Silent Partners

by Mark Shelton

The congas pattern is ending on beat three of the verse's last measure and you need to dive into the chorus with shake tambourine cookin' on the opening downbeat. Can you make the switch with only fractions of a second?

How about that moment when the music director stops the band in rehearsal and asks you to play a specific part on the bongos during the bridge of the song? The leader simply sings the rhythm and you play it back with supreme confidence on the next run-thru. Will you remember that lick when the worship set starts in forty-five minutes?

Both of these real-life percussion challenges can be eased with the help of some "silent partners." None of these items contribute anything sonically to the music, but these soundless supporters have assisted me in many rehearsals, worship services, and performances.

In Easy Reach

A trap table "lives" in my gig van so that it is always handy. Whether playing in a jazz ensemble, worship band, symphony orchestra, or folk group, a trap table has gotten me through many tight logistical situations. This soundless sidekick provides a central location for sticks, mallets, and hand-held instruments such as tambourines, shakers, claves, and cabasa (and you can park your coffee mug on it). The lightly padded surface of this silent partner assists you in transitioning instruments without extraneous sound.

A music stand with the desk parallel to the floor IS NOT a trap table. There is too little space and too much potential for a cacophonous spill.

You have a choice of either commercially available trap tables or you can design and build your own (like I do). My first tables were built from plans found in *Sound Designs: A Handbook of Musical Instrument Building* by Scoville & Banek. Over the years, I have experimented my way into a personal version that is simple to construct and easy to carry. Just grab a staple gun along with the basic ingredients of plywood, light padding, and black cloth and you cook up a table top fairly quickly. Toss your creation on a keyboard X stand and you will soon wonder how you ever lived your percussive life without a trap table.

Get A Grip--Quickly

While the addition of a trap table to your set-up is a major help, most of your hand percussion will be resting flat on the surface of the table. Some instruments like the tambourine and shaker are a bit troublesome to pick up quickly and quietly with one hand when the items are flush with the table. Enter the launching pad--it takes seconds to make, weighs next to nothing, and can really smooth out a challenging changeover. Resting on the trap table, this inaudible ally allows you to prop up a portion of an instrument or implement (shaker, tambourine, mallet, or stick) and create a space under the object. That small gap provides enough room to slide a hand under the thingamajig and bring it into playing position without extraneous sound. The launching pad is a simple solution that's simple to construct. My personal design calls for a strip of foam rubber folded lengthwise and taped into place (see photo below).



Better Than Your Memory

Keeping a music manuscript book nearby (or a few sheets of staff paper) makes it easy to jot down notes and rhythms. This quiet companion can come to the rescue in the rehearsal situation described earlier and it provides a place to capture your own bursts of creativity. Great licks and catchy tunes have grown from flashes of brilliance scribbled

in a composer's sketchbook. I like to keep a few sheets of unlined paper for taking notes in my mallet case along with the staff paper.

Of course, you are going to need a pencil--with an eraser. It's still low-tech and low-priced, yet many musicians do not make effective use of this hushed helper during practices and rehearsals. You need a pencil for writing music notation, taking notes, and for those personal markings on sheet music that remind and clarify. As soon as you decide on that sticking sequence, write in those rights and lefts. When you figure out which chord voicing on the vibes sounds best, put pencil to paper. Not only will this help during your current session, you will not waste time straining your brain when you resume practicing later. (Keep an old-school pencil sharpener in your mallet case--I do.)

Though never audible, the trap table, launching pad, paper, and pencil are part of my percussion set-up at every rehearsal. Form a partnership with these items and allow them to lend their silent aid to *your* music making.

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