

Approaching the First Lesson

Suggestions for the Private Percussion Teacher

BY JEFF HOKE

In the first meeting with a prospective student, the private teacher's initial approach is crucial. This is true regardless of whether the student is at the beginning, intermediate, or advanced level. The information obtained by the teacher in that first meeting will aid in determining an overall path for the student as well as in suggesting study materials, practice equipment, and sticks/mallets.

The following questions, approaches, and suggestions will assist private teachers in making the appropriate curriculum and material recommendations for beginning, intermediate and advanced students.

THE BEGINNING 4TH–6TH GRADE STUDENT

Begin your initial student meeting by establishing a positive first impression. Greet the student with a smile and a handshake and be as approachable as possible. Many students will undoubtedly feel a bit overwhelmed, as their surroundings may be new to them.

Next, initiate conversation that has absolutely nothing to do with music. Ask what school they attend and what grade they are in. Then allow the conversation to gravitate toward music—specifically percussion—and *listen* to the students' answers to the following questions. Encourage the students to express themselves by making it clear that you are interested in what they have to say.

What sparked your interest in percussion?

Explain that there are no wrong answers to this question. The answers might include, "I saw someone playing on television," "I recently attended a concert," "I heard a recording," "My brother/sister plays percussion," or "I just think it looks like fun." Any of these responses will serve as a point of departure for further discussion.

Are you involved in your school band program?

I explain that I have students who choose to play in their school band and students who don't, and either approach is valid.

Have you played percussion for the entire time you have been in band or have you played another instrument as well?

If the student has experience on other instruments you might use analogies in later teaching such as a roll being the equivalent to a held note on a wind instrument.

Does anyone else in your family play a musical instrument?

The answer to this question will tell you if there is anyone at home who can help explain musical concepts and/or methods to the student.

Other questions might include:

Do you have short- and long-term goals relative to percussion?

Do you have an instrument to practice on at home?

Do you own a metronome?

With the information obtained from these questions, you are in a position to begin making some recommendations. The first recommendation should be a general course of study—the goal being to prepare the student for the next level. If you are creative in choosing this course you can allow students to study what they *want* while teaching them what they *need*.

Next, recommend materials that facilitate the course of study you have recommended. Try to be cost-conscious when approaching this issue; quality is more important than quantity. Sticks and/or mallets should allow for general application and versatility. The student should be able to use the sticks you recommend on both snare drum and drumset and the mallets on all keyboard instruments and accessories.

If the student has not secured practice instruments, recommend a portable bell kit for keyboard study and a practice pad for snare drum study. A rubber-style pad should be considered for students living in apartments or condominiums.

THE INTERMEDIATE 7TH–9TH GRADE STUDENT

Establishing a course of study for the intermediate-level percussionist can be the most challenging. The student has probably already had some instruction through the school music program and/or private teaching, and now you need to evaluate the student's progress to date and continue his or her study at an appropriate level.

Asking students to play short etudes of graduated difficulty that incorporate fundamental concepts will allow them to demonstrate a mastery of beginning material and allow you to identify any gaps in their training. It is not uncommon for gaps to exist, and once they are identified you need to help students understand *why* they need to "back up" to address them.

Once you have determined a student's ability level from a technical standpoint, consider asking the following questions (in addition to those offered above) to establish a greater understanding of the student's grasp of broader musical concepts:

Can you list and define each of the dynamic levels in order from softest to loudest?

Can you define the following terms: accent, accelerando, ritardando, crescendo, decrescendo, D.S. al Coda/al Fine, D.C. al Coda/Fine, a Tempo, poco a poco, subito, trio?

Can you explain how first and second endings are followed?

Can you explain what the top and bottom numbers of the time signature tell you?

Can you explain how to find the key

from the key signature using both flats and sharps?

Once this evaluation has been completed, you can design a course of study that will meet the student's goals as well as the paramount goal of preparing the student for the next level.

Study materials have probably already been purchased but not completed. For the sake of consistency and cost effectiveness, try to incorporate the material that has yet to be covered in the existing texts, as long as it facilitates the prescribed course of study.

Recommendations for sticks and/or mallets will likely be based on the idea of exposing students to more specific tools for more specific tasks. Perhaps the general-purpose snare drum sticks that have been purchased can now be complemented with a pair of maple, oval-bead sticks for closed-roll execution or lighter, thinner sticks for specific drumset applications. Similarly, it might be time to add a second pair of keyboard mallets to facilitate four-mallet study.

The practice instruments being used by students should also be reviewed at this level. Practice pads are a sound approach for the beginner, but still a substitute for the genuine article. It may be time to consider the purchase of a drumset if the level of interest warrants it. When appropriate, I recommend the purchase of a complete drumset instead of just a snare drum; however, if there isn't sufficient interest in drumset I recommend an affordable wood-shell concert snare drum.

THE ADVANCED 10TH-12TH GRADE STUDENT

When first meeting with an advanced student the conversation is usually centered on goal setting and higher-education music school considerations. The advanced student will have solidified the fundamentals of percussion, both conceptually and technically, and is usually looking for guidance on how to succeed at the collegiate level. Some important questions to ask as a means of establishing a course of study are:

Do you plan to continue playing at the college level?

Are you considering declaring music as your major course of study in college?

Are you interested in music education, performance, or both?

When recommending materials for the

advanced high school student, consider using etude collections that offer opportunities to integrate concepts that have already been learned into a deeper pursuit of overall musicianship. I also recommend using standard repertoire from college audition lists. Multiple pairs of specialized snare drum sticks and mallets will be necessary for the performance of advanced musical and technical material.

Advanced students will need the highest quality practice instruments they can afford. The finer points of technique and performance cannot be completely appreciated if the instrument is not capable of reflecting them. The practice pad and bell set are now secondary to an appropriate snare drum and full-sized keyboard percussion instrument.

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