

Mallet Percussion: A Successful Beginning

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From the very beginning it is important to be sure that your percussionists are aware of the many instruments they will be learning. To me, that is one of the best selling points! I encourage all music educators to train your percussionists to become proficient on as many instruments as possible. Comments I often hear at college auditions are; "I only played snare in high school", "I never really learned how to tune the timpani- my director always did it for me", or my favorite, "the flute players always played the mallet parts".

The real world of being a percussionist means at least knowing how to play the standard instruments which include the snare drum, timpani, and keyboards, as well as the basic accessories such as the bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine etc. In the last 10 years many percussionists have broadened their repertoire to include hand drumming, world percussion, and electronics.

I hope the following information will be helpful as you work with your beginning percussionists. Please feel free to contact me should you have questions and/or comments.

- **Choosing Your Percussionists:**

When choosing your percussionists remember that besides having good coordination they must be able to recognize and match pitch. This is of course crucial for timpani, but it is also helpful when playing the melodic instruments.

It is important to inform students up front that they will be playing a variety of instruments, including the keyboards. Many young children just want to "play the drums", which in their minds is the drum set. It is helpful if all of the large instruments can be displayed and demonstrated when the beginners are first choosing what to play so that they can hear and see what is involved. It is a disservice to all if the student only sees a practice pad at the first meeting.

Prior knowledge of the keyboard through piano lessons is helpful for every instrument, but it is particularly helpful for the mallet percussion instruments.

- **When to start:**

Begin with the snare drum (matched grip!) in order to work on technique, without the complication of learning the staff and/or the difficulty of moving up and down the keyboard. Strong basic snare drum technique will set up a good foundation for many of the percussion instruments.

While working on snare, begin teaching theory such as note identification on the staff and keyboard. For example, you can have the students touch a note with their index finger on the keyboard as they identify a note on the staff. This way they are building some pictures in their memory bank about the keyboard without any technical obstacles. If the instrument bars are rosewood, skip the touching and just point.

Depending on how often you meet with them (hopefully in a like-instrument class), try to begin playing on the mallet instruments within the first month of classes. Waiting much longer increases your chances of meeting up with some "I only play snare" attitudes. Once you get started try to give the snare drum and keyboards equal time during the first semester.

- What to use:
Unfortunately there is not, to my knowledge, a good sounding, inexpensive student model xylophone or marimba. So, we are all stuck listening to the beautiful bell sets that come with a beginning percussion kit. They are better than nothing at all! Be sure that your students purchase a kit with a good sturdy stand that will adjust to a variety of heights and adapt to both the practice pad and bell set. They often come with a pair of mallets – some good, some not! I recommend that you have your students purchase a pair of medium rubber or yarn mallets that they can use at school on the concert equipment. Please use the “real stuff” whenever possible. During class rotate the students through the concert equipment. For example: 3 students on bell kits, 3 on xylophone, marimba and vibes.....Then switch!

There are a number of good and thorough beginning books available today. I like to have students purchase:

“A Fresh Approach to Mallet Percussion” by Mark Wessels (published by Mark Wessels.)

I supplement with;

“Mallet Percussion for the Young Beginner” by Randy Eyles (published by Meredith)

“Fundamental Method Book for Mallets Book One” by Mitchell Peters (published by Alfred)

“Primary Handbook Beginning Method Book with CD” by Garwood Whaley (published by Meredith)

“Fundamental Solos for Mallets” by Mitchell Peters (published by Alfred.)

I also teach some exercises by rote and I encourage improvisation. Class materials should include a lot of reading, rote or memorized exercises, and improvisation.

- Getting Started:
 1. Grip: The grip is matched, as in both hands the same with the palms down and the fulcrum between the index finger and thumb. The last three fingers should gently wrap around the mallet. Divide the mallet into thirds so that the fulcrum is at the bottom third division. The grip should be relaxed – take care not to create tension in the grip. Tension will inhibit the sound production and could eventually create problems with speed development and may contribute to injuries such as tendonitis.
 2. Stroke: The primary mover is the wrist. Keep in mind the wrist is connected to the arm and shoulder. Therefore the arms should be relaxed and allowed to move in a natural reaction to the wrist stroke. I recommend a fairly high legato or full stroke for beginners. The mallet starts in an up position (approximately 70-80 degrees), swings down to strike the bar, and returns to the starting position. Students should be encouraged to allow the mallet to do some of the work with a rebound feel. Forcing the mallet down and up usually results in a jerking motion or a smashing of the mallet head in to the bar. Have them think of the motion used when playing with a yo-yo (down and up) or dribbling a basketball.
 3. Mallet placement/Playing area: The best general playing area is just off center of the resonators on both the accidental and natural bars. I also teach students to play on the very edge of the accidental bars when necessary.
 4. Positioning: The instrument height is very important. Start with arms relaxed at your side and mallets in your hands. Bend at the elbow until your arms are very close to a 90 degree angle to the floor. The natural bars should be a few inches underneath the mallet head. The elbows should be at the sides not in front of or behind the body.