

Developing the Young Jazz Band Percussionist: Percussion Set-Ups and Sound Choices

by *Marvin Sparks, Jr.*

This article is a guide to developing the young percussionist in a jazz/popular music performance situation. In the past eight years, there has been a tremendous interest in ethnic percussion, and many groups are performing music that is heavily influenced by percussion. The young percussionists in typical high school, and all district/state and college jazz bands have little idea what to play, or how to create a percussion set-up.

In my role as a jazz ensemble director and percussionist, I have witnessed percussion set-ups by young students that generally lack imagination. Usually, students don't want to spend time putting together a percussion set-up so they opt for the simple stuff: congas, bell, tambourine, and a shaker. This limited approach stifles the imagination needed to develop quality percussion arrangements. The essence of the many colors of percussion artistry is how the player manipulates various sounds to set the mood of the composition.

Ideas for your set-up can be obtained by watching great percussionists in band situations like Bashiri Johnson (Whitney Houston), Vicki Randle (The Tonight Show), Ron Powell (Kenny G.), and Don Alias (Herbie Hancock), just to name a few. I mentioned the above performers because they usually perform as the only percussionist in the band. Go to outdoor concerts, check out VH-1 , MTV, BET, rent videos, and do whatever it takes to analyze their performance.

Setting up a real percussion set-up can be a lot of work, but after trial and error you will develop an efficient set-up. It's important to identify the timbre of different percussion sounds. In developing my set-up for various performance situations, I placed various sounds into different categories: Drums, Metal, Sustain, Wood, Aerial, and Electronics.

SOUNDS –

Drums

In the analysis of popular/world music and contemporary jazz styles, hand percussion is an essential component. A set-up with at least 2 congas, bongos and timbales, all with stands would cover most literature. For high school programs, two congas are sufficient, but with three drums the students can perform traditional rhythms from Cuba and Puerto Rico. Drumming together will help each individual develop technique, a rhythmic vocabulary, and consistency in their playing.

Metal

In this category, various LP cowbells, opera gongs, pipes, hubcaps, etc. and any metal sounds serve as rhythm instruments. Use a variety of metal sounds to establish a wide range of choices for the rhythmic patterns you create.

Wood

Wood sounds which include LP Granite Blocks, LP Jam Blocks, LP Wood Blocks, log drums, and temple blocks (old ones) can be used as part of your rhythmic part in the same manner as the metal sounds.

Sustain

When the band sustains a chord, this is the opportunity for the percussionist to play colors of sound to add spice to a chord or an ostinato figure. LP maracas, shakers (all varieties), wind chimes (all varieties), LP Bell Tree, ocean drums and cymbals fall into this category. The type of sustained sound used depends on the dynamic level and rhythmic foundation of the song. Maracas and shakers can also serve as rhythmic instruments in your pattern.

Aerial

LP Samba Whistles, kids plastic tube w/varied pitches, police sirens, popguns, slide whistles, and any unusual whistles you can find. Aerial sounds can be used as rhythmic (samba whistles) or sustain (plastic tunes, police sirens, etc.) sounds.

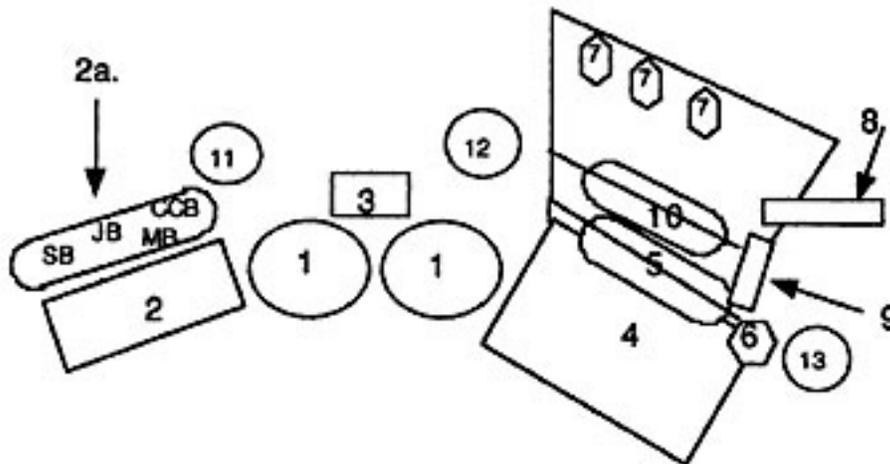
Electronics

With technology changing so rapidly, buy the amount of electronics your school budget can afford. You need a drum controller, sound source and amplification. Many companies make pads that can be positioned within your set-up. Electronics are used to recreate studio recordings: hand claps, various pitched shakers (slow tunes),

