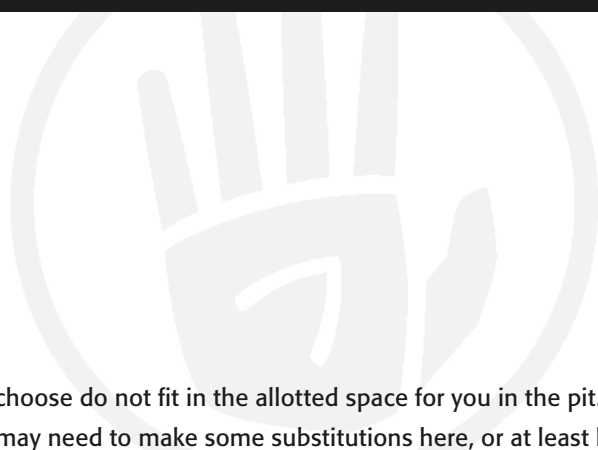




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The A B C's of Musical Theatre: Fool-proofing Your Set-Up and Score

Sometimes a pit orchestra ends up sight reading original music. If that's the case then try and use the following 6 suggestions wherever applicable or possible in your limited time to survive the first rehearsal. If you receive the book ahead of time, and possibly have access to a recording, apply the following 6 points to the preparation of the score and design of your set-up, and you will not only survive that rehearsal, but hopefully give yourself the chance to make some music. Also, I am primarily addressing the needs of a percussionist in a theatre orchestra, but many of these hints will apply to the drum set player, or any multiple percussion situation.

Instrument Selection

The first task in doing a show is gathering the instruments required by the score. There are three basic guidelines I follow in choosing the appropriate instruments. First, identify the time period or setting of the show. It's important to choose instruments that sound authentic to the story, or fit the ensemble sound indicated by the orchestration. If the orchestra has a classical chamber sound, you probably shouldn't bring your rock toms with hydraulic heads. A more "wide open" concert tom is probably the better choice. Having access to a recording of the show is the best way to understand what sounds you will be called on to create. If you do not have a recording, the Music Director can probably help you out in this area. Next, consider instrument size and volume. It's important to choose instruments that will be easy to play at a volume appropriate for the size of the theatre. If you're playing a 200 seat house, you probably don't need the 36" gran cassa & concert xylophone. A 24"-26" bass drum and a pit xylophone will probably be fine. Finally, assess performance space and dimensions. As important as it is to have authentic and balanced sounds, no one will ever hear them if the instruments

you choose do not fit in the allotted space for you in the pit. You may need to make some substitutions here, or at least be creative in the design of your set-up. Again, the recording or Music Director will aid you in understanding which instruments are the most important.

Instrument placement

The next thing to look for in a show part is how often each of these instruments is used. Find out what instruments are used most often, and then design a basic layout that will allow you to play those instruments, as well as hear the band and see the conductor comfortably. Bear in mind that some instruments, like timpani, usually have simpler parts, and are easily played while looking over your shoulder. However, bells or xylo often have more intricate parts, which may be rubato or dictated, and require at least peripheral visual connection to play. Also, look for similar instrument groupings, and orient the placement of your accessories to suit the score. If the score repeatedly uses triangle, wood block and bongos in combination, then examine those passages and place those instruments so that the sticking patterns, and playing angles all feel comfortable. Find out what instruments are used least often, and look for areas within, or around your set-up to stash them, and only pull them out when needed.

Mallets

Although my professors would shake their heads in shame, I keep my mallets on the mallet instruments. It keeps you from having to go back to a trap table every time you change instruments. I keep the bell mallets on the lower register bars. Most single note bell parts are usually in the upper range, so the lowest mallet will be out of the way. I also take care to slide them forward a little while picking them up, avoiding contact with the bars. I keep the xylo mallets on the middle register bars. More often than not, the outside ranges of the xylophone are not used, and become great mini-trap tables with use of a small towel. Vibe mallets move around a lot, primarily because you can't put the mallets down on the notes that

are ringing, and often times they need to move to another instrument quickly. I have the tail end of the rattan wrapped with moleskin or strapping tape so they don't click when I put them down. I almost always have 2 pairs of yarn mallets for vibes and cymbals. Also, it's a great catch-all mallet in case any other mallet gets dropped or misplaced. It could be used for timpani, gong, bass drum, woodblock, cowbell or even snare drum. Finally, I usually use a music stand between the timpani, covered with a towel for the timpani mallets.

