

# Teaching Percussion

## --ideas on the basic essentials for the beginning percussionists--

- I. Basic Considerations
  - A. Heterogeneous or homogenous classes?
  - B. How long are class periods? Do you have band every day?
  - C. As we know, it is the Percussion section and not the Drum Section. That being said, consider the following:
    1. The snare drum is considered to be one of the basic instruments of the percussion family, and so much derives from playing it.
    2. Secondly, keyboard instruments.
      - a. Introduce them early.
      - b. Spend some time on them every day, if at all possible.
      - c. Let's face it. Even though it is part of the percussion family, and we use vertical single strokes for it, it is a completely different instrument.
  - D. Plan your year to get basics in. You can only get so much taught. While wind instrument students are playing one instrument, you are playing at least two (snare and keyboard).
- II. Holding the Snare Stick
  - A. Define the fulcrum. Balance point of the stick.
  - B. Position of hands
    1. Thumbprint and first joint of index finger across from each other. Thumb points toward the bead of the stick, index finger points down. A gentle holding, not a strong squeeze.
    2. Flat backs of hands.
    3. Flat sticks.
    4. Sticks at approximately a 90-degree angle to each other. You can help the student with this with tape on a drum pad, or lines drawn on a batter head.
    5. "Cocoon" about half-way closed.
- III. Four Different Types of Snare Stroke
  - A. The Legato (or "long") Stroke: Stick starts and ends at the same height. Useful for playing loud passages of music.
  - B. The Up-Stroke: Stick starts low and ends high, using a whipping motion. Used on soft notes, preparing to do Legato Strokes.
  - C. The Down-Stroke: Stick starts high and is stopped low. Essential for playing musical passages that have sudden dynamic changes from loud to soft.
  - D. The Tap: Stick starts low and ends low. Very small strokes to play repeating soft notes.
- IV. Let's Talk (Snare) Drum Buzz (Multiple Bounce or Concert) Roll
  - A. Stage 1
    1. Lift up bead of the stick with the other hand and simply let it fall to the drum head, and rebound on its own until it stops on its own. Then switch hands.
    2. Then lift the stick up with your wrist, pause, and let gravity take over. Do this with alternating hands, as well.
  - B. Stage 2

1. Same as Stage 1, except let the sticks' bounces overlap with each other.
2. Before one stick finishes bouncing, follow the same procedure with the other hand.
3. In other words, every second or so, the two sticks will both be bouncing.

C. Stage 3

1. the speed-up process
2. To get this slow-motion roll to sound like an actual roll as we think about it, we need to get the bounces closer together.
3. The S-P-OO-L Method. SPOOL.
  - a. When first speeding the roll up, the student must be sure that their middle finger is in contact with the underneath side of the stick.
  - b. "S" stands for "SQUEEZE". The student "squeezes" SLIGHTLY with their middle finger on the underneath side of the stick.
  - c. "P" stands for "PINCH". The students' fulcrum fingers (index finger and thumb) pinch the stick SLIGHTLY.
  - d. "OO" stands for "OOMPH". This means the student becomes a SLIGHT bit more energetic (the notes delivered with a little bit of "oomph") with the movement of their wrists/sticks toward the drum head.
  - e. "L" stands for "LOWER". As the student progresses through these steps, the bounces—hopefully—become a little bit closer together, thus creating a buzzy sound. To gradually get faster and buzzier, the sticks must stop having quite as high of a stick height as in the earlier steps. In other words, keep the sticks "lower".

D. As the roll progresses, the idea is to keep as relaxed of a sound as possible.

1. The student needs to not be anxious to play fast, but to play smoothly.
2. Let the beads of the sticks "float" on the top of the head. No downward pressure. Like a lily pad on the surface of a lake.

