PROPER PLAYING AREA

Instantly Improve the Sound of Your Percussion Section

Throughout my experiences teaching young percussionists and music educators, I have found that one of the first fundamental areas of percussion technique to be overlooked in both rehearsal and performance is the use of proper playing areas. This simple awareness in both students and directors can drastically improve the sound of the percussion section, and the ensemble as a whole. Perhaps it is the stigma of going from practicing alone to playing amidst the watchful eyes and ears of your peers, or the adrenaline that comes with performing to a live audience, but I have repeatedly witnessed even seasoned percussionists produce undesirable sounds on their instruments due to a simple lack of focus and concentration. In this session, I will discuss proper playing areas for the most often utilized percussion instruments in an attempt to both inform beginning music educators, and serve as a reminder to veteran directors to always watch and listen for this seemingly obvious, but vastly effective performance tool.

Snare Drum

Let's begin with the snare drum - perhaps the most utilized of all percussion instruments. The tendency for young students is to step up to the drum and play right in the centre of the drumhead. However, for medium to loud dynamics, the desirable playing area is actually slightly outside of the centre, as seen here. The sound becomes more resonant because you are now playing on a tighter area of the drumhead. As dynamics diminish, it is common practice to shift farther towards the edge of the head, moving in a straight line out from the body.

The drum should also be setup so that the snares on the underside of the drum follow this same straight line, as shown here. This setup ensures that the student is always playing above the snares and therefore achieving the most precise and crisp tone possible. A simple test of playing a passage first above the snares, then outside of the snares will demonstrate this change in tone.

Tambourine

We will move next to the tambourine which is quite similar to the snare drum in terms of proper playing area. You can follow the same guidelines shown in the first snare drum photograph, playing slightly off-centre for medium to loud dynamics, and closer to the edge for softer dynamics. The straight line we now follow moves outward from the point where the student holds the tambourine, as shown here. It is worth mentioning that an easy way to quickly improve soft tambourine tones is to ensure the student is playing right above one of the jingles and still producing the "jingle" sound, along with the sound of the tambourine head. A balanced and even combination of these two sounds should always be a goal when playing the tambourine.

Bass Drum

The bass drum is also similar to the snare drum and tambourine in some ways. Playing slightly off-centre gives the desired tone, even in the softer dynamic range. The bass drum is large enough that this off-centre area can cover the full range of dynamics needed. On the marching field, bass drummers will usually play all medium to loud dynamics right in the centre of the head, and move outwards as they get softer. This achieves a more defined attack which projects better in the outdoor stadium setting. Playing in the centre of the head is utilized in concert playing as well, but is generally reserved for more rhythmic passages, or for when a "punchier" sound is desired, such as when playing a march.

Timpani

Next, we will discuss timpani, which I feel display the greatest transformation in sound when shifting from an improper to a proper playing area. The performer should play roughly one-third of the distance from the edge of the drum to the centre, as shown here. Similar to the concert bass drum, it is quite easy to achieve a great tone throughout the majority of dynamic ranges in this single playing area. Students should be careful not to move too close to the edge of the drum, as the sound becomes quite thin, and no longer produces a full, rich sound, which is so fundamental to the role of the timpani.

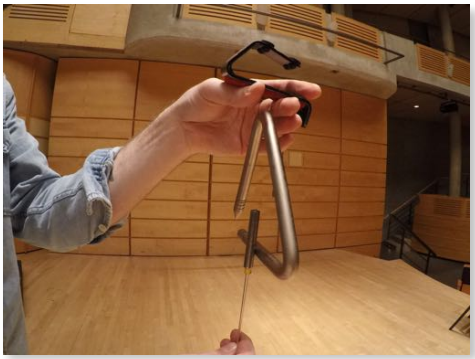
Suspended Cymbal

The suspended cymbal is also one of the most utilized percussion instruments, and can produce beautiful swells of sound when played properly. For single strokes on the cymbal, the proper playing area is roughly the outside one-third of the cymbal as shown here.
If a student plays the cymbal too close to the bell or centre, the tone becomes more pointed, and you lose the vibration that characterizes the suspended cymbal sound. Playing on the bell is acceptable when called for by the composer, but should be avoided otherwise.

When playing rolls on the suspended cymbal, the goal is to get the entire cymbal vibrating as soon as possible, as this will produce the most full-bodied and lush tone possible. In order to achieve this, we will position our mallets at opposite edges of the cymbal, as shown here. This will ensure that no matter what dynamic we begin our roll at, the sound will always be as full as possible.

Triangle

The triangle can also display a significant change in sound when moving from improper to proper playing areas. For single strokes, the student should strike the triangle in the centre of the bottom side. The quality of tone also changes depending on the angle at which the beater strikes the bottom side. For a thinner, simpler, more pointed sound, the student should strike the bottom straight on, as shown here.



For a sound that is darker, and containing more overtones, the student should strike the bottom at a 45 degree angle, as shown here. This 45 degree angle causes the ends of the triangle to vibrate opposite of each other, producing more overtones, and a more lush tone.

When playing rolls on the triangle, the student should move to the right corner of the bottom side, and alternate strokes between the bottom and top of the enclosed corner, as shown here. The roll sound can also be manipulated depending on the angle of the beater, and will produce varying tones according to the angles described earlier.

Mallet Percussion

When playing mallet percussion instruments, the student should always avoid the area where the yarn runs through the bar, also known as the “node”. Because the bar is hollowed out at these points to allow yarn or chord to be threaded through and hold the bar in place, the sound is much less resonant than when played elsewhere. Students should become accustomed to playing either on the edge of the bars, or right in the centre, as shown here.

It is common practice to play on the edge of bars when playing accidentals in the upper manual, and to play right in the centre of the bar when playing in the lower manual. This makes it slightly easier, especially for younger students, as they don't have to reach quite as far to play the upper manual. This change in tone is quite obvious, and will immediately improve the overall sound of a student's mallet playing.

So there you have it - simple changes in technique that instantly produce higher quality sounds. Once a percussionist or director becomes accustomed to more desirable tones on these instruments, the use of improper playing areas should immediately be distinguishable to the trained ear. However, without this awareness, these fundamental flaws often go unnoticed. These techniques apply to all realms of percussion playing - from the marching band field, to the concert hall, to the drum throne of a jazz ensemble. All it takes is an ongoing attention to detail to produce quality results. By implementing and adhering to these simple guidelines, it is my hope that you witness both an improvement to your percussion section sound, and a richer, fuller sonic addition to your ensemble.