

PERCUSSIONIST ETIQUETTE CHEAT SHEET



by Bron Harrison

OK, so you have made it into a band or orchestra. Clearly you know how to play music! But what about the other stuff? Everything you need to know that is, well, not playing music.

It may seem obvious though you will be surprised with how many people get this important percussion etiquette wrong.

If you want to be a professional, expand in your percussion performance career and show leadership to others, follow these simple DO's and DON'T's to give yourself a head start and be a superior percussionist.

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BUT I SPEND SO MUCH TIME WAITING...

I've got some blunt news for you – that's just part of the deal. Like it or leave it. As a percussionist you are going to be counting lots of bars rest, waiting for your entry or playing one triangle 'ting' in a 20-minute movement. Here is the deal – the benefit is you are the only one playing your part. Unlike string players or brass or woodwind players, where there are lots of people playing the same part, you have a unique part, and guess what – it sticks out like a sore thumb. Which is why it is important to get right. But yes, I hear you; there will be times where you will need to exercise extreme patience. This is one of the wonderful things about being a percussionist – patience. The other good thing about this very important personal characteristic is this: having (or not having) patience very quickly distinguishes the players that are worth having in the percussion section and the ones that you are happy to say goodbye to. Be patient.

“Patience is not the ability to wait, but how you act while you are waiting”

~ Joyce Mayer

CARE OF INSTRUMENTS

Never place anything on top of any instrument. And this means ANYTHING – no music folders, no food, nothing. The only exception is mallets for the instrument in the absence of a percussion table.

CHANGE OVER

This is the super quick running from one side of the percussion section to the other in between pieces, quickly tuning timpani and being ready to go before you can say, “planned, purposeful percussionists propagate impactful percussion playing”. Some pointers:

- For performances, have your music in order so you are not frantically flipping through your book trying to find the next piece.
- You need to do change over quickly and quietly. EVERYONE IS STARING AT YOU while the whole orchestra waits for you to be ready, make sure you impress everyone by showing them how calm yet efficient you can be at changing over instruments.
- Plan ahead – if you have a multi percussion part that involves a crash cymbal, ratchet and wind chimes, be sure to have these three percussion instruments set up in advance.

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PRACTICE

Imagine playing in a footy team or a doubles tennis match and after training you go home and practice only to turn up your next training and no else or your tennis partner has not practiced. How do I say this.... ummmmm, it sux. Big time. When you are the only one pulling your weight it gets really, really boring. Don't be that guy or girl that doesn't practice between rehearsals. Rehearsal time is for playing as a group, to master balance and dynamics between sections and practice consistency. It is not to have one person practice their part. Do not waste rehearsal time learning your part. Rehearsals are for you to learn how the other ensemble parts relate to your part and visa versa.

STICKS & MALLETS

Put them back when you are done.

Never use the incorrect mallet or stick on an instrument. If in doubt, ask your tutor. A great way to damage percussion is using the incorrect tools to strike the instrument.

Percussion instruments are expensive – surely you do not want to spend your hard earned cash on replacing keys, skinheads or other percussion parts.

TALKING

It's pretty simple. Don't do it. Talking whilst the conductor is talking or has stopped the group playing is a HUGE no no. You will need to learn how to communicate with your fellow percussion peers without speaking. Some helpful sign language tips:

- Using fingers to indicate number of bars rest have passed while you are counting
- Pointing to snares that need turning off
- Using breathe and the movement of your body to breathe in time before an entry to indicate to other players you are about to start playing
- Tap out with two fingers on your thigh other parts that you don't play to get better at sight-reading as well as being ready for back up if the other player is away for any reason

TAPPING

Similar to talking, tapping your sticks, holding your tambourine sideways so it jingles incessantly, dropping sticks / triangles is sloppy. If you want to be a tight percussionist, you need to master the art of being silent.

If a conductor ever asks a section to play without percussion, still mentally practice your part by tapping the rhythm on your thigh.

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TAKING TURNS

Depending on how big your section is, it is vital that you take turns. Having one player on the one instrument does not allow other players to have a turn. This being said, if you do not practice, are lazy, rock up late to performances or rehearsals, or think it is ok to dominate one instrument, you will not be issued principle parts (this means the main or most important part).

MUSIC

You are required to have your music as well as all other percussion parts – even if you don't play them.

SIT OR STAND?

If you are playing – do not sit down. You are required to stand to play. You may sit on a high stool if you are not playing for entire movements, other than that, you are required to stand still, with your arms either by your side, in front or behind you. No leaning on walls or instruments. Stand, like a soldier “at-ease”.

POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Do you like cranky teachers? Neither do I. So guess what? Teachers don't like cranky students. Attitude is everything. If you think you are too cool for school, are above the triangle or don't want to bother counting your bars rest, well I have news for you, you won't last long in any reputable band or orchestra. Conductors don't have time for egos. Leave them at home, when you are on your own.

SET UP

Arrive 10 minutes before the scheduled start time. Help others, and then warm-up a little. Warming up does not include:

- bashing percussion instruments as loudly as you can
- playing while the conductor is clearly trying to stop everyone from playing

Warming up does include:

- rudiments on a practice pad or snare drum
- scales on mallet instruments
- stretching

REHEARSALS

Do not leave rehearsals. Go to the bathroom before and after rehearsal. If you don't play in a piece: remain in the area.

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PACKING UP

Do not leave before EVERYTHING is pack up properly. This means:

- all mallets and sticks are in the stick bag
- all covers are on instruments
- snares are off
- timpani skins are not left tuned high/tight

MANNERS

Manners can get you very, very far in life.

Thank your conductor / tutor when you leave rehearsal.

WHAT TO BRING

1. Stick bag, including:

- sticks
- mallets
- pencil
- pegs
- drum key
- your instrument

Try to avoid borrowing instruments and mallets.

2. Music – yours and your whole sections’.

3. Positive attitude

BE PROTECTIVE OF YOUR SECTION

As a percussionist you are required to show others how to respect percussion equipment. As you already know, drummers and percussionists DO NOT bash their instruments; they play them, with carefully prepared technique and skilful execution.

If you see other people from other sections, coming and bashing the instruments, step up and say something. Explain that they are instruments that require certain technique to ensure they do not get damaged. If you don't have any luck, report any misuse of equipment to the conductor.

And as always, lead by example.

Good luck!