

## CREATING STANDARD ARTICULATION CONCEPTS FOR THE DEVELOPING PERCUSSIONIST (PARTS 1 AND 2)

by James Campbell

**T**he challenge of creating musicality when playing percussion is that the mallets move up and down, but the music moves side-to-side. It can be difficult to connect musical expressions with other instrumentalists who use air and bow motions to create their musical phrases. Creating articulation on percussion instruments can be an elusive pursuit because these instruments don't sustain like wind or string instruments.

Discussing the differences between articulations and styles can be confusing to young percussionists. In their early years, students should understand the following: staccato refers to light starts and short duration; legato refers to soft starts and full duration. As students gain experience, they should display awareness for more nuances that will create a deeper understanding and communication of articulation concepts as they relate to blending with the other musicians in band and orchestra.

**A percussionist's mallet grip, volume, and touch** on the instrument will affect the tone quality of the start of the sound and the length and color spectrum of the sustained tone. When I teach, I often find my articulation ideas are more obvious when I first demonstrate these concepts on timpani, since it has clear pitch and a long sustain, and then transfer the techniques to other percussion instruments.

The following guidelines will provide you with strategies to achieve proper stylistic blend with others.

**LEGATO: A directive to perform a certain passage of a composition in a smooth, graceful, connected style.**

- Maintain a light touch on the mallets at the grip point (fulcrum).
- Use a very fluid, full stroke with a natural rebound to create a legato start.
- Allow the percussion instruments to sustain naturally.
- As the percussionist gains experience, softer implements and changes in playing area (center, edge, tonal area on drums; center, nodal, off-center on keyboards) will enhance the legato articulation.

**STACCATO: A style of playing notes in a light, detached, and distinct manner.**

- Maintain a firm touch on the mallets at the grip point (fulcrum).
- Use a very quick down stroke with a quick, up stroke to create a staccato start.
- Quicker strokes are brighter, more emphasized. As the percussionist gains experience, dampening, harder implements, and changes in playing area will enhance the staccato articulation. The use of "dead-strokes" or quasi dead-strokes can be effective on some instruments.

**TENUTO: A directive to perform a certain note or chord of a composition in a sustained manner for its full duration.**

- Maintain a full, supportive grip on the mallets, in the entire hand.
- Use a slow down stroke with a small up stroke with added weight from the arm to create a tenuto start.
- Think about the striking angle for tenuto strokes. The use of a glancing motion can be an effective enhancement to the tone produced.
- As the percussionist gains experience, softer implements and changes in the playing angle will enhance the tenuto articulation.

**MARCATO: A style of playing that means marked, accented or stressed with a slight separation between notes.**

- Maintain a full, supportive grip on the mallets, in the entire hand.
- Use a quick down stroke with a quick up stroke with added weight from the arm to create a marcato start.
- As the percussionist gains experience, harder implements, partial dampening and/or changes in playing area will enhance the marcato style.

Additional Resource:

*The Drum and Percussion Cookbook*, published by Meredith Music Publications.

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