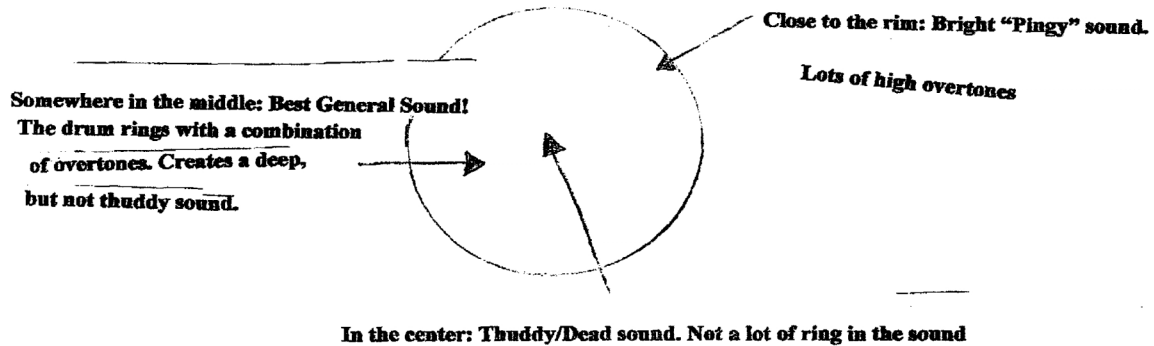


Midwest Clinic Handout
Developing a Professional Sounding, Tight and Musically Sensitive
Ensemble – Starting with your Percussion Section!

1) Looking at basic sound and technical concepts for percussion instruments with a special focus on those which are often overlooked. :

DRUMS: Bass Drum, Snare Drum, Timpani, Tom Toms, Tambourine, etc...



- One of the most important things to know about all is the different sounds available on different parts of the drum head.
- RELAX! (especially at the wrist) Relaxing is key to playing just about every instrument. Younger players and anyone still perfecting a technique tend to tense up easily at the wrist. If the whole arm and wrist are relaxed the sound difference is huge!

*Tambourine: Although the different sounds of the drumhead do apply to the tambourine, there is another major sound consideration with this instrument as well - since a tambourine has jingles suspended around the edges it is important to note the angle with which it's played.



Straight up and down: The jingles will continue once the note is struck



Horizontal to the ground: The jingles will take a while to get started and will continue to jingle once the note is struck



45° angle: Good! – This will create a good, articulate jingle sound.

CYMBALS: There are so many different techniques to getting a good cymbal crash, it can be overwhelming. Even though there are these different techniques there are three common elements that tend to be present in any good crash:

- 1) **The Angle of the Cymbals:** Tilting the cymbals is usually an easier way to set up a good crash. The angle helps to avoid air-pockets.



Straight up and down = easy air-pocket



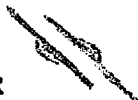
Set up at an Angle = better chance for a good crash!

- 2) **Stagger the Cymbals:** Staggering the cymbals also helps get a good crash. When the bells of the cymbals are not directly across from each other, there is less chance for an air-pocket to occur between the two bells.




Parallel = potential air-pocket

OR



Staggered = better chance for a good crash!

- 3) **The Flam (or grace note)**  : The flam is one of the most crucial elements of a good cymbal crash. It means that one side of the cymbals will crash together before the other. This combined with the angle and stagger of the

cymbals has the best chance of resulting in a good crash. *a good way to practice the flam is by using one cymbal to practice crashing on the floor*



Two edges coming together at the same time = air-pocket



Two edges flaring together – better chance for a good crash!

2) How to find the sounds you want. There are so many different sound and mallet choices for the percussion section that it can be confusing. Here are a few things to keep in mind when selecting proper instruments and mallets.

KNOW THE BASICS:

Mallet Options:

Heavy – heavy mallets tend to bring out lower overtones of the instrument creating a darker, richer sound.

Light – light mallets tend to bring out higher overtones creating a brighter sound.

Hard – hard mallets will usually have more contact sound with the instrument. They are good for very articulate, fast passages.

Soft – soft mallets will have less contact sound with the instrument and can sound almost “fluffy.” Their sound is also less articulate.

Cymbals and Triangles:

Heavy – like heavy mallets, heavy triangles and cymbals will have a lower, darker, heavier tone.

Light – like light mallets, these instruments will have a higher and brighter sound.

Big – bigger cymbals and triangles will be easier to get a louder sound out of. Bigger cymbals also tend to sound lower and a bit darker than smaller cymbals.

Small – small cymbals and triangles have higher overtones and tend to be brighter in general.

*Cymbals – 16” is on the small end for crash and suspended cymbals, but it is possible to get even smaller. 20”-22” are on the large end for crash and suspended cymbals.

*Triangles – 6” is a small/general triangle size (it is possible to go smaller, for a very high and bright sound!) 9-10” is a large/general triangle size (but it is possible to go bigger as well!)

Drums:

Big – larger drums have a deeper, lower sound

Small – smaller drums have a higher, lighter, brighter sound.

