

A Guidebook for the Music Educator

The Complete Percussionist

Second Edition - Revised and Updated

By Robert Breithaupt

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THE AUTHOR



Robert Breithaupt

As a college percussion instructor, performing musician, well-known author, arts administrator and entrepreneur, Robert Breithaupt enjoys one of America's most diverse musical careers. He is Professor of Music and Department Chair of Music Industry Studies at Capital University, and has developed one of the most comprehensive undergraduate percussion programs in the United States. His former students are successful in performing, teaching and in the music industry.

He is the co-director of the Summer Drum Set Workshops, the DVD entitled *Snare Drum Basics*, many articles on percussion pedagogy and presents clinics and seminars worldwide. He is also a past-president of the Percussive Arts Society, the international society for drummers and percussionists. Bob performs with many great jazz artists and he has held the drum set chair in the Columbus Jazz Orchestra since 1981. He also accompanies many of the nation's finest orchestras with a variety of artists as both drummer and percussionist.

Breithaupt serves as the Executive Director of the not-for-profit jazz presenting organization, The Jazz Arts Group of Columbus, is Vice-President of Columbus Pro Percussion. He is an endorser and consultant for the Yamaha Corporation, the Avedis Zildjian Company, Innovative Percussion and Remo, Inc.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to students of percussion - past, present and future. To those special individuals who share the passion for performing and passing on information about percussion instruments to future generations.

INTRODUCTION

The interest in the world of percussion has expanded tremendously since the original publication of this book, in 1991. The ability to access information, especially through the use of the Internet, has created resources that could have only been dreamed of at that time. However, many of same issues remain: educators and ensemble directors continue to complain that the percussion area is a weak link in their background. As in the past, the percussion area is in a constant state of change...new instruments, notation and playing techniques make staying abreast with new trends a challenge, both for the percussionist and the music educator. It is the goal of this text to provide basic information in the performance, maintenance and literature of percussion instruments for those who are or will become percussion educators.

This purpose of this text continues to be a method that will support the college methods class student, the instructor, and the practicing music educator. Created in outline form, the book is easily adapted to a lecture format and should be supplemented with musical examples that meet the needs of the students involved. As we know, not all students and educational settings are alike.



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For reference only.
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A graphic consisting of a black square with a white border. Inside the square, the word "Section" is written in a serif font at the top, and a large white number "1" is centered below it.

THE BEGINNING PERCUSSION PROGRAM

One of the unanswered questions by music educators may be "how did we begin so many drummers and develop so few musicians?" Thousands of youngsters begin on the percussion instruments each year, only to drop the study of the instruments after a short time. Many more choose not to participate in organized instrumental music programs but learn on their own, performing in various groups and combos apart from the school ensemble.

There may be as many different methods of developing a beginning percussion programs as there are programs themselves. When teaching percussion instruments in a music program, there are many factors to keep in mind:

- At what grade level is the student beginning percussion instruction?
- Does the instrumental program require previous musical experience?
- How does the school system view music education?

GOALS FOR THE PERCUSSION PROGRAM

The percussion instructor, in conjunction with other teachers, administrators and parents, must set the goals and the expectations of the percussion program. Before making drastic changes and demands in any aspect of the music program, be sensitive to issues such as tradition and the economic climate of your community.

METHODS OF PERCUSSION INSTRUCTION

Percussion Class - The most effective method of instruction for the young percussionist is the heterogeneous instrument class. Many school systems begin instruments (other than percussion) in a combination of like-instrument and ensemble experiences in the first year, adding percussionists the next year, after they have received a full year of percussion class instruction. In an effort to produce tone production, intonation and balance in the brass, woodwind and/or string sections, young percussion students are often left out of much of the activity of a beginning ensemble.

Private Lessons - Private instruction should be encouraged for all instruments. A positive experience with a private instructor will enhance the students' knowledge and make them more valuable to the ensemble.

Percussion Consultants - Music retailers, professional percussionists, college percussion students and even advanced high school percussionists can supplement the instruction of the percussion class. Many teachers do not take advantage of these valuable resources. Many universities can arrange a "special project" for a percussion major who is willing to help, using the experiences for credit or required observation hours in music education courses.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Prior Musical Knowledge - A student with musical experiences such as music class, piano lessons or growing up in a "musical" family may have an advantage over others, but this alone does not guarantee success on any instrument. The passion for music and the willingness to study a musical instrument should be the main criteria for participation in any music program.

