

THE
Instrumentalist
September 1996 \$2.50



Of Musicians and Percussionists

An Interview with Dave Black

by Catherine Sell Lenzini

Equally adept at all percussion instruments, Dave Black is a versatile musician who performs with classical ensembles as well as popular recording artists. He was the timpanist for the opening ceremonies of the twenty-third Olympics held in Los Angeles. Black has written music for the Louie Bellson, Bill Watrous, and Ed Shaughnessy bands as well as method books for percussionists of all levels. He has received nine consecutive A.S.C.A.P. Popular Composer Awards, and two albums he collaborated on were nominated for Grammy awards: Anita O'Day's In A Mellow Tone and Louie Bellson's Airmail Special.

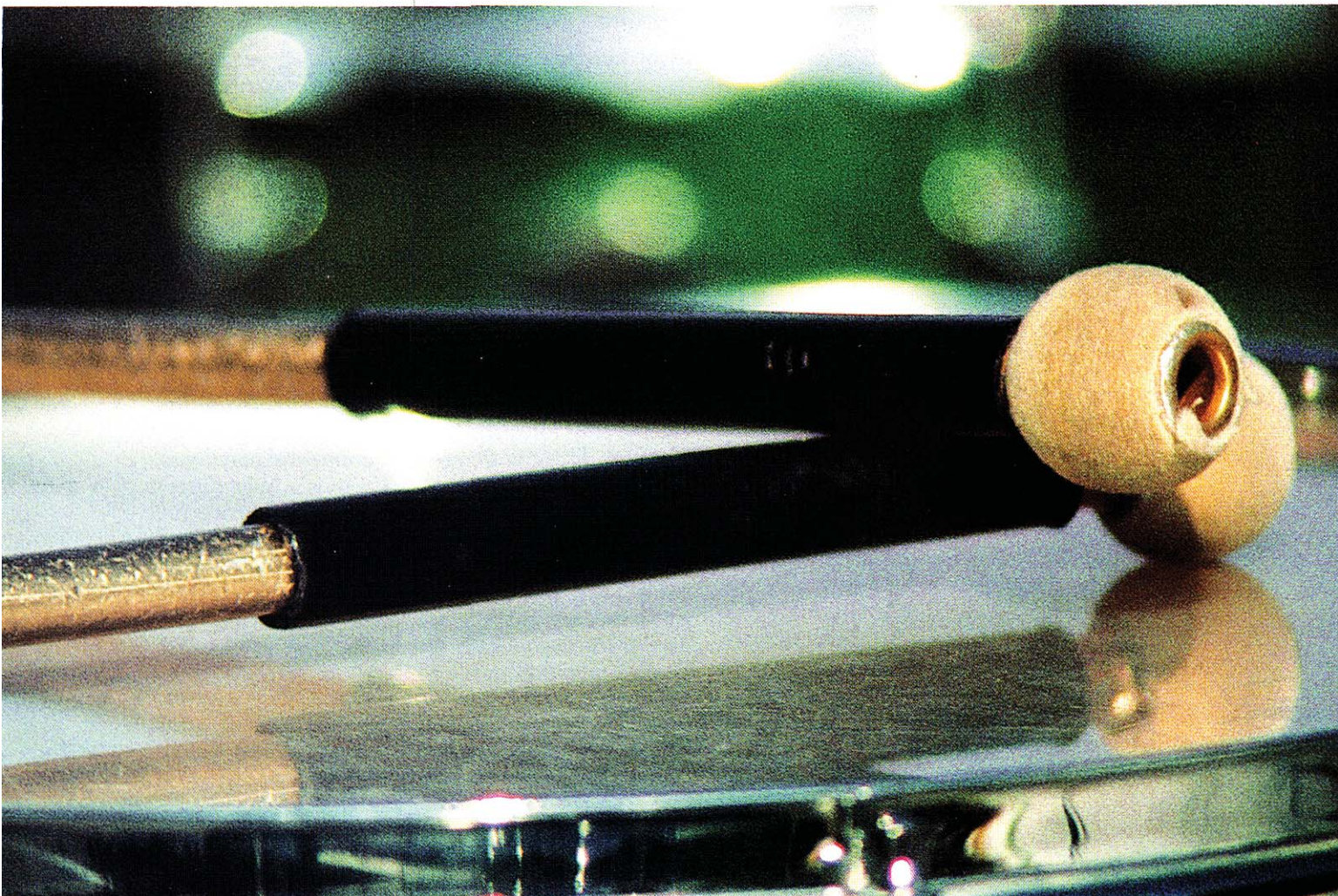
What should directors emphasize to teach percussionists to play musically?

