

Reading on Keyboard Percussion: Establishing Strong Fundamentals

Percussionists have the unique challenge of trying to develop facility in a variety of instruments very early in their development. Splitting time between snare drum and keyboard percussion often causes percussionists to lag behind the rest of the band in reading skills. Because most band methods feature short excerpts, elongated rhythms, and familiar melodies, it is common for students to rely on memorization. Students often become disillusioned as the band method and repertoire progress because memorization becomes too difficult. Unfortunately, once poor habits become ingrained, they can plague a musician for years to come. These problems can be avoided if proper sight reading fundamentals are formed from the beginning.

Although sound production on keyboard percussion instruments is initially easier than many other instruments, the process of reading presents unique challenges. Most beginning percussionists purchase or rent a percussion kit which includes an undersized set of bells. The bar size on these instruments is extremely small which gives the student a very slim margin for error. Wrong notes can often be the result of simply missing the target rather than misreading the note. Percussionists also have the added challenge of being disconnected from the keyboard. With every other instrument in the band, the musician is physically touching the keys, slide, or valves. In the case of keyboard percussion, the mallet separates the player from the instrument. This lack of physical connection can also cause accuracy problems. These issues often result in students getting lost because they end up looking at the instrument rather than the music. Addressing the following elements of reading will help your students develop strong reading fundamentals.

I. Note Recognition

Because percussionists split time between instruments, they invariably get less reinforcement than the rest of the band. Percussionists need extra practice with note recognition to level the playing field. I use the following methods to drill note recognition:

1. Flash Cards
2. "Mad Minute": Give the students a sheet of music comprised of whole notes about 32 bars in length. The students have one minute to fill in the note names. A proficient reader can get through the page in 30-35 seconds. You might be surprised at first, however, how many percussionists will struggle to finish the page.
3. Vocalization: Choose an exercise or musical excerpt and simply have the student say the note names out loud (including accidentals). The students should speak the note names rather than trying to sight-sing the part. Make sure you go at a slow tempo otherwise it can be quite a tongue twister. It can be helpful for beginners to remove the variable of rhythm and simply vocalize the pitches of the melody in a steady beat pattern.

II. Muscle Memory

When you repeat a task the same way thousands of times the mind forms a strong connection with the given task and it becomes second nature. Your mind controls your body without conscious thought. All musicians use muscle memory to play their instruments. Repetitive motions such as fingerings, valve combinations, and slide positions become second nature as a player's skill level increases. For a percussionist, muscle memory is crucial because of the separation between player and instrument created by the mallet. Encourage your students to be patient as muscle memory will take a long time to develop because it requires much repetition. There are some things you can do, however, to expedite the process. Approaching the instrument the same way all the time is a big key to success. The instrument should be set to the same height every day. Take a sharpie and make a small mark on the stand so that the student knows exactly where to set it every time. Be sure the students have the right stance and posture behind the instrument.

1. The feet should be shoulder width apart with the weight evenly distributed.
2. Stand with the shoulders square to the instrument.
3. Students should never have to reach for notes either right to left or front to back. Stand far enough away from the instrument so that when the elbows hang naturally at the sides, the mallets rest comfortably above the bars.

Developing muscle memory is a process of trial and error that, after a period of reinforcement, becomes habit. Think about learning to type. If you have ever taken a typing class, you were taught the proper hand position and told to keep your eyes on the screen. Once you begin typing, you receive instant feedback on your performance. Adjustments are made based on what you see on the screen. As this process continues, you increase the frequency of correct choices based on previous experience and your skill level rises. Of course, if you're one of those who use your index fingers and stare at the keyboard, you're not going to get much better. Unfortunately, many percussionists are essentially using the same approach when they try to play keyboard percussion instruments. A consistent approach with the right technique will produce the desired result.

III. Peripheral Vision

The eyes can be a valuable tool or a great hindrance in developing reading skills. Students often rely on looking directly at the instrument too much, which results in the eyes moving back and forth between the music and the instrument. It's ludicrous to think of another instrumentalist consistently looking down at their fingers or hands to find a note, but percussionists often learn to play that way. Because it's impossible to look directly at the keys and the music simultaneously, indirect or peripheral vision must be used. Teach your students not to look down: especially for mistakes! Let the ears, not the eyes, be the guide. Missing notes or hitting the dreaded screw is more desirable than looking down. It's a hard sell at first because students don't want to hit wrong notes and stick out in the sound. Complimenting them early and often for making *good mistakes*

will help them buy into this concept. In order to fully realize the potential of peripheral vision, students must learn to use *landmarks* to help find notes. Landmarks are any notes that can be seen with peripheral vision. Because the naturals or so called “white keys” won’t be visible peripherally, students must use landmarks to find them. In other words, we use what we can see to find what we can’t see. For example, by using B flat as a landmark, the student can find A by essentially going left and down one note. To introduce the students to this concept, I use the following exercises:

1. While the student is standing in playing position, instruct them to stare at the stand as if they were reading music. Call out note names and have the students touch each note with their index finger. Start slow and use accidentals initially as they are easier to find peripherally.
2. Try recapping the vocalization exercise from before. While keeping their eyes on the music, instruct the students to touch the note with their index finger as they name it out loud. Be sure they’re not looking down!
3. When you have the band silent play, the keyboard percussion can “finger” through the phrase by lightly touching each note with eyes on the music.

Here’s the big catch: the stand has to be at the right height to utilize peripheral vision. When set up correctly, the student should be able to see the accidentals while looking directly at the music on the stand. If the stand is too high, the keyboard will be out of the visual range and the player is forced to rely solely on muscle memory. This will greatly decrease accuracy, especially for young players. Most students will get frustrated and go back to looking directly at the keyboard in this situation. Stand height can be a sensitive issue because many band directors like the students to have the stands high, so they have a better line of sight to the conductor. Although I certainly don’t prefer this method for keyboard percussion, if you’re dead set on this I suggest a compromise. Allow the students to lower their stands for sight reading and the initial rehearsals until they really know the given piece. Wait to raise them until you get close to the concert to help heighten their awareness and tighten up the ensemble.

IV. Final Thoughts

I think you’ll find that most students truly enjoy playing keyboard percussion instruments when they have the fundamentals and can develop at pace with the rest of the band. Don’t allow students to take the easy road and sacrifice good technique for accuracy early on. In the long run, the development of good habits will lead to a high skill level.