

FOCUS ON EDUCATION

A Look at Percussion Pedagogy With Alyn Heim: An Interview

Cort McClaren



LYN HEIM IS A CHARTER MEMBER OF THE Percussive Arts Society. He is an educator, performer, author, composer, and active MENC representative. His most well known work, *Drum Class Method* now distributed by Columbia Pictures Publications, has become a classic text used throughout the United States in public school music. Dr. Heim earned his B.S. from Julliard, his M.A. from Columbia, and his Ed. D. from New York University. His presentation at the 1989 PASIC in Nashville, TN, focused on the "essence" of teaching and learning. A summary of his presentation and the results of a subsequent interview occur below.

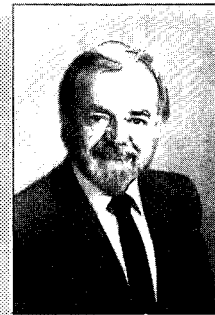
During his presentation at the 1989 PASIC, Mr. Heim described his impression of the "essence" of teaching and learning. The essence of **technique** involves the stroke, volume, position of the body and instrument, and stroke placement. The essence of **difference** involves the need for directors to realize that much of what they deal with [such as breath support, embouchure, attack and release] has little to do with drumming. Therefore, teachers need to provide appropriate activities for percussionists. The essence of **challenge awareness** involves the realization that what percussionists play may not be difficult, but determining when to play it requires supreme musicianship. He says that an airline pilot's description of his job is not unlike that of the concert percussionist: long periods of boredom interrupted by moments of panic. The essence in this case is that what is being played is not difficult, but finding out exactly when to play can often be frightening. Finally, the essence of **valuing** involves showing people their importance through carefully planned strategies, not simply telling them they are important.

"A master teacher teaches 'essence.' He begins from the center, not from the fringe. He imparts an understanding of the basic principles of the art before going on with the meticulous details. When the essence is perceived, the master teacher teaches what is necessary to expand the perception." (From Mr. Heim's 1989 PASIC presentation on November 9, 1989)

Cort McClaren: *The evolution of percussion pedagogy has taken some interesting turns, especially in recent years. As a charter member of the PAS, you've been around long enough to watch this evolution take place. Do you see any significant differences in performing percussionists and*

percussion pedagogues today as compared to thirty years ago?

Alyn Heim: I see differences from two sides. In one sense I don't see much change. I see the same books now that teachers used earlier, such as the Podemski, Wilcoxon, and the Goldenberg snare drum books. My book was first published in 1959 and is still being used. On the other side, I see change in a kind of exclusiveness, like marching band. Marching band has become an area that takes all the attention, to the disregard of everything else. I see college programs that actually discourage kids from playing in symphonic band and orchestra in favor of being in only the marching band. I see marching bands with fantastic percussion sections, but sometimes nothing else happens except field music in these programs. There has been a decrease in the type of all-around percussionist who can play concert music, field music, and recital music. From my point of view, performance has improved in all these areas because people specialize so much. To me, that is almost a disappointment.



Alyn Heim

Cort McClaren: *Is there danger in specializing too early?*

Alyn Heim: Yes, I think so. However, people get excited and want to be good at one specific instrument. They want to be good at snare drum or marimba, which is wonderful. I'm not critical, that's fine, but it's not good to specialize too much too early. There's a lifetime ahead. You will not develop your optimum musicianship by specializing in one instrument and avoiding orchestral literature and other areas. If you just specialize in drum set to the exclusion of anything else, you're not equipping yourself for employment.

Cort McClaren: *Do you think there is a significant difference in today's high school graduate and the graduate of 20 years ago, in terms of what he/she knows about percussion performance?*

Alyn Heim: I think they are better players today; there's no doubt about it. I just think the **overall** quality suffers as a result of becoming too specialized. People are playing better; that's something we can be proud of!

Cort McClaren: *What can we do at all levels of percussion education to accommodate learning all the basic percussion instruments, and still play them all well enough to have some sense of credibility? Is it possible to be a generalist during an undergraduate program and still be a marketable performer?*

Alyn Heim: Well, it becomes a matter of degree. I think if you're going to retain a specialist field, you're going to have to give up the generalists, and I don't think there are any two ways about compromising it. I just feel that specializing too much is narrowing the experience too much. Thirty years ago, teacher Tony Cirone and I revised the all-state audition material to include snare drum, mallets, and timpani. We were trying to get away from specialized auditions and give the students a broader experience. Some teachers said that we should allow students to audition on bass drum only. We said no. We tried to get students to study all three things in high school because we felt it was important. Subsequent revisions in an opposite direction allow percussionists to be even more specialized.

