

# Insights On Practicing World Percussion

BY B. MICHAEL WILLIAMS

**H**ow does world percussion fit into the practice puzzle? For most percussionists, it is added to a foundation of orchestral or keyboard percussion, drumset, rudimental drumming, or some combination of these. Rarely does a Western-trained percussionist start out with the intention of becoming a world percussion specialist. More typically, it gets added to the mix like so many spinning plates in a juggler's act. Fitting it all in does indeed take practice, but it also requires a great amount of respect for the diversity of our world's cultures and their musical expressions.

Practicing world percussion requires many of the same skills employed in mastering any musical instrument (scales, timing patterns, exercises for technical development, etc.), but there are also broader issues to consider, especially when one is learning an instrument from another culture. Ear training, transcription skills, familiarity with language (at least in terms of pronunciation for singing), and an understanding of cultural background and history are essential aspects of a percussionist's development in world music. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, one should make every effort to contact a qualified teacher, preferably an authentic culture-bearer.

Because of the amazing breadth of world percussion performance practices found today, I asked several prominent world music practitioners to share their insights on practice, either from a cultural or technical point of view. Each contributor's response follows a brief introduction.

***Mohamed Da Costa** is a master djembe drummer, dancer, and choreographer from Guinea, West Africa. He has been teaching and performing in the United States since 1990, and currently resides in Greensboro, North Carolina.*

In traditional African society, you would establish an apprenticeship with a teacher who allowed you to play at



Mohamed Da Costa

community dances. You would play the same part for months or even a year, depending on how fast you learn. You'd play "pa, ti pa, pi ti pa, ti pa," over and over. The teacher observed your playing and if your sounds and timing weren't right, you wouldn't be allowed to move on to a more advanced part.

The teacher knows if you are practicing or not, because he is always around. When the wind blows, it can carry the sound of a drum for miles, and your teacher can tell if your practicing isn't right. My teacher once came to our rehearsal in a village three miles away. As he approached the village, he could hear us playing, and when he arrived, he immediately began correcting our mistakes!

The apprenticeship with a teacher is a very important relationship. It is very special to receive your teacher's blessing. You must be willing to run errands for your teacher at any time, even in the middle of the night! It isn't about money. It is about respect. Today, things are changing in Africa. There are more regu-

lar classes now, much like what you would find in Europe or America. That isn't necessarily a bad thing. Everything changes, but the apprenticeship based on respect for the teacher is being lost.

***Michael Spiro** is recognized as one of the foremost authorities on Afro-Cuban drumming. He regularly performs with the group Talking Drums with David Garibaldi and Jesus Diaz, and presents performances and workshops worldwide. Michael lives in San Francisco. Web: <http://kayoakes.home.mindspring.com/mspiro>*

Traditionally in Cuba, there weren't really that many instruments on which to practice. Especially with *bata* drums, for example, you learned by *watching*, sometimes for many years. You would do "service" to the maestro (tune drums, carry drums, run errands, etc.), and in exchange you would go to the ceremonies and get to watch and memorize. You didn't sit down to play until you already thought you knew what to play. You practiced on your legs after watching the parts and then slowly "worked" your way into the battery. You wouldn't even be allowed to "hang out" if you didn't do the apprenticeship part first.



Michael Spiro

Now things are different in some ways. There are schools where you can learn (as part of an overall curriculum), and where you can be “tested” and “yelled at” if you don’t do your homework. The serious guys still do it like the old days—attach yourself to a maestro and go from there. In this traditional environment, technical exercises would never be required.

The conga drum, however, is a different story. In contemporary Cuban society, almost all the young musicians go to music school (for which they have to audition), and they all read, write, and play all the percussion instruments, from classical to folkloric. The competition is as fierce as you will ever find, even in the States, so the young players are all monsters, just to be able to stay in school. Then, in turn, to be able to get paid by the government to be a musician, you must have extremely high skills, for which you are evaluated every three years or so. This “academy style” has very exacting standards that are met through an array of technical exercises.

I was taught by the old masters, so their approach with me was, “Learn this by tomorrow, don’t waste my time, and be lucky I don’t hurt you if you make a mistake. You should be grateful I let you even be around this stuff.” I don’t teach like that, but most of my students think I’m much too mean, and that I carry that same mentality with me. I don’t think I do, but to some real degree, I teach from the perspective that “this is serious stuff, and I don’t have time to waste, so get with the program, or else!” It is also true that I have students who “apprentice” themselves to me, and so don’t pay me any money, but they pay a high price in “service.” Money is actually cheaper!