While directors regularly give woodwind and brass players specific instructions on phrasing and dynamics, they often ignore percussionists except to correct major errors. When percussionists play with the same accents and phrasing as the rest of the ensemble, the musical effect is wonderful. Many percussionists know that their instruments have a

wider dynamic range than string and wind instruments, but they are not sufficiently taught the nuances of balancing their sounds with other sections of an ensemble instead of overpowering them.

The first component of articulation is choosing the best beater, stick, or mallet from the wide variety available. One of my pet peeves is how many school percussionists and directors pay no attention to which tool is used to hit a drum, cymbal, or accessory instrument. Too often the nearest one is picked up, and no one pays any attention to how it sounds. Directors should notice when a student uses a snare drum stick to play a triangle or a marimba mallet to hit the bass drum. There are proper tools to play each instrument, and a proper way to hold them. I don't know how many times I've walked into a rehearsal to find somebody holding a tambourine incorrectly, dampening the bass drum too much, or choking the sound of a triangle.

It is up to the director to teach percussionists that it is important to tune all drums, not just timpani. When a bass drum is tuned well it resonates beauti-

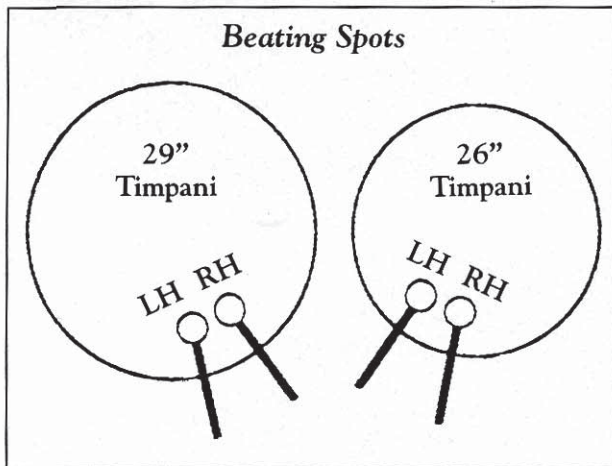


fully. Too little attention is given to tuning snare and bass drums or choosing the proper triangle or tambourine to play. When the lugs around a bass drum are too tight, the drum produces a pitch that's too high rather than a nice, resonant, low bottom sound. In addition to tightness there is an evenness to tuning that most people don't pay attention to. At each separate lug the pitch should match. Turning one lug ten times and another only once creates an uneven sound. The bass drum tuning for a concert band is sometimes different than that for a symphony orchestra because the literature is different. After new heads are played for awhile they have to be readjusted because they settle in. Directors should check the tuning of drums once every couple of months, and students should fine tune them each time they play.

What do directors often overlook when teaching percussionists?

Students with incorrect stick and instrument heights and body positions play either too close to the edge or too close to the center of the drum, which can produce sounds that are either too thin or too resonant.

Timpani should be arranged in a semicircle so that the beating spots are within reach as a player rotates from one drum to the next. Whether students sit or stand they should be close enough to the drums to strike the beating spots easily without extending the arms. The hands should be at a comfortable angle relative to the drums, so when the stick actually makes contact, the shaft is parallel to the floor.



Short students may choose to stand while playing, but sitting allows constant contact with the pedals for minute adjustments in intonation. When standing, the student's weight should be evenly distributed on both feet, with the torso bent slightly forward from the waist, which acts as a pivot for reaching all the drums. When playing from a sitting position, use a swivel stool to move between drums and pedals.

The first step for a mallet player is to stand approximately six inches away from the instrument

in the middle of the range to be played within and lean slightly toward the instrument with body weight distributed evenly between feet about 12 inches apart. When a position change is necessary, slide the feet from side-to-side rather than cross them. The position of the body may vary depending on the instrument and range.

The proper hand position is low and close to the keyboard with forearms pointing only slightly downward. The left mallet should be slightly in front of the right except when playing at the low end of the instrument while standing at the center, in which case the placement of the mallets is reversed. The proper playing position is for the mallet handles to be at right angles to each other.

