

See the Music: The Role of Gestures in Percussion Performance

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A successful percussion performance, whether it pertains to solo literature, orchestra, marching band, concert band, percussion ensemble, or any other musical ensemble, relies on many factors that extend well beyond the notated music from which many performers draw. Although technical mastery of the skills required in a given piece is certainly a prerequisite for a successful final product, the performer must also work to create an avenue for audience engagement in a way that simply reproducing the printed material does not. Truly effective performers of music reveal a portion of their soul through their performance, a feature that captivates audience members and is achieved by an individualized interpretation of the musical directions offered by the printed score.

Consider the following techniques percussionists commonly face: a shake roll performed as a crescendo on a tambourine, whole notes performed on a concert bass drum, and a note marked staccato on the marimba. Each of these techniques should be enhanced visually with an associated gesture that enables the listener to perceive the effect intended by the performer.

The Importance of Gestures

Percussionists often face several obstacles in conveying fundamental musical elements, such as note durations and articulations, because of specific instrumental limitations. For example, a sixteenth note and a whole note performed on the snare drum literally sound the same when performed. That is, the duration of each note will essentially sound the same length of time. As a result, it is vital that percussionists learn

to perform in a way that accurately reflects the true musical intention. This can be accomplished through a visual representation of the performer's conceptualization of the music during the performance. When combined with the sound created on the instrument by the performer, the visual stimulus projected toward the audience will allow those present to *see* the music as opposed to only hearing it.

Research examining the role of visual information in the performance and perception of music shows that vision plays a useful role. When performances of music are viewed as entertainment, then most visual information observed by the viewer is considered part of the show. Although very little, if any, acoustical difference is created through the use of gestures, the performer can, in fact, change the way the note is perceived by the audience. Skilled performers can strategically manipulate audience experience in order to achieve a desired result. This transforms the spectator into an active participant and creates an engagement between the performer and audience member throughout the performance.¹

See the Music, A Three-Step Process

Allowing the audience to *see* the music through a percussion performance involves three main successive steps. The musician must first physically see the notated music on the score when rehearsing (assuming, of course, the music to be performed is notated). The performer should then conceptualize, or *see*, how the music would best be represented visually during a performance. The last step takes place during the performance and involves the forward projection of the performer's embodied music in order to allow the audience to *see* the music and allow audience engagement.

1. Physically Seeing the Music

The genesis of this three-step process takes place during the reading of the notated music. The musician must first physically read what the composer has instructed the performer to execute. This involves specific tasks such as informing the percussionist when to strike, what to strike, how hard to strike, and how fast or slow to strike. Other specific instructions to the performer may include stylistic expressions such as legato, staccato, marcato, and tenuto. In addition, instructions are often included regarding the specific type of stick, mallet, or other implement with which to perform.

Although these instructions can be detailed and helpful, it only exposes the percussionist to a very shallow part of what should eventually become a much deeper and meaningful experience. A literal rendering of the notated music with little or no personal interpretation from the performer can result in a performance with no musical meaning. In addition to fulfilling the composer's written instructions on the score, the musician must also consider how the audience will perceive these instructions during the live performance.

2. Conceptualizing the Music

Once the performer has viewed the printed music, another type of visualization should begin – conceptualization. This is necessary in order to rehearse the music in a way that will ensure a satisfactory final product. The performer must begin preparation by drawing upon past experiences similar to what the final performance situation will likely include. For example, typical formal performances will usually include the performer on a stage, the performer's instrument, a seated audience, a dimly lit room, etc.

Although the performer does not remember every detail of each past performance experience, an abstract model can be constructed based on the invariant aspects the repeated encounters have in common.²

The musician should then strive to rehearse the music with an awareness of how the audience might perceive, or *see*, the visual representation of the performer's conceptualization of the music while on stage. For example, because a whole note on the snare drum will essentially sound the same as a 16th note on the same instrument, the musician should consider performing these notes differently depending on the situation. That is, the visual representation of each note should be consistent with the notation in the score. This technique helps percussionists visually sustain a single stroke on their instrument. In general, single strokes performed on most percussion instruments produce relatively short durations. In contrast, wind players have the ability to sustain notes based on the amount of air produced from their bodies, while string players have virtually no limitations regarding note durations.

The percussionist should conceptualize a visual representation of the particular note in question before rehearsing it. This will help the performer rehearse the conceptualized motion along with the necessary motor movements already involved with the particular note. Rehearsing in this manner will help the performer embody the work, a significant factor in determining how the audience will *see* the music.

Revealing Note Durations

Conceptualization can help percussionists reveal note durations during a live performance through the use of gestures. For example, two successive whole notes performed on a concert bass drum can be interpreted and performed differently. If the whole notes are performed with only the minimal amount of work required to produce the sounds, a motionless moment will occur following the first stroke until the preparation is made for the second stroke. This will result in the audience's perception of a note duration that is less than four beats. In contrast, if the whole notes are performed by producing full, fluid strokes that visually connect the two successive strokes, the entire note durations will be successfully represented visually, thereby allowing the audience to *see* the entire duration of the whole notes.

