



Percussive Notes

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2011 HALL OF FAME



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Guidelines for Marimba Practice and Performance

An introduction for the uninitiated

By Jeff Calissi

It's a safe assumption that among the various disciplines of percussion, the collegiate-level study of the mallet-keyboard instruments, particularly the marimba, is the most deficient. For the student who is new to the instrument, and to formal percussion studies, the marimba seemingly presents itself as an insurmountable goal.

While a college music program can be overwhelming, the study of percussion is a daunting task as well, particularly if a student is not proficient in the learning of the marimba. In addition to the curricula of music and general education classes that encompass a student's schedule, the study of a new instrument can be of additional stress. It can then be an easy fix for the student to skip practicing or lessons altogether, because the tasks can quickly become time-consuming and challenging.

It is during this time of the fall semester when good habits are formed that will take students through the rest of their journey through marimba studies. It is with this understanding, and with the help of several college instructors, that the following guidelines were created to facilitate a smooth progression of marimba study. It is written with the perspective of educating a student in the first person, as in a lesson.

MATERIALS

Saying "I can't afford [blank] (e.g., mallets, an etude book, pieces) right now" will only delay the inevitable and "Can I get that in a few weeks?" isn't a legitimate excuse. Please understand that if it were not necessary at the moment it was requested, your teacher wouldn't tell you to buy it. Think of it this way: Does your Algebra professor accept the excuse, "I can't afford a textbook right now. Can I just do the homework in a few weeks?"

Correspondingly, the amount of mallets and literature you may see other students possess was not amassed in one big order. It takes several semesters to acquire a bag full of mallets and music, so be patient and think of the materials you need to purchase for your percussion studies as you would the materials you need for any other class you are taking and will take.

PRACTICING

Being musical doesn't happen by thinking, it happens by doing, and the key to success is practice. Schedule your practice time like it's a class that you have to attend. If you treat practice like an optional "do it when you can" event, you won't be taking that time seriously. Schedule a block of time each day that lasts the same amount of time as another class or classes. While scheduling, though, keep in mind if you're on a computer or phone more than you're practicing, you need to re-evaluate your priorities.

Once in the practice room, set an attainable amount of goals and remember quality over quantity, meaning the amount of practice you attempt is meaningless if you haven't accomplished anything during that time. Don't just say, "I'm going to practice" in an ambiguous fashion. Setting a schedule will help break down a 10-minute/five-page marimba piece into manageable sections. For example, say, "I'm going to warm-up

for 15 minutes and include two-mallet major scales and arpeggios, four-mallet chord progressions using different techniques, and independent rolls, then do three exercises of sight-reading. I will then attempt to get from the beginning to rehearsal letter B at a moderate tempo."

Although the literature you have been assigned is important, be sure to practice the "boring" exercises like scales and sight-reading, too. Remember, you learned a language by way of vocabulary. What is commonly called "boring" is a musician's vocabulary, and you need to have an understanding of our percussion language before applying it to repertoire.

REPERTOIRE

With practice comes the steady sequence of literature that will be progressively more difficult. With one piece leading to another, combined with an inherent nature of being impatient, it's easy to become distracted by what you may see as something that can be tackled tomorrow. This is where you need to trust your teacher. Do the boring technical exercises and "easy" literature, treating it as though it was the greatest music ever written. When you have shown mastery of the basics and a willingness to examine your own musicality and technique, then the "fun stuff" begins.

Remember to always make beautiful music and do not worry about the difficulty level. Rather, make whatever you play sound as beautiful as possible. Nobody walks away from an outstanding performance and says, "Nice playing, but it was such an easy piece. I'm not impressed." Even a "simple" piece performed well will leave a great impression on your colleagues and audience. It will also help you hone your performance chops and make you a better musician.

LESSONS

Lessons were once described to me as "miniature performances" for an audience of one—the teacher. There are a certain number of "passes" a teacher is willing to give if no progression is made from the prior lesson, hence no "performance" that week. If any form of excuses becomes habitual, it starts to reflect poorly on you and stands to protract your studies to where the jury exam will not show any indication of development.

With few exceptions, such as an errant week of more-than-usual schoolwork that prevented daily practice, arriving to a lesson half-prepared is the same as being unprepared. For example, saying, "I had a question" about several passages or pages of music doesn't help with what you should have practiced all week long. This remark translates as you not taking the initiative to ask the question prior to your lesson, perhaps during percussion ensemble rehearsal, office hours, or seeing your professor in the hallway.

Also, you should never come to your lesson and announce, "I couldn't practice [blank] this week because I couldn't find my music." This tells your instructor that the next hour will not consist of going over what you should have practiced, but rather the teacher questioning why it took so long for you to find the missing music.

PERSPECTIVE

A positive attitude will open a lot of doors and will make your lessons a joy to teach, but nothing beats actual time in a practice room. Empty smiles wear thin after a while, so push yourself. No accomplished musician, athlete, world leader, or entrepreneur became successful by doing the bare minimum, and raw talent will only get you so far.

Demand excellence in everything you do. If you're lazy with classes, homework, or life in general you probably won't have much success with the study of music, either. Expect yourself to go above and beyond in everything. It will inevitably help advance your practice habits and musicianship.

Outside of class, medical students study, law students study, biology students study, history students study, but musicians practice. So while students in other majors are busy reading books and studying notes for their field, you get to make music. What a wonderful and instantaneous reward!

And finally, remember that being "good" is easy—just don't mess up.

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