**Bruce Carver** recently moved to Los Angeles from Chicago, where he was a first-call percussionist in studios and theater productions. In addition to mastering the core orchestral percussion instruments, keyboards, and drumset, Bruce is well versed in a wide variety of ethnic musical styles and regularly performs on an impressive array of world percussion instruments.

Practice may be a cruel word to some, but to me, it just means playing. I love to play. I’m just having fun when I’m sit-



Bruce Carver

ting at an instrument, discovering its voice and taking it through its vocabulary.

I do a lot of theater and studio work, which requires experience with a large field of instruments. So practice also means attaining an understanding of the instrument you are playing, its history, performance techniques, etc.

After understanding what it is you are going to play, you want to find and purchase the best instrument possible and spend time near it. At this writing, I am spending the majority of my time with tabla, tonbak, daf, bodhran, mbira, congas, djembe, and marimba. In time, some of these nucleus instruments may be replaced with others, but I always make time to practice tabla, marimba, and hand drums such as congas or djembe.

I spend one to four hours a day playing. I have percussion instruments in every room of my house, and sometimes it takes a while to get from one end of the house to the other! I don’t practice all instruments in one session, but I love to spread it out through the day. This keeps me fresh and focused. My biggest concern before I start playing any new instrument is that I know exactly how to play it. I will have researched the instrument, collected several recordings, and found a qualified teacher. The rest is simple. The rest is fun.

**Alan Dworsky** is the author, with Betsy Sansby, of *Conga Drumming, How to Play Djembe, Hip Grooves for Hand Drums, Slap Happy, World-Beat & Funk Grooves, A Rhythmic Vocabulary, and Secrets of the Hand*. He has just finished

*Lesson 3 in his new video series called Learn to Solo on Djembe or Conga. Alan lives in Minneapolis. Web: <http://www.dancinghands.com>*

I’m a hand drummer who loves African and Afro-Cuban rhythms: rhythms constructed of many interlocking parts played on a variety of instruments. Since I don’t have a community or group to play with on a daily basis, my challenge has been to approximate this rich rhythmic environment when I practice alone.

One way I do this is by playing along with traditional rhythms on CDs, but when I want to play continuously, I program my drum machine with a traditional rhythm and practice along with that. Then I can play as long as I want without having my concentration broken every five minutes while I wait for a CD track to repeat. This also allows me to control the tempo, so I can start out playing a part slowly and gradually increase the speed.

Whatever I play along with, I always try to tap the pulse in my feet while I play. The “pulse” is the term I use for the steady underlying beat people feel in their bodies when music is played. If you play sitting down and it’s hard to hold your drum steady and tap the pulse with your feet at the same time, run a strap from your drum around your waist to free up your legs.

When I can’t practice on a drum, or when I’m stir crazy and want to get outside and move, I do what I call “rhythm walking.” Rhythm walking is my adaptation of the “Ta Ke Ti Na” method taught by Reinhard Flatischler. I walk



Alan Dworsky

the pulse, clap or tap a clave or timeline rhythm in my hands, and vocalize a drum pattern, all at the same time. Rhythm walking is a form of rhythmic cross-training you can do anywhere: at a park, on a beach, down a city street. It loosens up those muscles and joints that get stiff and sore when you over-practice on your drum. And it's a great way to work on your rhythmic vocabulary while you get some exercise and fresh air.

**Erica Azim** is a Californian who fell in love with traditional Shona mbira music when she first heard it at the age of 16. In 1974, she became one of the first people from outside Zimbabwe to study with traditional mbira masters. Her workshops and performances have introduced international audiences to the traditional music of Zimbabwe. Her nonprofit organization, MBIRA, is dedicated to helping Zimbabwean musicians. Web: <http://www.mbira.org>. For more information on Erica's teaching methods, please refer to her article available at <http://www.mbira.org/onteaching.html>.

I find that one of the most important aspects of practice for the mbira student is to spend at least half of each available practice period playing old, well-known material, rather than mastering new material. The average North American mbira students, in my experience, have an easier time learning new material than "getting out of the way" for the songs and improvisation they know to really flow in the traditional Shona way.