Revealing Articulations

Another area in which percussionists should conceptualize their music is through the performance of articulations. Although altering the stroke in order to achieve different types of articulations is necessary for proper sound production, the subtle difference in sound can become more effective when coupled with a visual representation of the performer's conceptualization of a more visually effective stroke. For example, when performing a 16th note marked staccato followed by a quarter rest on the marimba (at a medium tempo), the performer must demonstrate a specific technique that helps to show the shorter note duration.

First, the performer must execute a full stroke. By definition, a full stroke is one in which the stick begins in the up position and returns to the same position at the

conclusion of the stroke. This full range of motion visually represents the stroke before and after the attack on the marimba bar. Because the note is to be performed staccato, the entire motion of the stroke should be quick, or with greater velocity than what would normally be required if the note was not marked staccato. This is similar to how a pianist would perform notes marked staccato on the piano. The difference, however, is that the pianist can directly affect the duration of the note by physically pressing down the key for the desired length before releasing.

In contrast to the staccato stroke, the percussionist can visually represent a tenuto articulation as well. The percussionist must conceptualize a stroke motion that is slower than the 'normal' stroke that is not marked with a specific articulation. This stroke should visually match the intended qualities that result from tenuto articulations; a smooth and connected motion should result which enables percussionists to visually sustain these notes for their full time value.

Creating Silent Music

Another example of how the execution of a conceptualized stroke can influence the way it is heard is through air drumming. By simply pretending to perform on the instrument by air drumming, a sensation is created that something is happening. This is similar to being indoors and observing a tree move in the wind outside. Although the observer is unable to hear any sound from the tree, an imagined sound of the tree, the rustling of leaves, is present. A logical connection is made by association as the listener understands and anticipates the sound.

A marimbist who desires to create the effect of a rolled chord fading away completely may choose to implement the air drumming technique into their performance. This can be accomplished by performing a rolled chord normally with full contact with the bars, before executing a gradual decrescendo until no contact with the bars is being produced. At this time the performer should continue executing the motion of the roll just slightly above the bars in order to prevent physical contact, but close enough to ensure that the listener still *hears* the music. This is an effective way to achieve the softest dynamic in music, the ‘silent’ dynamic, and helps to illustrate the point that sound is always happening as long as the mind can *see* it.³

Hand-Held Percussion

Conceptualization of proper performance in order to achieve the desired audience perception should not be limited to percussion instruments requiring sticks or mallets. A percussionist performing a shake roll on the tambourine should consider implementing some physical manipulation of the instrument during dynamic swells and fades. A shake roll that is to be performed as a crescendo can be performed by holding the tambourine at waist level, or out of sight to the listener, and then gradually raised to eye level during the course of the crescendo. The same approach may be taken for decrescendos, only in reverse fashion. Other hand-held percussion instruments, such as maracas and shakers, can be performed in this manner as well. The physical placement of the instruments corresponds to the metaphorical direction of the dynamic contour, which helps the listener to *see* the music.

3. Performing the Music

The third and final step in allowing the audience to *see* the music takes place during the actual performance. The music can be *seen* through its embodiment by the performer. By embodying the music through the incorporation of physical movements in order to reflect the performer's personal conceptualization of the music, the listener will be more apt to *see* the music unfold. Through embodiment, the performer actively projects themselves forward to the audience, thereby increasing the likelihood that the listeners will project themselves forward and become musically engaged with the performer. Embodiment of the music should be evident through the revelation of the performer's own unique interpretation of the music. This interpretation should come from deep within, thus revealing a portion of the performer's soul.

Percussion Ensembles

The process of allowing the audience to *see* the music can be applied to live percussion ensemble performances. The ensemble that performs their music with the minimal amount of energy required to produce the proper sounds will not be received in the same way as the ensemble that embodies their music and reveals it through physical motion and gesture. The ensemble interested in presenting the music both visually and audibly will define what type of strokes to use and how to execute them in a uniform manner. In addition, the ensemble will communicate regarding their body posture and movements.

Although a specific choreographed presentation is not the intention when performing most percussion ensemble literature, a uniform technique with appropriate

body language will help to present an aesthetically pleasing visual representation of most works. For example, the body language from the members of an ensemble performing a quick, aggressive work should look quite different than the ensemble that is performing a ballad that utilizes rolled chords and legato phrasing.

Conclusion

The combination of physical gestures with the awareness of body language helps the performer to embody the music. This is a result from initially seeing the notated music, applying a personal interpretation, conceptualizing the music, and finally performing the music with a forward projection. When these processes are combined with the technical skills required for the particular piece, a successful performance can be achieved; one that reveals a portion of the performer's soul and creates an open avenue for true audience engagement. Although percussionists face several obstacles in conveying fundamental musical elements, the freedom of live performance allows musicians to visually reflect their conceptualization of the music. These opportunities should create open avenues for audience members to not only hear the music, but to fully experience it – to *see* the music.

¹ Schutz, Michael and Michael Kubovy. "Seeing Music: The Percussionists' Strategic Use of Gesture in Live Performance." Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Music and Gesture, RNCM, Mahchester, UK: 2006.

² Snyder, Bob. *Music and Memory: An Introduction*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology: 2000.

³ Glennie, Evelyn. "Hearing Essay." *Evelyn Glennie Official Website*.
http://www.evelyn.co.uk/hearing_essay.aspx. Accessed 10/15/09

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