

Sight-Reading Contest Success and the Percussion Section

by Eric Rath

One of the most daunting aspects of getting your band ready for contest is preparing them for the Sight-Reading Room. With so much to consider -- from the actual music to your preferred procedure for how your band should approach the experience -- the percussion section can get lost in the mix. On a good day, the percussion may hardly even be noticed. On a bad day, the percussion section can be a real liability and can potentially create pitfalls that the rest of the band will fall treacherously fall into.

Fortunately this can be prevented when successful band programs actively apply the saying "plan your work and work your plan." This is no different when it comes to preparing your percussion section for success on the day of your contest.

Here are eight strategies that will make sure everyone knows their role, has a job to do and can reasonably understand what to expect when they set foot in the Sight-Reading room:

(Being from Texas, this is written from my experiences at UIL Sight-Reading Contest as a Band Director and as a Percussion Specialist. It can be expected, however, that many of these strategies will work in other Sight-Reading Contest formats.)

1. Make Percussion Assignments: Each year, the UIL Office publishes the percussion instrumentation needed for each level of Sight-Reading so you can be prepared for what parts/instruments are required. Take that list and go ahead and assign your percussion section to it. Don't wait until the contest is getting close or even the day of. As soon as the list is released, post the assignment chart for your students to see.

2. Assign Parts Based on Ability/Stability and Seniority: Generally, I stray away from viewing the snare drum as the most important percussion instrument and also from giving special preference to older players -- all percussion instruments are important and have their specific purpose and I've always considered someone's playing ability more important than their age, but this is the only case in which I fully embrace those views.

In most Sight-Reading pieces, the snare drum functions as the main/most active percussion instrument and should be played by your single most competent snare drummer. And when it comes to understanding how the Sight-Reading room works, your older players simply have more experience and are innately better prepared for what is going to be required of them.

The other standard percussion instruments are certainly important in the Sight-Reading room, but all too often, a tempo change, ritardando, accelerando or ending of the piece will hinge on your snare drummer being the catalyst and responding seamlessly with what you conduct.

3. Have a Plan for "Extra" Players: Often we will have more players in the section than is required in the sight-reading piece. Some directors prefer to double parts like the snare drum or one of the keyboard parts, but it has been my experience (from having hosted many band contests) that this can really open up a huge can of worms. When you double a part as crucial as the snare drum, you will inevitably get *two* interpretations of what you are conducting. What are your wind players supposed to do? Follow the student who is right with you or the one who is louder, gets nervous and begins to rush? It's too much to chance. Trust your assignments and trust your students to perform well.

So, what should you do with extra players? Everyone should have a job, so you can take additional players and make them "assistants" and "equipment managers." "Assistants" silently help students count rests or point out important functions of the music like accidentals or tempo or dynamic changes. "Equipment Managers" are those students who can contribute by making sure equipment is carried from the stage to the Sight-Reading room and can also be in charge of sticks, mallets, accessories or anything else you can foresee. Regardless of a student's role, be sure that everyone is fully engaged in the process -- especially during any judge's instructions or conductor's explanation periods.

No one needs to sit down, and everyone needs to have as professional demeanor as possible.

With all of that about assignments being said, this is what your assignment chart might look like:

Snare Drum: John (single best player, most reliable, straight-A student)

Bells: George (best keyboard player, doesn't miss the key, etc.)

Timpani: Ringo (a strong snare drummer, but might be a younger student)

Crash Cymbals: Paul (not the strongest player, but won't cave if there are exposed crashes)

Bass Drum: Eddie (keeps a solid pulse and will follow the snare drummer's lead)

Triangle: Mary (greater counter, and takes the instrument seriously)

Esther: Assist John (younger student)

Tabitha: Assist George (younger student)

Rufus: Equipment Manager (potential eligibility risk?)

4. Use Your Percussion Assignments in Rehearsal: Each time you sight-read in class, be sure that your percussionists are playing their assigned part. There is something to be said for rotating parts in other situations, but the routine of each student playing the same part in sight-reading practice *and* in the Sight-Reading Room will help to bolster their confidence on the day of contest and helps students to be best prepared for the type of writing they can expect to see for that part.

There will be some differences in instrumentation from the old Sight-Reading pieces you use to practice with and the actual newly-written piece you'll see in the actual Sight-Reading room. In those cases, be sure to take an extra two minutes and "call an audible" so that your percussionists are playing as similar an instrument as possible. (If Jimmy usually plays tambourine, but there's only a triangle part, then that's the part Jimmy plays -- *on tambourine*. The same could be said for any number of keyboard instruments.)

Suppose there is an unusual instrument required for Sight-Reading one year (Spring 2013, Level One Maracas... I'm looking at YOU!). The best thing you could do is to have the unusual instrument play an unused instrument part. For instance, play the triangle part or double the tambourine part on maracas. If you are super concerned about the maraca part, have the maraca player play alternating 8th notes each time the snare drum is playing (they need to look off the snare drum part not just start playing whenever they hear snare drum!).

5. Use a Director to Tune Timpani: A director is allowed to tune the timpani, so unless you have a very mature student who can tune timpani correctly every time, you or an assistant director should be in charge of tuning.

6. Respond Quickly to Eligibility Problems: If any of your percussionists fails, update the percussion assignments immediately (which can also be said of your concert pieces as well). Make sure the students feel comfortable with their new assignments and make the ineligible player responsible for getting the new student caught up to speed.

7. Students should "Air Drum" but not with Sticks!: In the same way that you want your wind students to "pop" their fingers and move their slides during the explanation period, you want your percussionists to be physically involved in "air drumming" their parts. Tell your students to "air drum" their parts as realistically as possible but also in a way in which they cannot possibly make an accidental sound. If a student has sticks or mallets in their hands, they are likely to drop a stick or accidentally play their instrument and that can be disastrous.

Have your snare drummer "air drum" up high so you can look back and easily see if his hands are moving at the right time and even the right rhythms.

8. Think Like a Sight-Reading Judge: In most cases, the music that your percussionists play in the Sight-Reading room will be significantly easier than what they just performed on stage. Your students can be lulled into a sense of boredom if they're not careful. But, if you and they think like a Sight-Reading Judge does, they will be more alert.

Most Sight-Reading Judges are not terribly concerned with the percussion section. They are generally looking to see if the band plays in the key signature well, with the correct rhythms and can demonstrate dynamics. In terms of the percussion section, the items that will be most on a judge's radar are things like tempo as set by the conductor and snare drummer, notes that are solos (a big crash or a triangle note on count '4' while everyone else is silent) and when the bells play, do they play in the key signature.

If you and your students are on the look out for those specific items, you are much more likely to perform them well. Be sure that *you* point them out to your students, too. You might have the percussion section from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra who need no instruction whatsoever, but it's important for the judges to hear you address those items specifically. (And let's face it, no matter how good your percussion section is, they still need to be "instructed" and involved in the explanation process because they are as important as the wind musicians in your ensemble.)

In closing, having a plan of action when preparing your percussion section for Sight-Reading is the single most important thing you could do to ensure their success. I've often said that I'd rather have a plan that had to be changed, than no plan at all. At the very least, putting even a preliminary plan in place will provide peace of mind for everyone involved.

Good luck!

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