

# **What's Going on Back There???**

## **A Percussion Section Tour for Band and Orchestra Directors**

By: Mark Carson and Doug Wallace (October, 2007)

Welcome to the first in a series of articles presented by Doug Wallace Percussion Publications aimed at providing you with practical knowledge concerning the use, tuning, maintenance, and repair of your percussion instruments. Our first article will be a quick tour of your percussion section, focusing on getting to know the back of the room, and all of those instruments that may be deteriorating while your attention is elsewhere. Our walkthrough will help you prevent serious and costly repairs, make more informed budget/replacement decisions, and keep a better handle on loss and damage in your section.

Ideally you would do this tour monthly, but let's not kid ourselves! Aim for three times per year, especially after a big event, such as a trip. Take notes using the checklist provided at the conclusion of this article, and consult a professional percussionist or repair person in your area if you are unable to service an instrument yourself. Once you are comfortable with the tour, it should take less than fifteen minutes, and it will be well worth the time and effort.

After inspecting your instruments, you will know if any instruments are being abused, are missing, need replacement, need tuning, need minor repairs, or require professional help. This article will raise more questions than answers, but it gives us a base to start from. We'll dig deeper in the future, focusing on one or two instruments at a time. In the meantime, if you have questions or suggestions for future articles, please let us know.

### **Let the Tour Begin!**

#### **Chimes / Tubular Bells**

Visually inspect the instrument. Are all of the hanging chimes secured to the rack with proper string or wire? Depress the damper pedal, strike a few notes, and then release the pedal. Does it dampen quietly and cleanly? When you depressed the pedal did the frame shift diagonally? If it did, grab it with both hands and move it side to side to see how loose it is. If the frame is too loose, it may not be safe for your students.

#### **Orchestra Bells / Glockenspiel**

Visually inspect the instrument. Are bars missing, ill-aligned, or rusting? What is the condition of the pin insulators? Is the stand working properly? Do the bars need to be cleaned or tuned? Mallet instruments are usually tuned to A=440 or A=442, depending on the manufacturer. Is the instrument being played with appropriate mallets? Do the bars ring freely when struck?

#### **Xylophone or Marimba**

Visually inspect the instrument. What is the condition of the bars and their suspension cords? The bars should be free of chips or splintering and the suspension cords should be taught. Do the bars need to be tuned? How about the frame? Is the frame loose? Are all of the post insulators or grommets there? Is the instrument being played with appropriate mallets?

#### **Vibraphone**

Follow a similar procedure as for the xylophone. In addition, check the damper pedal as you did with the chimes. Is the motor present and functional? When the instrument is played without the motor, are the fans in the open position? This will dramatically improve tone and resonance. Is the instrument being played with appropriate mallets?

## Snare Drum

Visually inspect the instrument. Does it need new heads? Does the “throw-off” release and engage smoothly and fully? Do the snares sit properly against the bottom head? Tap the drum one time with a stick or even your finger. Does it sound good to you? The snares should be heard consistently at all dynamic ranges. Don’t forget the stand... Are there missing or stripped parts? Does it adjust to the appropriate height for players of all sizes?

## Crash Cymbals

What is the condition of the straps and the knot? Where do the players put the cymbals during rests? If you use a cradle, are all of the parts of the cradle present? If you use a trap table, is it properly padded to avoid loud sounds when setting the cymbals down?

## Suspended Cymbal and Stand

Inspect the stand as you did for the snare drum stand and cymbal cradle. Make certain that there is a plastic or rubber sleeve on the post to avoid metal to metal contact noise and prevent damage to the cymbal. Are there missing felts or wing nuts? Keep in mind that cymbal accessories can be replaced for a relatively inexpensive cost. If you use a gooseneck cymbal stand, check the cymbal knot and make sure that the cymbal will not strike the stand when it vibrates. Is the instrument being played with appropriate mallets?

## Tambourine and Triangle


Visually inspect the instruments. What is the condition of the head on your tambourine? Are any jingles coming loose? Do you own a tambourine bag for storage? Do you have a nice sounding triangle with many overtones and plenty of resonance? Is there string of an appropriate type and length on your triangle clip? Do you own enough triangle beaters so that percussionists can execute various dynamics and types of articulation?

## Bass Drum and Tam Tam (Gong)

Visually inspect the instruments. With a large beater, give each one nice forte stroke. How do they sound? Do the instruments rattle? Are the stands stable? Do the bass drum heads need replacing? Are both instruments being played with appropriate mallets?

## Timpani

Visually inspect the instrument. Are the heads in good condition? Pedal each drum to the top and bottom of its range. Is the pedal movement smooth or uneven? Is it quiet or noisy? Does the pedal hold well in the higher and lower ranges? Do the drums get clear pitches? Are the proper mallets available for use by the timpanist? Do these mallets need to be recovered? Is a stool available for pieces with pedaling?

 **Now that you know a little more about “What’s Going on Back There,” please feel free to use the checklist provided on the next page to help guide you through your percussion instrument inspection.**

**Also- Remember to check back for follow-up articles in the near future!**



**DOUG WALLACE**  
PERCUSSION

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# **PERCUSSION INSPECTION CHECKLIST:**

## **Chimes / Tubular Bells**

- Visual inspection passed
- Chimes are suspended properly
- Damper pedal works
- Frame is sturdy

## **Orchestra Bells / Glockenspiel**

- Visual inspection passed
- Bars are all there and rust-free
- Pin insulators and alignment ok
- Stand works properly
- Bars resonate
- Instrument is in tune
- Appropriate mallets available

## **Xylophone**

- Visual inspection passed
- Bars all there and in good condition
- Suspension cord ok
- Frame is secure
- Post insulators or grommets are there
- Instrument is in tune
- Appropriate mallets available

## **Marimba**

- Visual inspection passed
- Bars all there and in good condition
- Suspension cord ok
- Frame is secure
- Post insulators or grommets are there
- Instrument is in tune
- Appropriate mallets available

## **Vibraphone**

- Visual inspection passed
- Bars all there and in good condition
- Suspension cord ok
- Frame is secure
- Post insulators or grommets are there
- Instrument is in tune
- Appropriate mallets available
- Damper pedal works
- Motor is functioning
- Fans are in open position when motor is idle

## **Snare Drum**

- Visual inspection passed
- Heads and tuning are ok
- Throw-off mechanism functions properly

- Snares contact the bottom head correctly
- Snares are present at all dynamics
- Stand is functioning and is at the correct height

## **Crash Cymbals**

- Visual inspection passed
- Straps are secure, knot is tight
- Cradle or trap table is properly assembled

## **Suspended Cymbal and Stand**

- Visual inspection passed
- Stand is functioning, all parts are there (felts, wing nuts, rubber or plastic sleeve)
- If using a gooseneck, knot is tied on cymbal strap
- Appropriate mallets available

## **Tambourine**

- Visual inspection passed
- Head is ok
- Jingles are secure
- Tambourine bag is available for safe storage

## **Triangle**

- Visual inspection passed
- Instrument sounds good
- String is secure on clip
- Triangle beaters are available

## **Bass Drum**

- Visual inspection passed
- Stand is secure
- No rattles
- Heads and tuning are ok
- Appropriate mallets are available

## **Tam Tam / Gong**

- Visual inspection passed
- Stand and suspension rope are secure
- No rattles
- Appropriate mallets are available

## **Timpani**

- Visual inspection passed
- Heads are ok, pitches are clear
- Pedals move smoothly and quietly
- Pedals hold their range
- Appropriate mallets are available
- Stool is available