

SELECTING BEGINNING PERCUSSIONISTS

Emily Tannert Patterson

One of the most important elements in ensuring success for beginning instrumentalists is helping students select instruments for which they are well suited. Just as students with a teardrop lip formation are not well suited for flute, or students with large lip structure are not well suited for high brass, a student who has difficulty displaying and subdividing pulse without instruction is not well suited for percussion.

In my school district, we test all students on “small pieces” (headjoints, mouthpieces, etc.) to help them select instruments they’re interested in and well suited for. These instrument drives take place during the spring of a student’s 5th grade year. Holding them enables us to correctly balance and schedule our beginner classes, and allows students and parents ample time to secure instruments and supplies prior to the school year starting. Students can indicate which instruments they are interested in trying out and are encouraged to have an open mind. For certain instruments, primarily percussion, double reeds, and low brass, we are very clear that there are limits on the number of students we can take, and that students must “test into” the class. For admission into the Beginning Percussion class, the skill set I am looking for is:

- ability to keep steady time
- ability to subdivide pulse without instruction
- ability to mimic basic snare drum skills (grip, stroke, and sticking patterns) with minimal instruction

TESTING PROCESS

Phase 1: Tap and clap

Supplies: metronome and chair

Student is seated with feet flat on the floor; tester sits opposite student. Metronome is set to 80 bpm.

Procedure:

- a. Ask the student to tap their foot to the beat. Then ask them to clap in between the foot-taps. What's important is what you DON'T say - don't say things like "right" or

"exactly" or "in the middle" - just say "in between the foot taps." You'll be amazed at the students who are able to give you perfect subdivision with no additional instruction—and that's what you're looking for. Some students' eyes will get really big and they won't understand what you mean; in these cases I demonstrate, but no more than 3-4 beats. The goal is for them to show that they already understand and can execute steady beat with subdivision without instruction.

- b. Once they successfully have (a), I'll ask them to flip it - meaning, clap on the beat and tap in between.
- c. Waltz - change the metronome to 60 bpm and ask them to clap twice in between the foot taps. You're looking for a triplet "tap - clap - clap." Most students don't get this, so I demonstrate 1-2 beats and see if they can then do it. If I'm backed up I don't even bother with this one if they can do the first two.

If the student can't do (a) pretty readily, after a little coaching, I usually don't move on. A lot of times the students will say, "that's hard!" and I'll say, "yeah, it is, but unfortunately it's just the FIRST thing you have to be able to do to make it into the percussion class, so maybe percussion isn't such a good choice for you. What other instruments are you interested in?" or I'll say, "that's pretty hard, huh?" and when they agree, give them that line.

Phase 2: "Monkey see, monkey do"

Supplies: pad or drum; two pairs of concert sticks

Procedure:

- a. Hand the student a pair of sticks; you then pick up sticks and tell them, "make your hands look like mine." Don't correct any flaws - the goal is to see if they can mimic you with no instruction (that's the "monkey see, monkey do" part!).
- b. Have the metronome going at 80, but don't say anything about it.
- c. You play and they play back to you, in quarter notes: RLRL; RLL; RLRR; LRL.

What you want to see is if they're able to mimic your motion (from the wrist, start up/end up, and sticking changes). Some students will mirror your sticking rather than mimicking, and that's okay. What you want to see is if the student stays with the metronome naturally and is able to mostly follow the sticking changes. If the student's grip or stroke is completely wrong (caveman thumb or pointed index), or is super arm stroke or down stroking, I'll fix it and see how well they respond to instruction/maintain corrections.

SCORING

We use a 1-10 scale to rate students. I generally only rate students a 9 or 10 if they perform all items perfectly or near perfectly. 90% of what I look for is the student's timing, and hope for their hands to work well. I rarely admit students with a rating below 7 to the class, and I generally try not to give ratings of 4-6; either a student has pulse, mostly has pulse, or doesn't have pulse.

SETUP

A nice facet of this test is that it requires minimal equipment and can be set up just about anywhere. It is, however, important that students are not able to preview the test by watching other students test. Ideally, the test will take place inside a separate room, and students will wait outside the door. If this is not possible, try to do the test as far away from the line of waiting students as possible. I sometimes have parents ask if twins/siblings can test together and the answer is no, they have to go one at a time.

