

Organizing the Symphonic Percussion Section

The unseen work of the Principal Percussionist

By Malcolm Lim

In addition to performing difficult and exposed music parts, the job of the Principal Percussionist involves organizing the percussion section: determining the extras to be hired, compiling instrument lists, ensuring unusual instrument requests will be available for the concert, plotting the map of where instruments go on stage, making instrument assignment choices, ensuring assigned music is available on time, communicating “doubling” requirements, directing the set up and tear down of instruments on stage, keeping the instrument storage room organized, maintaining the working condition of

instruments, and, above all, communicating with the personnel manager, the production manager, the conductor, the Principal Timpanist, and members of the percussion team.

I have put some thoughts together to potentially help those new to the job and to begin a conversation with those with more experience than myself. I have found that the organizational side of the job is not discussed very much in our music education, and online materials are scarce. Organizing is less sexy than performing; in terms of time spent, I would say the job is two-thirds organizing and one-third practicing and perform-

ing (others have suggested it is more like four-fifths to one-fifth). The ability of a potential Principal Percussionist to organize is not assessed as part of the audition process, but this skill is essential for the smooth functioning of the percussion section. I believe this skill can be developed, and it is for this reason that I offer these thoughts based on my work as Acting Principal Percussion for the the 2021-22 and 2022-23 seasons of the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra.

START WITH A SYSTEM

Busy weeks at the Calgary Philharmonic might include three different

Figure 1: Spreadsheet for Organizing the Percussion Section

	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
1	Concert	perc requested	perc confirmed	Request Music from librarian	Music out date	1st rehearsal	Inst list	Assign. sent	Map	Doubling Sent	Music Out	
3	FALL		(2 weeks)	(1 week)								
4	FC1 Brass Fanfares	T+2 (RS)			24-Aug	7-Sep	done	done	done	done	done	
5	FC04 Tom Jackson	T +2 (ND)	NOW	1Sept	7-Sep	21-Sep	done	done	done	done	done	
6	PO1 Broadway	T+2 (TH)	NOW	3Sept	10-Sep	24-Sep	done	done	done	done	done	
7	MT07 Napi and the Rock	T+1	NOW	7Sept	14-Sep	28-Sep	done	N/A	done	done	done	
8	FC03 Classical Xmas show	T+3 (SB, ND)	7Sept	14Sept	21-Sep	5-Oct	done	done	done	done	done	
9	SP25 Haydn with Hirzer	T+3 (SB, ND)	ASAP	ASAP	29-Sep	13-Oct	done	done	done	done	done	
10	FC04B Tom Jackson	T+1	30-Oct	6-Oct	13-Oct	27-Oct	done	N/A	done	done	N/A	
11	PO2 Mike Hope	T+1	8-Oct	15-Oct	22-Oct	5-Nov	done	N/A	done	done	N/A	
12	FC05 Brahms 2 (Fung)	T+1	14-Oct	20-Oct	27-Oct	10-Nov	done	N/A	N/A	done	N/A	
13	ED02 Rocky Mtn Fairytales	2p (SB)	19-Oct	26-Oct	2-Nov	16-Nov		done	done	done	done	
14												
15	WINTER											
16												
17	SS03 Nutcracker	T+1			26-Nov	10-Dec	done	N/A	done	done	N/A	
18	STV	T + 2			17-Dec	31-Dec	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	

programs, so I developed a system using a spreadsheet that helped me to make sure all tasks were completed on time. The column headings I use are: *Concerts, Percussionists, Request Music from Librarian, Music Due Date, First Rehearsal Date, Instrument/Equipment List, Assignments, Map, Doubling Sent, Music Out, Map/Instrument Sent, Prepare Trunk for Move, Cleanup Storage* (see Figure 1). This is a methodical checklist, and I tick off the items when completed. I like using Google Sheets so that I can access the information easily on my iPhone anywhere. I use the “Freeze” function on the headings row so that when I scroll down, the headings are still within view. What follows is an explanation of each column heading; related issues are also discussed.

Concerts: I type in the code for the concert: e.g., FC1 – Brass Fanfares.

