

GENERAL ISSUES CONCERNING PERCUSSION EDUCATION AT THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

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Information for this article was garnered from a survey distributed to two hundred-seven schools in the United States and abroad (One hundred-ten in the United States and ninety-seven abroad), a compilation of syllabi/curricula, and repertoire lists. Twenty-six professors responded to the survey (twenty from the United States and six from abroad). The author also garnered twenty-three syllabi/handbooks through conventional means. Some of the respondents sent a copy of their syllabus/curriculum in lieu of a survey, while others sent both. A total of thirty-three United States college percussion programs were examined, twenty-nine of which are college/university programs with the remainder being conservatories. Percussion programs in twenty-two states are represented: Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, West Virginia and Wyoming.

In general, each of the survey respondents agrees with the concept of a curriculum. Most believe that it should function as a flexible outline that suits the needs of the individual while maintaining a formatted and structured environment. Although all agreed with the concept of a curriculum, two respondents questioned the intentions of a curriculum, citing concerns over imposing national standards for the applied lesson. Many professors oppose the idea of national standards since it could undermine the system in a myriad of ways and eliminate variety and individuality amongst programs that are present today.

For the most part, the percussion programs evaluated were similar in scope and nature. Most emphasize total percussion, while a handful offer specialization as the primary course of action. A major similarity deals with performance issues, with the primary concern being how many times are appropriate for a student to perform outside the ensemble setting, such as on a master class/studio seminar? An overwhelming majority requires all students to perform at least once during the semester, three require zero, and four require two or three performances. One school requires one performance during the academic year, while another requires a minimum of five performances per semester.

All programs, except for one, require a senior recital. The norm is to require performance majors to perform a half junior recital and a full senior recital. This is the case in eighteen of the schools reviewed. More than half of the programs required education majors to perform only a half senior recital. One program required all percussion majors to perform both a junior and senior recital. Consequently, a student could go through college performing only eight times on an individual basis. Most teachers stated that time constraints was the reason for limited performance.

This hardly seems enough. Active performers know it takes several performances to acquire a total grasp of a single piece along with developing an appropriate stage presence. Performances in the lesson and practice room are quite different than those before one's peers or those outside of one's own studio. It is understandable that time constraints or the size of a studio contribute to the limited performance requirements. However, we are

percussionists, who in turn, play a multitude of instruments. Thus, we need multiple performances on a variety of instruments each year in order to perfect the necessary performance techniques, both physical and mental, that are involved.

Fear of performing is an area of concern. Most undergraduates, particularly underclassmen, experience performance anxiety before solo performances. It is stated that over thirty-five percent of musicians are afflicted with psychological problems. Approximately twenty-five percent of those are performance anxiety.¹ How do we alleviate this problem? Should we require solo performances right away, or do we ease students into the situation? The author's survey posed a question concerning student performance in small ensembles, such as duets. All of the survey respondents agreed that the concept of performing duets develops confidence, skill and knowledge of repertoire. However, only three of the schools required freshmen and sophomores to perform duets on both snare drum and keyboard instruments.

Another viable performance venue that may alleviate anxiety is through the audition process. Three of the observed programs provide their students with the opportunity to perform in mock auditions-orchestral and drum set. There are a multitude of articles written on the benefits of audition preparation through the means of mental practice, mock-auditions, or by going to as many legitimate auditions as possible. Nevertheless, this is still a missing element in many percussion programs. Preparation is both physical and mental, and successful auditions may only be achieved through constant preparation. Preparation is determined, not only by how many hours are spent in the practice room, but by how many times the material is performed.

The seminar time (a common component of many university programs) is used for the instruction of orchestral repertoire, Latin percussion, instrument care and maintenance, guest artist clinics, and even rehearsal time. The main reason why many of these topics are presented in the seminar appears to be two-fold: time constraints and the fact that many professors feel redundant by repeating themselves in each lesson. In turn, they choose a group lesson approach. Many professors feel that these items will be neglected if not covered in master class. However, how do we determine what is more important for the individual lesson? Are Latin percussion techniques and orchestral repertoire any less important than a Cirone or Musser etude?

Allotted time for lessons is another area of concern. Most schools offer a once a week fifty minute to an hour lesson, while others offer only a half an hour. Less than a quarter of the programs differentiated between degrees. In this case, contact time varies by major and credit hours received. For example, a number of schools offer an hour lesson to performance majors and only a half an hour to others. In turn, a music education major's performance skills and breadth of knowledge may suffer from this approach. Why are they slighted? For the most part, this is a conflict with how many credits are allotted for a specific degree. In return, a school of music would have to subtract credits from another musical area if they were to add credits for instruction on a primary instrument. Education majors need the same attention as a performance major for the simple fact that they will have the responsibility of teaching percussion at all levels of study within the public, private, and/or parochial school systems.

An interesting approach offered by two of the collegiate programs is that during the first year the students received two hours of class instruction and one hour of private

instruction per week. This classroom setting is used for introducing Latin percussion and orchestral repertoire, simply because many of the styles are performed in a group context. Therefore, the private lesson may be used for technique studies. Furthermore, what is the point of playing any style of Afro-Cuban drumming if you do not have the opportunity to perform in the group context?

Membership in the Percussive Arts Society (PAS) is an area that must be addressed. Seven of the thirty-three schools require membership in PAS. An overwhelming majority do not require membership, but all have the common opinion that membership should be strongly encouraged. One survey respondent stated that it would be illegal to require a student to join an organization for a class. Every percussion student in a college program should be required to participate for the simple fact that this is one of the few forums to discuss issues concerning the entire world of percussion, such as education, performance (all areas), job vacancies, and general information.

