

Playing the Bass Drum Musically

by Dr. Tom Morgan, Washburn University

In this article, I would like to address a common problem among young percussionists: proper bass drum performance technique.

To begin, we need to consider what the musical purpose of the bass drum is in an ensemble. The bass drum is the lowest sound in the percussion section. Whether it is played repetitively, such as during a march, or is used to reinforce accent points in the music, the bass drum “puts the bottom” on the band or orchestra. Therefore, it should be tuned as low as possible without the head “flapping.” If the drum is tuned in this manner, it will have a very resonant tone that must be controlled.

Unfortunately, students often deal with this resonance in one of two ways. One extreme is to fill the bass drum with some sort of material to muffle it. I’ve seen many different things used for this -- styrofoam packing material, news paper, rags, paper towels taped to the head, auto parts, etc. The problem with this method is that it limits the sound possibilities of the drum. When the head is muffled this way it is impossible to achieve a long, ringing sound. The only possible sound is very dead and muffled, similar to the sound of a wet mop hitting sheet rock.

The other extreme is to not control the resonance at all. Some even play the bass drum in a horizontal position, bringing the mallet straight down on the head (a practice I call the “Fred Flinstone Technique”). This approach makes it impossible to control the bottom head, and again, only one sound is available. The audience hears a low rumble with very little definition.

The problem can be solved by having the player put his foot on a chair or small wooden box, resting the right knee against the batter head. The left hand should be placed on the resonating head in such a way that the drum can be squeezed between the right knee and left hand. To play short, dry, muffled notes (for example, during a march) use more pressure between the knee and hand. For longer notes use less pressure. (If your bass drummer is female, it is probably best if she doesn’t wear a short skirt when using this technique.) This approach allows the percussionist to achieve both long and short notes and generally play the bass drum in a way that will match the rest of the music; in a word: musically.

The bass drum is an instrument that can enhance the music only if it is played musically, and percussion students need to understand that it must be approached thoughtfully and sensitively.

Since 1988, Tom Morgan has been Director of Percussion Studies at Washburn University where he directs the Washburn University Percussion Ensemble, the Washburn University “Fighting Blues” Marching Band Percussion Line, and Jazz Ensemble II. He holds Bachelors and Masters degrees in music education and music theory and composition from the University of Northern Colorado and a Doctoral degree in percussion performance from the University of Oklahoma. As a performer, Dr. Morgan is very active in the Topeka and Kansas City areas, performing and recording with numerous groups, including the Trilogy Big Band, a seventeen piece jazz ensemble with a recently released CD on the Sea Breeze Jazz recording label. A second Trilogy Big Band CD was released in October, 1995. In addition, Tom has performed with the Topeka Symphony Orchestra and the Topeka Jazz Workshop big band. He is in demand as a clinician at festivals and music camps throughout the region. For information on percussion study at Washburn, contact Dr. Morgan at zmorg@washburn.edu