Graduate Percussion Recital and a History and Development of Percussion Instruments and Percussion Music

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GRADUATE PERCUSSION RECITAL AND A HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT
OF PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS AND PERCUSSION MUSIC

by

Ned S. Mortensen

Report of a recital performed in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

Music Education

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INTRODUCTION

In today's public school band the percussion section is often neglected. Some band directors consider the percussion section a place to deposit outcasts. Even though a full, accurate and well-trained percussion section adds polish to a band, few band directors admit its importance. Percussion instruments are seldom recognized as effective solo and ensemble instruments even though both solo and ensemble work can help the percussionist become an accomplished musician.

In this paper, it is proposed to examine the history and development of percussion instruments and percussion music and to thus establish the importance of the percussion section in the public school band. It is further proposed to show in a report of the writer's lecture-recital how, through work with solos and ensembles, percussionists can be taught to be accurate and polished musicians.
The term "percussion music" to many people suggests no more than a lot of loud, banging sounds. This is not only the thought of the layman, but of many musicians. The master orchestrator, Rimsky-Korsakov, had only this to say about percussion instruments and their contribution to music as an art in his Principals of Orchestration: "... They can only be considered as ornamental ... they have no intrinsic meaning and are just mentioned in passing."¹ Most people would prefer to have the percussion section keep its customary place in the background. However, percussion music can be well organized and performed in a very musical and interesting manner.

Percussion music is capable of melody and harmony and is just as exciting, descriptive, subtle, and delicate as the music for any string or wind group. "Percussion music reflects the world we live in. It is descriptive of our fast moving pace, the scientific interest and tensions of the times."² In today's symphony orchestra every member in the percussion section is expected to be an excellent musician capable of handling all the demands of his part from Mahler, Stravinsky, and Bartók to William Schuman and Edgard Varèse.

²"Mr. Percussion Plays," Newsweek, August 10, 1959, p.60.
The kettledrummers and the trumpeters were the elite musicians of the time as long as five hundred years ago. They had their own special guilds which required at least four years of training for entrance. In the fifteenth century, Germany was considered the center of the kettledrum playing art, but the instrument was also used frequently in France, Italy and Britain as part of the military and ceremonial music. In 1685 André Philidor, oboist and music librarian to Louis XIV, wrote a selection for the unaccompanied kettledrum, Marche à quatre timbales. The Hamburg opera director, Nicolaus Adam Strungk, brought cymbals into the orchestra in his Esther, composed in 1680. Shortly afterwards a 450-page treatise on the art of playing cymbals was published, written by a theologian, F. A. Lampe.

As the music of the Romantic period came into being, more frequent and dramatic use was made of percussion instruments. The development of the pedal-tuned tympani and other instrument improvements in construction, material and mechanics kept the ever-increasing pace with composers' new demands of percussion. The first master composer to realize the potential of percussion for symphonic composition was Ludwig van Beethoven. The mysterious transition from scherzo to finale of the Fifth Symphony bears witness to this.

The Romantic Age produced the first of the truly great tympanists, Ernst G. B. Pfundt. “He not only cared passionately about his art, but during his thirty-six years with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, under

3Ibid.
5Price, loc. cit.
Mendelssohn and others, he worked out an improved pedal-tuning mechanism and published a treatise on the art of tympani playing. The Romantic composers added the regular use of what we consider today to be standard symphony orchestra percussion: four tympani, bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, castanets, gong, bells, xylophone, glockenspiel, celesta.

The method of drumming which is heard in America today originated for the most part in England during the last of the Romantic Period but has some embellishments made by American musicians. However, the teachings and writings of Englishmen of that time have left strong influence on our drumming which has survived to the present day.

One of the earliest publications on the art of drumming to be printed in America was the work of an Englishman, Charles Stewart Ashworth. Ashworth's work is confined mostly to signals and military calls for maneuver. His writings make no mention of a correct standing position. The holding of the drum sticks, however, is mentioned in this book.

... the upper, or left hand stick is the most difficult to be managed at first: it must be firmly held between the Thumb and two middle fingers, to rest on the third finger a little above the middle joint. The lower, or right hand stick must be held fast with the little finger, and be allowed to play with ease through the others as a man may use a stick in fencing. (sic)

This method of holding the sticks is very similar to the method employed

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6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
at Utah State University. This method is also used today in most other parts of the United States.

