Proverbs for Percussionists

by Mark Shelton

"A wise man will hear, and will increase learning…"
Proverbs 1:5 KJV

The Book of Proverbs provides timeless lessons condensed into concise verses. Massive wisdom concentrated into short, easy-to-read statements!

While making no claims to Solomon-esque smarts, I have gleaned a few nuggets of percussion wisdom from teachers, conductors, and authors--along with lessons learned during countless rehearsals and performances. Taking a cue from the writers of Proverbs, I offer twenty percussion tips in a concise, bullet-point format.

• Pencil and paper at every rehearsal! Never write on sheet music with ink. My school band director dispensed that advice to me sometime last century. Your pencil should have an eraser. An old school pencil sharpener lives in my mallet case.

• Listen and think like a producer when making musical decisions.

• A cymbal stacker and an LP Percussion Claw come in handy when you are running tight on space for your percussion set-up.

• Position the snare strainer directly in front of you. This places the snares directly under the two main striking areas (the center of the head and the area about halfway between the center and the counterhoop). You will notice better snare response when playing directly over the snares.

• A tambourine or shaker can be difficult to pick up quickly when lying flush against the surface of the trap table. Make a "launching pad" with a strip of foam rubber so that the instrument can be positioned for a quick grab.

• The triangle suspension system should always include two loops. One loop is for suspension while the other is the safety backup. The safety loop guards you from the conductor's "glare of death" when the suspension loop breaks.

•The decision to not play can be a musical decision.

• A mounted tambourine is a worthwhile investment. You will use it either by choice or necessity.

•You should always be able to explain why you played something. Dynamics, tone quality, instrument selection, rhythmic choices, and phrasing should all be thoughtful decisions.

• Download the app Percussion Tutor. Packed with dozens of rhythms from Latin America and Africa, this easy-to-navigate app features both notation and recordings for easy reference. Percussion Tutor can be a great friend if the worship leader decides to play "10,000 Reasons" with a Merengue groove.

• Learn about the function of clave rhythms in African and Latin American music.

• Memorize the 3:2 and 2:3 son clave and cascara rhythms along with the Afro-Cuban 6/8 pattern.

• The tumbao for congas and the martillo for bongos are super important grooves. Be able to play either one at a moment's notice.

• Stick Control by George L. Stone is a classic book that every percussionist should have in their collection. You will find exercises to sharpen your skills with sticks, brushes, bare hands, and FEET.

• You can hit the sweet spot for the cross stick rimshot without fishing for it. Just grab a felt tip pen and mark a ring around that area of the stick.

• Rudiments and Scales. Rudiments and Scales. Rudiments and Scales!

• Mark a line or dot on the seam of a "cartwheel" timpani mallet. If you can see the marking while playing, you know the mallet is not producing extraneous sound from the seam contacting the drum head.

• Did you lose track of those "paired" drum sticks? Upon your next purchase of sticks, mark the pair with the purchase date or some sort of code so that you can locate the matched set in the mishmosh of your stick bag.

• Read about percussionists in the Bible. The Old Testament accounts of Miriam, Asaph, and King David's rhythm section serve as inspiring examples!

• Reflect on the gift of music. Be grateful that you are a musician.

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