Coloristic Considerations

by Mark Shelton

Laying down an intricate rhythm pattern on the congas can be a lot of fun. A feeling of exhilaration may come over you as a steady stream of sixteenths pours from the tambourine. “Shredding” can be enjoyable, yet one shimmering note on the triangle sounded at that precise musical moment may garner more nods of approval from your fellow musicians than several displays of blazing technique. That single silver tone falls into the category of coloristic percussion. While percussion instruments can take on melodic, harmonic, and timekeeping functions, there are those spots where the unique tones are used specifically for the sake of “coloring” the texture of the music.

All percussion instruments can be considered coloristic, but some members of the percussion family function only in the coloristic area such as the Chinese bell tree, Ocean Drum (TM), wind chimes, rain stick, Thunder Tube (TM), bar chimes or Mark Tree (TM), and Waterfall (TM). The triangle, suspended cymbal, and finger cymbals are often used for color and can also serve in a timekeeping/groove role.

As percussionists, we invest time in practice and study to sharpen our ability to play grooves with accurate rhythmic subdivisions and proper “feel,” but there is also a need to develop our coloristic-percussion vocabulary, technique, and sense of placement.

Building Your Palette

Be on the lookout for new and interesting instruments and methods of creating timbres. A simple perusal of an instrument manufacturer’s website or catalog can make you aware of new sounds to broaden your reservoir of colors.

Think beyond conventional instruments. A “found sound” such as a metal mixing bowl or a large coffee mug might be just the right sonic element for a particular musical moment.

Build up your repertoire of tone colors by experimenting. Stir your creative juices to explore both the conventional methods of playing AND some alternative ways of producing sounds. Consider the bar chimes. Besides the common high to low glissando (or low to high), try to produce a sudden burst of sound using both hands to quickly set the cylinders in motion. How about just gently brushing a few of the cylinders for a gentle wind chime effect? Remember that with many percussion instruments, you can expand your sonic arsenal even further with a variety of implements. For example, a suspended cymbal’s tone can be greatly affected by striking with sticks, mallets, or brushes (or scraping with a coin).

Avoid limiting your experimentation to a single instrument at a time. Try combining timbres to create a compound tone. The dry quality of a woodblock mixed with the sustain of a triangle might be the fresh texture that the music director desires.

Subtle Shades

All finger cymbals are not created equally. Neither are all wind chimes. Listen carefully to how your tone colors blend with the surrounding instruments. Experiment with various sizes, metals, beaters, and striking areas to find the triangle tone that sounds just right at that certain spot in the song. Try a couple of different cymbals and you will probably hear that one seems more appropriate for the important roll leading into the key change. Remember that the subtle shades within a basic timbre can make a difference in the overall texture of the music.

Control Your Colors

As you amass your array of colors, work on technique that will allow you to play in a nuanced fashion. Explore the dynamic range of the instruments and develop control over starting and ending the sounds. With a purely coloristic instrument, such as the rainstick, there are methods to manipulate the volume and intensity of the "rain." (It just takes a bit of practice to learn how to stop the rain!)

Placement: Right Color/Right Time

Listen for coloristic percussion being used in a variety of musical styles. Check out the interesting percussion sounds used in smooth jazz. Listen to (and watch) the front ensemble in a drum and bugle corp to observe a fascinating display of well-scored timbres. Orchestral music from the Impressionist period (late nineteenth century) and forward is especially rich in the use of coloristic percussion.

Pay attention to what is being played by the other instruments when certain percussion colors are utilized. Store those aural snapshots in your memory bank and wait for similar musical moments when you can apply those color ideas.

If you are creating a percussion part, keep in mind that the decision to refrain from playing is sometimes the more musically mature judgment. As tempting as it might be, a simple guitar intro might not need those percussive "dings" that you are considering. One well-placed cymbal scrape under a piano melody may be far tastier than three. "Less is more" is often the case with coloristic percussion.

Color The Groove

Be aware that coloristic percussion considerations extend into groove playing also. When you play an eighth note ostinato on the shaker, you are adding color. Turn on your persnickety-percussion sensibilities and make a judicious choice from your collection of shakers. A 12/8 tambourine rhythm might bring more sparkle to the band if you switch from an instrument with brass jingles to one with steel or nickel discs.

From found sound to conventional instruments to modified digital samples, there is an amazing world of percussive colors. Dip in and explore that beautiful world--and choose wisely.

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