Cort McClaren: *That's interesting. Several years ago the PAS initiated a study to determine the status of all-state audition procedures throughout the United States. The committee discovered that many states require a splintered rather than generalists approach. In fact, the committee developed an audition model as a result of their research. What kinds of skills would you like to see a high school graduate demonstrate? What should they be able to do as a percussionist?*

Alyn Heim: From a generalist point of view, they should demonstrate highly developed skills in the four major areas, jazz, concert music, marching music, and percussion ensemble. They should also be able to play all basic instruments, including keyboard percussion instruments, so they're not just rhythm players.

Cort McClaren: *During your presentation this morning you asked a very pertinent question, "Does the band director have time to teach all these areas equally well?" What suggestions do you have for that particular dilemma?*

Alyn Heim: I wish I had the answer to that question, that could make me rich. The suggestions I gave dealt with the concert setting. I think that's where young percussionists have the least self-esteem. So, in terms of suggestions, directors should encourage kids to study privately, and encourage them to play in all types of ensembles. Rotate kids around and let more than one be in the jazz band, and so on. Directors do have to provide some instruction. Any good high school band will have

special instruction on clarinet, trumpet, bassoon, oboe, etc., since teachers can't do all of those either. In many New Jersey systems you'll find not only brass and woodwind specialists, but percussionists also. Of course, outside staff are often used for marching band. Some people will kill to get those trophies, so specialists are usually necessary in those programs.

Cort McClaren: *Everyone agrees that providing adequate instruction is a time consuming effort.*

Alyn Heim: A band director can't do it by himself. No way.

Cort McClaren: *Let's consider band directors and percussionists as separate entities. Although, there are many directors who are also percussionists. Whose responsibility is it to get the bandwagon going in terms of enhancing the quality of percussion pedagogy?*

Alyn Heim: I think it has to be on the school, on the band director. I don't think people outside the school can get it going. I think the band director has to see the need and somehow make it happen. Only the director can go to the band parents and say "We need to hire someone to help." Only the director can go to the princi-

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pal and say we need this or that. If percussionists on the outside get directly involved in the schools' activities, it looks too self-serving, as if they just want to get some lessons and make money.

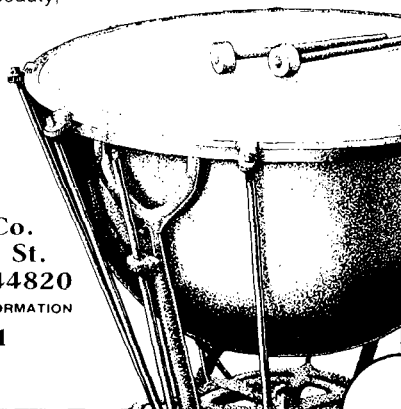
Cort McClaren: *I see a dichotomy in that plan. If band directors need the knowledge to guide percussionists toward higher goals, how can they acquire it without the aid of the professional percussion pedagogue, the outside person? Is it impossible to do any of this without those two factors [percussionist and directors] working together?*

Alyn Heim: I see what you're saying and I agree with you. The band director doesn't know any better and he's not going to ask for anyone's help. He'll just tell the drummer shut-up, play now, don't play now. So, for both things to happen we have to convince him that he needs the help. The outsiders can't get into the school without being asked. That's reality! We have to show the need, and we have to convince band directors that we need to work together.

Cort McClaren: *Your presentation this morning focused on the "essence" of teaching percussion. Has the profession as a whole grasped these ideas?*

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Alyn Heim: It's fuzzy. It's fuzzy because we're around the edges and not the center. Even a Gestalt isn't quite the same. A Gestalt is a sense of the whole thing and to have the sense of the whole thing you must be at the end of it. For example, people who graduate from college as percussion majors and are now teaching might have a sense of the Gestalt, of the whole thing. The essence is the thing in the middle, the thing that's the heart of it all. And that's fuzzy because when we have clinics on how to play tambourine and triangle and all kinds of exotic things, they sit there and take notes but in many cases still scream at the drummers. We have to get at the core of learning.

