

THE SERVICE BAND PERCUSSIONIST

by
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Author's Note

The purpose of this article is to provide the young player with an overall picture of the military band percussionist. Although the functions of the major military bands stationed in Washington, D.C. are basically the same, this article will deal mainly with The United States Army Band since this is the organization of which the author is a member.

The role of the percussionist in the major service bands must not be understated. In many respects his job is more demanding than that of the symphonic percussionist. Aside from being responsible for all of the standard band and orchestral repertoire, the service band percussionist is also expected to excel in the ~~jazz~~ and/or rudimental areas of drumming.

A wide variety of musical experiences are offered the percussionist by the major service bands. A partial listing of groups within The United States Army Band will give the reader some idea of the versatility required of the service band percussionist.

Concert Band

The United States Army Band performs concerts equal in number to many symphony orchestras. In addition to the regular summer concert series at the Watergate and Capitol, the Band presents a wide variety of concerts, including performances for band clinics, music educators, and The American Bandmasters Association Convention. Programs performed by the Band are

similar to those of any top notch musical organization. Composers such as Stravinsky, Milhaud, Persichetti, Copland and Mehlybel are no strangers to the concert repertoire of The United States Army Band. Through their ingenious compositional techniques, these composers write extremely well for the percussion section and constantly challenge the skill of the performer.

Studio Orchestra

The United States Army Band Studio Orchestra is made up of concert band personnel and members of The United States Army Strings. The Studio Orchestra is called on to perform at diplomatic and military functions in Washington, D.C. including many of those at the White House. In addition, the Orchestra records many film sound tracks which are used by The Department of The Army and other government agencies. The Studio Orchestra's repertoire consists of light classics, popular, and show music; requiring the full use of percussion.

Herald Trumpets

The combination of herald trumpets and rope drums make up one of the most unique ensembles used by the Band. The "Heralds" are engaged at almost all of Washington's important diplomatic and military ceremonies.

Combos

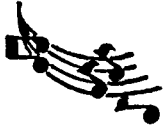
Combo drumming is an aspect of the percussionist's job that must not be overlooked. A large stage band as well as smaller combos are used to represent the entire aggregate of The United States Army Band. Most of the groups require only one drummer; however, on occasion a mallet player is added to augment the group.

Recording Sessions

The recording sessions that occur almost daily with The United States Army Band are perhaps the truest test of the percussionist's all around ability. With usually very little rehearsing, the percussionist is expected to perform on any number of instruments with the highest possible degree of artistry.

The percussion equipment used by the Band is of the finest quality obtainable. Rope or long drums used during parades and ceremonial occasions are hand made by Charles "Buck" Soistman. Snare drums are by Gladstone and triangles are supplied by Alan Abel. Most of the sticks, mallets and specialized instruments used by the percussion section are made by the players themselves. To insure instruments of the finest quality, all major manufacturers are represented in the Band's percussion battery.

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BACKGROUNDS

What Walter F. Hart of San Antonio, Texas, a retired USAF master sergeant, is bringing us here will be of greatest interest to those who remember the silent screen.

For six or seven years in the '20s--just before the advent of the talkies--native New Yorker Hart played drums in pit orchestras, and in this capacity it was his job to come up with all manner of sound effects.

Hart, who in 1958 closed out his career in the service as leader of the percussion section of the Lackland AFB Band, says:

"The tympani and a wide assortment of whistles served to make many different sounds.

"With the drums we could simulate six-shooters and cannon and Gatling guns.

"I remember the old silent film, 'The Big Parade.' I made a terrific cannon boom with the bass drum.

"The theater manager instructed me to tone it down a bit. He said someone in the audience had jumped clear out of his seat."

Hart described what must have been the most sophisticated of his sound effects gadgets.

He said: "We used a small electric motor. On the tip of the spindle, on one side of the motor, was attached a narrow leather strap several inches long.

"This was positioned so that when the motor was running the strap would fly around and strike a cushion from an old theater seat. This way we'd get the putt-putt-putt of a motorboat.

"But, say we wanted the sound of a riveting machine. We mounted a square steel plate on the theater cushion and a steel tip at the end of the strap. You would have thought you were in a shipyard.

"We also could get the sound of an airplane motor. This by letting the leather strap strike against a snare drum. I remember we used this for 'Wings.'"

Hart described how it was possible to produce realistic animal noises.

He said: "Ever see an old wooden butter tub? Well, you stretched a calf skin across it.

"Then you'd run a top string up through the center of the drumhead, securing the end of the underside with a wooden button.

"Next you put resin on the string, then wrapped a little piece of canvas around your fingers and slid them rapidly up and down the taut string.

"This made a sound just like the roar of an angry bear."

Hart didn't produce the bear's roar for us but he did give us a dog's bark.

He said: "It's exactly the same principle as that used in getting the sound of the bear.

"However, you rig the string up on a small tin can--one the size pork and beans come in."

Although Hart today doesn't have all of the things he used, he still has enough to put on a little performance for school children on occasion.

--reprinted from AROUND THE PLAZA by Renwicke Cary.

The United States Army Band percussion section is made up of the finest players. They are graduates of schools such as Juilliard, Eastman and Oberlin. Many have had professional experience ranging from the Dick Shory Percussion Pops Orchestra to the New York Metropolitan Opera Orchestra.

Acceptance into The United States Army Band percussion section is based on an audition conducted by the principal percussionist and members of his section, subject to approval by one of the officer bandmasters. The audition is similar to those which are given by many symphony orchestras. Performance of standard repertoire on all of the major percussion instruments makes up a large part of the audition. Sight reading is emphasized and the auditionee must have a good sight reading technique on all instruments. A great deal of importance is placed on the usually less stressed instruments such as cymbals, triangle, tambourine and bass drum. The conception of various tone colors, possibilities of sound and idiomatic techniques are all of equal importance. All auditions are given under conditions which allow the auditionee an opportunity to perform to the best of his ability.

I hope that this article has given the young percussionist a better insight as to the overall conditions surrounding the service band percussionist. Further information may be obtained by contacting any of the major service bands in Washington, D.C.