



ON THE VOICE

SHARON HANSEN, EDITOR

Vocal Percussion in Contemporary Choral Music

By Justin Glodich

Vocal Percussion, the imitation and creation of drum sounds by one's mouth, has developed an increased interest in the past decade. With the rise of television shows like Fox's *Glee* and NBC's *The Sing Off*; Mickey Rapkin's book *Pitch Perfect: The Quest for Collegiate A Cappella Glory*; and the *Pitch Perfect* films inspired by the book, contemporary a cappella, and, by extension, vocal percussion, have become part of our mainstream society. In February 2015, I had the privilege of presenting a standing room-only session at the ACDA National Conference in Salt Lake City on "Vocal Percussion in Contemporary Choral Music," where I experienced firsthand this rise in interest. This article will relay the information presented at that session, highlighting the importance of varied musical elements (rhythm, tempo, steady beat); exploring the connection between vocal percussion and vocal health; sharing the potential benefits of including vocal percussion in the choral program; and including a variety of examples

to practice and perform.

Deke Sharon, considered the "Godfather of Contemporary A Cappella Music," notes that "a cappella was the first music, and has always been an important part of popular culture, from Madrigals to Barbershop to Doo Wop."¹ The contemporary a cappella movement of today comprises thousands of groups in high schools and universities and in the semi-professional and professional realm. Groups are no longer tied to one genre, opting to perform music in almost every genre and style imaginable. Pentatonix, a professional group that rose to fame by winning Season 3 of *The Sing Off*, focuses on pop and electronic dance music (EDM) elements in their arrangements, while Home Free, a professional group from Minnesota, focuses on country music. The House Jacks, out of San Francisco, of which Sharon was a founding member, focuses on rock and funk elements, and ARORA, a vocal group from California, uses technology to create a new sound

entirely. All of these groups have one thing in common and that is the use of vocal percussion.

Based on personal experience as a vocal percussionist and clinician with the professional a cappella rock group The Fault Line, and now as an educator in the Eldred Central School District in Eldred, NY, I have found that vocal percussion creates new classroom performance opportunities for students. Using vocal percussion allows students to experience improvisation by adding a new vocal part into a preexisting piece of music. The use of vocal percussion in my classroom has helped build rhythmic and improvisational skills at all grade levels, providing students an opportunity to increase their musical awareness and theoretical knowledge. In some cases, students have composed music that was performed in class, showcasing their knowledge and growth.

Vocal percussion also has been used as a recruitment tool for males at the middle and high school levels.

The number of adolescent males joining choral programs is often considerably less than their female counterparts.² Some teachers believe that by recruiting athletes and popular students into the choir, their overall enrollment levels may increase.³ Although this strategy may prove successful in some areas of the country, it certainly does not work for all. By presenting vocal percussion as something popular and fun, male interest and participation has the potential to grow, as it provides something familiar and appealing from mainstream society to pique their interest.

The Basic Sounds

In creating vocal percussion, one uses a variety of different consonant sounds to mimic the basic components of the drum set: bass (kick) drum, snare drum, rim shot, hi-hat, crash and ride cymbals, and the tomtoms.⁴ The goal in creating these sounds vocally is to create the aural illusion that the vocal apparatus is the drum set. Although drummers have two arms and two legs working simultaneously to perform multiple sounds, the vocal apparatus is more

limited. In any case, each sound can be modified with variations on tongue and lip placement.

Table 1 shows three unique bass drum sounds that can be practiced and performed. Consider the three unique components of a note: the attack (beginning), the duration (the sustain), and the release (ending). Each of the bass drum sounds begins (“attacks”) with a different consonant, changing the timbre and quality of each. The duration and release of a particular note value are dependent on what is notated or what the performer chooses to improvise. Although it is noted in Table 1 that the performer should create a short, accented sound, other modifications, such as breath control and articulation, can be made to manipulate the overall sound.

