Staying Current With Your Skills: Update and Upgrade
by Mark Shelton

In a contemporary church service, a worship music set might include songs from Israel Houghton, David Crowder, Hillsong, Paul Wilbur, and Rend Collective Experiment. For the offertory, the choir could sing something from the Brooklyn Tabernacle repertoire. That song list encompasses a few different styles and requires a variety of percussion skills.

It is important to stay current with the constantly evolving state of modern worship music. That might mean learning new skills or brushing up on some dormant ones. Considering the prevailing trends in worship percussion, I offer a few suggestions worth considering as you budget your practice sessions and investments in new gear.

Electronics: Here To Stay

These days, there is a possibility of finding both the drum set player and the “hand percussionist” with an electronic percussion unit in their arsenal of sounds. The addition of one of these instruments can place hundreds of digital samples at your fingertips. You can dial up old-school drum machine sounds as well as access samples of acoustic instruments to beef up your timbral palette.

If you have not jumped on the electronic percussion train, consider getting on board with an investment in any of these units:
• Both the Octapad SPD-30 (TM) from Roland and Yamaha's DTX-Multi 12 (TM) feature multiple playing surfaces and hundreds of preset sounds. You get the option to record and play custom samples with either the Alesis SamplePad (TM) or Roland's SPD-SX (TM).
• A great feature of the Korg Wave Drum (TM) is its ability to recognize what is striking the playing surface (stick, brush, hand) and respond accordingly.
• My personal choice for electronic percussion is the Handsonic HPD-15 (TM) from Roland. Designed for hands, this unit includes capabilities to dampen and bend tones along with plenty of the vintage Roland drum machine sounds.
• A great way to dip your toe into the electronic percussion waters is with an app for either your smartphone or tablet. When a sample pad malfunctioned before a rehearsal, I eventually turned to my iPhone and tapped my way through two services using the SynToms2 patch on the iKaossilator (TM) app from Korg.

Stick-Struck Is In

In addition to hand drumming, worship percussionists make use of sticks and mallets on cowbells, woodblocks, timbales, and cymbals. In recent months, I have perceived a bent toward percussionists including stick-struck sounds from tom-toms, snare drums, and such in modern worship music. Check out Hilllsong United, Bethel Music, and my pals with Gateway Worship to hear musicians laying down some stick-struck rhythms (in addition to the drum set player's contributions).

Get your stick chops up to speed with George L. Stone's *Stick Control*. This classic collection of drumming exercises still ranks as one of the greatest books for developing (you guessed it) stick control.

Rock The Glock

Whether you call it the orchestra bells, glockenspiel, campanelli, or just plain “bells,” the metal-barred cousin to the xylophone is experiencing a surge of popularity in pop music, alt rock, and modern worship. The shimmering tones of the glock keep popping up in songs like “Beautiful Things” from Gungor and Bellarive’s cover of “Your Love Never Fails.” Having a set of bells and some basic skills can come in handy in a variety of worship settings--choir anthems, hymns, cantatas or that quirky little lick in “Endless Light.”

You can find elementary to advanced exercises to help you get around the glockenspiel in *Modern School for Marimba, Xylophone, & Vibraphone* by Morris Goldenberg.

Hand Percussion: Not Going Away Anytime Soon

Along with the skills for the additional instruments being brought into modern worship music, you still need to have your good ol’ hand percussion expertise at the ready. When the music calls for it, be ready to deliver on congas, bongos, djembe, and cajon. Of course, you should always maintain your abilities on the hand-held instruments such as tambourine, shaker, and cabasa.

Broaden your repertoire of licks for conga and djembe with a copy of *Hip Grooves For Hand Drums* by Alan Dworsky and Betty Sansby.

Take a visit to my YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/marksheltonmusic) to watch tutorials featuring techniques on hand-held percussion.

Get An Earful

Listening to a variety of musical styles is important to your continued growth as a musician. Pick up new ideas by going outside your favorite types of music. Check out the interesting percussion sounds used in smooth jazz. Listen to (and watch) the front ensemble in a drum and bugle corp and delight in a fascinating display of well-scored timbres. Dive into orchestral music from the Impressionist period to the present to discover masterful examples of coloristic percussion. Prepare for that moment when the worship leader asks for a Celtic feel or a Middle Eastern groove by wrapping your ears around music from those cultures. Taking in several doses of dubstep can give you some ideas on how to use the aforementioned electronic percussion.

The role of a percussionist in modern worship continues to grow. You just might have to break out of your comfort zone to get into the *current* zone. It's worth the effort.

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning...
Proverbs 1:5a KJV

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