airplanes, waterfalls. etc. A Mallet Kat (3 octave keyboard controller) can recreate marimba and vibes sounds and is portable.

Set-Up

Develop a concise set-up that is convenient to assemble and transport. I have included my personal percussion set-up below. 1. LP Congas 2. LP Timbales 2a. LP Mambo Cowbell, LP Salsa Cowbell, LP Cha Cha bell, LP Jam Block 3. LP Bongos 4. Percussion Table with an assortment of LP Whistles, LP Maracas, LP Afuche/Cabasa, LP Shakers, etc. 5. Various cowbells 6. Mounted tambourine 7. LP Triangles 8. Wind chimes 9. LP Bell tree 10. Jam Blocks®, LP wood blocks 11. 18" Cymbal 12. 18" China cymbal 13. 17" Orchestral suspended cymbal.



Points to Remember-

1. Use a variety of sounds.
2. Make sure your set-up is portable.
3. Use your imagination in the choices you make for sounds.
4. Analyze recordings and videos of other percussionist.
5. Record and analyze your playing at every rehearsal and concert.
6. Last but not least: Make sure you are in synch with the rhythm section in a complementary way.
7. DO NOT OVERPLAY!

Band Directors: How do I keep the other percussionists interested? This is a problem for the typical small high school/college jazz ensemble program with one band. I have three percussionists in my band and they alternate on drum set and percussion. Instead of

having the best player only play drum set or percussion, each student gets the opportunity to play and develop. On Latin tunes, extra percussionists can be used to play timbales, congas, bongos, drum set, and small percussion. When they are not playing they can learn through observation. The rewards of watching someone else make mistakes or play a tune well must be emphasized in your teaching methods. In my world percussion ensemble (Afro-Cuban Ensemble), each percussionist gets the opportunity to develop skills on the various world percussion instruments. You can pick the most promising players from this workshop to perform in the jazz ensemble.

DEVELOPING PARTS

Developing tasteful percussion parts for contemporary and popular music is a challenge. I use a multiple percussion concept inspired by percussionists and composers such as Max Roach, Airtio, Mino C., Peter Michael, Taku Hirano, David Holliden, Santana percussion section (Raul Rekow & Karl Perazzo), Richie Gajate Garcia, and Ndugu Chanler. Your basic concept in establishing percussion parts should be simplistic and rhythmically solid (groove). Your parts should correspond to each section of the song. Here are a few examples of developing your arrangement. Listen to top ten songs on the radio and study the percussion parts. Include in your listening sessions, music from various cultures (Brazil, Africa, Middle East, Latin America).

Here's a sample song and how I would orchestrate a percussion part:

"Make It Happen" by Marvin Sparks

INTRO (16 bars)

Free, Pedal tone, drum set playing 8th. notes on cymbals use sustain sounds, shakers, whistles, suspended cymbal rolls, wind chimes, out of time strokes on other sound sources.

VERSE (16 bars)

congas.. rhythm similar to the tumbao. Make your part groove with the melody and the drummer.

CHORUS (8 bars)

mf dynamic;

- use tambourine;
- pick an instrument for the dynamic level
- shakers–piano(p),
- tambourine–mezzo forte(mf),
- cowbells–forte(f) change sound source to a cowbell rhythm, tambourine, or shakers

SOLO SECTION (16 bars)

Horns playing background throughout... use Timbale/cowbells, electronics: Build your part with the soloist. If the soloist starts out strong, a timbale part would work well for that dynamic level and groove.

INTERLUDE (8 bars)

Free similar to the INTRO.

