GETTING STARTED IN PERCUSSION

by White House of Music

How to Become a Skilled Percussionist

Blog Summary

- Percussion is more than just drums. When you get started, you'll explore a wide range of instruments from snare and bass drum to bells and mallet instruments.
- Strong fundamentals matter early. Beginning with proper technique, the right equipment, and structured guidance helps you avoid bad habits and sets you up for long-term success.
- The right support makes all the difference. With knowledgeable instructors and quality tools, you'll gain confidence quickly and develop the skills needed to grow as a well-rounded percussionist.

My Experience As a Beginner Percussionist

When you first get started with your musical career, you'll never know where it might take you! I spent my entire career as a percussionist, but when I first signed up for band, my plan was to play the trumpet. My braces wound up being an issue, so when I was offered a choice between the trombone, alto saxophone, and percussion in sixth grade, I decided to pursue the latter and haven't looked back since! At first, I wasn't thrilled with the idea of being a percussionist. At that time gender roles were still a big influence on which instrument you wound up playing, but it didn't take long before I found my inspiration in Karen Carpenter (of The Carpenters). A critically acclaimed drummer, she proved that you could be both a girl and a skilled percussionist!

Our high school went through three different band directors in four years, each one offering their own specialty. It wasn't until my first high school band director (a trumpet player) was replaced by a percussionist that I realized how important it was to have a specialist providing one-on-one feedback

regarding technique and play style. It wasn't long before I discovered I had been gripping my left snare drum stick incorrectly, a frustrating bad habit that took me nearly a year to fully correct. Had I not received that valuable feedback from this percussionist, my skill level would have almost certainly not peaked, taking my life and musical career in a completely different direction!

With the ever-increasing teaching workloads, it's even harder for students to get quality one-on-one time with their band directors, so I highly recommend students invest in private lessons to help avoid running into similar pitfalls. By identifying my shortcomings early on I was able to adjust my technique, continue to major in Percussion at UW-Stevens Point, performed professionally with a number of different bands and orchestras, and spend more than three decades as a band director with various schools across Wisconsin and Tennessee!

A Percussionist's First Steps: The Selection Process

While each band director will have their own method of helping students choose an instrument, my approach always involved a two-step process.

The first step provided students with the opportunity to test out every instrument. Each student would attempt to play a few notes in front of their classmates, at which point they would complete a simple peer and self-evaluation. I would always have the students play the percussion instruments last due to their high level of demand. Students would often select a different instrument before reaching the final stage of this test, narrowing the field of candidates for the percussion section.

The second step of the selection process involved some basic coordination exercises. One simple test to evaluate coordination and rhythm is to have the student perform a Single Paradiddle pattern (right, left, right, right, left, right, left, left). I would also gauge student interest in the various percussion instruments and tried to determine their level of serious commitment toward comprehensive percussion study.

Percussionists Are More than Just Drummers!

Why is it important to screen percussion candidates more than most other band members? While many students sign up intending to play the drums, there are many more primary and auxiliary instruments they'll have to learn as well!

First-year percussionists will typically learn to play the following instruments:

- Bells (Xylophone)
- Snare Drum
- Suspended Cymbal

- Crash Cymbals
- Bass Drum

Percussionists will normally pick up the following instruments in their subsequent years:

- Timpani
- Marimba
- Drum Set
- Vibraphone
- Chimes

Other instruments commonly used by percussionists include the following:

- Tambourine
- Bongo Drum
- Cowbell
- Gong
- Conga
- Woodblock
- Hi-hat
- Triangle

With this vast selection of instruments, the learning process will vary more for percussionists than for most other musicians. The best music books for beginner percussionists will list the same piece of music on opposing pages (We recommend Premier Performance by Ed Sueta, a music book offered by the White House of Music).

To the left of the fold, the student can find the music for the snare drum, while the right side features the mallet notes. By reviewing both pieces simultaneously, the students learn treble clef, keyboard, drum technique, and sticking at the same time. These combination books will be a bit more expensive than standard books, but the additional investment is well worth it for the budding percussionist.

Once your student has mastered the fundamentals of these basic percussion instruments, they will need some one-on-one guidance from a percussion teacher on the technique required to play each of the auxiliary instruments they might encounter. It's best to get that feedback early on to avoid developing any bad habits down the road.

The Tools of the Trade: What Do Beginner Percussionists Need to Purchase to Get Started?

The exact list of items needed for beginner percussionists will vary from school to school, depending on your band director's needs. Typically, the band director will collaborate with White House of Music to create a "Rental Kit" featuring snare sticks, bell mallets, a drum pad, and a small bell kit.

There is typically a slight cost saving when considering percussion rental kits over most other instruments. Still, we highly recommend purchasing a metronome and music stand to properly display sheet music when practicing at home. By the end of a student's first semester, they will likely have acquired a stick bag including basic snare drum sticks (we recommend Vic Firth SD1 Generals), a set of hard rubber or plastic bells mallets, a set of timpani mallets (we also recommend Vic Firth T1 General and T3 Staccatos), and yarn mallets for the suspended cymbal. All of the above instruments and accessories are available for purchase through White House of Music.

Mallets and sticks should be considered disposable accessories, requiring occasional replacement due to normal wear and tear. Most band directors will have sticks and mallets available for student use, but having a backup set on hand never hurts!

What Kind of Instruments Do Schools Typically Provide Percussionists?

Schools typically provide most of the larger instruments, including timpani, concert bass drum, concert snare drum, drum set, marimba, and bells. Auxiliary instruments are also typically provided by the school. However, the aspiring college percussionist will want to acquire their own over time.

As a student progresses in their skills, they may want to purchase their own instruments for practice at home or at private lessons. Most practice for novice students can be accommodated with their rental kit.

Caring for Percussion Instruments

Unlike wind and string instrument maintenance, care for percussion instruments is fairly straightforward. Beginner students will be required to keep their equipment and instruments well organized. Students should cover the Xylophones with their dust covers, mallets should be placed in their bag, and timpani should be covered to ensure the heads are protected.

White House of Music: Your Local Percussion Resource

If you have any additional questions regarding beginner percussion lessons, instruments, and accessories, please don't hesitate to stop by your local White House of Music store. Many of our employees are former

band directors who would be more than happy to help provide valuable feedback.

White House of Music Retail Stores can be found in the following locations:

- Waukesha
- Brookfield
- West Bend

Additional print resources available through White House of Music include:

- Premier Performance Series by Ed Sueta
- Stick Control by George Lawrence Stone
- Rhythm Vocabulary Charts by Ed Sueta
- Modern School For Xylophone, Marimba, and Vibraphone by Morris Goldenberg

Fill out this form to be paired with a teacher that fits your instrument and scheduling needs!

Request Lessons Now