Aptitude: The following methods have been adopted in some programs to help create interest in the percussion family and to help determine aptitude for percussion study.

- Verbalizing various rhythms and having the student repeat them.
- Repeating the process above by clapping or hitting sticks on a surface, observing how "natural" the student looks during this process.
- Asking the student to clap or tap their foot to the pulse of a musical selection.
- Displaying as many percussion instruments as possible and giving the student the opportunity to play the instruments.

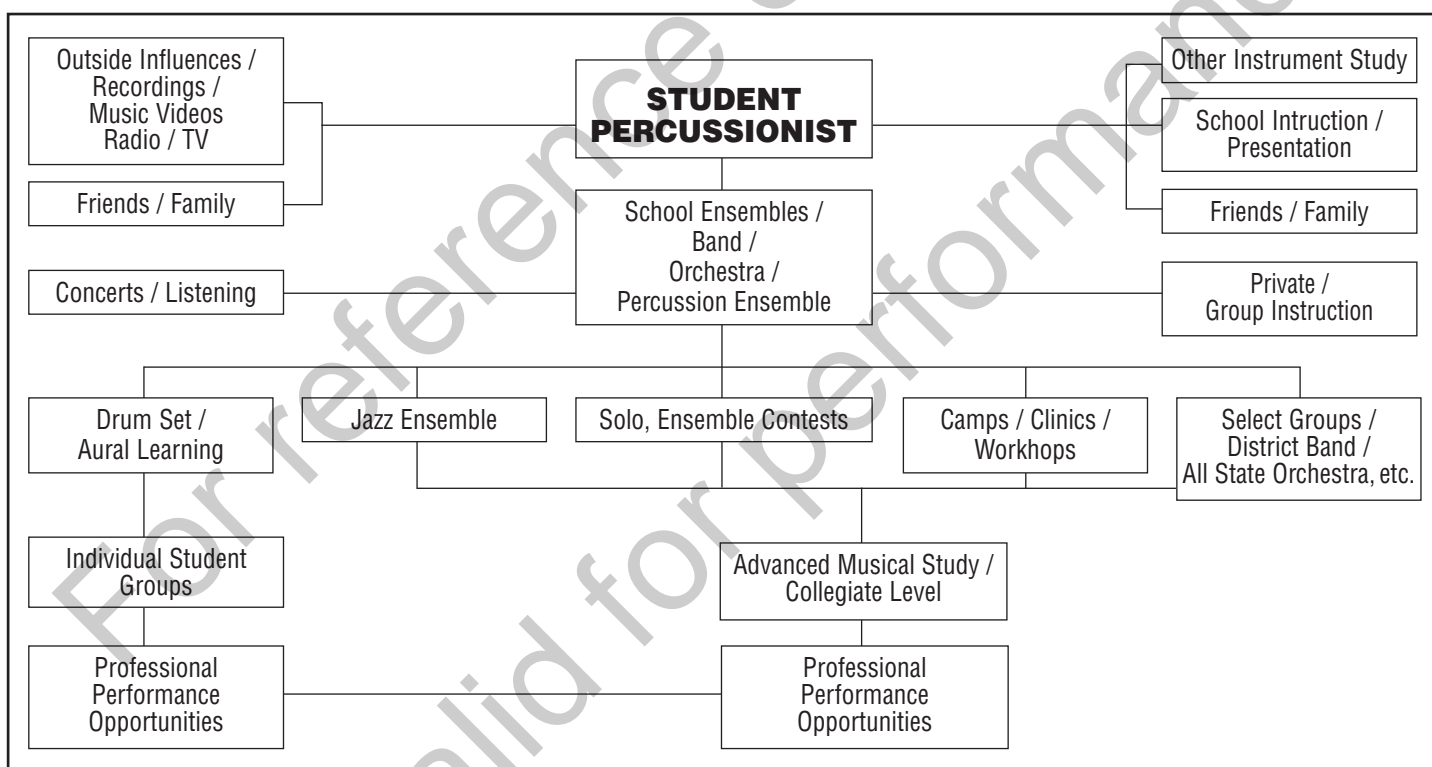
Instruments - Literature should be reviewed to make sure there are proper instruments. The lack of instruments and boredom with the lack of challenging parts is often a cause of disruption in an ensemble. Many instruments that are stored away after marching season or no longer used at the high school level can be put to good use in a beginning program.

