

The Instrumentalist

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The Intellectual Side Of Percussion Playing

by Bill Cahn

Most high school percussionists play fairly well, but they are generally less skilled at organizing the full set of percussion instruments for rehearsals. In percussion clinics I ask all students to prepare set-up diagrams for concerts and discuss how they plan to move the instruments between pieces, who is going to do what, and so on. Although this is normally the job of a principal percussionist, it is helpful for everyone in the section to set out the details for using and arranging each piece of equipment for each composition. I advise section leaders to provide information the other players need. A section leader's goal is to facilitate and help others make music, answering questions only when asked.

At a youth orchestra festival where I taught, the ensemble read a number of new orchestra pieces by young A.S.C.A.P. composers. Because one of the works called for an enormous set-up, I asked everyone in the percussion section to look over the parts

and estimate how long it would take to organize all of the instruments. The consensus was about an hour. For an 8:30 a.m. rehearsal, everyone had to brace themselves to wake up at 6:30, have breakfast at 7:00, and start setting up at 7:30. In a professional environment it is understood that the percussion section has an earlier call time than everyone else. When the conductor gave the downbeat, the percussion section was ready to go and played beautifully. The composer was impressed that the dozens of instruments were fully set up; he had expected to lose valuable rehearsal time trying to round up instruments and confirm that each player had the right part.

The first step in organizing percussion for a piece is to list the instruments in the top left-hand corner of every part; on the top right-hand corner write all of the sticks needed. Before each rehearsal and each piece, percussionists should check the list to make sure that everything is in place. It is impossible to

Members of the Toronto-based percussion ensemble NEXUS (left to right): John Wyre, Russell Hartenberger, Bill Cahn, Bob Becker, and Robin Engelman.



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make music on instruments that are not in front of you. Because different pieces within a program may require different elaborate set-ups, percussionists should create a set-up that minimizes the number of adjustments between works.

Composers today write for a wide array of percussion instruments and may include parts for instruments from Brazil, Africa, or Southeast Asia. Even with a Beethoven symphony, players have many choices to make. If a part calls for a cymbal, the percussionist has a variety of cymbals to choose from, each of which produces a different sound. The art of playing percussion entails the judgment and experience to choose the best instrument. Students can only acquire judgment and taste through experience and by listening to and evaluating performances. They should listen to as many recordings as possible and attend many concerts.

Years ago music programs encouraged students to become specialists on a particular instrument or style, but percussionists today benefit more from general training. The goal of education should be to broaden their vision, not to narrow it. Although students should become experts on a particular instrument, they should be able to play all types of

percussion. It is also true that mastery of a particular instrument helps players develop an appreciation for the instruments they do not play as well.

The specialist philosophy encouraged me to become a good orchestral musician, but in a symphony orchestra today, a percussionist may have to play drumset behind Mel Torme at a pops concert, give a performance with Brazilian musicians, or play a new work that uses instruments from India and Asia, so it is essential to be well rounded. This may change in the future, but for the moment the broader a performer's view, the better off he will be. A narrow specialized training only weakens a percussionist's ability to survive in the business.

There is currently an enormous preoccupation with technique. However, it is far more important for students to develop a sense of judgment about what they play, to have a model of sound in their mind, and to be aware of other sound possibilities. These skills naturally guide students to the necessary techniques; if problems arise, they will ask questions. The ability to listen is far more important than specific solutions, which are often what teachers emphasize. To teach students to hit the instrument in a precise way and to suggest that a particular method will always work is an unrealistic oversimplification. An overemphasis on technique stifles a love of music instead of encouraging it.

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Bill Cahn has been a member of the Toronto-based percussion ensemble NEXUS since 1971 and was principal percussionist in the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra from 1968 to 1995. Cahn has performed with many conductors, composers, and ensembles including John Cage, Aaron Copland, Marian McPartland, Steve Reich, Doc Severinsen, Edgar Varèse, and David Zinman. His compositions for solo and ensemble percussion are published by HoneyRock Publishing and Marimba Productions and are distributed worldwide; he has also produced a number of C.D.s. Cahn has been a panelist at American Symphony Orchestra League conferences and is currently on the board of directors of the Rochester Philharmonic. For his work in creating programs for public schools in New York, Cahn received the Rochester Philharmonic League Fanfare Award in 1988. The following year he received the Toronto Arts Award.

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Directors should focus on a student's sound rather than on hand position, which is the job of a private teacher. The one technical element that directors should look for in any student is tension. Serious problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome and back pain develop when directors are blind to tension in young players. Percussionists should be relaxed and encouraged to enjoy what they're doing; playing music should be fun, not a job or a burden.

Improvisation sessions help in developing a musical sense beyond technique. When I lead these sessions, the only rule is that the participants have to make music using the available instruments; within that guideline they should feel free to do whatever they want. An instructor's role is just to allow this process to unfold, although it is good for the teacher to participate as well. A small group of three to six players works best. I begin by telling them to be silent for five seconds or until someone starts, and the music continues until it reaches a natural end. Most students have never played music without thinking about techniques or notes. After each improvisation I lead a non-judgmental discussion about what the students played and then they try it again. These sessions almost always have a profound effect on the students and me.

During one improvisation everybody tried to play as loud and fast as they could, showing off their technique.

Although it was a lot of fun, someone later pointed out that some instruments could not be heard at all. I thought this was a great observation, and everyone wanted to try it again, listening to each other a little more carefully.

The challenge for music educators is to develop an appreciation of music in the population at large. When I was in school, we took music appreciation courses well into high school. Today the focus of music programs has shifted to encouraging students to be performers instead of teaching students to appreciate music, an ability that will enrich their entire lives. I would like to see a slight change in focus, which is not to say that performance should be de-emphasized. Students should have the opportunity to listen to all kinds of music and have open-ended discussions without right or wrong responses. The goal is to encourage reflection, not to teach a comprehensive history of music. Music should be a tool for self-awareness.

One of the best experiences for students is to attend professional concerts once or twice each semester. When I was a child in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Orchestra sent chamber groups to perform at schools and distributed tickets to music directors. I think most orchestras still do this. Students should have opportunities to hear music both in the classroom and at live performances, and these efforts should be balanced with preparing for the next football game or school concert. □