The first snare drum sound, “poo,” (Table 2), is similar to the bass drum sound “poo,” with the exception that the amount of air pressure used for the snare drum sound is greater than that of the bass drum sound. With the second sound, “pf,” it is helpful to begin with the “poo” sound and take away the vowel completely, closing the lips at the end. The snare drum

sounds can be varied by sustaining the notes, creating an illusion of reverberation.

The rim shot is a self-explanatory sound (Table 3). Begin with the hard “k” sound for this particular effect. Then, by adding a short vowel variation, the performer can change the timbre of the rim shot (kah, keh, kee, koh, kuh, and so forth).

Table 4 shows hi-hat sounds that can be performed in a variety of ways. The inhale sound is performed as if sipping through a straw and closing the lips at the end. This particular sound is helpful when combining *all vocal percussion sounds* together in the sense that the rhythm is being maintained continuously and there is no silence in between. The “ut” closing hi-hat sound is used in tandem with the inhale sound: the inhale through the straw serves as the “u” sound, and the “t” simply closes the air stream off. “Ut” is not intended to be performed with a full glottal attack on the “u.”

Each cymbal sound represented in Table 5 is straightforward. The variations on each sound convey the aural illusion that different cymbals are being hit or that one cymbal is

Table 1. Bass (Kick) Drum Sounds

Sound	Description
Doo	Think of lowest note you are able to sing. Create a short, accented sound.
*Poo	Similar to doo; short, accented sound with a more percussive effect due to lips pushing off each other.
Boo	Similar to poo; short, accented sound with lower lip forward.

Table 1. Bass (Kick) Drum Sounds. Brody McDonald, *A Cappella Pop: A Complete Guide to Contemporary A Cappella Singing*, (Van Nuys, California; Alfred Music Publishing, 2012), 92-93.

* “Poo” Sound Example: http://www.alfred.com/img/images/LandingPages/ACappellaPop/MP3s/00-38006_!~Example%2022.mp3. Sound file used by generous permission of Alfred Music Publishing.



Table 2. Snare Drum Sounds	
Sound	Description
Poo	Keep lips tight, let pressure build behind lips and explode.
*Pf	Similar set up to Poo, closing the lips to and f at the end.

Table 2. Snare Drum Sounds. Brody McDonald, *A Cappella Pop: A Complete Guide to Contemporary A Cappella Singing*, (Van Nuys, California; Alfred Music Publishing, 2012), 93-94.

* “Pf” Sound Example: http://www.alfred.com/img/images/LandingPages/ACappellaPop/MP3s/00-38006_!~Example%2028.mp3. Sound file used by generous permission of Alfred Music Publishing

Table 3. Rim Shot Sounds	
Sound	Description
* K	The basic sound you would hear at the beginning of words like cat or keep.

Table 3. Rim Shot Sounds. Brody McDonald, *A Cappella Pop: A Complete Guide to Contemporary A Cappella Singing*, (Van Nuys, California; Alfred Music Publishing, 2012), 90.

* “K” Sound Example: http://www.alfred.com/img/images/LandingPages/ACappellaPop/MP3s/00-38006_!~Example%2020.mp3. Sound file used by generous permission of Alfred Music Publishing

Table 4. Hi-Hat Sounds	
Sound	Description
* T	Closed Hi-Hat.
Tss	Open Hi-Hat.
Tf	Variation on open hi-hat.
Inhale	Inward open hi-hat.
Ut	Closing the hi-hat.

Table 4. Hi-Hat Sounds. Brody McDonald, *A Cappella Pop: A Complete Guide to Contemporary A Cappella Singing*, (Van Nuys, California; Alfred Music Publishing, 2012), 85-90.

* “T” Sound Example: http://www.alfred.com/img/images/LandingPages/ACappellaPop/MP3s/00-38006_!~Example%2011.mp3. Sound file used by generous permission of Alfred Music Publishing

Table 5. Cymbal Sounds *	
Sound	Description
Ksh	As Written
Keesh	As Written
Kiss	As Written
Kss	As Written
Psh	As Written

Table 5. Cymbal Sounds. Brody McDonald, *A Cappella Pop: A Complete Guide to Contemporary A Cappella Singing*, (Van Nuys, California; Alfred Music Publishing, 2012), 95-96.