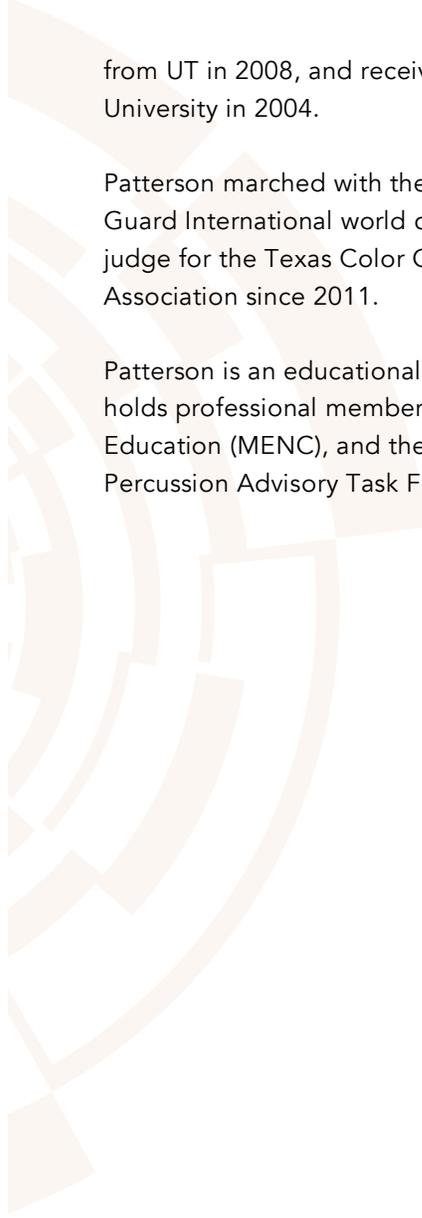
STUDENT/PARENT REACTION

There will always be parents who are upset when their students don't get in and are disappointed, so what I explain is that the screening tests for steady beat and subdivision, both of which are prerequisites for Beginning Percussion and which are taught in Elementary Music. I explain that I totally understand that students are disappointed, and that as a parent it is really hard to watch your student want something so badly and not get it. At the same time, this small disappointment is nothing compared to having a student struggle day in and day out to keep up with the pace of a very demanding class and lose their love of making music as a result. I explain that what we want most of all is for students to play instruments they're well suited for so that they're able to experience some success right away and enjoy their music-making experience, and if that means they end up on a different instrument than what they originally wanted, that's okay because they're still making music! Some parents ask if their student can get some outside instruction and try again next year; I tell them they're welcome to audition again in the future but that there is no guarantee that the scheduling will work out or that they'll get into the class. I also mention that if they are dead set on percussion, they may want to explore outside instruction where they can learn at their own pace and just enjoy what they're doing. And last but not least - I always tell parents that I'll be happy to set up an appointment and re-test their child with them present.

The end result of this process is a beginner class that is much more evenly matched in terms of ability to keep, understand, and subdivide time, which helps with pacing of the class, reduces the need to remediate in the later grades, and all of which leads to greater retention of and success for students in the long run.

Emily Tannert Patterson is the percussion director at Rouse High School and Wiley Middle School, Leander, TX. Her ensembles have garnered numerous accolades including the 2016 PAS Int'l Percussion Ensemble Contest winner (Middle School division), second place in the 2015 Black Swamp Percussion Ensemble Contest, the 2015 WGI Houston Regional Scholastic Concert World championship, and the 2014 TCGC Scholastic Concert Open championship. Patterson is also active as a percussion arranger, having written for drumlines and concert WGI ensembles in Texas, Michigan, Ohio, and elsewhere.

Patterson holds a Master's degree in Percussion Performance from The University of Texas at Austin, where she studied with Thomas Burritt and Tony Edwards. Patterson earned her Bachelor's degree in Instrumental Music Studies, along with an undergraduate Performance Certificate in Percussion and her Texas teaching certificate,



from UT in 2008, and received her Bachelor's degree in Journalism and Political Science from Northwestern University in 2004.

Patterson marched with the Glassmen Drum and Bugle Corps in 2003 and was a member of the 2004 Winter Guard International world champion indoor drumline Music City Mystique. She has been active as a percussion judge for the Texas Color Guard Circuit, Texas Educational Colorguard Association, and North Texas Colorguard Association since 2011.

Patterson is an educational endorser for Innovative Percussion sticks and mallets and Remo drumheads, and holds professional memberships in the Texas Music Educators Association, the National Association for Music Education (MENC), and the Percussive Arts Society, and is a member of the Texas Color Guard Circuit Percussion Advisory Task Force.