Encouraging artistic development in secondary-school percussionists often involves providing them with creative outlets in which they can refine their technique and channel their musicianship. At first glance, this statement seems self-evident; however, under closer scrutiny it reveals a great deal about the steps we can take to develop a cutting-edge program of percussion instruction.

The large ensembles that have become a part of the established music education curriculum offer many benefits, but in some cases they may not best address percussionists’ particular musical needs. One of the most common concerns of percussionists in the concert band or symphony orchestra, for example, is that they are not given as integral a role as other instrumentalists. Consequently, they are not as actively engaged, and they spend far more time sitting idly. Although thoughtful repertoire selection may help to alleviate these concerns to a certain extent, establishing a chamber music ensemble specifically for percussionists is one of the most direct ways to facilitate musical growth. When combined with experience in large ensembles, these groups create a complimentary and effective model for percussion education.

Participating in a chamber ensemble provides any musician with a unique venue for artistic development and musical maturation. In the case of percussionists, playing in a percussion ensemble provides benefits that may not be realized through large ensemble involvement alone: (1) the small group setting allows an opportunity to focus on the performance techniques of specific Western and non-Western instruments, leading to a greater understanding of the creative potential inherent to the percussion family, (2) it assists in the development of advanced musical competencies, such as an acute awareness of texture, colour, dynamic contrast, and the shaping of musical contours - competencies not addressed comprehensively in the repertoire for many large ensembles, (3) it assists in developing listening skills that can be applied to numerous settings, including mixed chamber ensembles and section playing within a large ensemble, and (4) it encourages teamwork, collaboration, and camaraderie within the percussion section, thereby developing trust among section members and instilling values of personal responsibility and leadership.

It wasn’t until I was an undergraduate student did I have the opportunity to play in a percussion ensemble. I found the experience exciting and musically rewarding, and wished that I had worked within this type of ensemble much earlier in my musical career. I found the repertoire varied and demanding, and I was challenged to draw upon all the skills I had accumulated to that point. Here, for perhaps the first time, I had a leading voice within a musical ensemble, and the part I performed played a vital role...
in shaping the ensemble’s sound. This has since influenced how I perform as a professional percussionist in a variety of musical settings.

**A Very Brief History of the Percussion Ensemble**

The percussion ensemble is foreign to many Canadian secondary-school music programs, but it is certainly not a novel entity. In fact, percussion ensembles have long played a dominant role in shaping popular and classical music performance traditions across the globe. For example, they were an important part of American vaudeville in the early twentieth century, and by the 1930s had attracted the attention of Western art-music composers such as Roldán, Varèse, Cowell, Chávez, and Cage, among others. Percussion instruments and percussion ensembles also feature prominently in the expressive cultural traditions of Cuba, Brazil, India, sub-Saharan Africa, and Indonesia, to name but a few. In some of these instances their use dates back hundreds of years.

If we were to take the necessary steps to include a percussion ensemble as part of a music program’s extracurricular or co-curricular activities, we would not be embarking upon an unexplored path. Percussion ensembles have been a part of music programs at the secondary and post-secondary levels for decades. Paul Price initiated a percussion ensemble at the University of Illinois in 1950, and George Gaber added a percussion ensemble to the performance program at Indiana University in the early 1960s. In the decades that followed, countless universities, colleges, and high schools incorporated percussion ensembles into their curricula. Consequently, percussion ensembles are now widely considered to be a staple in the developmental diet of any high school or collegiate percussion student.

**Creating a Percussion Ensemble: Where Do I Begin?**

The following questions may confront those who choose to initiate a percussion ensemble in a secondary-school music program:

**Do I have the necessary resources to support the creation of a percussion ensemble?**

**What type of ensemble should I create?** Should it be a Western percussion ensemble,¹ some type of world music ensemble, or a combination of the two?

**Where can I find repertoire?**

¹ The designation “Western percussion ensemble” refers to a group whose repertory has been created primarily by composers of Western art music.
These factors certainly influence one’s options. In particular, resources such as time, money, equipment, and available rehearsal space affect this decision at a fundamental level, and will determine the type of ensemble one is able to provide. For instance, if one has a collection of standard percussion instruments including a xylophone, vibraphone, glockenspiel, drum set, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, and various auxiliary percussion instruments, one may do well to consider creating a Western percussion ensemble. In this case, one would not have to invest a substantial amount of money to purchase additional instruments. There is a large body of repertoire written for these instrumental forces, demonstrating that a great deal can be accomplished with the instrumental resources currently found in most music rooms.