* Cymbal Sound Examples: http://www.alfred.com/img/images/LandingPages/ACappellaPop/MP3s/00-38006_!~Example%2031.mp3. Sound file used by generous permission of Alfred Music Publishing

being hit in different areas.

The tom-tom sounds in Table 6 require the performer to vocalize pitches in performance. By vocalizing pitches, the performer creates the variety of tom-toms found on a drum set. The more pitches used, the larger

the performer's "drum set" becomes.

Vocal Percussion and Vocal Health

While vocal percussion in contemporary a cappella has grown in

the past decade, vocal mimicry has longstanding, global roots. Indeed, precursors of vocal percussion can be traced back to African languages, ranging from vocal clicking to the mimicry of animal sounds.⁶ As more people attempt, practice, and per-

Table 6. Tom-Tom Sounds	
Sound	Description
* Toom	As written, with a vocalized pitch
Doom	As written, with a vocalized pitch

Table 6. Tom-Tom Sounds. Brody McDonald, *A Cappella Pop: A Complete Guide to Contemporary A Cappella Singing*, (Van Nuys, California; Alfred Music Publishing, 2012), 97.

* "Toom" Sound Example: http://www.alfred.com/img/images/LandingPages/ACappellaPop/MP3s/00-38006_!~Example%2034.mp3. Sound file used by generous permission of Alfred Music Publishing.

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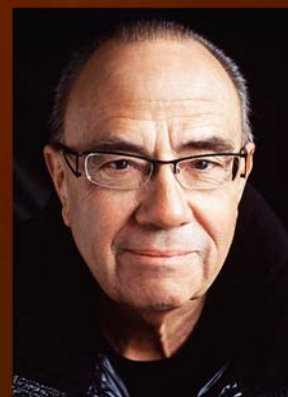
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form vocal percussion, the potential for vocal injury increases. While there are many studies devoted to vocal health for singers, there are not many for vocal percussionists. In 2013, a study was conducted by Andrew Saphthavee, Paul Yi, and H. Steven Sims exploring and evaluating the vocal apparatus to determine if vocal percussion may be a risk factor for phonotrauma (the abuse and misuse of the vocal cords) or if it, in fact, protects the vocal folds.⁷ Using fiber optic cameras and technology, four vocal percussionists were evaluated through laryngoscopy while performing sounds in isolation and in different combinations. The results of the study showed that although there are some similarities between singing and vocal percussion in what happens in the vocal tract, there are some unique differences. Most notable was their finding that the use of the entire vocal tract for vocal percussion and beatboxing may actually protect against glottal injury.⁸

A major concern with the practice and performance of vocal percussion has been the possibility of the performer developing a vocal fold hemorrhage. A vocal fold hemorrhage occurs when blood collects within the layers of the vocal fold after a blood vessel breaks.⁹ These hemorrhages can occur after athletic voice use, such as screaming and yelling, or with simple vocal overuse. It has been noted in the media that many of today's popular musicians have been diagnosed with vocal fold hemorrhages, forcing almost all of them to cancel parts of their performance tours. Artists such as Sam Smith, Meghan

Trainor, Jordin Sparks, and Adele are just a few contemporary artists who have had this diagnosis. (Ironically, Smith and Adele have been praised by the media for their unique vocal abilities, and both have won multiple Grammy Awards for their work.) According to the Saphthavee, Yi, and Sims study mentioned above, it could potentially take longer for the vocal tract to become overused because vocal percussion uses multiple areas of the vocal tract. Even so, it is important that choral conductors teach healthy vocal technique, whether it is for the purpose of singing or vo-

cal percussion, in order that students understand just how important technique—and its corollary of muscular endurance—truly are.