In the history of the military, percussion was used as a signal. For example, a number called "To the Arm" was used to warn of the approach of an enemy. "To the Arm" was sometimes only a long, continuous drum roll but was also played as a fife and drum number. 9

In spite of the many advances in percussion instruments during the nineteenth century, for many years percussion was limited somewhat to the military bands and drum corps. It was used in the orchestra most often to bring to mind military associations. Many 18th and 19th century composers used percussion for artificial and often nonartistic purposes. The long-reigning fad for "Turkish" music (triangle, snare drum, cymbals and bass drum) influenced composers to add this popular use of percussion. Its use, however, was considered quite "savage" and "oriental" by critics of that era. 10

It was Igor Stravinsky who was responsible for the emancipation of the percussionist with his Le Sacre du Printemps in 1913. This work certainly offered the percussionist more than the conventional rhythmic patterns of concert music. "The two tympanists in the final Danse Sacrale found themselves working with successive bars of 3/16, 4/16, and 5/16." 11 Later in 1918 Stravinsky opened up a new world to the percussionist with his L'Histoire du Soldat which contained four drums, a

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9Ibid.


11P. Price, loc. cit.
tambourine and cymbals to be handled by one player. Percussion instruments were considered in terms of their intrinsic values for the first time.

... in 1926 Béla Bartók wrote his *First Piano Concerto* with a middle movement scored almost wholly for solo piano and percussion. In the score, Bartók tells the players just what sounds he wants and even how he wants them to be produced. A story has it that Bartók once took up an entire orchestra rehearsal fruitlessly trying to get the cymbal player to produce the precise sound he wanted. By the time, a decade later, that Bartók had produced his two greatest masterpieces with percussion—the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, and the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*—percussion players had begun to catch up with the technical demands imposed by twentieth-century composers.¹²

The first pure percussion music as we know it today was written in the early 1930's. On March 6, 1933, Nicolas Slonimsky conducted the world première of the percussion classic *Ionisation* composed by Edgard Varèse. In this work thirteen players are required to play a total of forty-two instruments. Two sirens, piano, celesta and lion-roar besides every standard type of percussion instrument are used in the score. "This astounding piece made a major impact on the music world generally, and it set off an 'anything goes' trend in percussion composition."¹³

Composers of the twentieth century have called for more and more percussion instruments in their scores and have given the percussion section a vital role. The importance of the element of rhythm today has introduced many instruments of percussion to the modern concert audience.¹⁴

¹²Ibid.
¹³Ibid.
¹⁴Schory, *loc. cit.*
Many of these new instruments, as the ones introduced by Varèse, are not at all conventional. Composers have used such things as rice bowls, brakedrums, metal utensils, and sheets of brass and tin. These types of devices may or may not be classified as instruments, but they are struck in some manner to produce a musical sound; thus they are classified as percussion instruments. When writing for instruments such as these, the composer must describe the instrument and its technical performance in great detail, and even so, different performances of a given work will vary greatly. 15

In the instances where a composer may write for a unique type of instrument, he must devise a means of notation that will be understandable to the player. Sometimes a composer will want a familiar instrument to be sounded in a new way, and here again the composer must devise a means of notation.

This has the double disadvantage of being imprecise except to its inventor, and of requiring bulky explanations still because its symbols are not universally understood and accepted. There is now a great need for agreement on concepts of tone quality so that general notation may be possible. 16

It is only possible to write down fairly accurately the beats of the orchestral drum, the tympani, the familiar rolls of the snare drums, the customary crash of the cymbals and so on. But in direct proportion to the composer's desire for a wide variety of sound, his ability to notate them accurately diminishes. 17

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
The area of percussion music has been explored and expanded greatly in recent years. However, the problem of notation urgently needs solving if the full range of percussion elements is to take a considered place in cultivated music.

"Instruments of percussion are the earliest historically and the most widespread geographically of all of man's musical instruments."\textsuperscript{18}

The percussion family of instruments is larger than any other family, as it contains over 110 musical instruments including the mallet instruments. In some instances the piano is considered a percussion instrument because it is struck and thus is technically percussion.\textsuperscript{19}

Percussion instruments are divided into two main sections. The first section includes the autophonic instruments. These are instruments in which the sound is produced by the vibration of solid bodies, either wooden or metallic. For example, a bar of a xylophone is made of wood. In most cases this wood is rosewood. The bar is cut a certain length depending upon the relative note desired. After the bar or piece of wood is cut, it is shaved on the bottom side. This is done to get the exact note desired. Another example of an autophonic instrument is a set of bells. The bars on a set of bells are constructed in the same manner as the bars on the xylophone except that the bells are made of metal. The vibrations of both these metal and wooden bars produce a musical note when struck.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18}Schory, \textit{loc. cit.}

\textsuperscript{19}Thomas L. Davis, "Let's Have Percussion Ensembles," \textit{The Instrumentalist}, February, 1959, 12:52-54.