Doubling/Instrument Substitution – Doubling or substituting instruments may serve as an opportunity to keep students occupied and to help them learn new techniques. Doubling snare drum parts on practice pads, hand drums or tambourines, adding hand cymbals in unison with bass drum parts, or playing flute or oboe parts on a xylophone or bells provides a musical outlet for players who might otherwise be sitting idle. Also, with the addition of hand drums and other world percussion instruments in today’s classroom, there may be opportunities for students to develop technique on non-traditional instrument through doubling and substitution.

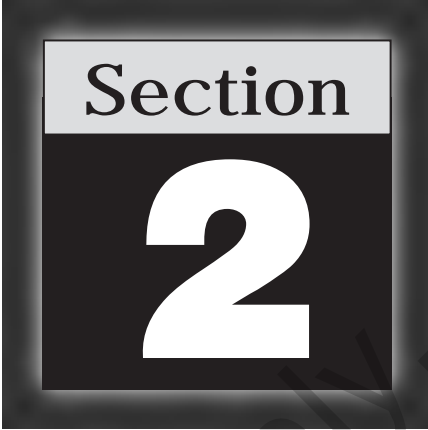
Sticks/Mallets Policy - The student should be expected to supply his own sticks and/or mallets for the snare drum or mallet percussion instruments. As the student becomes more advanced, the instructor may require the purchase of a variety of sticks, mallets and accessory percussion instruments. Be aware of the financial ability of the community to support these demands. Keep in mind that mallets and accessory percussion instruments have little or no resale value when compared to that of an instrument. Provide the student and parent with a list of sticks, mallets, etc. required for each grade level.

The Percussionist’s Flow Chart

This chart represents many of the influences that today’s drummer/percussionist will experience. The young player will profit from all musical settings, both in school and outside of school.



SECTION ONE NOTES:

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THE FAMILY OF PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS

The percussion section represents the only part of the traditional band or orchestra that is still experiencing significant evolution. We continue to observe instruments on that we have never seen, heard, or even classified as an instrument (brake drums, garbage can lids, metal pipes, etc.). Furthermore, as composers and arrangers continue to incorporate these items into their scores, the instructor needs to be prepared to accept them as a part of the percussion family and to understand their application.

While most musicians continue to consider percussion instruments as *pitched* (xylophone, timpani) or *non-pitched* (snare drum, hand drums, cymbals), the percussionist and composer are constantly challenging that assumption by altering traditional sounds and the manner in which the instruments are played.

The percussion instruments have traditionally been categorized in four types: membranophones, idiophones, aerophones and chordophones. A fifth category, electronic percussion instruments, is a recent addition.

MEMBRANOPHONES - Instruments where a membrane, either made of skin or a plastic/synthetic material, is stretched over a bowl or a shell. Membranophones include instruments with no shell, such as a Roto-Tom; a drum with an open end, like a conga, timbale or concert tom-tom; a closed-shell drum, such as the snare or bass drum, where the "reflective" head sympathetically vibrates with the head which was struck; and tuned drums, such as timpani, where a pitch can be clearly defined. Many instruments on the marching field (bass drums, tom-toms) and in concert music (concert toms, bongos) are tuned to specific pitches, but are difficult to perceive as tuned instruments due to their timbre.

IDIOPHONES - Instruments which vibrate in their entirety to produce the sound. An accessory percussion instrument which is struck, shaken, scraped, bowed or turned is usually considered an instrument of indefinite pitch. Tuned idiophones include the keyboard percussion instruments as well as tuned gongs, etc. However, more compositions are appearing that require instruments such as claves, wood blocks, temple blocks and lead pipes to be tuned to specific pitches.

AREOPHONES - Instruments where the sound is produced by a vibrating air column. The production of sound is generally produced by blowing, but some instruments produce their sound while being tossed or spun in the air.

CHORDOPHONES - Instruments where the sound is produced through a vibrating string. The string is struck with an implement or through mechanical means, and is enhanced by a resonating box or soundboard, as found in a piano.

ELECTRONIC PERCUSSION - Instruments where the sound is produced through electronics. Electronic percussion is generally defined as a family of instruments that are the upstart of the synthesizer, such as the drum machine or percussion controller. The percussion controller can "trigger" another MIDI instrument such as a keyboard synthesizer or other MIDI device.