Last Hints: A few "Fair Game Techniques" which might ease the demands of various set up constraints.

- The Flamingo - Remember that standing on one leg with your other foot on your knee gives you a portable trap table for tambourine, castanets, slapstick, etc.
- Developing a controlled, one-handed, two mallet cymbal roll that doesn't sound muffled or "clanky" will get you out of a lot of tight spots. Also, with just a twist of your arm, that same cymbal can be muted.
- If a segue between timpani and xylophone is just too fast to allow for a mallet switch, remember, It's not against the law to strike a timp. with a xylo. mallet.
- Four mallet technique can always be used, even if your mallets don't match. For example, holding a timpani mallet and bell mallet in your left hand while holding a bell mallet and triangle beater in your right hand can be very versatile.

Score Copying

Most theatre parts are rented from licensing agents and are bound in book form which must be erased completely at the end of the run. Therefore, I think it's an advantage to make a copy of the score. This allows you to then mark up the score, or alter the page layout however you wish. If your set-up is large, you may want to copy select pages again for a second stand at timpani or mallet instruments. I've made a habit lately of copying the score onto single pages of cardstock, and just sliding the pages to the left for the entire performance. Although I have to put them back in order afterward, it allows me to slide the page during any resting point on that page instead of just turning it at the bottom. This also allows me to be looking farther ahead at most times. You can also lay out multiple pages at once, or take single pages to a different part of the set-up. Plus, don't forget to number the pages!

Timpani Tuning

I chalk all of the timpani tunings in the score from back to front. For example, if you play F & Bb on p.55, then A & C on p.58, try and find a few measures of rest as closely after the F & Bb part to write in the tuning change. That way you aren't leaving it

until the last minute, and as you get more comfortable with the score you can find other places in those 3 pages to recheck your tuning. Once these tunings are in the book, then go through and write what pitches the drums should be tuned to at the start of every page of music. I usually write it small in the top right hand corner. This helps enormously during rehearsal when the Conductor might choose to jump around to different spots in the score. (You don't want to be the guy everyone is constantly waiting for.) Plus, as mentioned before, at any time in the show you can recheck your tunings without having to look ahead in the book.

Instrument Guideposts

It's always been my belief that the less cluttered the page is, the better chance you have of catching dynamics and other musical notations. Some music copy services place instrument segue notations in between every instrument change: To Xylophone / To Timpani for example. I begin by whiting out the excessive posts, if not all of them. I then go through and highlight or darken actual instrument headers in pen: Xylophone / Timpani for example. Now with your pages cleaner, the additional notes you might choose to make in pencil are much more noticeable. As discussed earlier in "Instrument Placement", you may have chosen selected instruments to stash somewhere until needed. Now that you have your clean score, be sure to indicate when to pull that instrument out and when to put it away.

If you have secured a recording of the show, there are several other notations you might choose to make, such as tempo (whether in general terms, or a specific metronome marking - though remember, the production you are playing won't necessarily be doing those tempos,) swing or straight (as these are not always indicated, or sometimes not obvious,) and fermata length. Fermatas are almost never shorter in performance than they are on a cast recording. So, if a fermata or G.P. on a recording allows you time to do any sort of business with the set up, mallets, etc., you can confidently use that time.

Last Hint: Tacet

The standard practice in Musical Theatre is to circle a part we intend to leave out, whether individual notes or an entire phrase. Why? Because if you crossed it out and then decided to reinstate the part, you would then be erasing the 'cross out' lines as well as the part. Erasing a circle leaves the part in tact.