

SNARE DRUM PEDAGOGY FROM DAY ONE

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SELECTING STUDENTS FOR PERCUSSION

Remarks: When screening prospective students for the percussion section, it is important to evaluate the student's level of motor skills and coordination. The ability to keep a steady pulse, demonstrate basic independence between their limbs, and show an understanding of simple subdivision are indicators of the student being successful in the percussion section. Also consider the student's personality and willingness to stand on their feet for the majority of the class and rehearsal time. They need to be an independent person who is also willing to learn multiple instruments. The evaluation process can be done in a variety of ways. Here is simple step by step example:

- While sitting in a chair, have the student demonstrate different hand/feet tapping combinations. (Example- ask the student to tap a steady beat with the right foot, then tap their right hand with the beat of their right foot, or tap their right hand on every other beat.) You could then switch it up, doing it all on the left. I would start very simple and increase the level of dexterity each time to see how they do.
- Turn on a metronome set at 76 beats per minute and ask the student to tap their right foot with the click. Then ask them to tap their hand(s) on their leg "in-between" the clicks. Then switch it up- ask them to tap their hand(s) to the click, then tap their foot in-between the clicks.
- Echo patterns/call and response: while sitting across from the student, model different short one measure rhythmic patterns (tapping them on your leg) and ask the student to do their best to tap it back to you. Some students will try and do the exact same "sticking" you use, showing their focus, and others will just try to tap what they heard. Again, start simple, giving the student one-three tries before moving on to the next one.
- "Sticking" combination patterns. Still sitting across the student, model different basic grouping patterns "RLRR", "LRLR", "RLRLRR", "LRLRLR" one at a time, and ask to student to tap back the pattern you modeled to see how quickly they pick up on the hand sequence.
- Lastly, if the student has done well up to this point, I then would move to handing them a pair of sticks and ask them to stand behind a drum pad that is set up. I quickly adjust the pad to the appropriate height for the student and simply ask them to make their hands look like mine. With minimal coaching on hand position, grip, and wrist rotation, I then repeat the echo/call and response patterns from before to see if the student can mimic my motions. If corrections need to be made, I observe how the student responds and if they are able to adjust their playing.

BEFORE THE FIRST SOUNDS ARE MADE

Remarks: Consider what equipment you are going to require your percussionist to use in your band class and your rehearsal space and storage for that equipment. We love our instructional time with our students, so being organized on the front end will save you unwanted headaches when it comes to class transitions and set up/break down time.

Take the time to have students label all of their equipment. Students can use white address printing labels to stick on the side or bottom of their drum pad and on their snare stand. If you are concerned with sticky residue, painters' tape will work too. You can have students use a black sharpie and write their initials on their sticks (I would recommend not writing where their hands will grip the stick). They could also cut a little piece of clear packing tape to place over their initials to prevent the ink from wearing off.

THE INSTRUMENT ITSELF

- When unpacking the snare drum, students should check to make sure all tension rods are accounted for. These can become loose over time or not very tight at all when coming from the factory if the student acquires it brand new.
- Inspect the snare throw-off mechanism to ensure it is working properly. If the drum is ever knocked over, this is one piece that usually gets damaged first.
 - While the snare throw-off mechanism is engaged, check to make sure the entire snare strainer is making contact with the entire length of the bottom head.
 - If they are in full contact, but you are getting a very loose sound, adjust the tension on the knob on throw-off mechanism, “righty-tighty, lefty-loosey”. Be careful not to overtighten.
 - You want to ensure the drum is able to resonate. If you overtighten, it will result in a very dry “box” sound.
 - Also make sure to inspect the individual snare wires or cables to see if any are bent, loose or damaged. This is the second most common part to become damaged as students set up/break down for class.
- Taking care to have properly tuned heads and the correct amount of tension on the snares is important for proper tone production.
Suggestions for tuning can be found in the “Other Considerations” section.
- When assembling the snare stand, teach your students to be mindful of the following:
 - First make sure the feet of the base are not too close to each other. This will result in the snare being tipsy and can be knocked over when fully assembled.
 - Next make sure the when adding the top portion of the stand (sometimes referred to as the basket, cradle, or claw for the snare drum) that the plastic sleeve inside the tubing of the bottom portion of the stand is working properly. Sometimes if students over-tighten the bottom wing nut when combining the two metal parts this can cause the plastic sleeve

to crack or break. These plastic sleeves can be replaced. Check with the manufacture for replacement parts.

- Teach students to properly adjust the opening of the basket (cradle/claw) and setting the snare drum in carefully to prevent damaging the bottom snare head. Then secure all wing nuts top to bottom to ensure safety of the instrument and the student.
- If using drum pads that come with the “screw on” to the stand system, stress to your students the importance of setting up the base correctly. If the rubber feet are too close to each other (resulting in a tipsy stand) and then somehow the entire pad and stand get knocked over, the pad tends to break off the stand when it hits the floor with the threaded screw still inside the bottom of the pad.

