



# YAMAHA

## Educator Series

PERCUSSION



*John Wittmann*

*John Wittmann is the marketing manager for percussion for Yamaha Corporation of America. He holds both a bachelors and masters degree in education with concentration in percussion, conducting and 20th century composition. John has headed two successful high school music departments in New York, conducting award-winning ensembles and receiving the TEACHER OF THE YEAR award in 1988. At Lawrence Central High School in Indianapolis, Indiana John instructed a nationally recognized percussion department, consistently winning state championships and achieving high individual ranking. John came to Yamaha as a drum set artist in 1990 and has also served as artist relations manager for Yamaha's Band and Orchestral Division.*

## To the New Instructor:

### Instilling Pride in Your Percussion Section From Day 1

*By John Wittmann*

Some band directors who play wind instruments believe that percussionists are a different breed. They feel that percussionists are, as a group, high maintenance and are the "troublemakers in the back." Chances are we have all heard insinuations implying that drummer/percussionists are one step below other musicians on the food chain. People react and act according to those insinuations. These actions perpetuate some negative affects that further separate the percussionists from the rest of the musicians in an ensemble. I can't stress enough that from day 1 of your new position as band director, or percussion instructor, it is crucial that you hold every member of your percussion section to the same high standards that you hold members of other sections.

#### The Dotted Line

Consider having a contract that each percussion student and their parents must sign. It could include expectations concerning setup, equipment care, attendance, lesson policies etc. If they know you mean business from day one they will considerate it an honor to be in your percussion section. Let them know you expect an elite force of professionals and although you plan on having fun, there is no room for irresponsibility. Every percussionist must know what you expect at every rehearsal from day one.

#### Professional Percussion Procedures

Do your part by always having the order of rehearsal on the board BEFORE they get there. If a percussionist is absent on any given day, it is the attending percussionists' responsibility to cover all parts (no exceptions). They will love this challenge but you must train them to expect it as standard procedure.

Percussionists should observe the blackboard immediately when entering band room and start set up immediately.

- On the first downbeat of the first warm-up it is understood that EVERY percussionist is playing a mallet instrument or percussion instrument part written for that specific warm up, not standing still. WARM UP TIME IS NOT SET UP TIME. Everyone else in the band came in set up their own instrument and is reading a melody. Double players on different octaves of a marimba, xylophone or bell instrument. No one is allowed to be setting up gear during this time.



*John Wittmann*

- Every percussion student must show up with all his or her tools every day. This is not optional. These are their instruments! How would you handle it if a saxophone player showed up sat down and said "Sorry, I forgot my sax."

I suggest it be understood that their tools for every rehearsal are:

- 1 pair of maple snare drum sticks
- 1 pair of medium yarn mallets
- 1 band folder containing band music, solo and ensemble music and method books
- 1 pair of medium timpani mallets
- 1 pair of hard rubber mallets

So what do you do if they show up with no tools? Simple, subtract one point and write it down in the grade book in front of them; no drama, just write it down. They will know by now that if they get 3 points taken of it equals one letter grade. Yes, this is a class and they are responsible. They have signed a contract and you mean business.

### **Testing, testing, one, two, three.**

You must test every percussion student fairly, often, and on various instruments. They play an instrument which by its very nature is challenging and problematic; it is one of the only instruments not held by a player, it is too high for some, too low for others, it is a "solo" instrument, young mallet players start on a bell kit and pad not a "real" instrument, etc. All of these factors result in physical issues that make phrasing, dynamics and general musicality more illusive. If you don't believe me, try making a dolce mezzo piano decrescendo retarding phrase on a xylophone or a snare drum. It takes years to sound good on percussion instruments...that's instruments, (plural) don't forget they have to learn the idiosyncrasies of many instruments, unlike your other students! Test often on simple skills from good books like the Yamaha Advantage Band Method.

### **No excuses- I am a pro- I am completely responsible-I deal with it.**

This was the mantra of the percussion section at Lawrence Central High School where I taught for several years. Everyone knew it. Everyone lived it. Everyone knew exactly what it meant. Every percussion student was simply expected to fix broken gear, find missing parts, organize music and "work" in the percussion section as if they were, as we would say "getting paid a million dollars an hour to do so". If a student was not holding up their part of the bargain, a simple look to the section leader from me was all it took. It was not a threatening look, it was an "I don't understand, we agreed to all be professionals" look. We had a wonderful and versatile percussion section. I learned quite a lot from them and the gifted staff.

Percussionists are generally creative people who can make or break the sound of your ensemble. As with any relationship, the more time you invest in it the better it is. Don't fall into the trap of ignoring your percussion section and yelling at them because they are not making the sounds you need. Teach them. Work with them. They will be proud to be in your section.