Percussionists: I enter something like T+2 (timpani and 2 percussionists); this means we must hire one other percussionist. I might have a column for subs requested, and then one for subs confirmed. I will use our online OPAS software to see if we need to hire a drum set player. I listen to the music on a particular program if I’m not familiar with it to help me decide which subs I should hire. At times, I will confer with the Principal Timpanist and the personnel manager on who to hire.

Request Music from Librarian, Music Out Date, First Rehearsal: Since the music needs to be assigned and ready for pick up by the percussion section two weeks before the first rehearsal (according to the CPO Collective Bargaining Agreement), I go through the calendar and mark down the dates for the first rehearsal for each program. Working backwards, I write down the deadline two weeks before that first rehearsal: the “Music Out Date.” I work further backwards and write down dates one week and two weeks before the deadline to prompt me to see if any of the music might be available for percussion. If the music is particularly challenging, I might request that a special effort be made by the music librarian to get it out sooner.

Instrument List: I have separate spreadsheets for each show. I usually start by going through the music and compiling a list of instruments needed. I will separate (1) the equipment that the crew would need to take care of (the big stuff like bass drum, mallet instruments, the trunk where the small gear lives) and (2) the equipment that I would take care of (included inside the trunk or placed on top). I list every instrument that a particular program requires. If people need to bring extra snare or cymbal stands, I specify this in the list. I also list the number of music stands required, and anything else, such as chairs and stools. I compile the instrument list while working on the part assignments and the map; all three processes affect each other. I always double check the list at the end because inevitably I could forget something, and it is always something big (tam tam or chimes). See Figure 2.

For certain pieces like Chin’s “Graffiti,” unusual instruments and mallets are required, so then I confer with the production manager about procurement; we rented gear such as a dozen tuned gongs and two chromatic octaves of almglocken from Timpano-Percussion in Montreal. We also had to look for bass chimes; it turned out our Associate Conductor drove up to Edmonton to bring them down (thanks Edmonton Symphony Orchestra). When the package of gongs and almglocken arrived, we put the frames to-

Figure 2: Instrument List (separating what the crew needs to take care of and what I would take care of)

A	B	C	D
Instruments (crew)		<i>(instruments we take care of)</i>	
big trunk		mark tree	
drumset		cowbell	
small tam tam		sus x 4	
large tam tam		china on stand	
djeme on stand		crash a2 x 2	
xylophone		bulb horn	
glockenspiel (bells)		siren	
vibes		triangle	
timbales		(at timpani the following)	
congas		train whistle	
wind machine		vibraslap	
bass drum (calf on wheels)		maracas	
crotales (lower octave)		tamborine	
chimes (tubular bells)		triangle	
Marimba			
1 chair			
10 stands			
1stool			

gether and figured out where everything had to live. All of this takes time.

Figure 3: Our venerable Big Trunk – still functional



Assignments: Once I know who is hired for a program, and once the music is in, I start working on the part assignments on a spreadsheet. I do this in conjunction with mapping out how the section will be laid out because it helps me envision how each player will move from one instrument to another. I work piece by piece, or movement by movement, laying out what each percussionist will do. I try to assign according to a player’s strengths. Sometimes, I give players a choice: “Would you prefer to play snare drum or xylophone for this piece?” It makes things a bit more democratic and increases the sense of autonomy in the section.

Part assignments for major standard works have been prepared on Percussion Orchestrations (www.percorch.com). I use Raynor Carroll’s “Symphonic Repertoire Guide for Timpani and Percussion.” The challenge is usually for shows where there is not a budget to hire an extra player, but the same parts must be covered, as far as possible. We might even have to “double” (including the timpanist); in the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA), percussionists and timpanists get an increase in pay called a “double” or “triple”

if they need to play across any of the following categories: percussion (drums and auxiliary); mallets; drum set; timpani. In this case, I must know what the timpanist is doing too, so I take photos of that music ahead of time to refer to. For dense scores with lots of instrument changes (e.g., *Harry Potter 3*), I resort to breakdown by bar number (see Figure 4).

Sometimes, composers write instrument indications that are not clear. In this case, I either try to communicate with the conductor or the composer (if that person is alive). The office staff have been extremely helpful in putting me in touch with current composers.

After emailing a copy of my assignment spreadsheet to everyone, I will tick this box.