Twenty-two of the programs require student enrollment in percussion ensemble, while four do not. It is interesting that one of the schools does not require percussion ensemble for the simple fact they do not have one during the academic year, instead they are relegated to holding ensemble workshops during the summer. This is due to the fact that the school applies minimum enrollment standards for a class. A small studio might not have an ensemble if a school imposes such restrictions. However, it is safe to state that most percussion students will be exposed to the percussion ensemble.

Technology based percussion is an area in which many programs are lacking. Only eight of the programs have technology requirements. There are many reasons for this. First, programs may lack the necessary equipment or the funds to purchase such equipment. Second, many musicians lack knowledge in this area, though comprehension of the topic is improving. This is understandable given the vast scope of percussion study. Nevertheless, we must collectively improve in this area since the National Association of Schools of Music standards require technological aspects to be included in each university program and for the fact that electronic percussion is ever prevalent in the recording and live performance industries.

Two of the garnered syllabi state that they will further the development of percussion students through the use of composition and listening assignments. They require the students to compose pieces for snare drum, drum line, keyboard instruments, multiple percussion, and percussion ensemble. As the student progresses with their studies, they are required to compose pieces that are longer in duration. The main goal is to present a step-by-step approach that will allow the student to acquire compositional facility in numerous areas of percussion. Hence, the benefits one would gain through developing compositional skills are the ability to compose for percussion in an educated manner, improving general musicianship skills (theory and aural skills), and the development of a thorough knowledge of the percussion family (ranges and limitations of the instruments). A fringe benefit is that students may acquire technological capabilities if required to utilize computer software, such as Finale. Thus, this contributes to the designated NASM technology standards.

The use of listening assignments will assist in the development of analytical skills and prove helpful in acquiring a fundamental knowledge of repertoire and styles. The students in these programs are required to listen to a variety of genres and instrumental areas

(percussion and non-percussion), such as jazz, orchestral, percussion ensemble and world music (steel band, gamelan, Afro-Caribbean) and develop a file of annotated listening cards. This is one area in which some of us (percussionists), as well as other musicians, seem to be lacking since we tend to perform/practice more than we actively and analytically listen. Through critical listening, one will be able to identify the idiosyncrasies of the instruments but also develop a sense of how the instrument should sound and be played.

Sight-reading skills seem to be an area that percussionists lack, especially on keyboard instruments. In most cases sheer lack of experience on keyboard instruments is the cause of the problem. More often than not, the symptom of this inexperience is that the student, being uncomfortable, will simply not devote enough practice time to promote the development of reading skills. Therefore, and with the best intentions in mind, percussion teachers should encourage their students to spend larger portions of time in the practice of sight-reading. Duet literature is often sought, so that a student may share his/her "misery" with another, thereby lessening the frustration that usually accompanies this activity.² Another avenue to remedy this problem may be to dedicate a few minutes of each lesson to this area of study. In turn, sight-reading technique needs to be placed on equal footing, especially on mallet instruments and drum set, with all other aspects of percussion study. This is simply due to the fact that sight-reading ability wins and loses performance-oriented jobs.

Many programs utilize semester book reports, proficiencies/barrier exams, and the grading and recording (audio or video) of lessons to enhance the development of the students. The book report assignment is invaluable. It enables the students to acquire knowledge in any percussion area of particular interest and allows for the student to acquire knowledge in areas that probably will not be covered in the lesson or in any other undergraduate class. The key element is that students must seek out information by themselves.

The recording of the weekly lesson is an integral component to some programs. It allows for the student and teacher to keep track of progression or regression in studies and it contributes to the listening aspect of music. The assigning of a weekly grade performs the same function. It adds to the concept of organization and enables the student to know what is expected of them.

The final concept that is prevalent in many programs is the concept of proficiency/barrier exams. Sixteen schools stated that barrier exams (exams that are required along with the end of semester jury) are incorporated into the curriculum. Nevertheless, the proficiency exams can be quite ambiguous. Are the specified requirements, such as tempo markings, to be interpreted as a benchmark in determining a grade or is it a pass/fail situation? A handful of programs specified that the required skills are set and must be attained before progressing to the next level. One professor stated that these exams are used to determine if a student is accepted into the performance program. The main idea of the barrier exam is to require everyone to possess the general technical skills, such as knowledge of scales, arpeggios, chord progressions, sight-reading and various four-mallet techniques. These minimum technical facilities will enable the student to perform and teach at an acceptable level. Furthermore, it is not to be understood as a plateau in desired ability. They are minimal requirements, and in no way should be construed as a level of attainment; it is only a beginning or point of departure.³

Proficiency levels at most universities are performance oriented. However, one of the

programs also requires proficiency in both terminology and history. This element is as essential to performance as the employed physical techniques. This is due to the fact that we must learn terminology in a variety of languages, usually English, French, Italian, German and Russian. Each of the languages utilizes different words for every instrument or similar words that can be misinterpreted. For example, the words pauken, timpani and kettledrums look different but refer to the same instruments. On the other hand, the words tambourine and tambour look similar but the instruments are quite different.

Where do we draw the line in the applied lesson? How much should the teacher and student know? How much can be assigned or expected from a student without going overboard? These are valid questions that need to be answered. Sooner or later it might become a viable option to expand programs for five years; this is in terms of all music majors, not just percussion. An extra year would make it easier for teachers to assist in producing well-rounded students who possess knowledge in greater areas of percussion.

NOTES

¹ Darin Workman, "The Roadblock for Auditions: Stage Fright," *Percussive Notes* (August 1999): 50.

² Gordon Stout, "How to Sight-read Correctly," {database online}; available at www.pas.org

³ University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music, "Percussion at UMKC," {database online}; available at <http://ctr.umkc.edu/user/lkaptain/minimum/html>.

About the Author

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