Cort McClaren: *Perhaps we're still in our infancy as percussion pedagogues?*

Alyn Heim: Yes, I guess so. But when I see the progress in forty years! I played on one of the first performances of Ionization ever done. Vårèse came to the school I was attending to make that first recording...and now kids are playing it all over the place. So, it's come a long way. We're not in our infancy as performers, but we are as educators. Our approach is splintered. We need to have specialized clinics at PASIC. But, we need to be more active in sharing this information with band directors in an effort to help their students become better generalists.

Cort McClaren: *There's that dichotomy again. There seems to be a difference between what we know about performance technique and the ability to disseminate that knowledge in a meaningful and helpful way to school directors.*

You have some very significant publications. Your materials appear in classrooms all over the country. What do we need in terms of percussion literature? Is there a void in any area?

Alyn Heim: The only level I can speak to is the school level. The things that I'm hearing are mostly material for college students. So, at the junior high and high school levels we desperately need more quality music that is understandable by directors and the audience.

Cort McClaren: *If more of that type of literature is available, will school directors have access to it and will they use it?*

Alyn Heim: I think if the literature is fashioned at a level that fits their needs, they would take to it if they got to see it. Many people ask my opinion about what to play. Most of the new things scare them to death. I have a published piece, Fanfare for Percussion, that has been played by college and high school groups. It appeared on the list of most-often-played percussion ensembles. It's written for five people; bass, cymbals, snare drum,

timpani, and triangle, involves 3/8, 2/4/, 3/4, all kinds of interesting rhythms, and the notation is great I wrote it for junior high school The point is, if the frame of reference is traditional music with normal notation with nothing too exotic, and if the students and the audience feel good about it, they'll buy it and play it. It has to be in a form that's easy to understand.

Cort McClaren: *You made a comment in your clinic that the training of percussionists in the early days was primarily by rote. Does that still occur? Do percussionists still learn primarily by rote in school settings?*

Alyn Heim: Yes. When I referred to rote learning I was speaking about the very early days - in military drumming. I think there's still a lot of rote learning in schools. Much of the rote teaching in high schools is rhythm teaching. I think drummers know that they are expected to read. Without a doubt, percussion instruction places considerable expectations on reading. The only place where this doesn't hold true is marching band. Since they can't memorize all those tunes, they just have to learn them by rote. Unfortunately, they play the same show all year, and they learn it by rote. I don't feel that rote is a nasty word; all musical learning is basically through the aural experience. I don't think kids should read music just by rote.

Cort McClaren: *Recently, while giving a presentation to a group of directors at a state music educator's convention, I said that "a high school percussionist doesn't have to know very much to be successful." Do you have any reaction to that statement?*

Alyn Heim: No, a young percussionist doesn't have to know very much; he/she can get away with it. The parts are usually easy and they rehearse for a long time

Cort McClaren: *Do directors consciously think that since percussion parts are usually easier that they don't need to spend as much time with percussionists?*

Alyn Heim: Yes, that's right. I've heard them say that.

Cort McClaren: *What is the "essence" of technique for all percussion instruments?*

Alyn Heim: It's three things the essence of the stroke, the essence of positioning, the essence of placement There is more and if you think in this mode you will come up with more. That's my hope - that this idea will spread and clarify this whole issue of percussion pedagogy.

Cort McClaren: *You've mentioned that percussionists know too much about technique and too little about disseminating this knowledge to school directors. Let's assume that within five years every percussion pedagogue and every teacher captures the "essence" of teaching and revolutionizes percussion pedagogy. Is there any danger of not expanding beyond that knowledge?*

Alyn Heim: No, I don't think so. That's our job and we're going to do that anyway. That's why PAS is here. Highly sophisticated detail, that's the purpose of PAS. If you get a high cymbal sound here and a low cymbal sound there, that's great because we get excited about our instrument and want to push it further That's no worry, it will happen, and it's happened already The only thing that hasn't happened is getting to the 'essence' sooner. It starts so late, usually not until college

Cort McClaren: *You said in your presentation that we haven't gotten to the center of the problem.*

Alyn Heim: Yes, that's right and if we get closer to the center in junior high and high school, drummers would be functioning better at that level That's where drummers do not function well If directors know the "essence" of the problem, the center of learning, we would be better off We tend to teach generalities instead of fundamentals When teachers start thinking about fundamentals they think back to basics, all those things you have to learn.

Cort McClaren: *Then fundamentals comprise a part of the "essence" of percussion performance.*

Alyn Heim: Yes. ■



Cort McClaren

Cort McClaren teaches percussion at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro He earned his Doctorate of Music from the University of Oklahoma