The Use of Microphones

When performing vocal percussion, using microphones is helpful. It is important to note that each vocal percussionist has his own preference for brand and model of microphone (e.g., Rode, Sennheiser, Shure, and so forth). If looking to purchase a microphone specifically for vocal percussion, it would be wise to test different

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microphones until you are satisfied with the sound quality. It is also important to note that spitting directly into the microphone is not optimal. This could lead to potential damage to the microphone via saliva. I personally start with the microphone one inch away from my mouth then move the microphone toward the side of my mouth so that the sound is still being amplified yet saliva is moving forward instead of directly into the microphone.

There are some specialty microphones that can also be used specifically for vocal percussion. The first is called The Thumper.¹⁰ The Thumper was designed by Freddie Feldman of VocoMotion Studios. It is a specially designed microphone that is strapped around the performer's neck. The microphone transmits the

low frequency sounds created from the performer's throat, and creates a lower, bass sound in performance. Figure 1 shows The Thumper in use.

Another system that can work in a similar manner to The Thumper is the Soundspots microphone by the DTar Company.¹¹ Soundspots are created for acoustic instruments but have been used by some vocal percussionists, most notably Jeff Thacher of the group Rockapella. The sound spots are two small circles that the performer tapes to each side of his neck. The microphone frequency levels are set so that the lower frequencies are stronger. Figure 2 shows the Soundspots being worn.

Tips for Further Practice

If you have decided that you

would like to further pursue vocal percussion, following are some tips that I have learned from personal experience. The first is to purchase extra microphone heads and replace them when necessary. The more often the same microphone head is used, the more bacteria builds up from saliva. It is also important to clean the microphone heads during and after performance. This will extend the longevity of the microphone itself. With that being said, hydration is key.



Figure 1.

Justin Glodich using The Thumper on Season 2 of NBC's *America's Got Talent*.
Photo used by permission of Freddie Feldmann.




Figure 2.

Jeff Thacher wearing
Soundspots Acoustic Pickups.
Photo used by permission
of Jeff Thacher.



As a vocal percussionist, saliva will be depleted throughout a performance, so it is important to have water at the ready at all times.

If you are just starting out as a vocal percussionist, it is important to understand that learning vocal percussion is just like learning any other instrument. It will take time and practice to build stamina. Start slowly and build reasonable goals as you progress through a variety of patterns and sounds. If it helps, practice along with music. Listen and analyze the percussion tracks of different songs and slowly attempt to emulate those sounds in your own way. Most important, have fun while practicing and performing. 

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NOTES

- ¹ Contemporary A Cappella Society, last modified 01/03/2009, accessed 8/12/15, <http://www.casa.org/about>.
- ² Mark Lucas, "Adolescent Male Attitudes about Singing In Choir," *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 30, no. 1 (2011): 46.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ⁴ Brody McDonald, *A Cappella Pop: A Complete Guide to Contemporary A Cappella Singing* (Van Nuys, California; Alfred Music, 2012), 80-97.
- ⁵ *Ibid.* Contains complete sound files to facilitate the learning of each of the percussion sounds. The author is

grateful to Michael Spreser of Alfred Music Publishing for permission to use the included sample sound files in this article.

- ⁶ Andrew Saphavee, Paul Yi, and H. Steven Sims, "Functional Endoscopic Analysis of Beatbox Performers," *Journal of Voice* 28, no. 3 (2014): 328.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 330.
- ⁹ Throat Disorder.Com, an online Resource for Patients and Physicians, copyright

© 2010 - 2013 Southern California Throat Disorder, accessed 8/12/15, <http://www.throatdisorder.com/voice-disorders/hemorrhage>.

- ¹⁰ BeatboxMics, copyright © 2015 – Vocomotion, accessed 8/16/15, <http://beatboxmics.com>
- ¹¹ Soundspots, Copyright © 2015 Seymour Duncan. Santa Barbara, California, accessed 8/16/15, <http://www.seymourduncan.com/acoustic/soundspot-classic-twin>.



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