E. Once the student can do this, approach them with primary strokes.

1. Begin with four 16<sup>th</sup>-notes and a quarter note, played alternately. 1-ta-te-ta-2.
2. After this, begin the process of having them play with the same primary stroke skeleton, and simply allow the sticks to buzz, except for the last note.
3. The teacher can play single strokes followed by the students, and then the teacher can do the same with buzzed, also followed by the students. "I play, you play".
4. After a while, have the students start with that same skeleton, but don't stop on count 2.

F. Make certain that the back fingers are in contact with the stick. Fingers should not come off the stick.

G. If possible, this should be a daily check item, even if it just means going down the line and hearing each student do a 3-second roll.

H. Stress to students that everything should still be moderately relaxed.

I. I tell students that they can't be considered good at snare drumming if they can't do a fairly good drum roll. This is a priority.

V. Let's Talk Double-Stroke (Rudimental) Roll

A. Go back to Stage 1 of the buzz roll.

1. Have the student lift up the stick with the other hand, let it drop, and then simply stop the stick after two notes. If they ask, I tell them we stop it with our back fingers, or by letting the stick hit the heel of my hand. I try to not overanalyze this.
2. I then have them lift up the sticks with the stick hand, and do the same.

3. I impress upon them that any thing beyond two notes is no longer a double-stroke roll.
  4. Have the students do this multiple times with each hand (not alternating). Again, the way to get the two notes closer together is the "SPOOL" method.
- B. Begin the primary stroke procedure that we used in the buzz roll.
  - C. I have found that the quicker the primary stroke rhythm, the more success students have in not letting double strokes evolve into buzzes.
  - D. Encourage the students to allow their sticks to bounce a little higher as they are learning this. I find that this also helps alleviate unwanted buzzes.
  - E. As with the buzz roll, it's good, if possible, to check this every day.
- VI. Let's Talk Flams
- A. With the wrists mostly, raise one stick higher than the other, and let them come down simultaneously.
  - B. Follow through, so that the student is in position to do a flam with the other hand.
  - C. The name of the flam is the hand represented by the note (and not the grace note).
  - D. Students need to be able to do this, both with alternating, and not alternating.
- VII. Let's Talk Drags
- A. Different name for a ruff.
  - B. Procedure resembles the flam process. Simply let the grace note hand strike/bounce twice.
  - C. Impress to the students that it is a "wide flam".
  - D. Drags can either be double-stroke or buzz. How do you know when to use which one?
- VIII. What About Keyboards? Is this just an afterthought?
- A. Make sure your beginning percussionists know that they will not simply be playing snare drum. Make this a point before anybody is placed into the percussion section.
  - B. Your students' perception will reflect your perception.
    1. Talk it up.
    2. Keyboards are "cool", because they can actually play tunes on them.
    3. In the beginning year, please choose concert music (winter and spring) that has keyboard parts on them.
    4. Divide up all parts so that everybody plays some keyboards.
  - C. Mallet grip similar to snare drum grip.
  - D. Drill note names on the treble clef staff.
  - E. Please don't allow them to write notes in.
  - F. If possible, do not allow the keys of the instruments (such as a beginning band set of bells) to have the letter names engraved. If they do, you may cover them with a little bit of tape. This might indeed change the timbre of the keys a bit, but on the beginning set of bells, this is not very consequential.
  - G. Have a plan when to start on keyboards. Many great teachers have different thoughts on this. I like to begin them at the same time as the snare technique is started, or very closely after that.
  - H. Some teachers will teach both keys and snare in the same period, some teachers alternate days, and some teachers construct other schedules (such as alternating weeks). In any case, make it as big of a deal as snare drum.

IX. Summary

- A. I would always find myself frustrated that I couldn't get everything taught in a year on both snare and keyboards that I wanted to. Give yourself some grace and realize that you only have a certain amount of time in the day or week to teach these two different instruments.
- B. The goal in percussion playing is a relaxed style of playing, with good coordination between hands, brain, and eyes, and to know that it is a unique opportunity for students to learn more than one instrument.