

## Article by Kevin Tuck – ktpercussion.com

# Five Survival Tips for the School Percussion Ensemble

### Have you had percussion ensemble rehearsals that you would rather forget?

Have you ever had a percussion ensemble consisting of one percussionist, three grade 6 piano players and a few beginning drummers who couldn't read a note?

I have been teaching percussion for over fifteen years, and in that time I have never had the chance to have a "perfect" group of students with similar abilities.

Furthermore with percussion ensembles you are often asked to "fill in the gaps" and provide an ensemble for the students in the school who don't have any other group to be in. Perhaps the school band has too many drummers, or there are an excess of piano players in the school who need an ensemble.

This article provides some simple tips that I have found work in school situations, and basic advice from my experiences

## Tip #1

### A Positive Experience = A Positive Result

The first and most important factor is that the experience is a positive one for the students involved. They need to enjoy coming to rehearsals, and feel that they are achieving.

I would always try and learn a quick and easy piece in the very first rehearsal. It needs to be playable straight away, can be improved in future weeks, and can be revisited regularly as a piece that they know. I would always pull out one of my stock standard pieces of repertoire for this such as my arrangement of "Linstead Market". I know it works, so I know they will have a positive result in the first lesson. The first lesson is not a time to try something new – go for something that YOU know WORKS!

## Tip #2

### Make Discipline a game

Getting the attention of the group was the hardest thing when I first started out.

#### **An inexperienced student with an instrument and a pair of drumsticks will not have the etiquette of a professional orchestral musician!**

That was one of the hardest things for me, as a professional musician having played in orchestras, when I first started I expected that I would be able to stand up in front of a group, and when I waved my hands they would stop playing and do what I said.

**WRONG!**

There was no way that was going to happen at first. They need to be trained to do this and if you don't control it from DAY 1 you will have problems for the rest of the year.

I have tried numerous things from whistles to rewards and "time out" chairs. What I suggest is that you watch experienced band directors, and see how they do it. Take the time to sit in on their rehearsals and see how they get the instant attention from the players, and then copy their approach.

One idea I have used very successfully over the years is: ***Make it a game!***

Most band rooms or classrooms have a whiteboard behind the conductor – or just improvise with a piece of paper. Simply write up on the board:

Me	You

And then any time they do something positive, such as stopping very quickly, performing a difficult passage well or showing good attention you give them a point in the "You" column.

If they don't stop when you say, or play their instrument while you are talking or some such thing, they you get a point on the "me" side.

Obviously the game is for them to get more points than you – The reward might be to go to lunch five minutes early, or to play a piece they enjoy or some such thing. It doesn't have to be big, just something they will enjoy and want. The factor of "them" beating "you" is what they will really enjoy!!

That way, the positive behaviors that you are trying to achieve will happen quickly and easily. After a while you can drop the game, and the students will be used to it, and show you the necessary respect.

## **Tip #3 Extra Incentives Help!**

It doesn't hurt to provide little extras to make your rehearsals a bit more fun.

A long workshop day can be changed into a "pizza day"! All you need to do is get a couple of dollars contributed by every student for a shared pizza meal. This is always a good incentive to get them to attend!

Late afternoon rehearsals are also greatly enhanced when students have the opportunity for a small "snack" beforehand. It can cost very little to provide something simple to boost their energy, and it can give them great confidence and enthusiasm. (make sure you check for any dietary restrictions in your group first)

## **Tip #4 Always have a performance to work toward**

It is very important that you know where you are going. Students won't enjoy going to rehearsals if they don't know what they are rehearsing for. The performance can

be as simple as setting up in the yard at lunchtime, but if you build it up in the students, they will look forward to it, and feel proud of their achievement.

Always have an idea of exactly WHEN they are going to perform from DAY 1, and don't make it too far in the future. This will ensure full attendance at rehearsals, and productive time spent preparing.

## **Tip #5**

### **The right music makes a BIG difference!**

What repertoire to choose? That is the difficult question, as I have spent many hours arranging and composing works for my Percussion Ensembles. Nothing I could ever find did the job exactly right every time. The main factors to consider are:

- You want something that gives ALL participants a really active role.

From the students perspective, there is nothing more depressing than to give up their time to come to rehearsal, and then given a shaker and an uninspiring part! They will be bored within minutes, and disruptive to the rest of the group. Even the simplest un-tuned percussion parts have to have stuff which actively requires them to read the music and participate.

- You want something that suits a variety of skill levels

It is very important that the more advanced students have something to challenge them, and that the inexperienced ones still have something that is accessible.

- It has to be able to sound good quickly

A piece might be fantastic, but if it doesn't sound good in the first rehearsal (at least a part of it), then it won't work. It will not inspire any practice or motivation if they can't see how it is going to sound when performed straight away. As a professional musician I was always prepared to give something a go for a long time before seeing results, but this expectation is unrealistic in some school settings. These days of computers and hi-tech environments, students expect to see results quickly. This is not necessarily a negative, it is just that we need to adapt our teaching approaches to it. Choose repertoire that sounds good straight away, but has a lot of detail in it, so that students can spend time working on it in rehearsals.

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