

Teaching the Beginning Mallet Player

Mark Wessels

Why is it that beginning percussionists have a hard time learning to READ keyboard music?! It always seems that other students in the band learn to read music faster, even though they have major roadblocks to overcome (forming the proper embouchure, using the proper air support, making a sound on the mouthpiece, etc.)—all before they can play one or two “semi-recognizable” notes on their instrument. In contrast, beginning mallet players do not have to worry about anything except hitting a key with a mallet! It sure reinforces the stereotype of the “dumb drummer”, doesn’t it?

Before you place the blame on some mysterious “brain vacuum” that exists in the back of your band hall, it’s important to realize that there are so many inherent problems when learning to sightread on keyboard percussion instruments that many young players get discouraged and simply quit trying! WE have set them up to fail from the beginning because we have not taken the steps to identify and address these problems.

IDENTIFY THE PROBLEMS

Physical problems of the instrument:

If you’ve spent any time at all trying to play on a beginning bell

set, most of the problems are easy to figure out.

- Size of bars (small “target” compared to the size of the mallet head).
- Screws in the bars (further shrinking the “target”).
- Kinesthetics (players do not touch the keys like every other instrumentalist).

Unfortunately, unless you have enough marimbas in your band hall for each beginning student (and one to take home as well), we pretty much have to deal with the instrument situation as it is.

Potential problems with the keyboard method book:

In my experience, a method book can present the biggest hurdle to learning to read music—especially if it wasn’t designed to specifically address the problems associated with the limitations of the instrument. Take a hard look at the mallet method that you’re using and see if it has any of these potential problems:

- The book begins with whole notes, which does not encourage the students to keep their eye on the music. Plus, the lines are easy to memorize!
- Notes may begin in the upper octave, where the key size is the smallest.
- Page layout and/or small note

size may make it difficult to find your place in the music if you glance away for a second.

- The method may start with the natural keys (C major scale). The natural keys are farther from the line of sight than the accidentals, so visually there is nothing to ‘break up’ the row of natural keys (as there is in a Bb major scale). Even for the advanced percussionist, there is no key that is more difficult to sightread in than C major!
- Poor note spacing may make it difficult to recognize rhythmic values. Also, notes that are crammed too close together make it very difficult to recognize notes on the staff.
- Some beginner mallet books begin with a full octave range and proceed to teach new keys above and below the staff within a short amount of time. Students don’t have time to feel comfortable with a FEW notes before adding others.
- Large interval jumps (5^{ths}-octaves) are VERY difficult to play without looking down.
- Pacing: The first few lessons may look great, but soon afterwards, a book may lunge forward in rhythmic or melodic difficulty.
- Rolls: While it is important for a beginner to learn how to roll, they are next to impossible to

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play on small keys EVEN while you're looking at your sticks.

So, given the fact that there are all these potential problems with the beginner keeping their eyes on the music, what is a typical beginner going to do? MEMORIZE THE LINES, of course! Sure, that might work for the first couple of pages, but then what? Chances are that your beginning drummers will begin to get frustrated as the lines become more difficult and eventually give up wanting to learn to play "the bells" altogether.

Sounds pretty bleak, doesn't it? Don't give up yet! Rather than have yet another class of "dummers", let's look at some of the ways that we can counter these problems and set them up for success!

SOLVING THE PROBLEMS

Some of these problems have easy solutions, some cannot be overcome except with diligent practice on the part of the student (isn't that always the case?). The purpose here is to eliminate as many of the problems as possible so that the students can have the best chance at success. Start the year by cultivating the right habits:

- If the student's bell set has engraved note names, cover them with a piece of electrical tape (for the time being, let's assume that your beginning percussionists are no less intelligent than the other band members who do not have note names engraved on their instrument!).
- Never allow your percussionists to share music. It's difficult enough to read music that is directly in

front of the bells—much less from across the room!

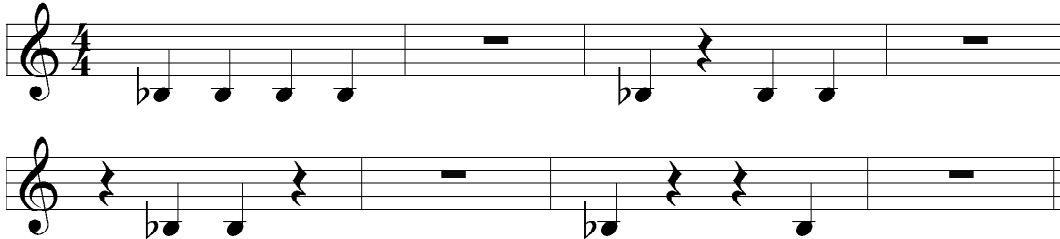
- Place the music stand as close to the keys as possible. And while we're at it... always use a music stand, not a built-in wire music holder! I know it may be convenient, but I've yet to walk into a clarinet class and see them all using lyres!
- Place the music on the stand as close to the actual notes as possible. If the line is on the right hand side of the book, but uses the lowest octave, move the book (or the stand) over!
- Encourage your students to keep their eyes on the printed page! Since mallet percussionists do not "touch" the keys, it's important to explain how peripheral vision is used to "see" the keys without looking directly at them. Making the player to use his or her peripheral vision is paramount to developing a kinesthetic "feel" for the instrument!
- Start on the "home" keys. The closest keys to the printed page are the accidentals. Since they are also in groups of 2 and 3, they are even easier to see with the peripheral vision.
- If you must use a band method book for your beginner class, try re-writing the lines! The example below is of the first line from a popular band method books.

