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The Well-Rounded...Musician?

John Parks



Many recent articles and web postings have been devoted to the concepts of well-roundedness in today's percussion world. I'd like to focus on two things that are sometimes overlooked, especially by younger students, in those discussions relative to being well-rounded *musicians* who happen to

be percussionists—one, being (or becoming) open-minded, and two, developing a thirst for overall musical knowledge. The funny thing is that neither of them is specific to percussion.

How many master classes have we all witnessed where the artist asks a student to try something new? How often is that request followed by, "Well, that's not how my teacher does it, and his/hers is clearly the right way"? My friends, I will tell you with ultimate confidence that there are rarely clear-cut cases of right or wrong in doing anything in percussion. It's simply a matter of better and worse. An extreme example might be turning around on stage and crashing cymbals behind your back, rather than using one of a hundred variants on the "accepted" way of crashing cymbals. There is nothing in the music that tells you your behind-the-back technique is wrong; technically you've done exactly what's on the page, provided you followed the instructions of the composer...although the behind-the-back approach is probably not the smartest, most musical or safest thing you could do. Are there better techniques? Definitely. Should you become familiar with other approaches, practice them like crazy and see what works for you? Most definitely. Could you then make a decision to use certain techniques at certain times, while using others for specialty situations—and could those change over time? YES! That's the point—there are many ways to skin the proverbial cat, and your choices are almost never limited to one way. For example, in a few recent clinics I have demonstrated some interesting new techniques for negotiating tambourine excerpts, and at one point I played a well-known passage three different ways (using slightly different approaches). I asked the students which one they liked, to which they replied, "All of

them." Now, all three approaches serve the music, although I would probably start with the most comfortable of them if I were performing it that day with my orchestra. The idea is that I have options with which to change that approach in order to suit a number of potential performance or audition situations, or to wed my musical sense with that of the conductor, orchestra, section, chamber group or duo partner. Put it this way—the more arrows in your quiver, the better—just make sure you can hit the bull's eye with all of them. So keep an open mind, or as I tell my students, become a Cuisinart blender. Throw everything in there and hit "frappe." What comes out is uniquely yours, and even that changes over time. That's what growth is all about.

Being a well-rounded musician also demands an understanding of music theory (structure, understanding relationships, hierarchy—way beyond dictation, sight-singing and Roman numerals), musicology (contexts, trends, pedagogy, performance practice, world history), and time spent in the library with books, scores and recordings to accumulate the aforementioned knowledge. First, understanding Schenkerian analysis, phrase rhythm or any number of theoretical concepts undoubtedly makes you a better musician—here's one example of how. Consider that many young players have a hard time letting go of their insecurities and find it difficult to express themselves or take chances with their musical decisions. They are scared to do something "wrong," or they are subliminally locked in to the interpretation they have heard repeatedly on a recording—or perhaps they are afraid of doing anything differently according to recent instruction. Being able to utilize the various tools of a theorist as they relate to performance can illuminate many potentially different approaches, and having this knowledge can empower young players as they work out their fears of performing things "incorrectly." I'm not suggesting that you must start drawing elaborate graphs for every piece you perform; just a simple reduction can be very helpful in uncovering motivic parallelisms, large-scale harmonic and rhythmic motions and also the sometimes-elusive "longer lines" that singers are always talking about. As a result, performers can feel more confident and informed in making their decisions (even if they are somewhat temporary). Second, it is also incredibly important to know the history of your craft as a musician—to understand contexts, teleology, trends, genres, forms, major figures, developments, etc. and be able to relate them to music at-large. And not just in percussion! Yes, we need to know of "our" repertoire, but you'll never understand the subtleties of any music if you do not understand the context, and believe me—it extends beyond the relationship of percussion to that particular music.

Another obvious aspect of this “musical knowledge” idea is becoming familiar with as much non-percussion music as possible. Attend every performance you can – of symphonic groups, string quartets, jazz and contemporary ensembles, marching bands, chamber music concerts – basically everything you can experience. You will never learn what “performance” really means solely from books, lessons, rehearsals or the practice room. Buy CDs and scores of everything you can. I had a rule in school; for every trip to the bookstore, I would leave with at least one full score in addition to whatever CDs and books I was there to purchase. Scores and recordings are as important for becoming a great musician as your instruments and implements. You should never feel badly about how much money these things cost – this is your potential career/lifelong pursuit we’re talking about! And listen to everything you can get your hands on, from orchestral music to Palestrina; from Miles Davis to Tool. It always makes me smile when I see my students in the halls walking around with headphones on, because one of the things we learn as musicians is that everything relates to everything – you can find common elements in all kinds of music, no matter how non-related they may appear at first. Additionally, attend as many masterclasses and clinics of non-percussion musicians as possible. Of all the presentations I have seen over many years, the best was that of Renee Fleming when I was a Doctoral student at the Eastman School of Music. That master class literally changed my life as a musician, and not a day goes by that I do not utilize something from that particular experience.

So remember to spend a little time in the library after you leave the practice room each day, as well as keep an open mind when those guest artists come to town and ask you to experiment with something new. I promise you will be well on your way to becoming a better, more well-rounded musician if you give it a try!

John W. Parks IV, Assistant Professor of Percussion at The Florida State University since Fall of 2003, earned the Doctor of Musical Arts in Percussion Performance degree from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. He holds two Master’s degrees from Northwestern University, one each in Percussion Performance and Jazz Pedagogy, and a Bachelor’s degree in Music Education from Furman University. Parks has performed with diverse performing organizations ranging from the Eastman Wind Ensemble on their 2000 tour of Japan and Taiwan and the Schlossfestspiele Orchestra of Heidelberg, Germany to the Kansas City, Alabama, Key West, Jacksonville, and Tallahassee Symphony Orchestras. John will be headlining the first-annual Thailand Brass and Percussion Conference in Bangkok, Thailand in July of 2009, which includes clinics, a solo recital, judging a solo marimba competition, and performing the Daugherty “Raise the Roof” with the Mahidol Symphony Orchestra. For more information on Dr. Parks or FSU, please visit www.music.fsu.edu/percussion.

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