Revisiting Total Percussion: Contemporary Strategies for Percussion Education

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As educators we constantly search for the most practical and effective methods with which to guide our students. We sift through mountains of information and consider a multitude of resources before deciding upon the most concise, pertinent ways to address skill development and musical understanding. Throughout this process we recognize that general methodological issues confronting music educators are not only encapsulated, but in fact heightened, when formulating best-practice approaches to instrumental instruction. In the specific case of percussion instruction, one of the most often debated, yet consistently relevant issues is Total Percussion.

Total Percussion is an approach to instruction that places equal emphasis on all instruments within the percussion family. It attempts to provide well-rounded training for aspiring percussionists, whether or not they may choose to attend a university music program, or to become professional musicians. Total Percussion was formally initiated by performers and educators in the late 1960s as a response to the unprecedented demands placed on percussionists by twentieth-century Western composers. (Payson and McKenzie 1966) Until that time most percussionists were specialists on one or two instruments, and the established system of percussion education reinforced this narrow perspective. The continuing exploitation of the percussion family’s vast resources demonstrated the inadequacy of this arrangement, and confirmed that a new approach was needed.

In today’s musical world it is inconceivable that percussionists would restrict themselves to a single musical genre, let alone focus on a single instrument. It is commonly accepted that success at any level requires proficiency on all the concert percussion instruments, including snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, timpani, mallet percussion, and auxiliary percussion. Excellence, on the other hand, demands thorough exposure to the drum set, numerous non-Western instruments, and knowledge of the stylistic nuances that create “groove” or “feel” in various genres.
Why Expand the Existing System of Percussion Instruction?

Experience as a performer, educator, and clinician over the past several years has given me the opportunity to evaluate the current state of percussion training at the secondary and post-secondary levels. From observing secondary-school percussionists participating in workshops or performing at festivals, to considering the needs of my own private students, I am constantly reminded of the areas of instruction we must continue to stress. I am also convinced that Total Percussion in the 21st century must be redefined.

The 1960s’ approach to Total Percussion stressed instruction on snare drum, timpani, and mallets, and in the 1980s further emphasis was placed on drum set and Latin percussion. (Mueller 1972, 7 and Spencer 1993, 40) However, we now face a tremendously strong wave of non-Western musical influences in the literature for the secondary school concert band, symphony orchestra, and jazz ensemble. The incorporation of non-Western genres into the Western repertoire compels us to reconsider the steps we take when delivering high quality, effective instruction. Furthermore, percussion instruction, in particular, must reorient itself, and must continue to evolve in order to keep abreast of contemporary influences.

What Strategies are Included in a Contemporary Program of Total Percussion?

Establishing a contemporary program of Total Percussion education does not require us to abandon the instructional methods we currently employ. Instead, it asks that we fortify successful practices and expand the nature of instruction to embrace a more comprehensive approach. This latter step involves detailed planning, a thoughtful allocation of resources, and features both Inward-Looking and Outward-Looking strategies.

A Inward-Looking strategy suggests that educators:

(1) Uncover as much information as possible regarding contemporary performance practices for Western and non-Western percussion instruments. Equipping oneself with the most up-to-date information is perhaps the best way to create an excellent program of percussion instruction.

(2) Research the particular non-Western genres appearing in one’s chosen repertoire. Valuable insight pertaining to the performance of non-Western genres can be gained through considering their social, cultural, and historical significance, instrumentation, and the ways in which time, rhythm, melody, and harmony are organized.
(3) Expand or augment a recording library to give students access to non-Western music. A lack of familiarity with the sound and structure of non-Western genres is perhaps the single greatest obstacle.

**An equally effective Outward-Looking strategy also contains a tripartite approach:**

(1) Encourage students to take private lessons. Instruction from a professional percussionist with experience in drum set, concert percussion, and non-Western percussion best addresses the immediate needs of most students.

(2) Arrange for regular workshops or masterclasses from an expert in a particular field. These sessions directly and efficiently address concerns related to Western or non-Western percussion. In either case, they can be arranged to focus on specific techniques, or can be used to coach a percussion section through the requirements of a particular composition.

One of the many benefits of the cultural diversity in many Canadian cities is access to non-Western music specialists. In Vancouver, for example, one will not have difficulty locating experts in Cantonese opera, Ghanaian drumming, Balinese gamelan, Brazilian samba, and Cuban salsa. Providing one workshop each month, or a series of focused workshops each year will assist in meeting the objectives of Total Percussion education.

(3) Form ensembles in order to provide vehicles for students to develop and to apply the skills they have acquired. Two ideal ensembles in this respect are a Percussion Ensemble and a World Music Ensemble. (Cook 1988, 1)

Directed toward percussionists exclusively, the Percussion Ensemble provides a forum for students of any grade to hone technique and to refine their sense of musicality. The concert band and symphony orchestra may only offer limited opportunities for percussion performance; however, more active and demanding percussion writing is a trademark of the percussion ensemble.

A World Music Ensemble, on the other hand, can be open to all students. This allows all instrumentalists to become acquainted with the instrumental techniques and stylistic nuances of various non-Western genres, and can promote cultural understanding through musical diversity. Current trends in music education for the general music classroom combined with the increasingly cosmopolitan environment in many schools may ultimately make the World Music ensemble a focal point of the music curriculum. (Smith and Tones, 2005)

Secondary school percussion and world music ensembles are very common in the United States and in some Canadian urban centres, so there are many
successful models to emulate. In Vancouver, schools such as Britannia Secondary, Charles Dickens Elementary, and the Sarah McLachlan Music Outreach offer percussion or world music ensembles. Drawing upon the experience and expertise of teachers and artists associated with those programs will assist others who wish to adopt similar approaches.

Conclusions: Where Do We Go from Here?

The necessity for establishing a contemporary program of Total Percussion education is indisputable. Whether or not one wishes to enroll in a university music program or aspires to become a professional musician, evidence suggests that today’s percussionist must be well versed in Western and non-Western performance techniques. Furthermore, the rate at which non-Western influences are being incorporated into the repertoire for various secondary-school ensembles demonstrates the sense of urgency we must espouse.

Successful practices currently employed in many schools provide the foundation upon which to develop a cutting-edge program of instruction, and collaboration between music educators and guest artists will help facilitate the acquisition of knowledge in this respect. Instituting a program of Total Percussion puts our students on the path to excellence, and if we wish them to meet the requirements of their profession with confidence and credibility, this is the most valuable path they can follow.

Works Cited


**Additional Resources**


The author encourages your questions and comments. Please feel free to contact him via email at <danny.tones@utoronto.ca>.

**Dr. Daniel Tones** is an award-winning percussionist and scholar who devotes a great deal of his time to encouraging musical development in aspiring artists. He has studied with some of Canada’s most well respected percussionists, has performed throughout Canada, the United States, and Asia, and has been broadcast nationally on radio and television.