

Clinic: Don't be Offbeat!

presented by David Birrow; reported by Faith Farr

David Birrow is a certified K-12 music teacher and a professional percussionist. He teaches at a wide variety of schools and has looked for the commonalities among them. He has found that the absolutely essential element that has to be right is steady beat. From there you can build rhythm patterns based on meter. David feels that many music teachers teach backwards—assuming that students know things, but they don't, and then we have to fix them. There are so many ways that rhythm could be incorrect—rushing or dragging, not reading/interpreting the notation correctly, not being steady, not being with the ensemble. David advocates a rich rhythm experience through movement, before beginning music reading. Generally movement is done in K-4 general music, but David feels movement must continue in band and orchestra class. If students understand how a motif “feels,” and can recognize the notation corresponding to that “feel,” they will be able to play accurately and musically.

David led us through 4-measure body percussion phrase. We kept the beat by tapping our heels on the floor. (David says heel tap for steady beat is *much* better than toe tap, even when seated, because it involves large muscles. Standing and tapping heels raises the entire body; sitting and tapping heel activates the entire leg to the hip joint. Toe tapping activates only the extremity.) The entire phrase included quarters and double-eighths, and required clapping hands, snapping fingers, tapping legs and chest for different sounds, and a high-5 to a partner at the end. It was quite a musical work-out with the most basic instrument—our body. After we had learned the phrase, David challenged us to perform in unison, with our eyes closed. He commented that eyes-closed unison is an excellent assessment tool—everyone is playing “alone” without being singled out, and no-one can rely on following their stand partner.

David recommends Edwin Gordon's *Music Learning Theory* system of rhythm syllables. Notes on the beat are always Du. Duple meter subdivision is ♪ Du de. Triple meter subdivision is ♪♪ Du da di.

Once students know the syllables, teachers can conduct verbal dictation exercises. The teacher speaks a 1-measure rhythm in a neutral syllable (e.g. ba), counts off a 1-measure silence for thinking, and then the students respond with the Gordon syllables for the rhythm the teacher spoke. For example: ♪♪ ♪ ♪♪ ♪ | ♯ ♯ ♯ ♯ | ♪♪ ♪ ♪♪ ♪ | “ba ba ba, ba ba ba” | [1 – 2 – 3 – 4] | “Du de Du, Du de Du.”

David recommends 4–8 minutes of movement and chanting at the beginning of each class before starting technique. Trying to play is useless without the “meat and potatoes” of movement. He also recommends teaching triple meter in equal amounts to duple. He feels that students will gain a deeper understanding of duple meter as they experience triple.

Bucket Drumming

David feels “bucket drumming” is the ideal musical environment for teaching rhythm. There is no tricky technique required; there is no “bad” bucket tone to worry about; and it is certainly fun. A bucket drum is a 5-gallon plastic pail with the handle removed. (To remove the handle, turn the bucket upside down on the floor and force a wooden door wedge between the handle and the side of the bucket.) In the hands of a master there are a variety of ways of playing the bucket from a standing position, holding the bucket with one hand on each side: tap the rim of the bucket onto the floor; take your hands away (as if to drop the bucket) and clap your hands back to the sides of the bucket before it drops; make a silent gesture up, out or down, as if moving a gigantic maraca. Sitting in a circle, the buckets were distributed to every second or third person, so half were actually doing the bucket and half were pantomiming the rhythm phrase. Then buckets were passed to the next person.

After teaching us with just the bucket, David introduced the sticks—oak dowels wrapped in duct tape to protect them from splintering. In 30 seconds David taught us everything we need to know about stick technique:

- Rest position—two hands on two sticks in your lap
- Wiggle the stick—with thumb and first finger
- Hug the stick—hold it in your whole hand
- Wave the stick—do a drumming motion from the wrist

Our first stick phrase used the center of the bucket and the rim: ♪ ♪♪ ♪ ♪ center, rim-center, center, rim. Those without buckets practiced with clap hands/tap legs instead of rim and center. Adding heels to keep the steady beat while keeping rim and center correct added to the challenge. Changing tempo added even more challenge. David advocates teaching a rhythmic phrase in this order: chanting, air drumming, knee drumming, bucket drumming.

Our grand finale was a percussion ensemble using David's many junkyard instruments:

- bucket drums
- guiros made of 1-ft pieces of corrugated drainpipe 4-inches in diameter. Piece of 1-inch diameter white PCV pipe served well as the guiro sticks.
- shakers made of plastic pop bottles half-filled with rice or metal nuts and bolts
- a “cow bell” made out of a wine bottle well-covered with duct tape. (In case the bottle is dropped, the pieces will be well contained. And multi-colored duct tape adds to the charm of the instrument.)

To learn more about adding inexpensive, fun, percussion to your classroom, consult David's *Bucket Book* for junkyard percussion, published by Alfred. Or contact David at www.davidbirrow.com.

Faith Farr teaches cello at her home studio in North Oaks. She is a founding member of the Minnesota Sinfonia and has served as editor of this magazine since 1996. ♯