Percussion In The Small
/ Quasi-Acoustic /
No Drum Set Worship Team



Mark Shelton

Percussion in the Small/Quasi-Acoustic/No Drum Set Worship Team
Part 1 Introduction
by Mark Shelton

When thinking about the modern praise band, many of us get the mental image of a pop/rock instrumentation with electric guitars and bass, drum set, and keyboards.

There are times when a much smaller “less electric” instrumentation is desirable. Events such as memorial services, ministry training classes, gender-specific sessions, and prayer meetings often call for a small quasi-acoustic worship team for reasons of limited space, budget constraints, or simply wanting a more intimate vibe.

Usually absent from these settings is a drum set. Although a small kit (played at an appropriate volume) can be suitable, a hand-percussion instrumentation seems to better capture the desired sonic (and optic) ambience.

I frequently play percussion for worship events as part of a scaled-down quasi-acoustic ensemble. The instrumentation is usually acoustic guitar and/or electronic keyboard, along with a small hand percussion set-up.

Playing percussion in these settings presents certain challenges and requires different preparation than when working within a larger rhythm section that includes drum set. I usually invest more time planning for the small ensemble than when prepping for weekend services with a large group of musicians.

In part one of this series, let us examine a few salient aspects of playing percussion in the small quasi-acoustic worship ensemble.

Ancillary Duties

In a praise band, there are certain responsibilities that are generally assigned to the drum set player. With the absence of Mr. Kit, the hand-percussionist will probably pick up a few extra duties in the small group:

• Triggering the in-ear click

• Knowing the beats per minute/metronome marking for each song and tempo change

• Starting songs upon cue from the leader

• Supplying the appropriate style-defining groove

• Playing set-ups and fills normally played by the drum set player

You might be handling all of those tasks while providing steady time and tossing in some tasty ethereal coloring. (Consider growing an extra arm.)

The Right Gear

Musical needs and personal taste (along with requests from the leader) will influence your choices of instruments.

My preference is to center my playing on an instrument with a wide frequency range. The djembe and cajon are my top candidates; either can produce a thumping bass sound along with a crackling slap tone. Of the two, my go-to is a cajon equipped with snares. This “drum set in a box” works great for laying down the kick/snare part of the timekeeping groove. In addition to this versatile carton, I expand my timbral palette with an assortment of percussion such as tambourine, shaker, bar chimes, and suspended cymbal. With fewer musicians in the ensemble, it is easier to make use of subtle instruments and tones--and actually be heard in the mix.

An upcoming article will go into depth about selecting gear for your set-up.

Check Your Chops

With less musicians and a thiner texture, your skills (or lack thereof) may be on display more than in a larger ensemble. Coaxing the distinctive tones from congas, djembe, or cajon requires study and practice. Make sure that you have the know-how before diving into this rather revealing environment.

Even though it’s called hand percussion, you are probably going to need some “stick chops” to roll a crescendo on a suspended cymbal with soft mallets, play brushes on a cajon, and color a moment with a few delicate notes on the triangle.

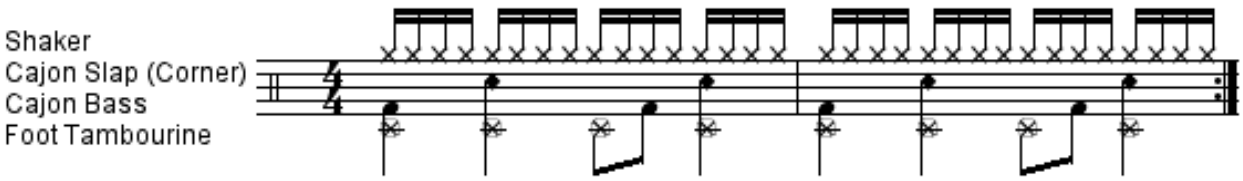
Extra Measures of Creativity

When playing hand percussion in the small group setting, you will likely need to call up some creative juices to compose your part. When a recording is available, I use the drum set part to give me some basic groove ideas, but I still have to get creative and re-orchestrate that rhythmic material for the hand percussion instrumentation.

If the worship leader wants a fresh “not-like-the-record” version of a song, be equipped with a batch of precooked grooves in your hippocampus--along with your improv skills.

Look forward to a future article in this series that will focus on constructing percussion parts for a cajon-based set-up within a small group setting.

As this article concludes, I leave you with notation for a four-part cajon-based groove that you can practice and perhaps use in a worship setting. Learn it and store it in your hippocampus.



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Part 2 Gear Suggestions
by Mark Shelton

Musical needs and personal taste (along with requests from the leader) influence the choices of instruments for any worship setting. Playing percussion in a small ensemble without a drum set is a game-changer as discussed in the opening article of this series. Choosing instruments for this musical setting merits some careful thought.