VERSE 2 (16 bars) similar to VERSE 1

CHORUS/VAMP TO THE END

forte–strong ending. Use the timbale/cowbell, and electronics to put together an exciting complementary part to the ending.

Hopefully this article will give the young percussionists in a jazz/popular music group a foundation for developing an approach to being "the percussionist." Remember, this is just the beginning. Begin to study different cultures; Brazil, Cuba, Africa, Tibet, Asia. Each culture has specific percussion instruments and rhythms. Make your discoveries part of your set-up and "signature" sound.

SUGGESTED EQUIPMENT LIST

DRUMS

- 1 – LP 222X 11 " Quinto
- 1 – LP 259X 11 3/4" Conga
- 1 – LP 252X 12 1/2" Tumba
- 1 – LP 201 A–2 Generation II Bongos
- 1 – LP Bongo Stand
- 1 – LP256B 13" & 14" Tito Puente Timbales w/ Stand

CYMBALS

- 1 - Sabian AA 18" El Sabor
- 1 - Sabian orchestral Suspended cymbal 17"
- 1 - Sabian AA 18" Chinese

SMALL PERCUSSION

- 1 - LP Salsa Cha Cha Cowbell
- 1 - LP229 Mambo Cowbell
- 1 - LP206B Deluxe Bongo Cowbell
- 1 - LP570 TriBells
- 1 - ES-6 Salsa Timbale Bell
- 1 - LP1205 Small Jam Block
- 2 - LP1207 Large Jam Block
- 1 - LP234A Standard Cabasa
- 1 - LP208 Standard Vibra-Slap
- 1 - LP1-5 Standard Flex-A-Tone
- 1 - LP576 Carnival Agogo Bells
- 1 - LP394 Macho Maracas
- 1 - LP389 Fiber Maracas
- 1 - LP441 Soft Shake
- 1 - LP 440 Shake It
- 1 - LP462 Rock Shaker
- 1 - LP483 Pro Shekere
- 2 - LP354A Caxixi, Small
- 2 - LP354B Caxixi, Large
- 1 - RMV 12" Professional Pandeiro
- 1 - LP174 Cyclops Hand Held, w/Brass Dimples
- 1 - LP175 Cyclops Mountable, w/Brass Jingles
- 1 - LP450 LP Bell Tree
- 1 - 30" Rainmaker
- 1 - 6" triangle
- 1 - 9" triangle
- 1 - 5" triangle
- 1 - 7" triangle

HARDWARE

- 2 - Cymbal stands
- 1 - LP372 Everything Rack
- 1 - LP592S Splash Claw
- 2 - LP592B Percussion Claw
- 1 - LP236C Mount-All Bracket for percussion
- 1 - LP760 Percussion Table

4 – LP636 Cradle Stand W/legs
1 – LP337 Bongo Stand Complete

CASES

Humes and Berg and LP cases (Enduro and LP soft cases for bongos and percussion)

STICKS

LP Tito Puente sticks: Vic Firth: Bashiri Johnson timbale sticks, Sizzle sticks, and many different combinations of Vic Firth mallets and sticks.

Marvin Sparks CLINIC/WORKSHOP TOPICS

- * Drum Line to the Drum Set
- * Transferal of marching percussion concepts to the drum set.
- * Latin Percussion Techniques
- * Basic Techniques for congas, bongos, timbales, and all small percussion techniques presented in a fun workshop format.
- * Importance of Listening.
- * Developing a Systematic Approach to Listening to Music.
- * History of the Drum Set
- * The Evolution of a Drum set Performance in Jazz, Latin Funk, and Rock Music.
- * Developing a Multi-cultural Music Program
- * Learn Techniques for the Development of an Afro-Cuban Ensemble—or the Programming of Latin music in Your Next Concert.
- * Motivational Lecture
- * Development of Self-esteem Through Music for Inner City Music Programs.
- * African American Music
- * A Survey of African American Music from Africa through the 90s.
- * Master Classes in All Areas of Percussion
- * Group Sessions on Marching Percussion, Orchestra Percussion, Snare Drum, Mallet Percussion, Cymbal Technique, and Timpani.

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