

“Tune Up!” Getting Your Membranes Ready for the Stage

Ray Ulibarri

As you prepare your bands for UIL Concert and Sight Reading contests, getting your Percussion membranes ready for the stage is an essential and often overlooked detail. Balance, projection, and blend within the ensemble all require a variety of techniques and experimentation. Starting with the basics—Timpani, Snare Drum, Bass Drum, and Toms—we can learn to practice some simple and teachable techniques for success.

First, when drum heads get old they lose the ability to be articulate and resonant. When well maintained, it is possible for them to retain their idiomatic qualities for longer. Keep in mind that a tear or too many dents in any head will render it useless. Storing small drums in cases and covering large drums will keep heads functional for longer, and just requires routine follow ups with the section. It is important to remember that time must be allowed at the end of rehearsal to let the percussionists do this. Follow up until your students are in a routine of consistency. It will save you money and prolong the shelf life of your drumheads. Caring for your membranes is just as important as proper reed maintenance is to a woodwind player, but eventually they all wear out.

I change my Timpani heads around once a year for the High School and every two to three years for the Middle School. Concert Bass Drum heads last longer but can go dead with heavy use such as Marching Band.

Dead heads will lack resonance and depth. I have found that snare and tom heads need to be changed more frequently than Timpani. The Snare Drum is the workhorse of the band as it is often used for solo playing as well as on the concert stage. Because of this heavy usage, I always keep spares on hand, and I change these as needed. Pay very close attention to

the bottom head on the snare as it is very thin and will puncture easily. If the bottom head is punctured, the drum will lack projection and warmth of tone. If you are in doubt, tap the head softly at the edge and listen for a good fundamental with a broad range of overtones. Spares for Timpani and Bass Drum

may not be financially feasible for all programs, so save your old undamaged heads for spares until new ones can be purchased.

For Timpani, I use either the Evans Strata or Orchestral models.

The Strata are very versatile and blend with percussion ensemble and band. It's a warm sounding head that is also very durable. For band, orchestra and solo playing, I prefer the Orchestral model. This head retains pitch extremely well through all dynamic levels and is very durable as well. Ultimately, the choice is personal, and after years of experimenting, I still

change my mind occasionally.

Keeping the heads true, (in tune with themselves) is daunting at times and takes consistent effort in tuning. Tap the head lightly at each lug/tension rod and make sure they match in pitch. Also it is extremely important to make sure the lowest fundamental is tuned to the right

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pitch. This is to facilitate the correct tunable range on each drum. An easy way to remember the correct lowest pitch is a first inversion Bb major seven chord 32” D, 29” F, 26” A, 23” Bb.

As for Concert Bass Drum, I use the Evans Strata heads. I prefer the Strata 1400 series with the power center dot for the playing side of the bass. This thicker ply head with the power center allows the player to play rather aggressively when needed and it can really add quite a bit of punch to the ensemble. On the backside, I use a 1000 Strata without the power center. A thinner head on the back tends to be more responsive and activates the shell resonance quicker. I tune the playing side of the head as low as possible but make sure it doesn't sound “flappy.” I also tune the back side of the head a half step sharper than the front to facilitate shell response.

Snare Drums are easily the most under-explored instrument in the percussion section. There are quite a few options, and finding the right sound for each production is well worth the effort. Evans offers a number of Batter (or top heads) and a couple of options for the snare side. I often have four to five different snare sounds per program. From light and delicate to deep and robust, they are almost a choir in their own right. Try to at least have a light, bright and extremely articulate choice, a deep robust choice, and something in between the two to compliment all possibilities. For light and articulate, I prefer the Strata 700 7mil and the Orchestral 200 on the snare side. It resembles calf skin and it is very sensitive (think the beginning of *Bolero*). It can also really help with balance issues. Next, I usually have a medium pitched general snare

