

## Learning and developing on the drum set



The ability of an educator to listen critically and provide solutions to problems a student encounters is vital regardless of what instrument you specialize.

As an educator myself, I'm dedicated to the musical well being of all my students. For the majority, I detect aspects of their playing of which they may not be aware. These deal primarily with sound consistency, production, and time feel. When teaching, I try to provide information that is to the point, simple to understand, and relevant to their musical situation. For instance, if a student is having difficulty interpreting a big band chart, I usually ask what big bands they listen to. My advice then is to listen to the music you play. The goal is to make good music with good musicians. If it's worth playing, it's worth taking the time to listen to and learn.

### Goals

To help focus the direction of instruction, establish students' goals and needs by formulating a curriculum based on the individual. I say this with the caveat that all players of all levels concern themselves daily with the technical aspects of drum set in terms of technique, relaxation, and set up. The standard to which I aspire is good musicianship and self improvement. When discussing teaching philosophy with my professor, Joe Morello, he recommended that I "treat my students as individuals because they all have their own set of unique problems." In other words, applying one set of books or exercises to all may not harness a positive result.

## Instruction

Effective drum set instruction can be categorized into the following development/performance areas:

### Reading notation and drum set interpretation

The understanding of musical elements and terminology such as note and rest values, time signatures, clefs, and musical signs is critical for development on any instrument. It is true that many drummers have had success without knowing how to read, however, in my experience, the more versatile you are the more opportunity you will have to work professionally.

Understanding drum set interpretation can be achieved simply by analyzing a big band arrangement. Sit down with the student and listen to a reference recording and explain the different sections of the composition. Notice how the drummer on the recording accompanies each section a little differently. Some adjustments that you will notice are:

- a. Dynamic changes when transitioning from section to section.
- b. Variations in texture from section to section (hi hat time playing on intro, brushes on the snare drum for the melody, time playing on the ride cymbal behind a soloist).
- c. Variations in rhythm (using rhythmic information from the bass, piano, reeds, and brass sections to compose drum beats that connect musically to each section of the arrangement).

### Mechanics: Hand technique and Coordination

Learning the 26 standard drum rudiments and practicing hand endurance exercises is the foundation for which to inspire good musicianship. A player's sound will be directly affected by how consistent his or her stroke is. Concentrate on allowing each stick to rebound off the surface they are striking. The objective is to strive for a consistent stroke and sound as you execute an even flow of rhythm, dynamics, accents, and tempos in all styles of music. Be consistent by practicing in front of a mirror and video taping practice sessions, rehearsals, and concerts. Self awareness is *the* key attribute.

Drum set performance requires four way independence when playing beats, fills, and solo ideas. Contemporary drum set also demands each player to toggle between musical styles based on triplets (swing), and duple subdivisions (eighth and sixteenth note subdivisions) when playing Rock, Funk, or Latin music. The beats you play are merely "snap shots" of a larger musical style, meaning, if a student plays a Bossa Nova beat without listening to great Brazilian ensembles and recordings, they will not acquire the necessary feeling for that music. One tip would be to develop a listening program. If the focus area is jazz, then

a selective discography of recordings that date back to the 1930's is indispensable. If teaching includes Pop, Samba, Afro-Cuban, or other styles, then listen to exemplary recordings of that type of music with your students. Listening to great musicians is the most effective way to learn and understand musical nuances. Also, transcribing, practicing transcriptions, and viewing live and taped performances of great bands will increase your musical attentiveness.

## Environment

A teaching studio with a quality instrument, audio and video playback capability, a drum machine or metronome, a mirror so the student can self diagnose, and the use of a practice notebook to gauge their short and long term lesson development can help a student develop more efficiently.

## Practice Makes BETTER, not PERFECT

Early in my development, I had the opportunity to study drum set with the great drummer and educator Ed Soph. At our first meeting, I proudly brought each method book that I had worked on in an old suitcase. After greeting me at the door, we went up to his studio and he looked at the books that I had brought. He then briefly commented on the vast number of materials and asked me to PLAY...

Play?? I responded...I sat on the drum throne not knowing what to do. I asked if he would like to hear a swing beat? Or maybe a rock beat? Would you like me to play a solo?? He responded with "play something you feel COMFORTABLE doing."

Years later I reflected on that moment and realized I wasn't very comfortable playing much of anything, and that the materials I practiced were usually dictated to me by a teacher. I would practice my assignments without THINKING why? What were these exercises going to do for my playing or musicianship? When you play with musicians in a band, you improvise and create. These ideas are an extension of your personality and life experience.

All proficient musicians have put in time and effort practicing, thinking about their instrument, and how it relates to the music they play. They find a way to MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS like cell phones, computers, and email which can steer you away from your musical focus. These players have also listened carefully developing musical instincts in addition to technique, endurance, and speed.

I encourage you to enjoy the learning experience and deeply discover the music you hear in your heart and soul.