Since the late 1960s, however, composers have focussed increasingly on the role of mallet instruments within the percussion ensemble. Many of today’s compositions rely heavily, if not exclusively on the marimba, vibraphone, xylophone, glockenspiel, and other pitched percussion instruments. If one chooses to include selections from this part of the repertory, it would be necessary to have access to at least one marimba.

Those who have an interest in multicultural music education, who wish to address the varied demographics of the contemporary classroom, or who simply have a fascination with various world musics may want to consider creating a world music percussion ensemble, or at least to incorporate some non-Western music into a more standard Western ensemble. Hand-drumming ensembles that draw upon the music performance traditions of Cuba, Senegal, and Ghana, for instance, are an excellent example of this type of group.

World music percussion ensembles also have the advantage of being inclusive. They cater to any music student regardless of his or her percussion background. Even most percussionists at the secondary level have little experience with hand drums, so a level playing field is quickly established among the ensemble’s members.

One of the drawbacks to creating a world music percussion ensemble is that most schools or school districts currently do not have a collection of instruments sufficient in size to accommodate a group of 10-15 players. This reality is slowly changing (one may refer to programs offered through Britannia Secondary School and Britannia Community Centre, the Sarah McLachlan Music Outreach, or Arbutus Middle School), and we are making progress in establishing this type of ensemble within the secondary music curriculum.

**Percussion Ensemble Repertoire: Resources**

Once one has decided upon the type of ensemble to offer, the issue of repertoire selection can be addressed. There are a number of resources available to educators and performers who wish to learn more about the Western percussion ensemble, in general, or who wish to find repertoire appropriate for the number of players, types of instruments to be included, and the various abilities of students within the ensemble.
For example, for those seeking a comprehensive overview of the percussion ensemble’s origins in Western art music, and a detailed list of literature for this type of ensemble from the first half of the twentieth century, one may refer to the excellent series of articles written by Michael Rosen and Larry Vanlandingham in *The Percussionist* (see bibliographic information listed below).

In addition, one may wish to consult the following sources:

(1) **The Percussive Arts Society**

The Percussive Arts Society (<www.pas.org>) is a wonderful resource for performers, educators, and percussion enthusiasts. Its online research archive (available through subscription) contains back issues of *The Percussionist*, *Percussive Notes*, and *Percussive Notes Research Edition*. Through their search engine, one can quickly uncover articles pertaining to many aspects of percussion, including repertoire appropriate for the secondary-school or post-secondary percussion ensemble, in addition to the articles mentioned above. Each new issue of *Percussive Notes* also contains a section entitled “Selected Reviews of New Percussion Literature and Recordings.” This peer-reviewed section highlights some of latest contributions to the field of percussion.

(2) **Print Music Retailers’ Catalogues**

Steve Weiss Music’s online catalogue of print music (<www.steveweissmusic.com>) is an invaluable resource. Detailed listings for percussion solo, duo, ensemble, and mixed chamber ensemble are given, and include required instrumentation, number of players needed, and level of difficulty.

Other good places to look include <sheetmusicplus.com> and <amazon.ca>. In the latter case, try searching for “percussion quartet” or “percussion quintet” in the “books” search category.

(3) **Publishers’ Websites or Online Catalogues**

Notable publishers of percussion music include Alfred Publishing/ Warner Brothers, Boosey and Hawkes, Honey Rock, Southern Music Company, and Universal Edition. Music for Percussion, a prominent publishing house created by Paul Price in the mid-twentieth century, is no longer active; however, other companies still carry its inventory. Accessing the website or online catalogues of these publishers will enable one to search through dozens of widely available compositions, and, in some cases, to hear recorded samples of the music itself.

(4) **Recordings of Prominent Percussion Ensembles**
Another place to access information about repertoire, and to hear the repertoire being performed at an extremely high level, is through the recordings of prominent professional percussion ensembles including Nexus (Canada), So Percussion (USA), Kroumata (Sweden), Percussion Group the Hague (Netherlands), Synergy (Australia), and Amadinda (Hungary). While much of the repertoire performed by these groups may not be suitable for a beginning-level ensemble, these groups provide a valuable model of musical excellence to which students can strive to emulate.

(5) Local Experts

The greater Vancouver area is fortunate to have several individuals who coach percussion ensembles on a regular basis, or who are very knowledgeable about the field of percussion. Those who are interested in learning more about the percussion ensemble and its repertoire may wish to contact Graham Boyle (Capilano College), Bob Caldwell (Douglas College, Kwantlen University College), Salvador Ferreras (Vancouver Community College), Martin Fisk (West Vancouver Youth Band), or Vern Griffiths (University of British Columbia). For those who reside in Victoria or on Vancouver Island, Dave Humphrey (Victoria Conservatory) and Bill Linwood (University of Victoria) are excellent resources.

