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PERCUSSION FROM THE PODIUM: Tips for Conductors

The following is excerpted from an article for wind band conductors originally published in the Association of Concert Bands Journal, Vol. 34, No. 2, June 2015. The three-part article is a collection of helpful hints, tips, and insights intended to increase communication and improve the musical relationship between conductors and percussionists. For more information about The Association of Concert Bands visit www.acbands.org.

Score Study for Instruments and Implements

Thorough score study and preparation in consultation with your percussion section leader before rehearsal can save valuable rehearsal time and keep rehearsals flowing and productive.

Research the terms used by composers for instruments and mallets within all of the percussion parts as part of your score study (even better, play through each part yourself). For example, a piece calls for "wind chimes," which is the circular-mounted instrument that hangs on back porches, but a glissando down in pitch over four beats is notated—this is actually a mark tree part, but is given an incorrect name in the score.

Other examples include works that call for striking a triangle with a wooden stick (Bartok once indicated this) and rolling on a suspended cymbal with soft timpani mallets (many famous wind band pieces from the early 1900s ask for this). You may certainly choose to stay true to the composer indications, but a wooden stick on a triangle will not create a characteristic sound, and the fragile felt on the timpani mallets may be damaged if used on a metal surface. Using a triangle beater and soft keyboard mallets will create more appropriate sounds and extend the life of the instruments and implements.

Issues of Notation and Duration

It is important to note that percussion notation is not yet standardized, thus terms and indications may be easily misinterpreted, so it is imperative that scores are studied thoroughly to avoid disruptions and time-off-task during rehearsals.

Of particular concern is the fact that, unlike wind and string notation, percussion notation often indicates only when the sound is to begin, not necessarily when it is to end. (Even Tchaikovsky's wonderful crash cymbal parts often include what appear to be staccato crashes that clearly should be allowed to ring on.)

As a somewhat extreme example, a whole note written for suspended cymbal should be allowed to vibrate for four beats then dampened with the hand on the fifth beat; however, what do you do when there is a whole note written for woodblock? You could ask the percussionist to perform a roll for four beats, but is that really what the composer intend ed? More likely is that the composer simply desires what acoustically sounds like a quarter-note, but this situation and the resulting discussion could easily drain minutes from your rehearsal if not dealt with ahead of time.

Counting Rests means Playing Silence

It is true that percussionists often count more rests in a composition than any other instrument section, but stress to your percussionists that if music is defined as "organized sound and silence," then counting rests should be considered "performing silence." In this way, it is important for percussionists to stay focused on the music being performed even when counting rests, just as an actor must stay in character even if not speaking.

You can help all of the members of the ensemble stayed engaged when counting rests by encouraging them to write cues in their parts. For example, state "The oboe plays four eighth-notes on beats three and four, then the triangle enters on the downbeat of rehearsal C" or "The trombones crescendo for two measures right before your forte-piano timpani roll in measure 72."

Post a Rehearsal Schedule

Posting a rehearsal schedule is one of the simplest, yet most effective things you can do to ensure a smooth and efficient rehearsal. Even a basic listing of the pieces in order of rehearsal will allow percussionists to know exactly what instruments are needed and when they need to be ready.

For the most part, winds simply put a sheet of music in their folder, pull out another one, and are ready to go, but not so in the percussion section. Avoid rehearsing pieces out of the posted order or on the spur of the moment deciding to work on a piece with a completely different percussion instrumentation (especially the one that calls for the largest number of instruments) without allowing adequate time for the percussionists to set up. The proper instruments or mallets may not be available because it was not a part of the posted rehearsal order.

Publicizing the rehearsal order before rehearsal (preferably a few days beforehand) will help percussionists plan so that they can help you minimize the time needed between pieces for changing set ups and instruments.

Position of the Percussion Section

Revaluating the position of the percussion instruments within your ensemble may fix a number of balance and blend problems, as well as phasing issues.

Timpani are best positioned near the low brass section (especially tubas), the keyboard instruments near the high brass and high woodwinds, the bass drum near the timpani (but not so close that the timbres blend into one), and the snare, cymbals, and bass drum together because they often read from the same part. Other instruments may be positioned between the battery and keyboard instruments as needed.

If limited rehearsal space is an issue, consider "stacking" the keyboard instruments or accessories in two or three rows with enough space between to walk safely.

Stage Plots

Once you have decided upon programming for a concert, ask the section leader to create a set up a stage plot or diagram for the entire concert to anticipate and solve many logistical problems before the first rehearsal. For example, placing a second tambourine in the keyboard section will keep a player from running across the back of the ensemble to play a two-measure passage or positioning the glockenspiel between the xylophone and vibraphone will allow two players to get to it easily without moving instruments or stumbling over one another.

Put Your Sound Inside

An effective rehearsal technique that calls a player's attention to issues of balance and blend (and works particularly well with percussion instruments) is to ask players to "put their sound inside" of another instrument. For instance, if the clarinets, oboes, and flutes are playing a high-pitched, staccato passage that has been orchestrated with wood blocks or temple blocks, ask the winds to create their articulation based on the woodblock timbre or to put their

sound “inside” the temple block or vice versa. In this case, the rehearsal technique utilizes the percussion instrument itself as an aural guide for the winds and increases awareness of balance and blend for both the upper woodwinds and percussionist.

Direct versus Interpretive Terms

When collaborating with percussionists to pinpoint the exact color or nuance required, use a mixture of direct terms (louder, softer, shorter, longer, more, less) in conjunction with interpretive images (an ephemeral fog, starlight on the ocean, an army away in the distance). Using only direct terms can result in flat, stiff, robotic playing, and using only interpretive terms can be vague, confusing, and i neffective.

Achieving the Right Sound Color

If the sound colors percussionists are creating do not match your internal sound concept, first know that you do not have to be satisfied with the sounds, instruments, and implements being used. Many percussionists come prepared with an array of plastic, rubber, yarn, cord, and felt mallets, which may be exploited to change the timbre of an instrument in innumerable ways.

Note that percussionists are capable of playing as loud or soft as the musical dynamics dictate, so asking them to use a harder or softer mallet will first and foremost change the color and articulation of the sound—not the volume.

You may absolutely ask for a brighter tambourine sound, a lower-pitched triangle, heavier bass drum mallets, a xylophone mallet with less attack or slap at the front of the sound, etc.; however, if your percussionists do not have the necessary tools, then they or the ensemble should purchase or borrow what is needed. Oftentimes, local freelance percussionists, orchestral players, or college teachers are usually glad to offer their assistance, opinions, or perhaps instruments for a small rental fee (or none at all).

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