

Redefining The Identity Of The Drum Set

I have had numerous non-drummers ask me for advice with either instructing drummers, notating music for drummers, understanding specifics of grooves or any number of drum specific questions. Generally, these are well educated and capable musicians or educators who feel an inadequacy in their ability to relate to what drummer's do. I've decided to write briefly about creating a relationship between the drum set and any other instrument through the understanding of the drum set's similarities to those instruments. This hopefully can provide educators and musicians with a sense that they have an intuitive and translatable understanding of the role of the drum set.

The drum set can be a difficult instrument to categorize. It is not usually characterized as a melodic or harmonic instrument but rather as a utility of the band. Often the drummer is told to "Just keep time" or "Play a steady beat". While strong rhythm is a component of musicianship every instrumentalist should possess, it is not the only or even the most important function of the drum set player. The **ENTIRE** ensemble (drummer included) should be able to play with a strong melodic sense, a sensitive understanding of harmony, and accurate rhythm. Dividing the ensemble into separate responsibilities limits the potential of the musicians participating in the group. After all you wouldn't tell a lead trumpet player to "Just play the right notes".

When we either hear or pronounce simplifications of the role of the drum set it creates confusion in the drummer's approach. Its counterproductive for a drummer to be focused on "just playing time" because the occasion will arise when they need to play in unison with the ensemble or even play counterpoint with the melody. The drummer shouldn't have to redefine his approach at that point. The drummer should have a universal approach applicable to any musical situation. This approach should be defined by melody, harmony, and rhythm, the same principles which any wind or string instrument defines their relationship to the ensemble.

MELODY

The drum set will rarely be the primary melodic focus of a piece or section of music. However, this in no way means the drum set does not have specific melodic parts. The "beat" or "groove" or whatever you refer to it as is a drum melody. You can't play the drum part/melody for an AC/DC tune over an Ellington composition or vice-versa. If you define the "beat" as a drum melody it is easier to understand how the drum set relates to the melodic statements of the ensemble. When the drum set player needs to "set up" an ensemble figure, think of the setup as counterpoint to the melody. Or when the drummer needs to play a fill bridging two phrases, consider that a melodic call and response between the melody and the drum fill. Defining these types of drum specific

musical moments using melodic terminology will increase your understanding of the role of the drum set. Defining the drum set's parts in this manner creates a relationship based on similarity with other instruments.

HARMONY

The drum set obviously will never provide chordal support for an ensemble. However, the drum set is a harmonic instrument since it's generating multiple pitches simultaneously. The pitch choices a drummer makes have a profound impact on the timbre of an ensemble. Again on the AC/DC tune the drummer will be using closed hi-hats, rim shots on the snare drum, and burying the bass drum beater into the bass drum head. This isn't an appropriate texture for playing Ellington. Should the drummer be on a large or small ride cymbal? Should they be paying backbeats with the snare or a rim click? Should they be playing "four on the floor" with the bass drum? When should they switch from brushes to sticks? These are the harmony/texture specific questions everyone needs to be aware of. Generally these issues will have a direct relationship to the harmonic subtleties of the rest of the ensemble. When the harmony is orchestrated in the saxes and low brass the drums might need to be voiced using their most resonant sounds. When the harmony is being played only by the piano behind a flute solo a drier, lighter texture should be employed. There are quite a few textural/harmonic variations available on even the smallest drum set. Simply trying to create these possibilities mentally will expand your sensitivity to the options available.

RHYTHM

I believe that rhythm and melody are essentially the same. One cannot exist exclusive of the other.

Hopefully reading this can help the non-drummer understand that they know more about the properties of the drum set than they might give themselves credit. Relating the drum set to the properties of the rest of the instruments in the musical family helps to foster better musical communication within ensembles.