The autophonic instruments themselves are divided into two sections: the instruments of definite and indefinite pitch. Instruments of indefinite pitch in this class would be instruments such as wood blocks or claves. For example, a wood block is not capable of being tuned to any certain note. In other words, it is used only as a rhythmical instrument, not as an harmonic or melodic one. Instruments of definite pitch are instruments such as the xylophone, marimba, chimes, and bells. These instruments are used harmonically and melodically and are capable of producing certain notes.\(^{21}\)

The second section of percussion instruments is the membrane instruments. The sound from these instruments is produced by the vibration of stretched skin or membrane, usually referred to as a drum head. The drum head is stretched over a shell, either wooden or metal, in much the same way one could stretch a rubber inner tube over a coffee can.

The membrane instruments also have both definite and indefinite pitch. An instrument of definite pitch is the tympani. Instruments of indefinite pitch are the snare drum, bass drum, and the tambourine.\(^{22}\)

An ensemble containing just a few of both the membrane and autophonic percussion instruments is capable of traveling the musical cycle from Bach to Kenton.

The present revival of interest in percussion among both composers and performers is partly the result of a new awareness from the public and recording companies. However, credit also must be given various

\(^{21}\)Ibid.

\(^{22}\)Ibid.
colleges and universities throughout the nation who have taken a vital interest in percussion in recent years. The University of Illinois was the first school to give credit for percussion ensemble classes. Since they did in 1950 many other schools have followed their example. The Eastman School of Music began having an annual contest in percussion composition in 1955. This contest is constantly motivating young composers to achieve along this line. With the new developments in percussion instruments and new enthusiasm for percussion composition, percussion can definitely look to a favorable future.
RECITAL PROGRAM
Utah State University
Fine Arts Department
presents
Ned S. Mortensen
in a
Graduate Recital
Edith Bowen Auditorium
Wednesday, May 24, 1961
8:00 P. M.

- Program -

March for Percussion            Emil Raab
    Percussion Ensemble

Drum Oddity                     R. M. Buggert
    John Boyce

Solo for Horn and Clarinets     Melvin Edvalson
    Wind Ensemble

Bobbin' Back                    R. M. Buggert
    Gayle Richmond

Composition in Greys            Ned Mortensen
    Percussion Ensemble

Connecticut Half-time           Wm. F. Ludwig
    Ned Mortensen

Octet for Percussion           Frank E. Ward
    Percussion Ensemble

(This recital partially fulfills requirements for the
Master of Science degree in Music Education)
"Drum Oddity," a snare drum solo written by Robert M. Buggert, is a drum solo utilizing some of the standard drum rudiments. (There are twenty-six rudiments that each drummer should be able to play well.)

John Boyce, the performer of this solo, is a private student of the writer. This student has been studying for seven months and is exceptionally bright and responsive to instruction. Through his study he has learned to read musical rhythms much more difficult than the rhythms students his age (13 years) who play other instruments can usually read. The entire solo is made up of combinations of different rhythms demanding a great amount of stick control. The dynamics of this solo are difficult for a young student of drumming to attain inasmuch as one measure is ff and the following measure p.

Gayle Richmond, also the writer’s student, performed "Bobbin’ Back," a snare drum solo written by Robert M. Buggert. Gayle Richmond has been studying fourteen months. He is less responsive to instruction than John Boyce, but through much hard work he has become an adequate drummer. This solo presents a rhythm that is difficult for a young student to understand. The rhythm is a dotted sixteenth followed by a thirty-second note. The solo is written in 2/4 meter and is to be performed at a metronome marking of 120 beats per minute.

"Connecticut Halftime," a snare drum solo written by William F. Ludwig, was performed by the writer. This solo includes eleven of the accepted twenty-six rudiments. There is not an indication of tempo.
Some of the rhythms, however, are too difficult to play faster than 130 beats per minute. The solo is written in 2/4 meter and this meter marking does not change throughout the composition. As in any drum solo the accents play a very important part. The writer had to plan several different sticking patterns to allow for correct placement of the accents.