Whether a student stands or sits when playing snare drum, the top of the drum should be slightly lower than his waistline. A player using a matched grip should position the drum flat from left-to-right but tilted slightly forward or backward to achieve the correct stick angle. When playing with the traditional grip, position the drum flat on the forward/backward plane but tilted downward toward the right because of the angle of the left stick.

The sticks should form approximately a 90-degree angle with the tips near, but not on, the center of the head. The striking space should be no larger than 1½ to 2 inches in diameter. Because the pitch of a drum varies considerably as you move from the center to the rim, each stick has to be an equal distance from the center to produce an even tone.

How does playing in a marching band help percussionists to improve as concert players?

Students learn to play with great precision in drum lines but sometimes lose track of dynamics and pound loudly rather than play with subtle contrasts. Marching bands generally memorize the half-time shows and play the same music over and over, which does nothing for students' sight-reading skills. Percussionists in a marching band may embellish or improvise the written part to fit their taste, making up beats that sound hipper and are more fun to play. However, the worst habit of drum line percussionists is carrying over the rudimental fashion of playing to an orchestra or concert band, where the literature calls for techniques that vary to fit the style of music. This transference of rudimental playing to these idioms is a detriment. There is a huge difference in the sound of marching and concert instruments and the techniques used to play those instruments. The sticks used in marching bands are generally heavy and thick, while those suitable for concert bands are much lighter and more delicate. The playing techniques do not transfer well from one idiom to the other either.

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How important is it for percussionists to change mallets?

Every timpanist should have pairs of soft, medium, and hard mallets, so they are able to play any passage. The same is true for marimbists, except they use yarn mallets. Snare drummers may use a heavier pair of sticks for loud passages and a lighter pair for the soft orchestral passages such as in *Bolero*. You wouldn't play the *Bolero* snare drum part with regular sticks but would probably use a pair with a smaller tip/bead size for that specific dynamic range. You should have an assortment of beaters for playing triangle and mallets for playing suspended cymbal. Orchestral bell mallets should include a hard rubber, a plastic, and a brass pair.

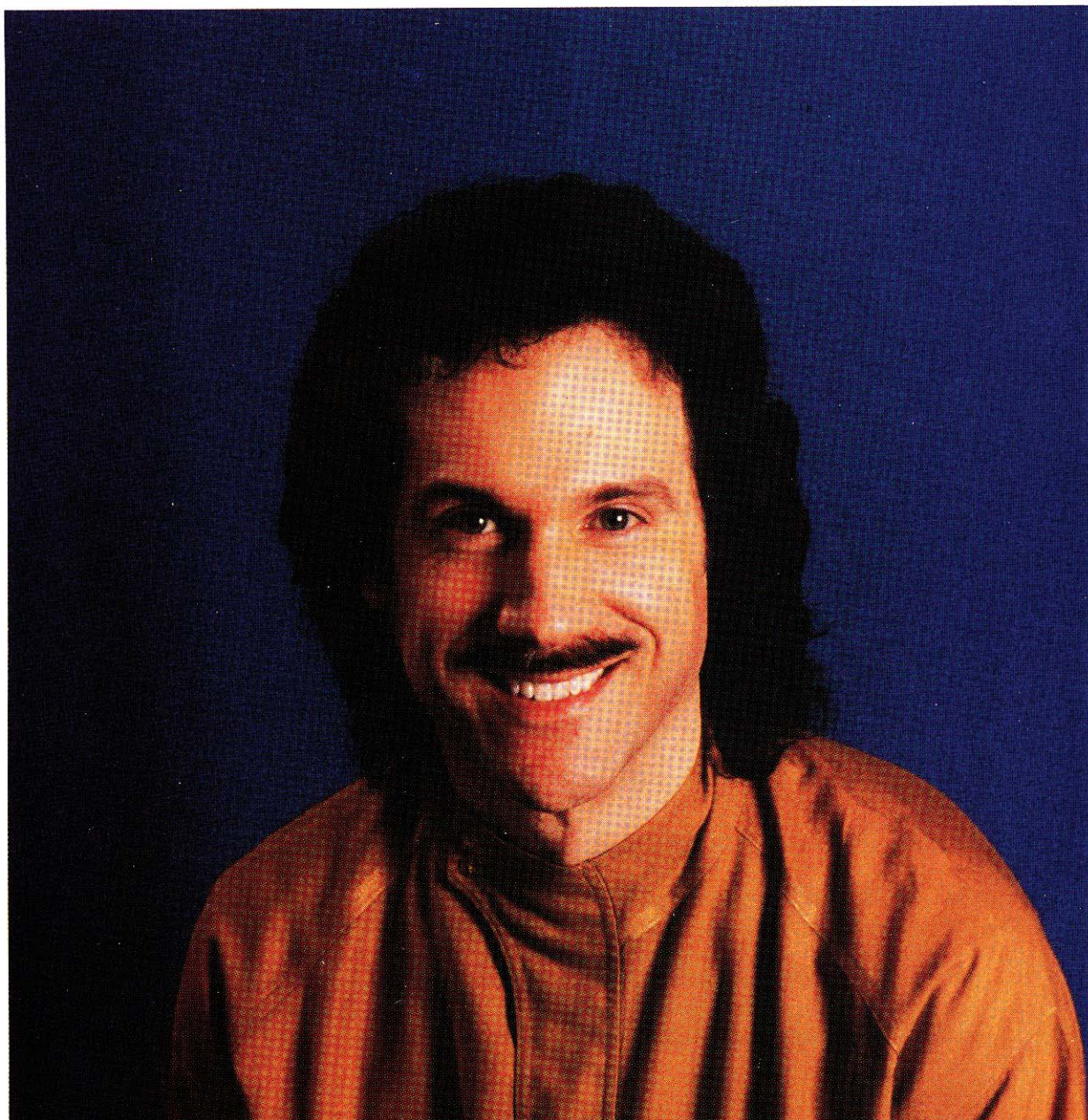
The choice of mallets should produce the desired articulation, style, and dynamic level. Sometimes a composer will specify hard or soft mallets, but for the most part conductors and percussionists have to know what sound they want and which mallets will produce that sound. Hard mallets are best for fast, rhythmic passages because they give definition to

