

Innovative Percussion[®] Inc.

Patience is a Virtue

Ben Toth

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Benjamin Toth



Honing one's percussion skills (and ultimately one's musicianship) is an endeavor worthy of a lifetime's pursuit. Much of the percussion repertoire, both solo and ensemble, can take months to learn, involving countless hours in the practice room. In fact, the road towards

playing a large-scale master-work for percussion really begins long before the piece has even been selected and requires years of technical and musical development. This technical and musical development serves as the foundation on which to build one's musicianship.

Practice Strategies

The first bricks in our percussive foundation are laid when we are still in grade school and middle school. Although most young students are eager to play etudes and short pieces, it is critical that they also spend time on technical development. Every practice session should be divided into segments, with each segment focusing on a different instrument. I recommend that young percussionists study xylophone/marimba, snare drum, drum-set and maybe a smattering of timpani as well. Each segment should begin with some warm-ups, followed by a bit of sight reading and concluding with an etude or solo piece. The warm-ups for snare drum and drum set should include (in order): taps and stick control exercises, grace notes (rudiments are best) and rolls (with younger students focusing on shorter roll lengths like 5's, 7's and 9's - open as well as closed.) Xylophone/marimba warm-ups should include scales and arpeggios, both with several variations.

Conscientious students can easily spend half of their daily practice time on warm-ups and sight reading. Anxious students should remember that any shortcuts one takes while developing technique will be cause for regret when they finally begin to tackle advanced repertoire. Even the youngest students can practice two, three or even four instruments per day as described above, perhaps allotting 7-10 minutes per instrument.

Of course, as the student gets older, the amount of daily practice time should continually increase. High school and college students (underclassmen) are advised to follow the same practice strategies mentioned above but will also increase the amount of time spent on timpani and will incorporate four-mallet exercises and etudes for marimba. Older students may also enjoy inserting some orchestral repertoire into their practice routine to serve as a substitute for, or complement to, their etudes and solo pieces. In most cases, it is still appropriate to spend about half of one's practice time on warm-ups and exercises and the other half on etudes, excerpts and/or repertoire.

Once the student has entered high school they may be practicing two, three or more hours per day. At this point, it is essential that they take frequent practice breaks - maybe five minutes each half-hour. This gives one's hands a chance to recoup and also helps one stay more focused in the practice room. In fact, the most important tool in any practice session, whether the student is 8 years old or 28 years old, is one's brain. It is critical that each percussionist learns: (1) how to detect or hear a problem in the passage at hand such as a wrong note, poor tone quality and sloppy articulation; (2) how to discover the cause of the problem. For instance, improper grip or fulcrum, inappropriate stroke, arm position and body position; and (3) how to find or create an exercise in order to overcome the problem. For example, practice slowly, temporarily simplify the passage by eliminating grace notes or dynamics and/or practice each hand separately.

What Should I Play?

Percussionists must also make some important decisions regarding what instruments to focus on and what repertoire to play on those instruments.

While it is true that most of us are drawn to percussion by the seemingly endless array of instruments in the percussion "family", I recommend that each student sets some realistic goals for each semester in terms of the instruments they'd like to study. Sometimes two instruments are more than enough - with snare drum and mallet-keyboard percussion commonly dominating the students' practice time. Adding in timpani, drum-set, hand percussion, etc., is dependent upon the amount of time that the student is able and willing to practice. Again, this is true for the grade school student, as well as the college student. Perhaps the student should try a rotational system as used in some university programs by focusing on snare drum and marimba/xylophone for two or three semesters, then phasing out snare drum (as one becomes more comfortable on the instrument) in order to incorporate intensive time on timpani, etc. In any

case, I highly recommend that young percussionists do their best to study a wide variety of percussion instruments in a logical, systematic way. Along the way, it is interesting and useful to note the similarities and differences in the techniques associated with various percussion instruments.

The responsibility of selecting etudes and repertoire of an appropriate level of difficulty usually lies with the teacher. Each etude or piece should challenge the students' technique and musicianship by being one step beyond their "comfort zone" or range of experience. Anxious students that are eager to play a piece that is too far removed from their current abilities are again taking a short cut that will result in more long-term problems than solutions. Those problems can include, but are not limited to, technical bad-habits, accuracy problems and interpretive issues.

In terms of compositional styles, it is essential that the serious percussion student experience a wide variety of vastly contrasting works. There will be plenty of time further down the road to discover one's "signature repertoire." For example, I recommend that snare drum studies include rudimental as well as orchestral etudes and that the student explores the etudes from an assortment of authors (there are certainly enough snare drum etude books to choose from.) Similarly, I recommend that each student plays a wide variety of marimba repertoire including solo pieces from contrasting sources or categories. One possible way to categorize marimba literature is as follows:

- Pieces from the classic Japanese repertoire, particularly from the 1960's and 1970's
- Pieces written by marimbists which tend to "lay" very well on the instrument, as many of them are composed on the marimba
- Transcriptions, particularly from the Renaissance and Baroque periods, though some Romantic and later pieces also work very well on marimba
- Pieces written by contemporary worldwide composers for specific players which often exploit the technical, timbral and/or musical traits of a specific marimba artist
- Concerti

In short, young players who are particularly inspired to play Bach are advised to also play Miyoshi and vice-versa. Young players should always remember the saying that sometimes "it's not important what form the sculptor gives the stone...it's important what sculpting does to the sculptor." Of course, it will take years to explore an appropriate variety of marimba literature and a bit of discipline and patience.

Mission Accomplished

Let's say that you can look in the mirror and honestly say the following:

- I have consistently dedicated an appropriate amount of time to technical development.
- I have developed the ability to sight read as well as memorize music.
- I have done so on a variety of percussion instruments.
- I am thoughtful, thorough and systematic in the practice room - never mindlessly "ramming" phrases over and over, hoping that they will magically improve.
- I have played pedagogically useful and logically graduated pieces in terms of technical difficulty and musical sophistication.
- I have explored contrasting repertoire, avoiding the temptation to only play pieces that I think are "cool" on a first hearing.
- I have waited until my teacher and I agreed that I had built the appropriate technical and musical foundation to finally tackle major repertoire and am able to play this repertoire effectively.

Mission accomplished? No way! There is ALWAYS another technique that requires some "wood shedding," a new percussion instrument to discover or an unknown (at least to you) composer or composition to explore. In a sense, the mission is never accomplished - providing us with endless challenges and opportunities to grow as musicians. Though we achieve many small goals (daily, weekly, yearly) in our pursuit of musical perfection, the ultimate goal remains elusive. This fact can prove to be a source of inspiration and motivation, rather than frustration, and it only requires a little patience.

Benjamin Toth, director of the percussion program at The Hartt School, University of Hartford, has presented concerts and recitals, radio and television broadcasts, master classes, and children's programs throughout Europe and the United States, as well as in Brazil, Hong Kong, Japan and Trinidad. Toth's varied musical interests are reflected in his performance credits, highlights of which include: the Percussion Group Cincinnati, Jovan Percussion Projekt, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Sinfonia da Camera, Akron Symphony Orchestra, Goodspeed Opera House, Hartford Stage, Bushnell Theater, and the Jimmy Dorsey Band. He has recorded for the Albany, Arabesque, Bis, Centaur, GIA, Hartt, Innova, TNC and Yesa labels, having appeared on fifteen recordings.

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