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PERCUSSION FROM THE PODIUM:
Tambourine, Triangle, and Castanets

The following is excerpted from an article for wind band conductors originally published in the Association of Concert Bands Journal, Vol. 35, No. 1, February 2016. 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.

Triangles

The ideal concert triangle sound includes a wash of colorful overtones, not a single fundamental pitch (like a glockenspiel bar); thus, if you hear a clear, specific pitch from a triangle, it is likely that the percussionist is striking the lower bar with the beater parallel to the floor instead of at a 45-degree angle and in the center of the lower bar instead of towards the corner. Players should keep this angle when rolling on a triangle such that the front of the bottom bar and the back of the side bar are both struck alternately.

As with cymbals, triangles come in a variety of small to large sizes and are made from many different metal alloys, some of which are designed for articulate playing, while most are intended to create a rich spectrum of shimmering overtones.

Triangle clips may be purchased from manufacturers or be homemade, either of which must have two separate loops of high-test fishing line (the second is a backup designed to save everyone from the embarrassment of an ill-timed equipment malfunction).

In addition, the various metal alloys available, a wide variety of triangle beaters are available in different shapes, sizes, materials, and construction, all of which impact the resulting tone quality.

Triangle Technique

Percussionists should avoid playing with the triangle clipped to a music stand because vibrations from the triangle may cause the music stand to sound (if necessary, pad the music stand with a towel before clipping the triangle to the stand).

Holding the triangle clip in the hand on top of the thumb and between the index and middle fingers provides the most stability and easy access for dampening.

A special effect that should be used with discretion, but can add just the right touch to a final note, is to gently wave the triangle after it is struck to produce a subtle vibrato.

Tambourines

Tambourines should be made of (1) a sturdy, shallow, wooden shell, (2) pairs of metal jingles in double rows mounted in slits cut in the side of the shell, and (3) a secure skin head (though professional-quality instruments with humidity-resistant plastic heads are now being manufactured).

A standard, all-purpose tambourine should have a 10” diameter natural skin head and a double row of jingles, which may be made of silver (bright), copper or bronze (dark), and combinations of metals for various colors and staccato or legato articulations.

If skin heads become limp due to high humidity, it is

best to tighten the head using a large, variable setting heating pad to control the heat level (it can be placed under black towel on a music stand for performance use).

Tambourine Technique

Tambourines are held with the thumb on the head side at 6 o'clock (the hole is for mounting on a cymbal stand), and the remaining four fingers slightly muffle the head from underneath.

Dry, articulate sounds are generally achieved with the tambourine held at a 45-degree angle to the floor, while positioning the instrument more parallel to the floor will result in wet, legato sounds.

Tambourines are struck with the thumb and fingers bunched together close to the edge for less articulation and more towards the center for more articulation and sharp accents.

For fast, articulate, loud passages, percussionists can mount the tambourine and strike it will drumsticks or mallets, or they can place a foot on a chair or stool and alternate playing on the knee cap (front of the head) and knuckles of the fist (inside of the head); however, to limit extraneous sounds, players must plan when in the music they will turn over tambourine at end of a loud passage.

Tambourine Rolls

Perhaps one of the most difficult techniques to master (and one that can make or break a musical performance), a tambourine shake roll is performed with a controlled, rotary wrist motion and should begin and end with a single stroke to achieve a clear beginning and end to the roll. Immediately following the initial tap, the tambourine should be positioned perpendicular to the floor while shaking to allow the jingles to move freely. Too often percussionists move the instrument a wide distance from side to side, but a smaller distance of a just a few inches will produce a fuller, smoother roll. End the shake roll with a tap and position the tambourine at a 45-degree angle to the floor again to stop the jingles from vibrating.

Soft shake rolls may be performed low and at the player's side (or even behind the player), and crescendos may be achieved by moving up and out to eye level for the loudest dynamics (the opposite motion is used for decrescendos).

Extremely soft passages are best performed with finger or thumb rolls, which are accomplished by rubbing the fleshy part of the finger tip or thumb around the outside edge of the head (not on the rim) and playing a release note with

the palm or heel of the hand. Experimentation outside of rehearsal is typically needed for percussionists to find the correct pressure that allows them to sustain finger or thumb rolls evenly (usually it requires less pressure than expected).

Though some players slightly moisten their finger or thumb, rubbing beeswax on the head from 11 o'clock to 5 o'clock is more hygienic for tambourines shared by the entire percussion section.

Castanets

Instruments made of hardwood (not plastic) on a handle (not string) will produce the most authentic castanet sound and are more practical for concert use than the finger models designed for flamenco dancers.

Castanets should be played on the knee (often with one foot on a chair or stool) or placed in a "castanet machine," which is a mounting device that allows castanets to be played with the hands or soft mallets for quick instrument changes.

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