The Art of Not Playing

by Mark Shelton

Out of the eight instrumentalists in the worship band, only the two keyboardists were playing. Their sparse texture was the sole accompaniment for the entire song. Neither my colleague playing drum set nor I on percussion allowed ourselves to slip in even a meager cymbal roll. Sure, there were moments when a tasty percussive tidbit could have worked, but we somehow fought off temptation. The art of not playing requires discipline and is an essential element of musical maturity.

Standing in the back of the orchestra, you can observe violinists and woodwind players processing the hundreds of notes from their sheet music into beautiful cascades of sound. Percussionists can monitor the activity around us as we continue to count the 258 bars of rests leading into three taps on the triangle. The efficient orchestrations of the great composers and arrangers demonstrate the power of percussion when scored at the right moments. As a music student and later on as a professional orchestral musician, I grew accustomed to the “forced discipline” of the printed score as I waited to play an often sparse yet highly effective percussion part.

In many styles of sacred music, we have “forced discipline” when we are reading from a chart with specifically notated percussion--along with a conductor who expects a faithful rendition. However, in modern worship music, a percussionist is frequently expected to take an active role in creating the part. When “forced discipline” is absent, “self discipline” is needed.

• In some cases, it may be desirable to play throughout the song, but usually there are sections where percussion can take a rest. If the drum set player is laying down the time, consider waiting until the repeat of a section to add your color to the groove.

• The opening verse of a down-tempo worship song might seem a good spot for a sixteenth-note shaker line, but could you wait until the second phrase comes around to add percussion?

• Showing restraint also applies to “coloristic percussion.” Those dings and shings which are tasty (when judiciously administered) can become tedious and distracting when overdone. Every transition from verse to chorus does not require a cymbal roll and using the bar chimes more than three times in any song borders on excess.

•Technique exists to serve our musical ideas. Developing blazing technique can serve you well when it is needed. However, it can be tempting to apply that skill whether or not it is required. Just because you have the tambourine chops to match every accent that the drummer is playing does not mean that it is always a good idea.

• Check yourself with questions such as:
How is this part that I am playing affecting the music?
Does my choice of instruments and rhythms enhance or detract?

How can they miss you if you never leave?

Either playing or not playing affects the overall musical texture. At times, you can heighten the impact of percussion by laying out for a few moments. After hearing the same sonic material for a while, our ears enjoy receiving new information. The reentry of percussion after a period of absence can provide fresh stimulus for the listener. Simply resting for a chorus and bringing in a stream of tambourine sixteenths on the repeat can give a needed lift to the song (and the worshiper).

How about a trim?

The art of not playing includes *not playing so much* even when you are playing. Think about simplifying your part (deleting notes, removing a few accents, eliminating the clutter). Reducing your part a bit can give some needed space to the music and can help tighten the rhythm section as a whole. If a printed part seems to suffer from overwriting, use a bit of artistic license to edit the excess.

Can you give me more?

Although you have every intention of playing a meaningful and concise part, the music director can have a different idea and request more percussion activity than you deem appropriate. If you are asked to play more than was in your plan, go ahead and honor the request. No matter what your artistic intentions, submit to leadership and take direction.

Are you just going to stand there?

Membership in the praise band makes you a worship leader with a responsibility to set an example for the congregation. Choosing to lay out for a section does not grant you a license to remain motionless with hands jammed in pockets while your brain journeys to Alpha Centauri.

So, what should you do if you are not playing? Here's an idea: WORSHIP. Be engaged in the moment. Sing, clap your hands, look at the leader, and let your countenance reflect the mood of the music. The parts of the song without percussion will not feel awkward if you focus on worship.

As percussionists, we have great ability to change the texture of the ensemble with our variety of sounds but always remember that we can also change the texture by not playing. Demonstrate your taste and restraint with the confidence that the decision to play less is indeed a musical decision.

LIke a city that is broken down and without walls is a man whose spirit is without restraint. Proverbs 25:28 WEB

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Excerpts from *Percussion For Worship* by Mark Shelton

Previously published in *Worship Musician!* www.christianmusician.com