate these sound qualities using a variety of mallets, which are to percussionists what colors are to a painter. If conductors are unfamiliar with the proper mallet selection for each instrument or are unsure of a mallet's degree of hardness, size, or weight, they should contact a percussion specialist for guidance or to give a masterclass; this is an excellent way for both the conductor and the students to learn about mallet characteristics. Most mallet and stick manufacturers prescribe specific mallets for particular percussion instruments so percussionists can produce their desired tones without damaging the instruments.

Bells require a hard plastic mallet, but for a brilliant tone, specialty metal

mallets are best. Chimes sound best with a designated chime mallet made of rawhide, plastic, or hard rubber. A vibraphone should be played with a hard cord or yarn mallet, because hard rubber, plastic, or metal mallets will damage the instrument and cause it to emit an uncharacteristically harsh sound. A plastic or hard rubber mallet works well for a xylophone; a yarn or cord mallet will likely cause the xylophone to be inaudible in large ensemble situations, and a metal mallet will damage the instrument. A marimba sounds best with a yarn or cord mallet, but be careful to use a softer, more resonant mallet in the instrument's lower register, where the bars are thinner. Plastic, hard rubber, and metal mallets will damage the instrument.

The choice of mallet for timpani should reflect the volume and articulation notated in the music, offer proper articulation for rhythmic passages, and provide the timpani's characteristically deep, warm sound. A mallet that is too hard for legato passages or rolls will result in a harsh tone, and a mallet that is too soft will compromise the timpani's rhythmic clarity. Use concert snare sticks for a snare drum, because drumset sticks or nylon-tipped marching sticks will produce uncharacteristic sounds. A bass drum requires a heavy mallet with a large beater for the dark, robust tone that characterizes the instrument.

A suspended cymbal sounds best with soft yarn marimba mallets or specialty suspended cymbal mallets, as timpani mallets or drumsticks will not produce the desired suspended cymbal roll. To initiate the roll, imagine the suspended cymbal as a dial clock and place the mallets at its edge at the 5:00 and 7:00 positions to start. As the player rolls and crescendos, move the mallets to the 3:00 and 9:00 positions. Triangle beaters for soft, medium, and loud playing should be available. Acquiring beaters

in pairs is best, in case an especially fast passage requires two beaters. A beater that is too large or small can cause a thin or strident tone.

Always strike a tambourine with the hand, fist, or fingers; use mallets or sticks only if indicated in the music. Use a designated tam-tam beater, not a bass drum mallet or any other stick or mallet. The tam-tam beater is larger and heavier than any of the others and will produce the instrument's characteristic deep, resonant sound.

Intonation

Intonation and tone quality are interdependent; each is necessary for the other. Most percussion instruments have fixed tones that cannot be adjusted during a performance, but snare drums, bass drums, and tom-toms can be tuned and sound best when their heads are in tune and balanced. There are devices that enable players and conductors to tune drum heads quickly and accurately by measuring drum head tension so they are resonant and in tune. Concert percussion tuning at least once a week is advisable, because percussive pressure on the drumheads, humidity, and temperature changes can adversely affect head tension, which affects pitch.

Timpani are the sole percussion instruments for which the player can alter and tune the pitch. This process involves clearing the timpani head, or tuning the membrane so each spot on the head in front of each tuning bolt has the same tension as the others. A cleared timpani head produces a pure, sustained pitch, which is necessary before trying to tune the timpani to a specific pitch.

Tune timpani quietly by putting your ear close to the timpani head and lightly tapping it with your finger. If the timpani have tuning gauges, set them weekly to ensure pitch accuracy. Many adjudicators will note conduc-

Background & Purpose of the Presentation



- **Background:**

- A major task each year is preparing an ensemble for instrumental music adjudication.
- Directors often focus upon assessment captions (tone quality, intonation, precision, technique, balance, blend, and musicality) for wind and string students.
- Directors often neglect the percussion section because of time constraints or lack of understanding of percussion techniques which causes behavioral and/or performance issues.

- **Purpose:**

- I will offer practical solutions for percussion concerns, especially as applied to assessment criteria.

The Questions.....



- How does percussion affect your overall adjudicated performance?
- How to improve your rating with percussion performance?

4 Focus Areas

1. Battery Percussion
2. Accessory Percussion
3. Mallet Percussion
4. Timpani

5 Adjudication Criteria Applied for Each Percussion Instrument

1. Tone Quality
2. Intonation
3. Precision and Technique
4. Balance and Blend
5. Musicality



Adjudication Criteria Application

Tone Quality

- Use the same terms you use for winds and strings (e.g., dark, round, warm, light, etc.)