*Bass Drum – Bass Drums are measured both by the width of the head and by the depth of the drum. The standard sizes for a concert Bass Drum are from 32"-36" in width. The more depth the drum has, the bigger and deeper the sound will be.

*Snare Drum – Snare Drums usually have the same diameter (about 14") and differ mostly in depth. A small snare is 4 - 5.5" deep or less, a good general snare is 6.5" deep and large snares or field drums can get much bigger for a deeper sound.

*Tambourine – 8" is a good general/standard instrument.

LISTEN!

*Once the instrument and mallet choices have become a little clearer, the only way to find the best sounds for a specific piece of music is to listen to it and find out as much about the piece as possible.

Examples:

Anton Bruckner, Symphony No. 7: Bruckner's symphonies are characteristically very dense, with thick dark orchestrations. In the seventh symphony, there is one cymbal crash in the whole piece. The crash is at the peak of one of the biggest climaxes of the whole piece and occurs with a tutti orchestra. The best sound to go for in that crash would be huge and low sound with dark overtones; therefore, the best choice would be a large, heavy pair of cymbals (20's or 22's.)

Sergei Rachmaninoff, 2nd Piano Concerto: There is a big cymbal part in the third movement of this concerto. The dynamic at this part of the piece is very soft. The orchestration is thin and includes upper strings, flutes and the piano in a relatively high register. Smaller cymbals will make it easier to play this passage at the soft dynamic. Light cymbals will not only make the playing easier as well, but will compliment the lighter texture of the orchestra.

Claude Debussy, Nocturnes: There is a very important snare drum part in the second movement (*Fetes*) of this piece. The part occurs during passages that are not very densely orchestrated. Debussy's music in general tends to be lighter in character. It would be natural to choose a smaller snare drum for this piece and to play away from the center of the drum. *using a muffle on the snare drum can eliminate some of the high ring closer to the edge of the drum which is usually a more desirable sound for more touchy playing.

Dimitri Shostakovich, 10th Symphony: The 2nd movement of this symphony has an incredible snare drum part. At the end of the symphony the orchestration is very thick and the entire orchestra is playing at a *forte* at the very least. The obvious choice here would be a larger snare drum if possible, played close to the center of the drum for a dark, loud and intense sound.

Note: If you are in a situation where there are not many different drum to choose from, using the knowledge of the different sounds a drumhead can make will make a difference as well.

3) Playing Chamber Music!

The goal of chamber music is for a group of people to make music with one intention. For this, good communication (verbal and nonverbal) is necessary. Everyone must be so clear on the group intention for phrasing and sound that the result sounds like one person.

The most important ingredient for a professional and tight percussion section is the understanding of how to play chamber music. It is important to note that you do not need to have an older or more advanced group to begin teaching chamber music skills. Chamber music teaches students better listening skills; gives them a stronger sense of community as a section and aids in their general communication skills both in and outside of the performing ensemble.

How to break down and teach chamber music skills?

- 1) **Get Close:** The closer the students are to each other the easier it will be to communicate and listen.
- 2) **Cues:** The most important aspect to remember about cueing is that it must be lead by one person and followed by the others. If everyone tries to cue, then everyone will come in at different times!
- 3) **Look at each other:** Eye contact is critical in verbal communication and it is just as critical for musical communication.
- 4) **Breathe Together:** This is an important chamber skill that is often overlooked for percussionists. All wind and brass players have to breathe, but percussionists technically don't have to breathe to play their instruments. However, breathing is one of the best ways to come in together and stay together.
- 5) **Move Together:** Moving together to the music helps keep everyone in the group in the same feel
- 6) **Think as one voice:** This skill is by far the most difficult and takes the most time and practice to master. The goal is for each member of the group to be aware of every part and how they all combine to make one sound and to sound like one person with one idea about phrasing and dynamics. Although there is no substitute for practice and years of experience, there are a few fun ways to practice some of these skills.

- A) **Play a lot of chamber music** (the obvious one!)
- B) **The clapping game:** Have students learn both parts to a duet. Once both parts are memorized, they will begin playing and every time they hear a clap, they will switch to the other part. This helps them to begin to hear more than one line at once so clearly that they can start playing the other part! (this is an especially good exercise for students who usually play single lines – which applies to almost everyone except pianists and organists!)
- C) **Phrase as a group:** One good exercise is to crescendo and decrescendo together. The goal of this exercise is to keep the balance and texture of all the instruments the same as the groups gets louder and softer together.
- D) **Hear how it all fits together:** the best way to accomplish this is to play pieces where each person in the group plays only part of the composite rhythm. Ex. If the composite rhythm is four sixteenth-notes and the first player has the first of those sixteenth notes, it is important for that player to know that they are just a part of the group of four sixteenth notes.

Larger Example: Karel Husa, Music for Prague 1968, 3rd Movement "Interlude."

*One last note: Now that the percussionists are finding great sounds and playing chamber music with each other, these ideas can be applied to the rest of the ensemble. (the snare drummer and the trumpet player can look at each other during a passage that they have together, the timpanist and the bass player, etc.)