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Teaching Total Percussion Through Fundamental Concepts

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Fundamental Percussion Concepts:

1. Establish a natural **technique**
2. Produce great musical **sounds**
3. Develop great **time** and **rhythmic** understanding
4. Understand **rolls** and how to practice them

These four fundamental concepts unite all areas of percussion. Addressing these issues and building these skills pays off with long-term, lasting benefits. A student who masters these essential concepts can solve his or her own musical problems and will develop into a great musician.

1. Establish a natural technique

Concept: Develop a natural technique from bouncing a ball.

Activity: Ball analogy exercise.

Most method books introduce basic technique through a series of pictures and instructions that describe the mechanics of playing snare drum. I find that this approach leads most students to believe that drumming is an entirely new motion. The comparison of bouncing a ball to the percussion stroke helps them realize that they already possess the physical coordination to play percussion. As a result, the student can more easily develop a natural and successful technique. A basketball is ideal but a tennis ball may be easier to use in the classroom, especially with a group of students. If a student tosses a tennis ball with his or her thumb up use a basketball or imagine the motion of dribbling a basketball.

The ball analogy allows the student to experientially discover that:

- playing a drum is a natural motion, and a motion he or she has already learned
- the entire arm from the shoulder to the tip of the fingers is involved in the playing motion
- the ratio of motion from the arm, wrist, and fingers depends upon on the dynamic level and the instrument being played

- high stick height translates to a loud sound on a percussion instrument, low stick height to a soft sound
- the back of the hand is nearly parallel with the ground, rather than perpendicular
- a tight grip results in fatigue, the stick should be held stick securely but not too tightly
- this approach takes into account each individual's unique physiology and provides a model that the student can use to refine his or her own technique

2. Produce great musical sounds

Concept: Teach quality tone production on all percussion instruments.

Activity: Timpani tone and tuning in the full band rehearsal.

For all instruments tone and intonation is a major focus. However this is frequently overlooked when teaching percussion. Often the only direction a teacher offers for improving tone is to request a different mallet or instrument. Open your student's ears to the realm of sounds they can make on a percussion instrument! As with other instruments, percussion can produce a warm sound and a full range of overtones. Percussion instruments can have an attack quality that is staccato or legato and some percussion instruments require the duration to be controlled and shaped. The loud dynamics on percussion instruments should not sound harsh and overplay the instrument.

The timpani present the greatest challenge to the percussionist in the area of controlling sound. Striking area, tuning, duration control (muffling), and articulation (through mallets and technique) requires decision-making and technical facility from the student. This challenge presents a great opportunity for the percussionist to address sound issues and learn how important this is on all percussion instruments.

Involving your percussionists during your band warm-up, playing tuning notes and scales on timpani will produce amazing results. When percussionists focus on tone and intonation as much as your wind players they learn to make independent and appropriate musical judgments about how their sound fits in with the ensemble.

3. Develop great time and rhythmic understanding

Concept: Build time skills and teach rhythmic systems.

Activity: Duple rhythm grid exercises and applications.

It is essential for all musicians to have a solid understanding of rhythm. Rhythm is mathematical and made up of precise relationships. Most people learn rhythms as separate entities rather than understanding a few rhythmic systems. It is much more helpful to gain an understanding of these rhythmic relationships and systems.

The duple rhythm grid represents every rhythmic possibility in 4/4 time that uses quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes. Longer rhythms get created, but they are just built by combining the rhythms from the grid. The student who understands these 15 relationships and how they look at different division levels will be prepared to play over 80% of the printed music they will encounter! The majority of the remaining rhythms that are not covered by this grid are the triple subdivisions. A similar grid system can be created to help understand the relationship of these rhythms.

4. Understand rolls and how to practice them

Concept: Understand the techniques and applications of different roll types.

Activity: Methods for building these unique percussion skills.

A roll is the way the percussionist makes a sustained sound. Some percussion instruments do ring and produce a true sustained sound, but many have short durations and must give the *illusion* of a sustained sound. The roll is an illusion because in reality the percussionist plays a fast and precise rhythm that is disguised to sound smooth and sustained.

There are three types of rolls. While they are all called rolls and create a similar effect, they are very different techniques and used in different musical situations.