The March for Percussion is, as its title indicates, a strict tempo composition. The tempo marking, 120 beats per minute, is the accepted tempo marking for a march in the United States. The tympani, which was played by the writer, is the dominant instrument in the ensemble. The other instruments are the snare drum, triangle, tambourine, cymbals, gong and bass drum. The use of the triplet figure is the dominant rhythm in the first section. This rhythm is mainly employed by the tympani and snare drum. In the second section the snare drum and tympani have many sixteenth note patterns which are accented by the other instruments. Dynamically the composition builds from p to ff and back to p with the exception of an ff gong note at the beginning and the end.

The sticking required of the tympani player is difficult. It requires the use of several cross-sticking patterns. This number is excellent for teaching students exact counting of the triplet and sixteenth note patterns.

The Composition in Greys, an original composition by the writer, employs the following instruments of the percussion family: three tympani, one snare drum, one pair of timbales, suspended cymbal, finger cymbals, bass drum, tom-tom, triangle, chimes and bells.

The composition is in the key of G minor. It begins slowly with a syncopated rhythm played on the chimes. The bells come in in the ninth bar playing in thirds with the chimes. The rhythm is supported with the
tympani (tuned to G, D, and C), finger cymbals and suspended cymbal. The composition begins in 4/4 meter, and this meter is continued for thirty-two measures with various rhythm variations. At this point it changes to 3/4 meter utilizing all of the instrumentation except the bells and chimes. The accents are arranged to give a feeling of duple meter. The composition then goes into 5/4 meter with the accents arranged to give a feeling of triple meter. The chimes build a ninth chord climaxing the 5/4 section. The composition resumes its original meter at this point, and it ends much the same way it began with the exception of the last five bars. These are made up of perfect fifths between the bells, chimes and tympani. The composition concludes with a G minor chord supported by the entire instrumentation.

*Octet for Percussion* by Frank E. Ward is an excellent example of a musical selection which uses only percussion instruments to achieve melody and harmony. The composition begins with a triangle, tom-tom, snare drum, and tympani. The tympani, an instrument of definite pitch, is tuned to Ab and D. These instruments dominate the first sixteen measures building in dynamics from p to f. The xylophone, bass drum, timbale, woodblock, and cymbals come in at different intervals building up to ff. At this point is the climax of the composition. The composition ends the same way it began—very softly, the triangle sounding the last note.

The melody is achieved by the xylophone and the pitch variance occurs from the low sound of the bass drum to the high sound of the triangle. One of the main attributes of this composition is the steady rhythm, the almost monotonous pulse of the tympani and tom-tom. This steady tempo is interrupted at unexpected places with the snare drum,
timbale, and xylophone. The element of surprise is one of the most interesting and unique characteristics of the composition.

The xylophone, which was played by the writer, is the most difficult part to play in this work. Some of the passages have very fast, syncopated rhythms. There are many accidentals which make difficult sticking patterns. There is no indication of a key signature.

The Solo for Horn and Clarinets is not concerned with the writer's problem in percussion music. It was used to demonstrate the writer's ability to play in an ensemble on an instrument other than percussion. The writer played the bass clarinet.

Solo for Horn and Clarinets is composed by Melvin Edvalson, a junior music education major at Utah State University. This composition is comprised of three distinct sections. In the first section the theme appears against a whole tone harmonic structure revolving around A. The second section reacts against the first section's simple restraint but ends in dissipation. The accompaniment is built around the simultaneous key center B♭ and A and the solo around F. The third section, beginning in B♭ and returning to A, resolves all conflicts underlying the first two sections.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The revived interest in percussion today presents a challenge to anyone connected with music, especially to the band director in the public school. The history of percussion justifies percussion instruments being given equal status with other musical instruments. The public school band director is now faced with an opportunity and an obligation to create from the percussionists in his band musicians of full stature.

Through a lecture-recital the writer showed how students of percussion can learn to read rhythms and execute the necessary drum rudiments in a drum solo. These students can learn the art of working with other students, the necessity of playing rhythms accurately, and the technique of making their parts blend with the entire composition in percussion ensembles. They can learn to count constantly because in the percussion ensemble there is often not a melody line to follow.

There is much variety in the percussion family of instruments. The xylophone has a keyboard similar to a piano and produces melodies, the tympani requires a sense of power to produce its dynamic sound, and the snare drum requires dexterity and skill. All percussion instruments call for a knowledge and understanding of rhythm. Surely in this large and varied family of instruments there is an instrument to interest any young musician who has the proper guidance from a band director who is aware of what percussion can do.
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