

TMEA STATE COLLEGIATE NAFME CHAIR'S MESSAGE

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AS A CONDUCTOR, it certainly makes a helpful difference to be a percussionist when posed with the challenges of complex percussion parts in today's wind band literature. Some of our contemporary composers have explored the plethora of magnificent sounds of various percussion instruments through a variety of compositional techniques that keep our percussionists hopping around and our conductors challenged to the highest level.

Conductors who are not necessarily percussionists are often intimidated by the various techniques and complex writing of today's music. They can often end up neglecting the proper techniques of playing the percussion instruments or they avoid literature that requires a large percussion instrumentation that employs complex rhythms.

During my lifetime as a percussionist and conductor, as well as coordinating instrumental music education at Union University, I've sought to parallel the techniques of woodwind and brass playing with that of percussion playing. In order to help non-percussion students and conductors who are not percussionists gain confidence about their knowledge of percussion playing, I have encouraged them to use their own technique of playing their wind or brass instrument as a parallel with the techniques of percussion playing. The result has been a successful means of gaining a better understanding of percussion playing through the comparative process.

For example, you could make a fair comparison between the embouchure of a brass and woodwind player as to the

"grip" of holding a stick or mallet. Having a proper embouchure for a wind player is the same as having a proper grip for the percussionist. When the embouchure is flawed the result is failure to produce a characteristic sound and major pitch issues. When the percussionist grip (embouchure) is also flawed, they will find that there are some things that they simply cannot play or specifically cannot perform at certain tempos. The embouchure and the grip are the essence of a wind and percussion player's ability to perform their instruments characteristically and successfully.

Further, we can parallel the action of taking a breath on a wind instrument as a percussionist picking up the stick or mallet to strike a percussion instrument. Since the response of striking a percussion instrument is immediate and often the response of a reed vibration or a brass player's attack can be considered to be in some ways "delayed", very often the unison attack between the winds and percussion instruments will not land on the entrance together. I've found that by asking my percussionists to literally take the same breath that the wind players are required to take, the action has resulted in a simultaneous entrance with the instruments. The "breath" taken by the percussionist appears to create a perfect landing with the response of a wind instrument's entrance. Consider requiring your percussionists to take a physical breath at the same time that the wind players are preparing for their entrances with their own breathing techniques. I believe that you will see that the chances of those entrances landing perfectly together are increased dramatically. Ask the percussionists to take the breath every single time that they have an entrance and you will be amazed at the accuracy of the entrances landing together with the wind instruments on a consistent basis.

As conductors, we are also challenged by the mindset that when there is a dynamic level of piano or pianissimo, our younger wind players will not give energy to their sound because they relate the softer dynamic to a weaker breath and even further, a weaker embouchure. Percussionists tend to do exactly the same when they are confronted with the softer

dynamic levels. They will often relax their grip and weaken their fulcrum (holding point of the stick or mallet), which in essence, causes them to lose control over their ability to play at a softer dynamic with clarity. Since it actually takes more energy and a significant breath for our wind players to play the lower dynamics with control, it is also essential that percussionists actually firm their grip on the stick or mallet to gain control over the implement at softer dynamic levels. When our wind players discover this, their sound and pitch changes dramatically and when our percussionists find out that they need to firm their grip at softer dynamic levels, a light bulb can go off to their success of playing lower dynamics with clarity and control.

Lastly, keeping your percussionists completely engaged with your rehearsal can be attained by your demand that they watch their music, and listen to discover how their parts affect every wind instrument in the ensemble. In most percussion writing in band and orchestral compositions, there are moments that involve a doubling of percussion with that of the wind instruments. In those instances, I try to pause in our rehearsals to ask our percussion players as to what significance their part has to the whole. In the specific moments that they are doubling wind parts, I ask them to match articulations so that their sound is consistent with the interpretation of the wind technique being employed at that moment. Requiring your percussionists to listen, respond and assist the winds to gain a better articulation through agreed interpretation can result in spectacular moments of consistency and compositional intent. It also increases their understanding of how important their part is to the whole.

Such demands can make all of the players better listeners, then eventually better responders to their techniques of playing their part with an understanding of how their interpretation affects the whole.

I look forward to sharing ideas of conquering complex rhythms in Part II of "Percussion from the Podium". In the meantime, I encourage you to find your own parallels of comparing the art of producing quality sounds on the wind instruments to that of similar techniques with percussionist instruments. I think you will find your job easier, less intimidating, and your percussionists will be more unified with the wind instruments through their search for common goals. 