Tweak. Adjust. Edit. Manipulate.

by Mark Shelton

Although you are playing the exact rhythms and pitches, a percussion part might need some fine-tuning before it conforms properly. Whether a part comes from a carefully notated score or a rhythm pattern sung by the director, it is your responsibility to endeavor to weave assigned parts correctly into the entire musical fabric.

Correct Instrument

Tambourine, tamborim, tambour, tam-tam. Although the spellings are similar, each of those 'tam' words refers to a different percussion instrument. Your seemingly out-of-place part might not be fitting because you have chosen the wrong instrument. Percussion names can be confusing. For example: timbales is the French term for timpani, while timbales also refers to the single-headed, shallow-shell drums commonly played in salsa music. A quick search of the web or consulting a dictionary of percussion terms will steer you to the appropriate instrument.

Proper Tone

German silver or beryllium copper jingles? Wooden shell or metal? Wire brushes or nylon? Percussionists are blessed with the ability to change tones to better fit our sound into a musical passage. It can be as easy as striking a snare drum in a different area of the head or using a harder timpani mallet to produce the appropriate timbre. Allow your ear and musical instincts to guide you as you search for that 'just right' tone color. I will often 'audition' different timbres during a rehearsal to determine which one works best for a particular musical moment.
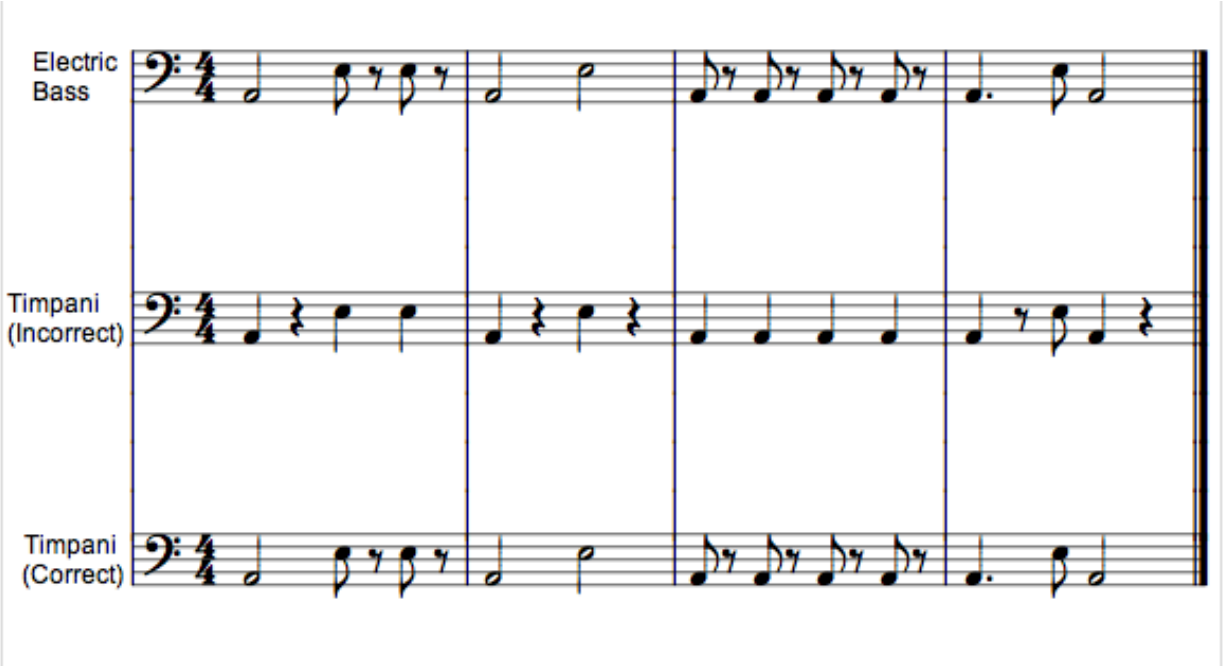
Ideal Dynamic

Finding the appropriate volume level so that your part fits into the overall balance of instruments requires a critical ear along with dynamic control of your instrument. Listen to the total sound of the ensemble and imagine the ideal volume for your part BEFORE you enter. Try to play at that level and evaluate if your dynamic is blending correctly into the mix.

Accurate Note Lengths

Notated percussion parts are sometimes written with imprecise note lengths. If your part was conceived to double rhythmically with another instrument, the parts might not be matching due to inaccurate notation. This problem is most obvious with percussion instruments that are capable of long sustain such as concert bass drum, crash cymbals, timpani, and triangle.

In the following example, the electric bass line is notated precisely, but the timpani part (which is doubling the bass) is written with inaccurate note values. (I assure you that this issue is not uncommon.)



If you suspect this problem, you can either figure out the proper note lengths by listening or by taking a look at the correctly notated score.

Octave Placement

A number of the definite-pitched percussion instruments transpose to a different octave than what is notated. This practice is done to avoid excessive use of ledger lines. Timpani sound an octave lower than written, while the xylophone soars an octave higher than notated, and the glockenspiel rings two octaves above the written notes. It is possible for a composer or arranger to unknowingly score these instruments in the wrong octave. Experiment with adjusting octaves to place a part in a characteristic register.

Effects

A big dose of elevator-shaft reverb on a single woodblock shot can be super tasty, but the same instrument without the effect can sound awkward in the same musical passage. Acoustic sounds can be transformed significantly with audio signal processing. Without the proper effect, an acoustic instrument might seem out-of-place. If your 'dry' acoustic instrument tone isn't making it in the mix, consider playing an appropriate digital sample.

The Last Resort

On rare occasions, you will encounter percussion parts that seemed like a good concept in the head of the writer or producer, but the idea just doesn’t work when played in context. Such a part will defy your best efforts to make fit. Consider rewriting or deleting.

Whether you are assigned a lead line or a simple background rhythm, use your critical listening skills to evaluate your part and apply the treatments that will best serve the music.

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Mark Shelton is a freelance musician and educational consultant based in Dallas/Fort Worth. Performance credits include North Carolina Symphony, Tin Roof Tango, Daystar Singers & Band, Gateway Worship, Wichita Falls Orchestra, Strata Big Band, TALEA, and Dallas Wind Symphony. www.marksheltonmusic.com www.percussionforworship.blogspot.com