Drum Set in a Box

The cajon has become my go-to instrument when working with the scaled-down/quasi-acoustic/drum-set-less worship ensemble. With bass tones produced at the center of the front panel and crisp highs at the upper corners, the cajon can be used to achieve a full-bodied groove. This "drum set in a box" is great for mimicking kick, snare, and hi-hat parts. For a small group situation, I prefer a cajon equipped with a snare attachment behind the front playing panel. The snare "buzz" helps to fill sonic space in the ensemble. The economical LP Aspire Accents Cajon is my personal choice.

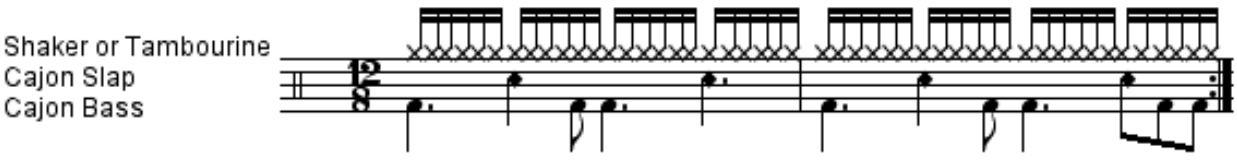
• Most cajons have screws around the edges of the front panel. Loosen the screws near the upper corners in order to raise the corners away from the side panels. This slight gap will allow for a better slap tone.

• Experiment with inserting card stock (as a shim) to further increase the gap.

• Check out my video demonstrating how to "soup up" the slap.

Shaking Stuff

Add another layer of sound above a cajon pattern by including a shaker, caxixi, or headless tambourine. Shaking out eighths or sixteenths with one hand while the other paw covers both the bass and slap on the cajon creates a hefty three-part groove.



When I am playing cajon and tambourine simultaneously, I favor shaking a lighter instrument. Weighing in at 159 grams, the 8" single-row Baja tambourine from Sound Percussion Labs is about 55% lighter than a standard size double-row tambourine. Fewer jingles make for a leaner sound that fits nicely with a smaller group of musicians.

Seasoned percussionists know that a shaking percussion instrument by itself can provide some gentle rhythmic movement when a song breaks down to a subtle moment.

Tasty Touches

In addition to timekeeping duties, you should be prepared to add splashes of ambient texture to a song.

• A suspended cymbal can supply a variety of sounds such as rolls with soft mallets, scraping with a triangle beater, and single strikes with bundled rods.

• Spice up a musical moment with a well-placed shaker roll.

• One delicate “ding” from the triangle or finger cymbals can be just the right touch--and those instruments won’t take up much real estate in your set-up.

• A set of bar chimes is always with me for this type of ensemble.

Three More

These instruments can easily find a place in your percussion arsenal for the small/quasi-acoustic/no drum set worship team:

• The Foot Tambourine from Meinl fastens onto your foot with an elastic strap and allows you to jingle away with every tap of your toes. Capable of a fair amount of volume and easy to toss in your mallet case, the Foot Tambourine is a budget-friendly way to add some high-end sparkle above a cajon pattern.

• Wearing a Finger Shot (by Latin Percussion) on each hand allows you to add a shaker sound with every downstroke onto a cajon or hand drum.

• Tap the flat surface of the Sizzle Board with your palm and you will hear the “sizzle” from the fill material inside. Produced by the German company Schlagwerk, this little gadget also sounds great played with a brush or bundled rods. The device comes with straps so that you can attach it to your thigh and play the Sizzle Board along with the cajon.

Deciding which instruments to play goes hand-in-hand with making rhythm and orchestration decisions. Look forward to the next installment in this series which will provide some advice for creating parts for songs.

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Percussion in the Small/Quasi-Acoustic/No Drum Set Worship Team
Part 3 Creating A Part

by Mark Shelton

Creating percussion parts for the small/quasi-acoustic/no drum set worship team presents certain challenges and requires different preparation than when working within a larger rhythm section that includes drum set.

Whether you are “covering” a well-known worship song, creating an arrangement for an “original,” or experimenting with a fresh approach to a classic, you are going to need to call on some creative juices to compose your percussion part.