Map: The map is important for helping

me see if the part assignments work out. I put every instrument that is required for the program on the map, also noting where the music and trap stands are (the number of music stands required is sent to the production manager so they can have an idea of what we need). The map helps me determine where I need extra triangles or suspended cymbals, or less commonly other things like extra bass drums or glockenspiels. I try to imagine if it is feasible for a player to physically move from instrument to instrument in order to play everything I have assigned. I also want to position certain instruments closer together (beside each other, perhaps) for music ensemble reasons; it is amazing how a distance of even ten feet can affect ensemble performance.

Usually, in the "North American" setup

that we often use, brass is stage left, horns and woodwinds are in the middle, and percussion is stage right. Timpani are usually set up in front of the percussion; this provides the percussionists with a clear line of sight to the timpanist for ensemble purposes. From left to right (perspective of the percussionist) the basic setup is as follows: bass drum, cymbals (bass drum and cymbals often play together), snare drum, complementary percussion (e.g., triangle and tambourine); mallets such as glockenspiel and xylophone (sometimes vibes and marimba could go in a second row behind the first row if they are used less frequently); chimes are usually placed at the end of the mallet section. So, the entire percussion section is book ended by the bass drum and the chimes. I like the chimes at the end so that it does not obstruct sightlines between players. However, if there is a ton of rhythm instruments, and I feel that the glockenspiel and xylophone need to be close to the woodwinds for ensemble, I will put those two mallet instruments beside the woodwinds, then place the bass drum to the right, followed by the rhythm instruments.

For big shows (e.g., *Harry Potter 3*, Disney's *Frozen*, John Williams), sometimes several versions of maps will have to be tried before settling on the final version. Often, I confer with the timpanist over the best plan; on occasion, for space reasons, timpani and percussion have been split, which is not ideal. Lately I have been trying to be more strategic about placing the instruments that have the most rhythmic responsibility (e.g., snare drum, woodblocks) as central as possible in the orchestra in order to mitigate the effects of sound delay.

If a drum set is used in a pops show, sometimes it can be situated near the percussion but as central as possible, beside the timpani. However, if there is a bass player hired, kit and bass are often planted in front of the brass, stage left. In this case, if the kit player must do any doubling, I make sure they have all the instruments they need, so they don't have

Figure 4: Part Assignments for Harry Potter 3, using breakdown by bar number

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
	ML	CS	LW	ND	JF										
7M1-7M11A															
7M2															
7M3-7M4															
7M5															
7M6															
7M7															
7M8															
7M9															
7M11-7M12-End Credits															
ML															
CS															
LW															
ND															
JF															

Figure 5: Example of Map for Harry Potter 3



to travel to our side to play something (see Figure 6). Having a monitor to hear the kit can solve sound delay issues and improve ensemble.

Using my iPhone, I will scan the map into Dropbox, so I can easily attach it to emails. Sometimes, no matter how much

I plan, available space will force me to re-adjust, and so I leave myself more time by coming early to set up for rehearsal.

It is helpful for the percussion team to see the map; it reduces uncertainty and helps them mentally prepare their choreography for the first rehearsal. Of course,

Figure 6: Pops show setup; I was the only percussionist; drum set player and timpanist are also doubling; second row needed for wind-machine and marimba.

