

Teaching Contemporary Percussion for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

By Tom Berich

In February 2009 I was approached by the Young Audiences of Indiana to put together a percussion piece for the Indiana School for the Deaf. It was to be performed in April, three short months later. Reflecting on my knee-jerk hesitation, this certainly appeared to be a daunting task that I felt wildly unqualified for. I did not know American Sign Language (ASL), and I've never spent *any* time around people who are deaf, so I had no concept of the limitations and barriers.

This article is designed to be a guide for first-time instructors of deaf and hard-of-hearing students. To properly explain the reasons behind my suggestions and approach, a little back story on this project is needed.

THE BACKSTORY (and why the project changed before it started)

I had recently joined the roster of teaching artists for Young Audiences of Indiana, an arts-in-education non-profit organization. Young Audiences and the Indiana School for the Deaf have had a relationship for almost ten years, bringing arts education—including dance, maskmaking, and storytelling—to deaf and hard-of-hearing students. My general program (for public schools) was teaching an interactive evolution of modern steelpan involving African drumming, Tamboo Bamboo, found objects, Pan 'round Da Neck, and Calypso.

Diantha Daniels, the Director of Artist Programs with Young Audiences at the time, felt that the Tamboo Bamboo aspect of my program would be a good fit for this teaching experience because the students would be able to feel the vibrations of the tubes on the ground through their feet. At the time, I couldn't have agreed with her more. I thought that Tamboo Bamboo, as an interactive percussion piece, would be ideal for people whose primary means of interpretation was visual and vibratory. I felt I was ready to give this a shot.

My next step was to see a performance of dance and interpretive sign to get an idea of the types of programs the School for the Deaf

usually did. This is when my impressions changed dramatically.

When I was first brought in to observe the performance, the most striking thing I noticed was that the 4th–12th graders in front of me were the most physically charismatic stage performers I'd ever seen. As a former live show producer for Nickelodeon, I was keenly aware of being *there* and in the moment on stage,

but...the physicality of the story telling!—the presence! The kids on stage weren't just *there*, they were kinesthetically "*there, damn it*" and the audience was coming along for the ride whether they were ready or not! It dawned on me that even if there wasn't an ASL interpreter there (and there were two), I still would have been completely entertained by the raw on-stage charisma.

This experience quickly forced me to abandon the idea of Tamboo Bamboo, which would have been far better suited for a small group, and think bigger to accommodate the large performance hall aspect, because not only were the performers hard of hearing, but much of the audience would be, too. I began to consider Taiko.

Taiko was definitely the way to go, and I was given four students who jumped into this project with both feet. Since it was new to them as well, it was an excellent opportunity to find out what would and would not work when teaching students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

VISUAL ROTE METHOD (and teaching music to those who cannot hear it)

Taiko drumming, with its big sound,



relatively simple rhythms, and large visual attributes, seemed an ideal choice for teaching almost exclusively by movement and abandoning the sense of hearing. Of course, Taiko is not the only type of percussion that could work, but for a beginning percussion piece a simple Taiko number was hard to beat (so to speak); however, accessing authentic taiko drums was prohibitively expensive. Instead we opted for a much simpler solution *a la Stomp*, including various sizes of garbage cans (replacing the daiko) and one-inch dowels (the Bachi or mallets). The timekeeper (Chanchiki) was a simple brake drum. With its high-pitched frequency—and easy accessibility—it proved fairly simple for the kids to feel, although I had to try a few different ones before selecting the one they were most comfortable with.

The rote method of teaching is nothing new, and being a community steelband teacher, rote method is what I use most. But when the student is entirely unable to hear whether he or she is playing correctly with the ensemble, what does a teacher do?

The solution to this dilemma was to work with the students in a semicircle where they all had constant visual contact with one another. Since there was no conductor, and ultimately



the goal was to use this piece as part of a program to take to the public schools for Deaf culture awareness, the consistent metronomic duties went to the brake drum player. Keren, a bright, energetic, and very expressive student from Honduras, worked out perfectly as the timekeeper/pseudo conductor.

Whoever dictates tempo in your ensemble (even if it is you as the instructor) must have specific, minute visual cues for the members to refer to. Since Keren's pattern was nothing more than a repetitive swung eighth-note phrase, we found that it helped the rest of the ensemble if he was outfitted with different colored gloves. He was playing a brake drum with short steel bars, and this not only helped preserve his hands from calluses, but it helped the other percussionists follow his right hand. Bear in mind that the students could not appreciate what it sounded like, nor did they care; it was only important that they could *feel* it, and what they physically did matched the hand they were following.

The next teaching obstacle was the minute, but varying, visual interpretations of the same pattern. This might be the most frustrating thing for musicians who can hear. I found that the previously stated swung eighth-note pattern was actually interpreted three different ways during the first couple of rehearsals. Giovanni, who had some drumming in his background and was a student I had the opportunity to work with prior to the rest of the group, felt it the closest to the true swung eighth note I had originally planned. When we brought in Malvin, a tall and graceful hip-hop dancer, I was surprised that his initial pattern was far closer to a straight dotted-eighth/sixteenth-note phrase feel. This took a minimal amount of tweaking via repetition, but ultimately worked, and yet when Keren was initially introduced to this pattern his visual interpretation was of straight eighths. So how does the teacher deal with this conundrum, when the students can't hear the difference?

