

# How to Successfully Plan, Manage, and Rehearse a Mixed Instrumentation Percussion Ensemble

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## 1. SELECTING THE EXACT INSTRUMENTATION

-In the world of percussion there is lots of ambiguity and uncertainty in most pieces for mixed instrumentation chamber groups. It is up to the director/coach to determine what the “correct” instruments and sounds are!

-Should the sound be high, middle, or low? Lots of ring/resonance, or dry? What type of quality should the sound have?

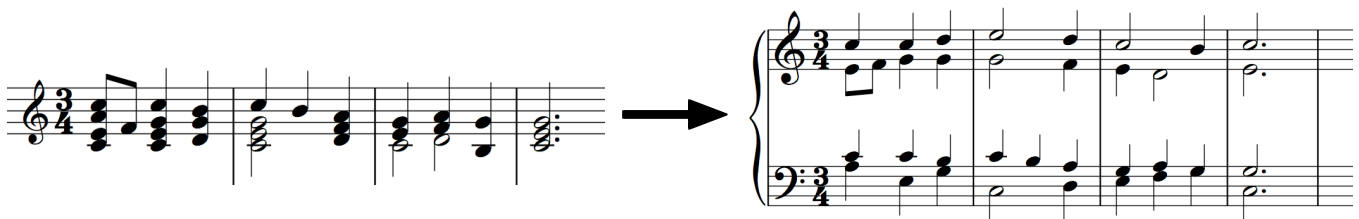
-Most instruments in a percussion ensemble do not sound the same from ensemble to ensemble. This reality is unique to percussionists, and rarely seen by winds/strings/vocalists.

These instruments are all snare drums. Which one is the correct one to use?



-To better inform your choice of instruments for snare drums, toms, “found” instruments, and others, consider the year the piece was written, the composer's nationality, the style of the piece, the results of some good score study, and of course any program notes included with the piece.

-**Balance** is the key point here! Think of non-pitched percussion in a similar way to a typical pyramid of sound for wind instruments. Bach chorales sound much better when each voice has room to breathe, rather than all being scrunched into the same range.



-Similar to how the Bach chorale sounds better in open range, try picking instruments that fill a sonic niche. Individual instrument timbres will help greatly in letting each individual part be heard, but it definitely doesn't hurt to use the Bach chorale approach as well.

-Pieces that ask for “found” instruments or only list instruments as “wood”, “metal”, etc., are a great opportunity to explore sounds with different instruments and mallet choices!

## 2. PREPARING FOR THE FIRST REHEARSAL/MEETING

-The tone of your ensemble's rehearsals is set from the very first meeting, so put the time into preparing for it to ensure that the rest of the semester will go smoothly!

-Here is a sample checklist of things that generally **MUST** be addressed by the director/coach before the very first meeting:

- All parts are assigned to specific players.
- Rehearsal times and locations are determined.
- Exact instrumentation is selected.
- Mallet/stick choices are at least narrowed down to a few choices that will work well.
- Players know if the first rehearsal will be a discussion session or actual playing.
- THE DIRECTOR KNOWS THE SCORE
- A setup/layout is determined.
- Any unusual playing techniques or instructions are thoroughly researched.
- Any unusual notation and foreign terms are thoroughly researched.
- The first one or two playing rehearsals are planned out and explained to the ensemble.

### Some Points to Think About:

-You don't always have to rehearse from beginning to end. Are there points in the middle that could use major attention first?

-Have a rough schedule of rehearsals for the first few weeks and adjust based on what you hear in rehearsals. Most pieces obviously have certain sections more difficult than the rest of the piece.

-Put yourself in the shoes of both the audience and the players when designing your player layout. Some people should be closer to certain others, and some people should be closer or further to the audience depending on their instrument(s) and parts.

-Are there any awkward transitions in player's parts that need to be addressed? It is up to your players to figure these out, but be ready to help if necessary.

## 3. MAKING MUSIC OUT OF "NOISE"

-How do we make a good, worthwhile musical experience out of instruments that have no melodic, pitch-based abilities?

-If we take out melody and harmony (as commonly defined) there are still many musical aspects we can utilize:

DYNAMICS	RHYTHM	RANGE	TEXTURE	FORM
Softs	Accuracy	Instrument Choice	Articulation	Formal Structure
Louds	Contrast	Voice Contrast	Mallet Choice	Climax
Accents	Aleatoric Content	Sound Pyramid	Blend	Denouement
Melody	Clarity		Balance	Transitions
Harmony			Voice-Leading	Phrases
			Melody/Harmony	Beginning-End

#### 4. MANAGING THE REHEARSALS FROM WEEK TO WEEK

-Communication is key for any good ensemble. Be ready to accurately describe texture, form, mallet choices, etc. to the ensemble when necessary.

-Make a habit of communicating to the ensemble via email as well. Things that were at the bottom of the priority food chain during rehearsal and plans for the next rehearsal can be addressed in email to the ensemble. Recordings and helpful links can also be sent this way.

-Be open to changes in instrumentation. You will likely find that some things just don't quite work well from time to time. Also try changing instrumentation just for the sake of hearing something new from time to time. You may find something you like and want to keep!

-Always let the ensemble know what the plan is for the next rehearsal or two. That being said, if you tell the ensemble "We will rehearse letters C through F", don't go past letter F! This will cause great frustration in most players. Instead, make C through F sound amazing.

-Be critical of your players and hold them accountable for knowing their parts.

-Be musical, and enjoy what you do!

-Ryan