BODY POSITION/BALANCE/POSTURE

- When standing behind the snare drum (pad), students should stand relaxed with their feet slightly apart.
- The height of the drum should come just below their waist line. If the drum is too high or too low, it may cause issues with their playing technique.
- When students raise their arms up into playing position, the elbows should remain by their sides. They should not be outreached nor pulled back behind the body.

HAND POSITION- Matched Grip

- For beginning students, I encourage matched grip since this will be the universal grip for all other percussion instruments students will be learning in the beginning band curriculum.
- Think of the hand position/grip as being the equivalent to woodwind and brass players formation of the embouchure. This takes daily reminders and reinforcements, and not just in the first year. Continue to evaluate your students’ hands to ensure they are creating good habits. Your students will thank you later even though they will get annoyed with your constant reminders. Have patience and be persistent.
- Starting with the right hand, have your students place their thumbprint behind their first finger, between the first and second joint. It should feel natural and relaxed. Then have them create the shape of a soft fist with the remaining fingers (see figure 1)
- Have the students visualize the drum stick in three equal parts. (see figure 2)
- Students should place their thumb and index finger 1/3 up from the butt of the stick. Making sure the entire thumbprint is resting flat on the side of the stick and the index finger is wrapped around, have students gently wrap the other three fingers around the stick. Check to make sure they are not “squeezing”, but forming a relaxed fist (see figure 3).
- Do the same process for the left hand. Then have the students, while holding the sticks in each hand, turn their palms up and the back of their hands facing down to the floor to see the fingers on top. They should quickly be able to view if their hands are positioned equally from the bottom of the stick for both sticks. If not, they can make the adjustment to make them match. Beginning students sometimes are not aware they are holding each stick a little differently (see figure 4). Once students feel confident with hand placement

with the guidance of the teacher, they can take a marker, pen, etc. to create a mark on the stick where their thumbs and index fingers come into contact on the stick.

- Have your students bring their sticks up to the playing surface and place the beads of the sticks side by side in the center of the drum (Let the tips rest on the surface for now, this helps with stability as students develop an awareness of their hands). If done properly, the angle of the sticks should create the letter “A” or an upside down “V” (see figure 5). Make sure the elbows are not condensed up next to the ribcage, which results in a narrower angle.
- When the arms, hands, and sticks are in the proper playing position, the angle that is created from the elbows to the playing surface should be slightly lower than parallel to the floor. If the student had to adjust their arms or shoulders (raised or lowered) when they approached the drum (pad), then adjustments need to be made to correct the height of the drum (pad). Once this is completed, students can mark their snare stands to ensure quick assembly for class. Just remember students will grow and this will not be a permanent fix.
- Check to make sure the thumbs remain flat against the stick and the top of the hands remain flat. Some students may tend to have the wrist rolled a bit where the thumbs are positioned on top of the stick. Simply ask them to rotate the wrist to have their palms facing the floor. An easy way to remind students for proper hand position is to ask them to envision they are trying to balance a quarter on the tops of each hand.
- Lastly, have students hold the tips of the stick just off the playing surface to create the desired playing position.
- Overall go slowly in the beginning and have students walk through the process every time they grab their sticks to form proper grip, hand position and stance. Remind students everything should feel very relaxed.

PRODUCING THE FIRST SOUNDS

Remarks: Before beginning to play, students need to understand the drum works with them in creating the sound and technique. If you have a basketball handy, this could help the students understand the mechanics of proper stroke and rebound. If not, have them visualize they are dribbling a basketball, they will create a natural turn or bend of the wrist. Next have them create the soft fist we used in the beginning to form the proper grip and pretend they are knocking casually on the drum (pad) as if they were knocking on a door lightly. Try to use only the turn of the wrist and no forearm at this point. This will prepare them for learning the basic four stroke types used in drumming: full stroke, down stroke, tap stroke, and up stroke.

Developing the first basic stroke, rebound awareness and proper pathway of the stick

- Focusing on one hand at a time, have the student bring the hand and stick into playing position. Slowly raise the tip of the stick straight up into the air by bending at the wrist (same motion we created when knocking on the door). Make sure the wrist and fingers stay in the same position as we lift the stick. Check to make sure the wrist did not twist to the side as we lift and check to make sure the back fingers do not open up away from the

stick. Strive to move the fingers and wrist as one unit while staying relaxed. Hold this position for a moment- we will refer to this as our “up” position.