each note. On a rapidly articulated eighth- or sixteenth-note timpani passage soft mallets will not produce the necessary definition. For a more punctuated, fortissimo sound that cuts through the ensemble, use hard mallets. By listening to the other sections, percussion students can often select the correct mallets to produce specific effects, but directors will have to correct any choice that does not blend with the overall sound.

How should directors teach students to tune timpani?

Timpani tuning is so difficult because percussionists often have had little ear training or experience in tuning a pitched instrument. However, directors should not tune the drums for students but teach them to match the pitch of a piano or chromatic pitch pipe. The next step is for students to practice tuning from a tuning fork, extrapolating the intervallic relationship.

Start tuning with the pedal in the low note position while humming the pitch and gently striking



the drum. Gradually increase the head tension by depressing the pedal until reaching the desired pitch. Always approach pitches from below, even when changing from a higher to a lower pitch. Although students learn to strike the drum with a stick when tuning, this technique would disrupt a performance, so players should learn to tap the drumhead lightly with the middle finger while bending close enough to hear a soft note.

What are some guidelines for identifying potential percussionists?

Most youngsters develop an interest in drumset from listening to rock bands, but they have little interest in learning all of the percussion instruments. Try to ascertain whether their interest is limited to just playing drumset, then test students for coordination and rhythm. Several basic exercises will help to determine whether a student should play percussion.

Hand and foot coordination can be checked by having students tap the right hand and foot together to a metronome, then the left hand and foot together, and finally either foot and alternating hands. These simple tests determine whether a student understands right and left, follows instructions the first time, and can keep time by tapping a foot without looking at it. Additional exercises include tapping quarter notes with a foot and eighth notes with a hand, or tapping quarter notes with a foot and sixteenth notes with a hand.

Simple rhythm tests are also helpful. Tap a specific rhythm on any surface and ask the student to tap the same rhythm by ear. There should be no accents, as a shift of emphasis changes the level of difficulty.

Basic Percussion Rhythms



A prospective percussionist does not have to score perfectly to qualify, but if most of these skills are inadequate, percussion may not be a desirable instrument choice.

What are some of the essential exercises for beginning percussionists?

Rudiments are the scales of drumming and essential to build coordination, dexterity, and speed. Every beginning student should start with rudiments, but the goal is not to produce a group of robots but to give each player the tools to execute a variety of passages with proficiency. Unlike wood-

wind and brass players, percussionists seldom play melodies, and it can be tedious to sit alone in a practice room playing drum parts. Many students who practice alone do not develop a good sense of timing because they are unaware of any rhythmic inconsistencies. By practicing with recordings, they will be more motivated to practice. Many publishers sell play-along cassettes and compact discs for percussionists. Promotional recordings of new band works can also be used by percussionists. This is particularly valuable for works the band is rehearsing, so percussionists can hear the dynamic contrasts and phrasing instead of practicing a percussion part alone.