Repertoire Suggestions: The Western Percussion Ensemble

The following chart contains a list of recommended repertoire for Western percussion ensembles at the intermediate to advanced secondary-school and undergraduate levels. Many of these compositions are considered early masterworks, and serve as an ideal introduction to the repertoire for this type of chamber group. These pieces are suggested also because their instrumentation makes them feasible at many secondary schools.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Written</th>
<th>Players</th>
<th>Publisher/ Date</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benson, Warren</td>
<td>Trio for Percussion</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Music for Percussion, 1961</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Three Pieces</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>G. Shirmer, 1960</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cage, John</td>
<td>First Construction</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Henmar/C.F. Peters, 1962</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Living Room Music</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Henmar/C.F. Peters, 1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second Construction</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Henmar, 1978</td>
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<td></td>
<td>She is Asleep</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Chávez, Carlos</td>
<td>Toccata</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Belwin Mills, 1954</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tambuco</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Three Brothers</td>
<td>1951</td>
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<td>Music for Percussion, 1954</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Percussion Music</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Music for Percussion, 1954</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chamber Piece</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Music for Percussion, 1962</td>
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<td>Cowell, Henry</td>
<td>Ostinato Pianissimo</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Merrion/Presser, 1958/1979</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pulse</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Music for Percussion, 1971</td>
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<td>Harrison, Lou</td>
<td>Fifth Simfony</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Belwin-Mills/Warner, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bomba</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Belwin-Mills/Warner, 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canticle no. 1</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Music for Percussion, 1965</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Labyrinth no. 3</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Music for Percussion, nd</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Song of Queztecoatl</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Music for Percussion, 1962</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fugue for Percussion</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Music for Percussion, 1962</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harrison/ Cage</td>
<td>Double Music</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>C.F. Peters, 1961</td>
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<td>Hovhaness, Alan</td>
<td>October Mountain</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>C.F. Peters, 1957</td>
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<td>Roldán, Amadeo</td>
<td>Ritmicas V</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Southern Music Publ., 1967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ritmicas VI</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Southern Music Publ., 1967</td>
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<td>Varèse, Edgard</td>
<td>Ionisation</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Colfranc/F. Colombo, 1967</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Numerous other percussionists/composers and educational authors have written for the percussion ensemble in recent years, including John Beck, Bobby Christian, Anthony Cirone, Elliot Del Borgo, Siegfried Fink, Mark Ford, Lynn Glassock, Murray Houllif, William Kraft, Stan Leonard, David Mancini, William Schinstine, and Michael Udow. In addition, researching other prominent figures in the history and development of the percussion ensemble, such as Paul Price and Dick Schory, will reveal a great deal about the early repertoire for this ensemble, and the reasons for its current directions.

**Repertoire Suggestions: The World Music Percussion Ensemble**

For those interested in establishing a world music percussion ensemble, or in incorporating samples of world music into the repertoire for the Western percussion ensemble, numerous excellent educational materials are available. The following list provides an introduction to world music ensembles in general, and hand-drumming ensembles in particular:


**Conclusions**

We are quickly approaching the sixtieth anniversary of the percussion ensemble’s inclusion in the mainstream music curriculum. Furthermore, it has been almost seventy years since John Cage made some of his most important contributions to this idiom,
and almost eighty years since Roldán and Varèse composed their seminal works. An even longer history precedes us when we consider the prominent role that percussion instruments and percussion ensembles have played in the expressive cultural traditions of many non-Western societies. In other words, we have a very solid foundation upon which to build a cutting-edge program of percussion instruction that includes the percussion ensemble as a central component.

Many developments in the past several decades, such as an ever-expanding repertory of high quality compositions for the percussion ensemble, and the widespread growth of vibrant percussion programs in secondary and post-secondary institutions, provide encouragement to educators who are thinking of adding a percussion ensemble to their music programs. There are numerous printed and online resources available to assist one through the various stages of implementing a percussion ensemble, and their are experts in some larger communities who can provide excellent advice.

We clearly recognize the beneficial role that the percussion ensemble plays in the musical development of the percussion student. It assists in teaching advanced musical competencies, develops listening skills that can be applied to other contexts, and encourages teamwork among the percussion section. We realize also that it serves as a complementary creative outlet to the large ensembles in which percussionists regularly perform. By establishing a percussion ensemble and encouraging students to participate in it early in their musical development, one has a unique opportunity to provide a valuable and lasting musical experience.

Bibliography


The author encourages your questions and comments. Please feel free to contact him via email at <daniel.tones@gmail.com>.

**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.