The answer was speed. I quite literally spent

two rehearsals with the students playing just the swung eighth-note pattern over and over together and on the same instrument. I had them two at a time facing each other on a single drum and playing the same thing. The more they saw each other, the better. The more they actually connected with each other, both visually and physically, the easier the pattern developed in their hands. The first rehearsal was

spent getting the pattern correct at a very slow tempo, and the next rehearsal we brought it up. Just swung eighth notes—for 90 minutes.

VOLUME (not the same as dynamics)

When I first saw the initial dance and interpretive sign performance, what actually struck me, on the most basic level, was “Holy cow it’s *loud!*”, which was entirely *not* what I was expecting a deaf performance to be. It is true that many deaf students do, in fact, *feel* music through vibration. Solo artist Evelyn Glennie performs barefoot for this reason, but this was not practical for these students. Evelyn performs the majority of her concerts for the hearing public, while many deaf student concerts are primarily for a deaf audience. What is practical for the students is the need to perform extraordinarily loud. Instructors should also be prepared for other programs deaf students will potentially be rehearsing that involve amplified music (dance, interpretive sign, etc.). The volume level for these events is exceedingly high because of the need to *feel* the music. For the hearing public these volumes are teeth rattling. If you are not prepared with hearing protection you might need to run to the nearest lavatory and put as much tissue in your ears as you can fit!

LARGE VISUAL PERFORMANCE

Taiko was definitely the way to go for a number of reasons. It is repetitive, loud, and *highly* visual. Any and all movement on and between the instruments needed to be very large. I specifically moved drums further away from each other and from the students to get more movement out of their bodies. I forced the students to put more physicality into it, and this brought me to two very important instruction points:

1. Any physical/visual actions that the teacher uses need to be *much* larger than he or she may be used to. If you are already an expressive person (either with your

hands or animated in general) this will help tremendously.

2. Facial expressions go a long way with the hard of hearing. Hearing persons can express much in vocal inflection, but hard-of-hearing students transfer that inflection to their face and body, while the words go through their hands. Even if you think you are overacting, or expressive to the point of histrionic, it is actually something the students will appreciate.

WORKING WITH AN INTERPRETER

When working with an interpreter, you should be aware that explanations need to be very concise. An interpreter is just that: he or she *interprets* what you say, and that may or may not be actually what you mean. The simpler you can make your explanation, the better. Many times the interpreter won't know about or understand music, so your explanations can easily get lost in translation.

Always address the person you are talking to and not the interpreter (i.e., don't say “Tell her I said...”). Not only is it rude but it can be very confusing to the interpreter, who is trying to sort out whether you are telling the interpreter to tell the deaf person something, or whether you are telling the deaf person to tell someone else something. (One exception: it is okay to talk about the interpreter in the third person to the deaf person. You may even hear the interpreter talk about him or herself in the third person; for example, “The interpreter needs to move.” This is to reduce confusion about who's talking.)

Kathy Kelly MacMillan, formerly of the Maryland School for the Deaf, offers this handy etiquette list for first-time teachers of deaf students.

- Keep your face and lips visible.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Make sure the deaf person is looking at you before you speak, sign, or gesture.
- Speak naturally. Don't exaggerate your mouth movements or speak too slowly, and don't shout!
- Be careful not to stand with your back to a window or other light source; this makes speechreading and getting information from facial expressions difficult.
- Offer pen and paper to write notes back and forth, but be aware that English is a second language for many deaf people. When writing notes: Keep it simple! Use short sentences and plain language. Don't use idioms and slang. Repeat the question to make sure you understand.
- To get the attention of the deaf person: Tap his or her shoulder or arm. Wave in his or her line of sight.

DEAF CULTURE (and who you will be dealing with)

Throughout this article I have referred to both deaf and Deaf. There is a difference.

One word (deaf) is based on audiology; the other (Deaf) is based on identity. The Deaf community has a lot more to do with identity and language than it does with actual hearing loss. A hearing interpreter fluent in American Sign Language is a member of the Deaf community, but a deaf person who doesn't sign and doesn't socialize with other deaf people would not be. And a hard-of-hearing person who signed and socialized with other deaf people would be included.

The term "hearing impaired" is actually not a well-accepted term in the Deaf community. "Deaf" or "Hard of Hearing" are better terms. While 'hearing impaired' seems politically correct, it implies brokenness and is actually an outside label placed on the Deaf community by the hearing world.

You may find a few signs helpful, including the signs for numbers one through ten, "thank you," "very good," "faster," "slower," and other simple musical terms. What is wonderful about the Deaf culture is that everyone is very happy to show you these kinds of signs to help you communicate.

CONCLUSION

There are more than 100 schools in the United States alone that cater to deaf students. Many of these organizations have funding for the arts in education but no means of teaching music. Many percussion educators have turned down opportunities to teach these students because they feel overwhelmed. I know this feeling, but there is a wonderful opportunity for educators and a completely untapped resource of students eager to learn, whose talents tend to get overlooked. It is also a great excuse to learn American Sign Language and possess a valuable skill that could come in handy at any time.

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