When teaching beginners, directors should solicit outside help and invite guest percussionists from local symphonies or colleges to illustrate playing techniques on different instruments and demonstrate how to select proper mallets for various sounds and styles. High school percussionists are usually excited by the prospect of working with elementary students. Directors owe it to their percussionists to make correct information about playing techniques available.

Is there still controversy over whether to play with matched or traditional grips?

Matched grip has a tremendous advantage over traditional grip in versatility and flexibility when moving from one instrument to another. Although the traditional grip is in no way obsolete, in recent years it has become preferable to start beginners using the matched grip. With the matched grip there is one set of instructions for both hands, simplifying the problem of working with right- and left-handed percussionists simultaneously. Traditional grip can always be learned later, and players will already have at least one hand functioning correctly.

Because the muscular actions are the same in each hand, arm, and wrist when playing with a matched grip, players progress more quickly and efficiently than when using the traditional grip. Many of the problems encountered by beginners can be traced to the somewhat unnatural left-hand position of the traditional grip. This results in excessive teaching and practice time spent on correcting the left hand. With matched grip, special left-hand problems are almost eliminated. Another point in favor of the matched grip is that when snare drum, timpani, mallet keyboard, and drumset are played using a similar grip, students progress more quickly to become well-rounded percussionists.

What progression of instruments do you recommend?

Beginning drummers should have experience both on keyboard percussion and snare drum during their first year. Whether students start on snare drum, or keyboard percussion, or both simultaneously, depends largely on the teacher's preference, class size and frequency, age of students, and availability of equipment.

One method is for students to learn basic rhythms and stick control on snare drum before adding the reading of pitches necessary to play keyboard instruments. Another option is to start on keyboard percussion with minimal rhythmic and technical challenges to introduce students to the fact that the percussion world is broader than just a drumset. When students learn both instruments at the same time, the rhythm reading and some of the techniques used on one instrument will help in playing the other. No matter which method is used, halfway through the first year all beginning percussionists should have some experience on snare drum, keyboard percussion, and timpani. Almost all junior high band pieces have timpani and mallet parts,

and each year composers write more challenging parts than the previous year.

How do students benefit from playing in a percussion ensemble?

Percussion ensemble experience trains percussionists to play all instruments musically because they become the band or orchestra, playing the melody, the harmony, the rhythm, and the accompaniment. Not only does it teach balance, dynamic contrast, and ensemble playing, but it makes the role of a melody and accompaniment part obvious. In percussion ensemble, as in any ensemble, the element of listening is crucial.

In addition to learning to play musically, students learn a wide variety of instruments. Much of the band and orchestra literature has parts for accessory instruments, but many directors don't pay much attention to how students play those instruments. That's the problem with percussion, you can pick up an instrument, hit it with anything, and produce a sound. It's a real pet peeve of mine that directors and students don't learn how to hold the tambourine or the triangle correctly. There are many different techniques for playing tambourine, from thumb rolls to hitting in on your knee. Proper beater selection for triangle and how to hold the instrument without muffling the sound should be considered, but few people pay attention to that.

What is the best preparation for a career as a percussionist?

Diversity is the key to success. Many orchestral players know how to play drumset. Mitch Peters is principal percussionist for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, but loves to play drumset and would enjoy going on the road with a rock band. The chances of becoming a classical percussionist are slim. Most orchestra positions are filled for life and the turnover is once every 20 years. Each major orchestra has five or six percussionists who are going to stay in those positions for the next 20 to 30 years. The people who are going to get work know how to play all styles of music and a wide variety of instruments. In the Los Angeles studio scene, they don't hire three people to play three different percussion instruments; the person who can play all three instruments gets the job.

Aside from becoming proficient on percussion instruments and in all different styles of music, branch out and become proficient in other areas of music, business and otherwise, because most people have to supplement their performance income. There are many options in the music business. One of the biggest misconceptions of young people is that you either become a performer or you have to choose another field. They don't realize that there are many opportunities in music publishing, manufacturing, retail, and engraving. Instrumentalists with well-developed, diverse skills will always find work in the field of music. □

