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PERCUSSION FROM THE PODIUM:
Snare Drum

The following is excerpted from an article for wind band conductors originally published in the Association of Concert Bands Journal, Vol. 34, No. 3, October 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.

Snare Drum

If the snare drum sound you hear is not ideal for a particular work, consider a number of variables regarding the construction of snare drums:

Shell Depth: A 6.5" deep shell sounds lower in pitch and more full and dark than a 5" deep drum.

Shell Material: Metal shells produce brighter sounds than wooden shells, which create darker, rounder sounds because the porous, organic material absorbs many upper frequencies.

Heads: Thick heads are typically more dry, deep, and dark, while thin heads produce higher frequencies. Coated heads or heads with internal dampening rings will also sound more articulate than uncoated heads.

Tuning: Both snare drum heads should be in tune with themselves (not necessarily one another), meaning that the same sound is produced when the head is struck next to each tension rod. Both heads should be relatively tight (the snare side head more so than the batter head) and tuned to an overall pitch of approximately A=440. Find the pitch of a snare drum by humming an A into the drum and sliding the pitch up and down until the drum resonates the pitch back to you sympathetically, then adjust the overall pitch of the heads up or down as desired.

Dampening: Use commercially manufactured dampeners like Moongels or homemade dampeners of suede leather to dry up the sound of the head for soft, articulate playing, and remove dampening for louder playing and loud, long rolls.

Sticks: Large, barrel-shaped stick tips with more contact area will aid players in producing smoother buzz rolls and robust sounds, while small, round-tipped sticks will create clear articulations, especially at soft dynamic levels.

Snares: The snares themselves need to be adjusted to the proper tension, which is done by over-tensioning the snares until they sound like guitar strings when the head is tapped softly in the center, then relaxing the tension just until the sound spreads out and the snares are sensitive and respond at the very edge of the drum. Wire coil snares typically sound best at soft dynamic levels and spread at loud dynamic levels, so consider purchasing a concert snare drum with wire coil, uncoated cables, and/or coated cables. Each of the three materials speak best at soft, medium, and loud dynamic levels, respectively, so having all three on a snare drum ensures that it will be sensitive and articulate throughout the dynamic range of the instrument.

Playing Area: It is important to note that, while the general playing on a snare drum is just off-center, percussionists are able to play loud and soft anywhere on the head. Thus, soft dynamics do not automatically equate to playing at the edge of the

snare drum. The edge of the head is tighter and has more rebound than the middle of the head (as on a trampoline), which helps make soft playing easier due to the increased bounce; however, if the instrument is a low quality snare drum, it will begin to produce a hollow timbre like that of a toy drum or tom-tom a few inches from the rim.

Snare Drum Technique

If the snare drum sound, color, and timbre you hear is ideal for a particular work and you believe an issue stems from the manner in which the instrument is being played, consider a number of variables regarding snare drum technique:

Grip: A cursory examination of a snare drummer's grip may reveal the cause of uneven rhythms and inconsistent sounds. Proper matched grip involves a relaxed grip devoid of tension (the same tension used to hold a ladybug), a slight space between the thumb and the side of the hand (the size of a vending machine coin slot), the thumb on the side of the stick directly across from the first joint of the index finger (the two make a plus sign), and space between the fingers and palm to allow the stick to move freely.

Roll Style: Rolls are the percussionist's sustained sound or long tone, and, as such, multiple-bounce or buzz rolls should be used in concert settings to blend with an ensemble (though double-bounce or open rolls are stylistically appropriate for Sousa marches or other military-style compositions).

Multiple-Bounce/Buzz Rolls: Often the cause of uneven, inconsistent buzz rolls is that the buzzes produced by each hand are of different lengths and/or dynamics. It is possible that the primary strokes/base strokes are too slow because, as dynamics increase, the speed and height of the sticks also increase; as dynamics decrease, the speed and height of the sticks also decrease. Performing multiple-bounce rolls with an odd number of primary strokes (such as five or seven strokes to a quarter-note) may help obscure any unevenness or primary stroke rhythms. Additionally, even-sounding snare drum rolls are often achieved with a neutral wrist and a pivoting from the elbow, which creates more leverage and decreases initial attacks.