

How To Purchase Concert Percussion Accessories

by Neil W. Grover

A more accurate title for this piece should be, “Concert Percussion Accessories; What To Purchase?” Buying is the easy part, deciding *what* to purchase is the task at hand.

Acquiring a viable array of instruments for a student percussionist is an important, yet often neglected, part of a music educator’s core responsibilities. All too often, I encounter band rooms where quality percussion accessories are lacking, and unacceptable substitutes are used. For some reason, percussion accessories seem to be relegated to bottom of a music educator’s line item budget. Excuses like “my percussionists just don’t take care of the accessories” or “we already have a (rock) tambourine” breed an atmosphere whereby students are forced to play on inadequate instruments which would make even a pro like me sound unmusical! Playing musically is difficult enough with a good quality triangle, no less a cheap piece of junk! It’s important to realize that quality should not come at the expense of quantity. While being sensitive to budget restrictions is more important than ever, it is possible for the average music department to identify, and (over time), purchase an array of quality percussion accessories, which when cared for, provide many years of trouble free service.

Percussion accessories run the gamut from whip to flexatone: triangle to log drum. For the purpose of this article, I will concentrate on those instruments which are most critical and basic to the educational percussion program.

Cymbals

Cymbals are instruments of great artistic expression. Just listen to a recording of Tchaikovsky’s “Romeo & Juliet Overture”, or Debussy’s tone poem “La Mer.” Ah, those glorious overtones, which can only be produced by a good set of cymbals. There are a few general rules to observe when purchasing cymbals. The first is determination of size (diameter). A general size range is 16” - 20”. But, I would never



give 20" diameter cymbals (which I use often in the Boston Pops), to a young student. This would be akin to handing a little league player a bat used by the Boston Red Sox line up. Imagine a 14 year old swinging a major league bat! By the time the bat is swung over the plate, the ball would already be back in the pitcher's glove. Now, picture the same 14 year old struggling with cymbals that are too large and heavy, dragging every quarter pulse of a Sousa march! Unfortunately I often see this scenario. What to do? What size is appropriate? Here's the rule of thumb I use:

Maximum Size= AGE + 2.

So, a 14 year old student should use a 16" diameter pair of cymbals. The younger the student, the smaller the cymbal; an easy concept and one that will allow any age student percussionist to have complete control over the instrument, not the other way around. I also suggest avoiding the heavy weight size will work for 99% of the repertoire. While one pair of "hand cymbals" might be workable for elementary school programs, I suggest two pairs for Middle School and three pairs for a good High School program. Smaller cymbals work great for marches, with their repetitive punctuations, while the larger sizes help create the open sonorities which highlight a climatic musical phrase. Hand cymbals (or piatti) should always be fitted with leather straps NOT wooden handles. Wooden handles distort the sound and will eventually lead to cracks in the cymbal bell. I also highly recommend the use of leather pads, not the furry, wooly type. While many pros avoid the use of pads altogether as it does dampen some higher overtones, for school purposes, pad use is recommended.

In addition to hand cymbals, a good thin suspended cymbal is a necessity. I recommend one somewhere between 16"-18". A suspended cymbal should be fast speaking and be possess the ability to swell quickly when rolled on. Once again, the smaller size is best for younger players. While many schools use drum set cymbals for concert work, these cymbals are not designed to produce the quick, responsive shimmer that is so desired by concert percussionists. If at all possible, purchase at least one good orchestral suspended cymbal.

Tambourine

If I had \$1 for every school that uses a headless rock tambourine for concert work, I could retire a rich man! A proper concert tambourine should always have a quality head. Most pros prefer natural skin, but there are synthetics available also (good for humid areas). A head is necessary to play finger rolls and for proper rhythmic articulation. I find a good solid shell with a staggered double row



of jingles sounds best. While a 10" diameter tambourine seems to be the most popular size, for younger players (elementary & middle school) I would recommend considering an 8" model as it's easier for smaller hands to control. Quality of the jingle alloy is paramount to good sound and articulation. While numerous alloys are available, I strongly suggest a sound that is bright, full and articulate. This will help even your weak players achieve good rhythmic clarity. Many tambourines feature hand hammered jingles, which are the choice of pros. These tambourines cost a little more, but what they provide is a plethora of sonorities and dramatic contrasts. Avoid cheap tambourines with tin jingles; they will add nothing to your ensemble's sound.

Triangle

The dreaded triangle happens to be one of my favorite percussion accessories! Believe it or not, there are good quality triangles and many terrible ones. The



better instruments are made from quality steel or bronze. They are available in sizes from 4" to 10", but for my use a 6"-9" triangle produces the best results for concert work. Of course, wouldn't it be nice to have a few sizes on hand to vary the sound color? The suspension line is as important the triangle itself. Recently, a young percussionist asked me to look at her school's triangle. She thought something was wrong, as it

sounded "dead". The instrument itself was fine, but it was tied to a metal clamp using a bootlace! If your triangle doesn't ring, odds are it is being dampened by a heavy suspension line. I strongly recommend that all triangles be suspended from a clip or mount using a very thin monofilament line. Fishing line works great! All professional clips come already so equipped, and in fact have a secondary "safety" line, in case of breakage. Don't forget a good set of at least three weights of triangle beaters.

Woodblock

A good solid woodblock is a staple of the percussion section. Today, there are many synthetic blocks available and while these are extremely durable, many compromise sound quality. Properly cared for, a real woodblock should last many years. Available in many sizes and materials, I prefer the sound of a 9" size maple



woodblock. Avoid the woodblocks with two sides to play on (high/low). What you get is a block that produces two inferior sonorities. If you're playing Anderson's "Syncopated Clock" get two quality woodblocks sounding approx a minor third apart, like 7" and 9" models. To produce the best sound, make sure your percussionists use a hard rubber mallet on the woodblock, NOT a drum stick!

Temple Blocks



Temple Blocks usually come in sets of five and are made of both real wood and synthetic materials. Though originally found only in music of the Far East, they have found their way into the standard percussion setup. Once again, the synthetics are durable but at the expense of sound quality.

"The Kitchen Sink"

While I am limited in the size and scope of this article, there are hundreds of additional percussion accessory instruments, some esoteric, some for world music, and, some applicable for daily concert work. I can't mention all these by name, but there are volumes that list and describe the full compliment of percussion accessories. Perhaps the best resource for help in purchasing concert percussion accessories is your local percussion educator. S/he is usually "in the know" when it comes to percussion instruments. A good percussionist will spend a great deal of thought, time, and effort, assembling the proper array of instruments for a particular work. As such, they could be a great help planning your inventory needs. Additional help can be acquired from membership in the Percussive Arts Society (www.pas.org), the premier organization of percussionists worldwide. Lastly, a good percussion retail specialist will be invaluable in helping you choose percussion instruments that will serve your needs and not break your budget! Help is all around. Just ask and ye shall receive.

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