that blends with most ensembles. I use the coated Evans Orchestral Staccato 7.5mil. I feel it's the most versatile head for band, and if you can have only one option, this is it. It is really easy to tune with a focused sound, perfect for the middle school setting! This head makes an average player sound better. For the deep robust sounds I like the either the Orchestral Staccato or the Strata 10mil. for the top and the Orchestral 300 3mil. on the snare side. The Strata is a bit thicker and darker in timbre. I love this head on a field drum and it works well for marches. Don't be afraid to experiment and let your ear be your guide. Maybe you want a light articulate sound to accompany the woodwinds or you may want a contrasting darkness to warmup their sound. Never forget to consider style and historical relevance to help guide you. For example a band in our cluster is playing *Highland Rhapsody* by Jan Van der Roost. I am using a pipe drum with the Evans Grey Hybrid head which lends itself to the style and historical relevance of the piece. For the 6/8 at the end section we

wanted a little more darkness and body so we switch to the Orchestral Staccato. In the end, all bands have a slightly different approach and concept when it comes to sound. Experiment and choose what works for you.

You also have a number of options available when it comes to Concert Toms. I choose to use a head that works for band as well as percussion ensemble. Again the Strata line from Evans is really versatile because it blends with almost anything. Other choices may be a clear or fiber skin head and even power center dot. They all have different characteristics and work well in certain settings.

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Finally, and most importantly, you need to make the sound right for the hall where you are performing. If you are hearing unwanted overtones that are interfering or covering your winds, you may have to get creative. I recommend E-Rings by Evans to dampen your snare drum. They look like the outer perimeter of a drum head and lay nicely over the top head. (See figure 1a.) Some people will use a credit card taped to the top head or a wallet, but I find these unsightly and inefficient as they cover only a portion of the head.

For toms I use the EMAD. It is a tab that is applied to the head to control overtones. (See figure 1b.) Both are inexpensive and do the job nicely. For Bass Drum you can use a folded bath towel to help dry up the sound and make things less muddy. Timpani mutes can also help with the same problem. These are available commercially, but sewing two 5” circles of felt together with a 3/4” washer inserted between solves this problem as well. Use the towel and Timpani mutes sparingly as they are often overused.

Every hall is different, so get back and listen carefully to the balance and blend of the entire ensemble. Ultimately, there are no right or wrong choices, but with a little experimentation and careful maintenance, your percussion section can enhance your band’s sound and help your percussionists take more pride in their individual contributions to the ensemble.

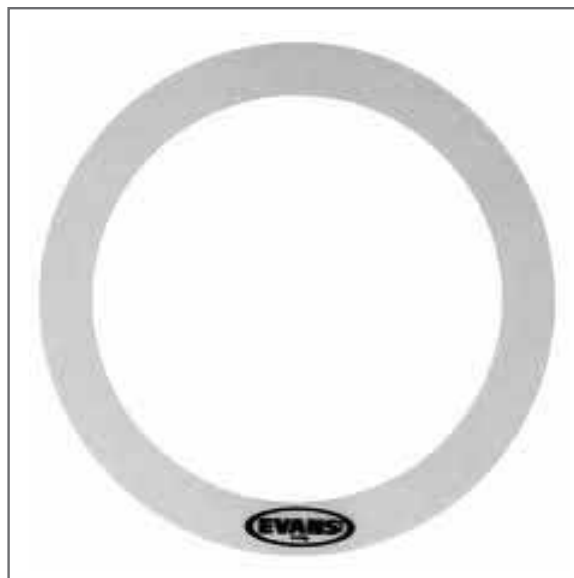


figure 1a



figure 1b

Ray Ulibarri is beginning his 18th year as a percussion instructor in public schools. Mr. Ulibarri was Percussion Director at Pomona High School in Arvada, Colorado, and a former Caption Head at The Bluecoats. He was the former Percussion Arranger for the Blue Knights Percussion Ensemble and Crossmen. Mr. Ulibarri is currently at Ronald Reagan High School in San Antonio, Texas.

Serving as a clinician for Yamaha, Evans Drumheads, Innovative Percussion, and Zildjian, he has had the opportunity of traveling extensively presenting clinics across the United States.