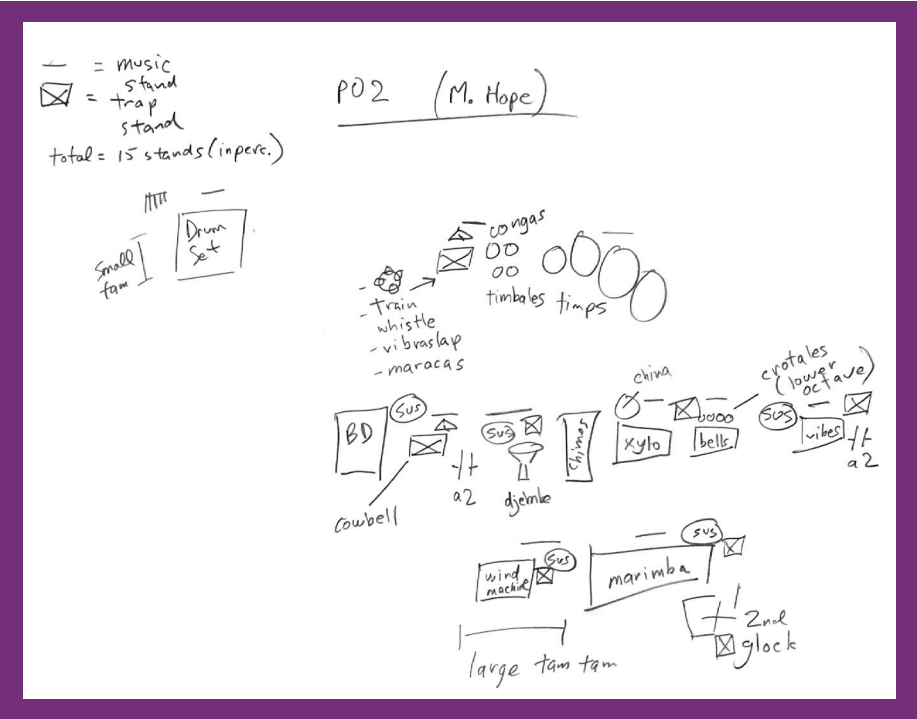
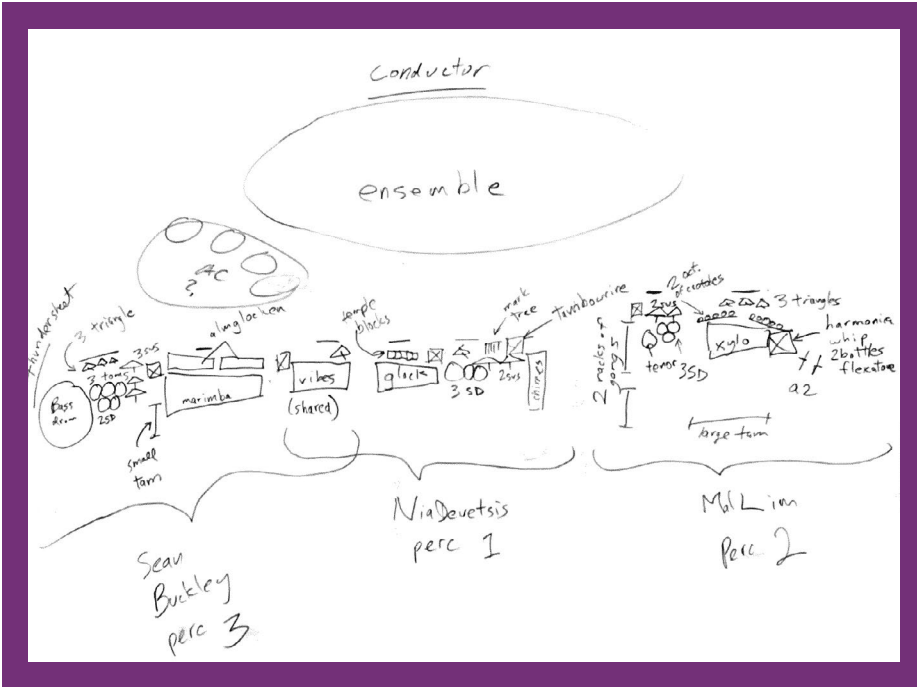


Figure 7: Map for Unsub Chin's "Graffiti"



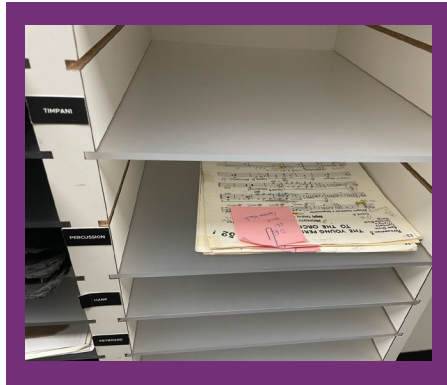
I do not want to micro-manage, so if people want to set up their station differently, they are welcome to.