- Starting in the up position, in one fluid motion, have the student return the wrist to the initial playing position and immediately back to the up position, allowing the tip to strike the playing surface while keeping the fingers relaxed on the stick. The student should feel the stick easily rebound and the wrist and fingers simply follow the rebound of the stick in a vertical motion. This stroke motion is commonly referred to as a “rebound”, “legato” or “full” stroke. Have the students watch their hand to ensure they are not twisting to the side (sometimes referred to as “slicing” of the stroke). If they did not feel the rebound, they may be holding on too tightly. Do several independent isolated strokes at a time before going to the opposite hand. Did I mention to make sure the stick is moving vertically and the hand is relaxed?

Introducing hand coordination sticking patterns

- To continue working on developing full strokes introduce to your students a variety of sticking pattern sequences. Some very basic and common ones used are:

RRRR RRRR LLLL LLLL
RRRR LLLL RRRR LLLL
RRLR RRLR RRLR RRLR
RLRL RLRL RLRL RLRL
RLRR LRLR RLRR LRLR

The goal is to maintain a consistent relaxed, fluid stroke throughout. Ask your students to start slowly, maybe quarter note equals 90bpm and gradually increase tempo over their practice time. Have them create and write their own to share with the class!

Stroke Development

- Once students understand a full stroke, the other stroke types typically come to the students quickly.
- Have the students think tap strokes as very soft full strokes. The motion and mechanics are similar, just with a significant reduced height.
- When producing a down stroke, the student is controlling the rebound. The stick does rebound slightly, but the back of the fingers control the front of the stick. By using the back fingers, they can control the height of the rebound.
- The up stroke starts in the down position and then travels up. Have the students play a tap stroke, then turn the wrist to lift the tip of the stick up in the air immediately after playing the initial tap stroke.
- Teaching students when to use full, down, tap, and up strokes when reading standard music notation can seem daunting at first. See appendix 6 for musical examples, and appendix 7 for detailed markings on when to use the specific stroke types. With practice and guidance, the students will eventually be able to make the educated decision when to apply the proper stroke type needed.

RECOMMENDED METHOD BOOKS AND PRINT MATERIALS FOR BEGINNERS

Remarks: You can never have enough supplemental music for your students.

- Five Minute Drill-Daily FUN Classroom Routines for Percussion-by Eric Rath and Ralph Hicks
- Simple Steps to Successful Beginning Percussion- by Kyle Wylie
- A Fresh Approach to Snare Drum- by Mark Wessels
- Elementary Snare Drum Studies- by Mitchell Petters
- Readin', Ritin' and Rudiments- A collection of studies for the Beginning Snare Drummer- by John W. McMahan

RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT FOR BEGINNERS

Remarks: The quality and weight of the stick can make a difference to your students' development early on.

- IP-LD Lalo Davila Snare Sticks
- Vic Firth American Custom SD1 General Snare Stick
- Vic Firth Heavy Hitter Slim Drum Pad
- Innovative Percussion Drum Practice Pad

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Remarks: Consider how you will arrange your beginning class instrumentation. If you are a single director at your program and do not have the capability of bringing in outside help, consider how you will incorporate your percussionist in your daily instruction. For me, I've found success with percussionist focusing on keyboard playing in the beginner woodwind/or brass class during the school day, and then meeting before or after school one day a week as a percussion section to introduce the technique of playing snare drum. I then gradually add a student or two in a rotation of playing the snare drum during the regular school day, building into a routine for all students to play both keyboard and snare drum in class.

Develop a counting system that is consistent with your winds. As you incorporate your rhythm studies, have the percussion section "say" or "chant" their sticking they would use for the rhythms they are studying. If they can say it, they can play it. Consider alternating verbally counting or chanting sticking patterns.

Use of mirrors in classroom/rehearsal space? Having a way for students to see their hands and strokes is very useful. They can self-assess quickly.

Tuning: There are many opinions and a variety of ways to tune the top and bottom heads. You can find several videos on YouTube demonstrating these practices. A solid start is to google "Basic Snare Tuning" by Tom Freer.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Stroke Types Development Exercises

(Full, Down, Tap, Up)

4/4

R R R R R R R R L L L L L L L L

5

R R R R R R R R L L L L L L L L

9

R R R R R R R R L L L L L L L L

13

R R R R R R R R R R R R L L L L L L L L L L L L

17

R *sim...* R L L

21

R R L L R R L L

25

R R L L R R R L L L

Stroke Types Development Exercises

(Full, Down, Tap, Up)

4

R R R R R R R R L L L L L L L L

5

R R R R R R R R L L L L L L L L

9

R R R R R R R R L L L L L L L L

13

R R R R R R R R R R R R L L L L L L L L L L L L

17

R *sim...* R L L

21

R R L L R R L L

25

R R L L R R L L