

Suggestions for Improving Your School Percussion Section

By **Dr. Ben Miller**



Ben Miller is Professor of Music at Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia, where he serves as Coordinator of Percussion Studies, Conductor of the Symphonic-Community Band and is a member of the M.U. Jazz Faculty. A native of Joliet, Illinois, he received his B.M.E. degree from Indiana University and M.A. and D.M.A. degrees from the University of Iowa. As Coordinator of Percussion Studies Dr. Miller teaches applied percussion, conducts the M.U. Percussion Ensemble and Steel Band and teaches percussion techniques classes for music education students. In addition to conducting the Symphonic-Community Band he also teaches instrumental conducting. Dr. Miller is the former Timpanist and Principal Percussionist with the Cedar Rapids (IA) and West Virginia Symphonies and serves in a similar capacity with the Huntington Symphony and Pops Orchestras. A popular guest artist, conductor, clinician and adjudicator Dr. Miller has presented concerts and clinics throughout the United States. He is President of the West Virginia Chapter of the Percussive Arts Society (P.A.S.) and is a member of the International P.A.S. Education and University Pedagogy Committees. He is also the West Virginia Chairperson for the National Band Association and is a member of MENC and IAJE.

1. Demonstrate a positive attitude toward the percussion section during full band or orchestra rehearsals.
2. Demand the same level of musicianship from the percussionists as you do from all other ensemble members.
3. ALWAYS REMEMBER: In concert band and orchestra, the percussionist is a soloist! Whatever you expect from your solo clarinet or trumpet you must also expect from your crash cymbal, triangle or tambourine player.
4. Provide a secure area for storage when instruments are not being used for rehearsals.
5. NEVER PERMIT FAKING ON ANY PERCUSSION INSTRUMENT AT ANY TIME!
6. Study a full conductor's score and have all percussion parts assigned before the first rehearsal.
7. Post the order that the music will be rehearsed before the beginning of rehearsal.
8. Have enough music stands and be sure all musicians have good eye contact with the conductor.
9. Allow enough room for comfortable playing as well as for moving from instrument to instrument.

10. NEVER PLACE A PERCUSSION INSTRUMENT ON THE FLOOR! Use trap tables or music stands. Cover a table or stand with a pad or towel to avoid non-musical, extraneous sounds.
11. Rotate parts; let everyone get experience playing every instrument.
12. Teach timpanists to match pitches (sing) and identify common intervals (hear and sing).
13. Timpani must be tuned to their **fundamental** pitches for the pedals to work properly.
14. Keep percussionists actively involved in the composition being played.
 - a) What role are they playing? Solo, equal, accompaniment?
 - b) Balance/Blend within section, with the rest of the band/orchestra.
 - c) Ask the percussionists to explain what is going on in the other sections of the ensemble while their part is playing.
15. Require all percussionists to have their own sticks and mallets (including Bass Drum and Triangle).
16. Snare Drums, Tom Toms and Keyboards should be high enough to permit comfortable/efficient playing.
17. Active Preventive Maintenance
 - a) Have protective covers and/or cases for all percussion instruments.
 - b) Lubricate all tension rods at least once a year.
 - c) Replace plastic heads at least every 2 years.
 - d) If one or two snare strands are stretched, cut them off with a wire cutter.
 - e) Always loosen wing nuts before changing the height or angle of a stand. NEVER use anything but fingers to tighten wing nuts.
 - f) Polish all metal at least once a year.
 - g) MAKE MINOR REPAIRS BEFORE THEY BECOME MAJOR!