Doubling Sent: If anyone needs to be paid doubling (additional pay to play across the categories of percussion, mallets, drum set, and timpani), I make sure to send that information to the personnel manager two weeks before the first rehearsal. I do not want the personnel manager to have to look for this information, so I will email him directly.

Music Out: Even though the deadline is two weeks before the first rehearsal, if possible, I will try to get the music out sooner, especially if it is a difficult piece. Once the music is labeled with each sub's initials, I put it in the percussion cabinet ready for them to pick up. Each person has a package, so they do not need to look in the assignments to sort through a pile of music (see Figure 8). I will have also emailed a copy of the assignments to everyone; on occasion I will print out a physical copy and include it with the music (but I am also thinking about our carbon footprint these days). I let everyone know that the music is available, like "tomorrow afternoon after 1 P.M.," because I do not want the subs to be guessing. Then I tick this box.

Instruments/Map Sent: I need to send the equipment list and the map to the production manager two weeks before the first rehearsal, because he has his own team to communicate with. This also gives the personnel manager time to tell me: "Hey because of the space constrict-

Figure 8: Music ready for pick up with clear labels.



tions, I don't think this is going to work." Then we redraw the map. I usually copy the message to the personnel manager, the Principal Timpanist, and the other subs, so everyone has the information. If I know that the conductor is interested and might have suggestions (from experience), I will copy her as well.

Prepare Trunk for Move: A few days before the first rehearsal, I make sure to ask the production manager when she plans to have the crew move the gear from storage to the rehearsal space. We use WhatsApp to communicate storage room issues between the production manager, the Principal Percussionist, and the Principal Timpanist. To help facilitate the move, I put as much of the gear on top of the trunk as possible. Some of the gear (timbales, crotales, tomtoms, RotoToms, temple blocks) have special stands that the crew might not be familiar with, so I put it on the trunk for them.

If we have to perform off site (e.g., the opera, ballet, outreach), we use a small trunk for instruments, trays, and mallets. If it is a big show, we will use two small trunks. We have a "road" bass drum, xylophone, glockenspiel, and drum set, and these must be specified in the instrument list.

Set Up and Tear Down: This is not a category I use in the spreadsheet, but it is an important topic, so I would like to address

it. I am usually one of the first to show up at the first rehearsal to mark our territory and fine tune the position of instruments. The crew will normally have brought everything I have requested and roughly placed them according to the map. We percussionists are loud, so to maintain friendly neighbor status, a minimum 10-foot rule between us and the rest of the orchestra is our tacit understanding.

For big inter-galactic shows (Chin "Graffiti," Figure 7), we try to set up a day before the first rehearsal, but we must clear it with the personnel manager and the production team. There is often not a budget to pay us to set up like this, but in the interest of a smooth rehearsal and relieving stress, we may opt to forgo compensation (as long as it doesn't happen too often).

It is ideal if all rehearsals are in the concert hall, but this is not always the case. If we rehearse in the rehearsal hall, this necessitates setting up twice. In this case, I take pictures of the setup for reference, and I encourage the section to do the same for their individual setups. We try to keep trays intact and put them on or in the trunk.

Post-concert tear downs involve the

whole team, and no one goes home until everything is packed in the trunk. We cover everything that needs to be covered, unlock wheels, wrap up the vibraphone cord, take off clips that we have used to keep trap stands at the appropriate heights, and pile instruments on top of the trunk. We prepare the equipment to facilitate transportation by the crew. So, percussionists are usually the first to arrive and among the last to leave. The Principal Percussionist leaves even later.

Clean Up Storage: After each show, the crew returns the trunk and all the gear to the storage room; it is my job to put things away. The timpanist and I usually communicate to see how best to arrange the instruments in view of what needs to be available for personal practice, to get ready for the next show. Our storage area is small, so we have to use space efficiently (see Figure 9).

CONCLUSION

At the beginning, it is crucial to have some sort of system one could consistently use to ensure no balls or mallets get dropped. I have shown what works for my context, and others will have their own specialized needs, but the main

Figure 10: Setup for Disney's Frozen

Figure 9: Space is at a premium in storage, so we try to keep things organized.



point will hopefully have been made. Over time, one could modify, simplify, or dispense with the system, but by then the system will probably have been hard-wired as habit. When things go smoothly, everyone is happy.

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