If you were 10 years old, playing this line in the back of the band hall at m.m.=80, would YOU keep your eyes on the music? Do you think you could resist the temptation to look down at the keys? I bet you'd have time to set a small fire and still be back in time to play the next note!



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Here's how I could rewrite the line to make it work better for your percussionists:



Take a look at the SIZE of the music and the rhythms involved. Given the rests that are randomly placed throughout, I'll bet that your students will keep their eyes on the music – if nothing else than to avoid the humiliating 'playing in the rest' mistake!

Given that a beginning mallet player can easily learn several notes, you can even use harmony notes to vary the exercise even further, or you may even choose to create several different reading lines for each line in the band method book. Chances are that you will be spending several days (if not weeks) on the first few pages – so why not give them LOTS of reading material to keep them on their toes?

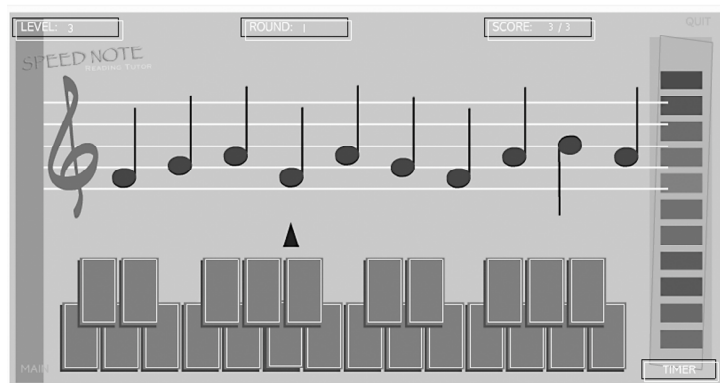
I know that creating a "packet" of rewritten exercises may take several hours of work, but even if you do it for the first six pages of your band method, you've started your percussionist out with the right habits!

Repetition and Reinforcement

Another key to learning to read music for the beginner is REINFORCEMENT. Introduce a note or two, then grind it into them until they can't help but remember it!

Remember typing class? j j j f f f f j f f f j f j . . .
I'd hate to admit it, but learning to read music on the bells is much more like typing than it is a beautiful musical experience!

To this end, I've recently developed a computer video game (see graphic below) that is included free with every copy of my beginning mallet method book. In the first level of play, the students are asked to name 100 random notes on the staff. To make it fun and challenging, the player must "race the clock" to name as many notes correctly as possible before time runs out! To encourage the student to get even quicker at recognizing the notes, they can play at 3 skill levels— each requiring the player to finish in less time. Level 2 includes exercises on finding a given note on the keyboard. In other levels, they must recognize accidentals... then key signature changes... all while REINFORCING note recognition skills.



If you'd like to try the game, it is available online:
<http://www.vicfirth.com/education/keyboard/speednotegame.html>

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Introducing New Lines

Another factor that contributes to students being able to develop the habit of keeping their eyes on the music is how new lines in the book are introduced. Most band directors have other instrumentalists “finger through” a line before they play it and say the note names, but there are a few additional things that you can do to help percussionists:

1. Have students name the notes that the line contains. Do a short “hit the key exercise” while you call out these notes. Students should keep their eyes on the music and use the peripheral vision to find the notes on the keyboard.
2. FINGER through the line (physically TOUCHING the keys with the fingers) while they say the note names (while keeping their eyes on the music).
3. Play measures out of sequence. If the song is one that they know the tune to, they will try to memorize it from the beginning. Playing different measures in the piece forces them to look at the page.
4. Don't play the line over and over! Go on to another line BEFORE students have a chance to memorize it.

Final Suggestions:

- I make “looking down” part of each mallet test I give for the first 12 weeks. You have to “get in close” on your tests, but students realize right away that memorizing doesn't help.
- Missing a note on the bells is not as important as playing the wrong fingering on another instrument. Don't count off points on tests for “hitting a screw!”

- Sticking is NOT a big issue to me when the students are reading. If I choose to work on a more difficult line or etude, I will go back AFTER we've read through it and instruct them in proper sticking techniques.
- Read lots and lots of easy music! Buy a “classroom set” of *A Tune A Day* books written for other instruments, then play a few lines from the beginning of the book.
- Make test assignments cover a “range” of 5-6 lines rather than just one. That keeps a student from memorizing one simple tune.
- Don't practice for them! Assign lines that are a bit over their heads. Basically, if they feel like they can learn it in class, they will never PRACTICE!

CONCLUSION:

There's no doubt that teaching beginning percussionists how to read keyboard music is a difficult task due to the limitations involved with bell kits. With patience and persistence applied to overcoming the inherent problems, your students can soon read keyboard music at least as well as your other instrumentalists! Work to develop the correct habits from the beginning and your “drummers” may soon become true “percussionists!”

Mark Wessels is the Director of Internet Activities for Vic Firth Inc. In addition to being a band director for 12 years in the Texas public schools, Mark is a respected clinician, adjudicator and author throughout the United States and is very active in percussion education. His beginner method books, A Fresh Approach to the Snare Drum and A Fresh Approach to Mallet Percussion are best sellers throughout Texas, and are rapidly spreading to other parts of the country. More information about Mark's method books is available online at mwpublications.com.