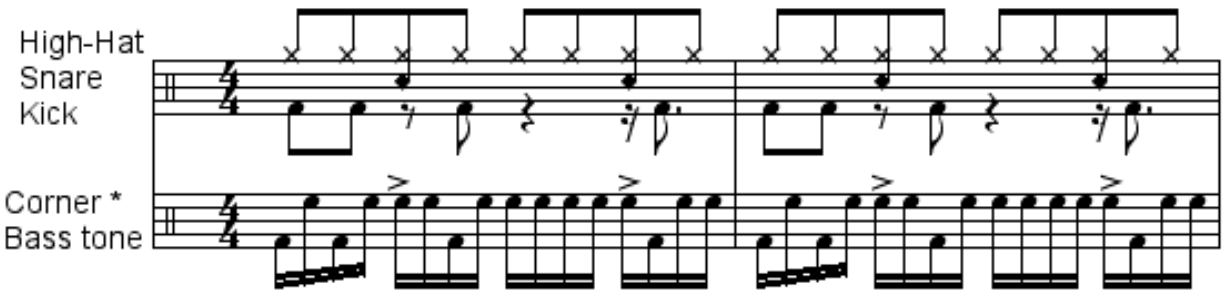
Allow me to share some ideas based on how I construct a cajon and light percussion part when “covering” a song for the scaled-down/no drum set ensemble.

Given the opportunity and some study resources, I prefer to prepare a part prior to rehearsal and adjust elements when I work with the other musicians. If the leader has suggested a certain recording for pre-rehearsal study, I lean heavily on that version as I construct my part.

Rather than “reinvent the wheel,” I will often borrow ideas from the drum set groove, reorchestrate onto my set-up, and arrive for the rehearsal with something that bears resemblance to the example recording. This method provides a degree of familiarity along with a fresh instrumentation.

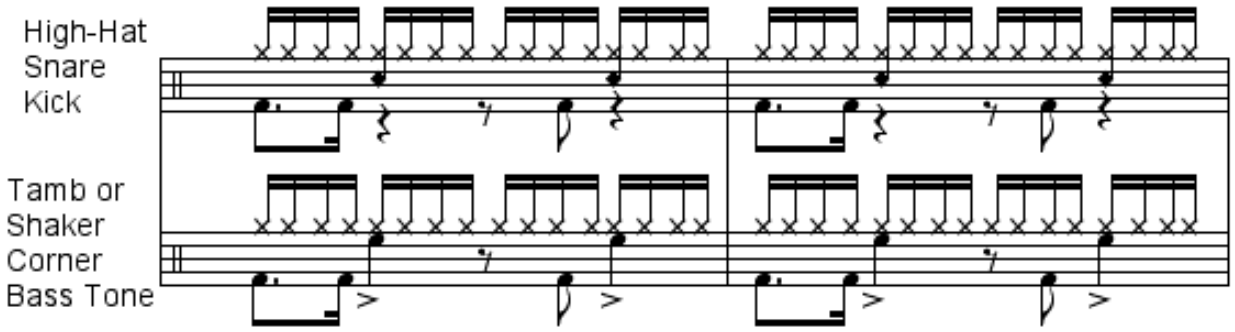
After I determine a song's form (a.k.a "roadmap"), I focus on the drum set parts and pay special attention to the kick and snare rhythms. In my cajon-based set-up, those kick and snare parts easily transfer to bass tone and corner slaps on “the box.” The ride cymbal and stick-played high-hat lines can be implied on the corners of the cajon or ghosted on the bass tone area. I will often add some extra ghost notes to fill up some aural space.

Check out this simple pop/rock drum set groove and my cajon version below it:



* Ghost the unaccented notes

A shaker, tambourine, or caxixi can be used to cover the high-hat rhythms from the drum set:



A heavy polyphonic groove as described above will probably not be appropriate in every section of a song. In the less rhythmic moments, a few percussion goodies and a dose of restraint might be all that is needed. When the worship music is being provided by a small/quasi-acoustic/no drum set worship team, the congregants are anticipating a thinner texture; you can take advantage of that expectation and "lighten up."

• Does the intensity come down but the chorus still needs some rhythmic drive? Maybe drop to just a steady stream of sixteenths on a shaker.

• Should the heavy groove go away but not the timekeeping? Strip your part down to just the backbeats with thumpin' cajon bass or you can simply play downbeats on a caxixi or chajchas.

• The breakdown bridge might be a good spot to let the rhythm guitar carry the time while you toss in a few well-placed “dings and shings” with some atmospheric percussion.

• Remember one of your tastiest effects--TACET. The decision to "go silent" for a section (or more) can be just as wise as choosing the right instrument. Subtracting your sound from the mix can work in a variety of textures and tempos. (Check out my article “The Art of Not Playing” in *Worship Musician!* Volume12 Issue 4)

Absent the drum set, your percussion part will also include the fills and setup rhythms that enhance the music and provide aural cues for the musicians. Of course, the musical interplay between all the musicians will probably cause either minor or major changes in your plan as the group creates the final arrangement.

Transcribing and re-orchestrating drum set grooves onto a percussion set-up will give you a supply of ideas from which to draw when the worship leader wants a fresh “not-

like-the-record” version of a song or when you and your colleagues are arranging a new composition. That process can also sharpen your imagination for composing original material when needed.

Be creative. Stay creative. Colossians 3:23

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