Roll Types

<u>Name</u>	<u>Also Called</u>	<u>Use</u>
Closed	multiple bounce or buzz	Snare Drum - Orchestra, Band
Single Stroke	hand to hand	Timpani, Mallets, Most Accessories
Open	double stroke	Snare Drum- Rudimental solos, Marching Band, Parade drumming

The roll types should be introduced to students in this order. The closed roll on snare drum will be the first roll that the typical percussionist will encounter in the school curriculum. The single stroke roll will be the next roll type required of the percussionist, through the addition of mallets, timpani, and other percussion instruments. Finally, the student will encounter more technical snare drum playing in a rudimental or marching style that will require the open roll. This order is also appropriate from a developmental standpoint. The closed roll, while quite demanding, does not require the speed of the single stroke and open rolls. It focuses more on control than speed. As the player's technical facility develops, the speed to play and control the single stroke and then the open roll will be possible.

The Closed Roll

There are two essential concepts to the closed roll: the **buzz stroke** and **roll base**. Introduce your students to buzz strokes before even mentioning the word roll. Play rhythmic exercises with buzz strokes. The sounds should be even between the hands. Once the buzz strokes get a full sound and are consistent gradually speed up the hands until the smooth roll sound is heard.

The underlying rhythm to a roll is called the roll base. The roll base can be any rhythm—eighth notes, triplets, sixteenth, quintuplets, sextuplets, etc. The rhythm is chosen depending on the tempo of the piece. To make a roll sound full there is an ideal range of speed to the roll base. In slow tempos, a faster rhythm roll base is needed, at faster tempos, a slower rhythm roll base is needed. Choosing the right roll base gets a smooth sound and allows the player to start and stop the roll exactly on time.

Practicing the Duple and Triple Roll Exercises develops the ability to choose and execute the correct roll base. Most students can play very successful closed rolls in their first year of playing percussion.

The Single Stroke Roll

The ability to play a single stroke roll is the result of speed and control of alternating strokes. Practicing single strokes should be part of every percussionist's routine from the time they begin playing. The single stroke roll may take a year or two to develop. A smooth sounding single stroke roll requires a relaxed, natural technique that gets a smooth legato sound.

The Open Roll

The open roll results when double strokes are played fast enough to produce a continuous sound. It has a definite fast rhythm that should be clear and audible. There are an exact number of strokes to this roll and this is where the terms, five-stroke roll, seven-stroke roll, and so on, originated.

Playing fast double strokes in the open roll is similar to double-tonguing on a wind instrument. The double stroke is a composite motion where one motion gets two sounds. The double stroke feels like one fluid motion but we can examine its separate parts. The stick begins above the drum, moves *down* to strike the drum and strikes the drum again as it returns *up* to the prepared position above the drum. I call the double stroke a "two for one" motion. This motion may be assisted by the natural bounce of the drum but it does not rely on it. A proper double stroke can easily be made on a non-bouncing surface. Most students can develop the open roll during or after their second year of playing percussion.

General Percussion Teaching Tips:

1. Begin percussionists with a focus on the mallet instruments. They will be much more engaged in the learning process early on and their note reading skills will develop at the same rate as your winds instead of lagging behind.
2. Post timpani ranges near the drums or even write them on the heads with a permanent felt marker. Use bass clef notation rather than note names.
3. Require your students to think about controlling duration as well as attack on triangle, bass drum, timpani, crash and suspended cymbals.
4. The simplest crash cymbal technique is to hold the weak hand steady while the strong hand smoothly brings the other cymbal into contact. Use gravity (move downward) to help the smooth motion, which gives a warm sound. The cymbals need to make contact in a slight “V” shape to avoid an air pocket.
5. Set up bass drum and cymbals next together since they typically play rhythms together.
6. Don’t have players share music stands because at least one player won’t be able to keep his or her eyes on the conductor. Percussionist, instrument, music stand, and conductor should always be arranged in a straight line.
7. Start young jazz band start drummers with only ride cymbal and hi-hat for swing tunes. Gradually add the rest of the set as the time becomes steady. Do use the entire set for rock and latin tunes.
8. Encourage both sight-reading and memory skills on the mallet instruments.
9. Place the tam tam slightly sideways in the percussion section to allow the player to see instrument, music, and conductor simultaneously. A tam tam or gong placed directly behind the player’s backs requires them to look away from the director and music.
10. Help your shorter players feel more comfortable playing chime parts by having them stand on a small podium.
11. Use sturdy music stands covered with a black cloth or carpet square as trays for sticks and small instruments. This will help players make quick changes without creating extraneous sound.
12. Watch out for “flat flams” in snare drum playing. A flat flam is when both sticks strike simultaneously and create a pop sound. This is almost always a result of the grace note (lower) stick coming up too high. If the grace note stays very close to the drum a good flam sound can be produced consistently.