

Too Many Percussionists or Not Enough Parts

Solutions to an Old Problem

Gary Barton

How would rehearsal discipline be affected if the trumpet section, or any other section, of the band sat through some or all of a class period with nothing to play, with no contribution to make to the band? This is a reliable recipe for discipline problems. This happens often to the percussion section due to too many players in the ensemble or literature that has little percussion activity. Before I begin, please realize that there are many great works, especially slow works, that simply do not utilize the percussion section, much in the manner of the slow movements of the great romantic symphonies. The percussion section will always be required to use great self-discipline during the rehearsal and performance of these works. Fortunately, these typically are works that are performed by more advanced ensembles. My suggestions are slanted toward middle school bands and any literature for band which uses complete percussion activity.



Keyboards

Keyboard parts may be played by any number of players. This is an ideal way to keep percussionists busy. Have one player play each part with the appropriate mallets, then have others play with very soft mallets to prevent balance problems. Rotate the players on the appropriate mallets so that each one gets the opportunity to be the “heard” player. Stress to the players the importance that they all play and that it is important for them to exercise their keyboard skills on a regular basis.

If there is no keyboard part, oboe parts often work well. Also,

try writing a part. I once judged an invitational band festival where a high school third band performed grade one and two literature. The three clarinet players in the band played all first parts and keyboards played all second and third parts. The band received all superior ratings. With discretion in literature and mallet hardness, this can be an amazing solution in which the keyboards enhance the ensemble in an unusual way. If you don't feel comfortable doing this at a

contest, it is certainly safe on a home concert or when conducting an honor band.

Timpani

Much elementary and middle school level literature does not include a timpani part. This often is mandated by the publisher and

not by the composer. Try writing a timpani part yourself. I usually start with the tuba part as my guide. It is very easy to create an easy but interesting timpani part and the students are the ones who benefit.



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Snare Drum

While some conductors refuse to allow more than one player to play the snare drum part, I have found that two to four can play the part if the drums are tuned well for blend. The only other ingredient needed to make this work is a demand on the part of the conductor for sensitivity from the players. I tell them that forte may really need to be mezzo piano, or fortissimo may need to be mezzo forte. The literature being performed will also impact this decision and its direction from the podium.



Rotate the Players

Instead of making initial assignments of the percussion parts, try moving players through all of the parts in a regular rotation. This is only recommended if there is a fairly long preparation time for the performance. I would never do this if a week or less was allotted for preparation, as in a clinic situation. Once this is established in the home rehearsal hall, your students will grow much closer to what we think of as “complete percussionists” and you will never again worry if one percussionist is not at the concert because the others have already rehearsed the parts.

If you regularly have too many percussionists, then you must formulate a plan of action to solve the problem over a period of time. Until then, these suggestions may help in a musical and educational way. Always remember to use musical discretion when using multiple players on any percussion part.

Gary Barton received the B.M.Ed. from the University of Louisiana - Monroe and the M.S.Ed. from Indiana University. He currently teaches at the Baker Sixth Grade Campus in LaPorte, Texas where he also works with all aspects of the middle school and high school band programs. His 28 years of teaching have included positions in Mississippi, Louisiana Tennessee, and Arkansas. Mr. Barton served as an Adjunct Instructor of Euphonium and Tuba at Arkansas State University for five years. He is a veteran member of the faculty of the Indiana University Summer Music Clinic for High School Students. Mr. Barton is a past-president of the Arkansas School Band and Orchestra Association and the East Central Mississippi Band Directors Association. In 1996, he was awarded Baker Campus Teacher of the Year and was a 1998 inductee into the Band World Magazine Legion of Honor. Mr. Barton has been published in 'The Instrumentalist,' 'The Leblanc Bell,' 'British Columbia Band Talk' and 'The NBA Journal.' He has held several positions with the NBA; currently as NBA Southwestern Division Chairman. Mr. Barton holds memberships in Phi Beta Mu, the American School Band Directors Association, the World Association for Symphonic Bands and Ensembles, the Association of Concert Bands, TMEA and TBA.