

A Method for Assigning Percussion Parts in Community Bands

~ By Roy Halliday, Laurel Hahn and Pat Wiggers

Picture this scenario: A band gathers for its weekly rehearsal just following a successful weekend concert. All are proud and satisfied with a performance well done, but anxious to get started on the new music found in their folder. After a short period, the conductor announces the first selection, and all pull out their music, quiet down, and wait for the first downbeat. But what is the large clamor in the back of the band? Why can't they ever be ready on time? Why are they talking when we should be playing? What is wrong with those percussionists?

Percussion sections differ from other sections in several ways. They have a large variety of instruments including many kinds of drums, and a variety of mallet and accessory instruments like chimes, bells, cymbals, triangles, etc. Skill levels also vary. Some players "do it all," but most percussionists have good skills on some instruments and not on others. For example, a percussionist may be a good snare drum player, but not play mallets very well. Sometimes, players from other sections may fill in and require tutoring in basic percussion techniques. Finally, instruments may need to be physically moved between pieces to make them easily accessible to the players.

Part formats also vary. Parts may be labeled as Percussion 1, 2, 3, etc., with individual players assigned several instruments to play at different sections of the piece. Other formats have separate pages for principal instruments (snare, bass drum, timpani, mallets) and additional pages for accessory instruments. Sometimes all instruments appear on the same page, with different instruments assigned to different staves.

All this must be considered during the assignment process, prior to rehearsal. Generally this is done by the principal percussionist, section leader, or by general agreement among the players. In some cases, this is relatively easy when sections have been together for a few seasons. However, in most bands, personnel may change from year to year, and the section may not be well-balanced. For instance, there may be three strong timpani players – remember that only one can play at a time – but no one who plays mallets.

The issues require an easy and comprehensive method of assigning parts. This is important not only for the individual percussionists but for the conductor as well. How many times have we heard the conductor ask, "Where is the slap stick? It's in the score but I don't

Figure 1: Sample Percussion Spreadsheet filled out for a concert

Percussion Assignments –Spring Band Festival -- Feb. 23, 2013												
TITLE	B.D.	Snare	Timpani	Chimes	Bells	Xylo Vibes	Cr. Cym	Sus.Cym	Triangle	Other	TACET	
1 American Elegy	Debra		Trevor			Vibes- Nancy		Will	Katherine		L G M	
2 Purcell Suite	Katherine	George	Nancy								L M D W T	
3 Arabian Dances	George + wood block	Will + wood block	Trevor		Nancy	Xylo-Laurel		Mitch + claves	Debra + wind chm.	Kath.-Tamb +rain stick		
4 Clarinets Allegro	Laurel	Will					Mitch				K G D T N	
5 Welsh Folk Suite	Nancy	George	Will	Laurel	Katherine		Trevor		Debra		M	
6 National Fencibles	Laurel	Trevor	Nancy				Mitch				K G W N	
7 Penny Lane	Debra	Trevor	Will			Xylo-Laurel Vib-Nancy		Mitch	George - bongos	Katherine- Tambourine		
8 Adrenaline Engines	George	Trevor + ride cym	Nancy		Laurel	Xylo-Will	Mitch + sus cym		Debra + Wd BIK	Katherine brake drum		
											TACET	
	1	Laurel	Additional Equipment to Get Ready								L - 2	
	2	Katherine	Percussion Room				Percussion Cabinet				K - 2	
	3	George	Bongos				Wood block				G - 3	
	4	Mitch	Stand for wind chimes				Wind chimes				M - 3	
	5	Debra	Hi Hat				Brake drum				D - 2	
	6	Will	Xylo				Claves				W - 2	
	7	Trevor	Vibes				Tambourine				T - 2	
	8	Nancy	Sus cym								N - 2	

... Percussion Assignments

see anyone covering it?" This is followed by someone frantically looking to find the slap stick part.

Our method eliminates these problems, and reduces the complexity of the assignment process. It is easy to keep track of who is playing what and when. Parts needing to be covered for absent players can be quickly seen and reassigned. The chart provides a comprehensive view of the percussion assignments for an entire concert program.

The method uses a spread sheet with horizontal rows containing the compositions, and vertical columns listing each percussion instrument. Individual cells contain the names of specific players. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show a sample spreadsheet filled out for a particular concert of the Valparaiso Community/University Concert Band and the instructions for using the spreadsheet to efficiently organize your percussion section.

Ed. note: The percussion spreadsheet and the instructions for use will be posted on the ACB web site as a resource. It will be posted in the public area in order to make it as widely accessible as possible. Many thanks to the team for creating this resource.

Individual cells can contain other information besides the player's name. For example, in "Arabian Dances," Will plays wood block part

in addition to snare drum. If a part is unfilled, a small "x" in that cell is a reminder to determine who can cover it.

A spreadsheet is easily adaptable to the needs of different bands, and can be changed from concert to concert. It can be adapted to more complex situations, such as when each person plays several instruments. For example, the bass drum player may cover triangle and claves, while the snare drummer also covers the wood block.

The basic method can be done by hand with the help of a copy machine. However, spread sheet programs like Excel (PC) or Numbers (Mac) provide flexibility and save valuable time. It is definitely worth learning one of these time-saving programs. The end result will be a well-organized percussion section, and a happy director!

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Figure 2: Instructions for using the Percussion Assignments Spreadsheet

Instructions for the Percussion Assignment Spreadsheet

1. Check with your director about any personnel changes. Arrange to get the new percussion music a week or so before the first rehearsal.
2. Write titles in concert order in the first column on the spreadsheet. Go through the parts for each piece and pencil a check in each cell (box) where a player is needed. Use an X for xylophone and V for vibes in that cell. Begin penciling players' initials in the cells. (Initials are less to erase when you change your mind!)
3. Know (or learn) your players' strengths and weaknesses. Assign better players to difficult parts and important solos. Watch for easy parts that less-skilled players can play with confidence. If you know that someone new will be joining the section, call or email them and ask about their background, strengths and preferences.
4. If you have many players, pencil initials of Tacet players in that column. Total the times each players sits out, and adjust assignments so everyone takes turns.
5. Move people to different instruments from piece to piece, so they can improve their skills in different areas. You will develop a more well-rounded section than if one person always plays timpani. When players are comfortable on multiple instruments, you can be more flexible with last-minute changes.
6. When you finish tentative assignments, type the names in the spreadsheet. If your players are covering several instruments each, you can fit more words in the cells by using a smaller font or "wrapping the text." In Excel, select the desired cell, then go to "Format cells" in the tool bar. Click on "Alignment," then enable "Wrap Text." For example, if Barbara plays both snare and suspended cymbals, you can fit "Barbara + sus cym" in one box in the Snare Drum column.
7. Pencil each player's name and assignment on all of their parts. Sort the music into John's parts, Mary's parts, etc. When handing out the music, explain that changes may be necessary "for the good of the band." Let them know that it's OK to request an easier part if they think one is too difficult.
8. Email the spreadsheet to your director. Make two copies to take to rehearsal – one for yourself for quick reference, and the other where all the percussionists can check it.
9. Write notes on your copy during the first rehearsal. Make changes at home, print a new chart for the next rehearsal, and send the edited version to your director.
10. Instead of feeling exhausted after a parts-grabbing session on new music, enjoy your efficiently organized percussion section and have fun!