FUNDAMENTALS OF STROKE, ARTICULATION AND TONE

The goal when striking a percussion instrument is to put the instrument into vibration by striking it with a stick, mallet or by hand. The sound which results is determined by the following criteria:

- 1.) Instrument Played/Surface Tension/Composition
- 2.) Grip/Hand Position
- 3.) Level, Velocity and Intensity of Stroke
- 4.) Articulation/Sticking/Implement Placement

Relaxation is the key to creating the percussion instrument's full, uninhibited vibration after the instrument is struck. The grip point on the drum stick or mallet is called the fulcrum. The arm, wrist and fingers all play a part in a relaxed stroke. Specific grip techniques for the instruments will be discussed in later sections of this book, but a flowing, controlled stroke generally accompanies a relaxed grip. By slightly changing the intensity or angle of the grip, different sounds may result.

The speed/velocity of the stroke will determine both the sound of the instrument and the intensity of the rebound. This principle applies when a ball is thrown to the ground: how hard you throw the ball to the ground will determine how high and fast it bounces back. Additionally, a ten-pound rock dropped from three feet will leave an impression larger and deeper than the same rock dropped from ten inches. To approximate the three-foot impression from the ten-inch distance, one must *force* the rock to the ground with great effort and intensity. These analogies represent the difference between a stroke technique based on gravity/natural motion and an approach based upon tension/force.

Some instruments and implements create more rebound than others. A xylophone bar struck with a rattan-handle mallet will not produce the same rebound as a properly-tuned snare drum, struck with a snare drum stick. This is due to the nature of the bar and the construction of the mallet. To create a flowing stroke on a mallet percussion instrument is to emulate rebound by striking the surface and removing the mallet quickly so as not to inhibit the vibration of the bar. This principle is consistent on most percussion instruments. The term "*drawing the sound*" from an instrument, such as the bass drum or the triangle, relates to this effect.

STROKE TYPES

There are four general stroke-types used in percussion playing: the **full-stroke**, the **down-stroke**, the **up-stroke**, and the **dead-stroke**.

The **full-stroke** is the stroke which returns to the point of origin. A full-stroke can be played at any dynamic level on any instrument. A full-stroke may accompany rebound, especially from a surface which will promote a rebound action, such as a snare drum.

The **down-stroke** is the stroke which is restricted from rebound after striking the surface. Due to the nature of the stroke, the down-stroke will often produce a sharp attack. It is also utilized when moving quickly from loud (high) to soft (low) strokes.

The **up-stroke** is a stroke which lifts away from the surface quickly after striking it. Up-strokes are used for various articulations and to place an instrument into vibration quickly. It is also utilized when moving from soft to loud strokes.

The **dead-stroke** is a specialty stroke, designed to inhibit all vibration of the surface. While used on all percussion instruments, the dead-stroke is often heard on keyboard percussion instruments and when performing rim shots on snare drum.

Altering the grip for timbre changes:

A tight fulcrum or increased tension in the arm will result in a more compact tone with less resonance. In this case, the stick or mallet stays on the instrument longer.

Utilizing **rebound and/or a more relaxed grip** will result in a fuller tone.

tone and articulation through implement selection

Softer mallets produce a stronger fundamental pitch, while harder mallets produce a weaker fundamental pitch. A soft mallet produces a sound with a stronger fundamental pitch and less overtones, generally a "darker" sound. A hard mallet produces the opposite: a sound with strong overtones and a weaker fundamental pitch, generally a "brighter" sound.

Mallets with more mass produce a darker tone, while mallets with less mass produce a brighter tone. The size of the mallet will help to determine the quality of sound. The surface area of the mallet may be appropriate for one instrument, while either being too large or too small for another. For example, a tam-tam struck with a yarn marimba mallet will produce a thin, uncharacteristic sound from the instrument, while a tom-tom struck with a bass drum beater will have the opposite effect: a muffled tone, resulting from a mallet too large and heavy for the instrument.

Changes in the velocity of the strokes will alter timbre and dynamics, while changes in mallets primarily alter timbre. Often a conductor will exclaim "...Play louder... pick up a harder mallet!" While the quality of the hard mallet may provide a brighter sound, a change to a harder mallet will not provide more volume, but will alter the timbre or articulation of the sound.

Consider the following when performing:

- 1.) Choose an implement whose size will produce the characteristic tone of the instrument.
- 2.) Experiment with stick height and velocity of stroke before changing implements.

BASIC NOTATION GUIDELINES

Author's Note: Information regarding some aspects of notation may also be found in other sections of this text. Drum set notation is discussed within the context of chart reading, while various terms, abbreviations and symbols used in percussion notation may be found in the supplemental section of the text.