Intonation

- Intonation and tone quality are interdependent; each is necessary for the other.
- Always tune bass drums, snare, drums, tom toms and timpani on a consistent and regular basis

Precision and Technique

- Because most percussion instruments are unpitched, an adjudicator's focus is often rhythmic precision.
- To master percussion technique, focus on proper grip and rebound stroke when striking the instrument.

Adjudication Criteria Application

Balance and Blend

- Wind, string and percussion balance and blend are synonymous.
- Always ask your percussionists who has the melody and can it be clearly heard?
- If percussionists cannot hear the melody or primary line they are.....

Musicality

- Include percussionists in all warm-up procedures.
- Full-band warm-up exercises, including chorales, can help the entire ensemble to reinforce dynamics, style, articulation, shaping, phrasing, balance and blend.
- Conductors can communicate important musical elements that transfer to contest pieces, reinforcing proper implement selection and playing technique.

Battery Percussion



1. Music stand height
2. Stroke & Articulations
3. Dampening
4. Rolls
5. Tuning
6. Proper Playing Areas and the Clock

Placement...

1. Place cymbals to the right of the bass drummer for overall ensemble balance.
2. Place the snare drum to the right of the crash cymbal player.
3. Suspended cymbals are often notated on the same part with crash cymbals, so juxtaposing them allows either player to cover the part if quick alterations are needed.
4. Accessory percussion instruments are beside the cymbal players on a padded or covered trap-table.
5. ALWAYS USE A PADDED STAND OR TABLE FOR ACCESSORY INSTRUMENTS, STICKS, MALLETS, ETC.

Battery Percussion



Assessment Criteria:

- Tone Quality
- Intonation
- Precision and Technique
- Balance and Blend
- Musicality

All the following indicators affect the assessment criteria:

- Music stand height & Stick/Mallet Tray/Stand
- Stroke & Articulations
- Dampening
 - To eliminate ringing and decrease volume
- Rolls
- Tuning
- Proper Playing Areas and the Clock

Accessory Percussion



1. Tambourine - Proper playing area and rolls
2. Triangle - Proper clip and beater
3. Tam Tam/Gong - Proper playing area
4. Accessory instruments such as triangle and tambourine should be made of high-quality materials and stored in designated instrument bags.
5. Tambourines should always have heads; headless tambourines are generally used in popular music and not considered appropriate for concert assessment.

Mallet Percussion



- Placement
 - Group mallet instruments together and near the upper woodwinds
 - Group vibes and marimba close to the front of the stage
 - Music stand height & Stick/Mallet Tray/Stand
- Metals
 - Bells
 - Vibraphone
 - Chimes
- Woods
 - Xylophone
 - Marimba
- Define proper mallets and playing areas for each instrument

Timpani



- Placement: Group timpani near the low brass their juxtaposition will improve ensemble intonation and rhythmic precision.
- Stick/mallet tray/stand
- Proper mallets
- Proper playing zone
- Rolls - Single stroke
- Proper intonation

TEACH YOUR
STUDENTS TO
TUNE THE TIMPANI

Final Considerations

Stage Set Up

- Create an established percussion seating arrangement/layout and use it every day
- Consistency will promote excellence



Arrangement >>>

[illegible]

Equipment

- Bring all sticks, mallets, beaters and accessory instruments used regularly for rehearsals, so the adjudication performance can reflect the ensemble's other performances.
- Bring your own snare drum, accessories, and cymbals in bags or cases



Part Assignments

- Create percussion assignments before the first rehearsal, post them in an area clearly visible to all players, and give copies to each player.
- When rehearsing sight-reading, assign a specific snare, bass, timpani, accessory, and mallet players, to alleviate confusion during the sight-reading performance.



Chairs, Stools, Entering and Exiting Stage

- Concert band and orchestral literature may have minimal or tacet percussion parts in which the player will not play for a period of time.
- Consider having percussionists sit in chairs or stools when not playing.
- They may exit the stage when resting for a prolonged period, but they must exit and re-enter quietly so they do not disturb the performance.



Tone, Intonation and Musicality

- Include percussionists in all warm-up procedures including singing.
- Full-band warm-up exercises, including chorales, can help the entire ensemble to reinforce dynamics, style, articulation, shaping, phrasing, balance and blend.
- Conductors can communicate important musical elements that transfer to contest pieces, reinforcing proper implement selection and playing technique.





- Instrumental music adjudications are relevant, meaningful opportunities for both students and conductors to receive feedback and measurable evaluation.
- Educators who employ today's methods and procedures enable successful performances for their percussionists.

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Roles, Experience and Processes Related to Selecting Grade-Level Concert Band Music

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