I also find from my own learning experience that the most important times to practice new material, even for ten minutes, are right before sleep at night, and first thing upon waking up in the morn-



Erica Azim

ing. This way, even learning a complex oral tradition with no notation whatsoever, nothing is forgotten. This is not always possible, so I have found that a recording of each mbira lesson is a valuable reference for use during practice.

**N. Scott Robinson** teaches classes in world music and culture at Kent State University in Ohio as part of The Center for the Study of World Musics. His performing and recording credits include work with Benny Carter, Glen Velez, Malcolm Dalglish, Annea Lockwood, John Cage, Paul Winter Consort, Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman, Marilyn Horne, and Jeanne Bryson. Scott's most recent recording, *Things That Happen Fast*, features performances of his original compositions for frame drums, berimbau, udu, cajon, karimba, congas, and many other instruments from around the world. Web: <http://www.nscottrobinson.com>



N. Scott Robinson

Percussionists have so many choices as far as what they can play. Even though Western percussion instruments are diverse, they tend to be more related in terms of rhythmic concepts and physical technique than non-Western percussion instruments. A Western percussionist needs to build a foundation before trying to absorb so many different things, like Indian drumming, African drumming, gamelan, mbira, etc. Developing a strong rhythmic concept, coordination between the limbs, ear training, reading, and improvising abilities are things that all Western percussionists should spend the proper amount of time practicing. A thoroughly devel-

oped foundation will serve a musician well in the future no matter what direction he or she decides to go in later in their respective careers.

One of the issues I think is essential for successful music practice is to involve the mind in everything you do. Percussionists often spend a great deal of time doing "physical practice," such as running scales on mallet instruments, snare drum rudiments, or drumset time-keeping, without really thinking deeply about everything they are playing. I noticed improvement in my focus and concentration after having practiced things that required a great deal of thought to execute. I try to spend a short amount of time on "physical practice" and a longer period on "mental practice." By "mental practice," I don't mean just thinking about something. I mean to involve the mind in whatever it is that you're doing.

I noticed that after spending a great deal of time learning South Indian rhythms and hand drum technique, not only did my playing improve, but my understanding, concentration, and confidence grew. I think this had to do with the fact that I was involving my mind by vocalizing rhythmic phrases and yet still having to think about the rhythmic cycle and physical choreography of the hands on the drum. My studies with Glen Velez on frame drums often led me to involving my entire body by walking while playing, playing intricate rhythms with the fingers, vocalizing, and thinking about all of these things simultaneously.

I enjoy working on something I call the "Rule of Opposites." If a particular rhythm I want to learn is in a compound meter, then I'll practice it in a duple meter as sixteenth notes. For example, southern Italian *tamburello* technique is often in a very fast compound meter involving a triple stroke-turning technique of the hand. I spent a lot of time working on this as sixteenth notes in three-four meter, which made me really think hard about every single position of the hand and where it was in the rhythm.

Another thing I do with Indian rhythmic phrases is to say the opposite of what I'm playing. If I am playing a phrase in sixteenth notes, simultaneously I'll recite it twice as fast as thirty-second notes and then switch so my voice recites the slower version in sixteenth notes while my fingers play the faster, denser version in thirty-sec-

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ond notes. This makes me think really hard, and both my mind and hands are getting a great musical workout.

Another issue with percussionists and practice is having a clear notion of what you're going to do with what you're studying. Everything I practice leads to a single goal: improvisation. I play a lot of really different instruments, but I practice them all in the same way. Odd meters, improvisational techniques, and involving the mind and other parts of the body in what I'm doing gives me

more awareness in both the body and mind while I play. This helps me feel confident and relaxed when I improvise in performances because I've spent the time thinking about what I might play in a lot of different ways. Having pursued Western percussion and jazz for a long time, I rely on that foundation while pursuing non-Western percussion. The physical techniques are different between the instruments I play but my goal is always the same, so it makes for a more related concept as to how I ap-



B. Michael Williams

proach the instruments and music I want to play. Without a foundation, it would be too overwhelming trying to study so many instruments and musics that aren't really related in any practical way.

Having the proper context in which to utilize what you practice is another important consideration. Non-Western percussionists usually grow up and develop within a culture strong in tradition. That context allows their skills to be utilized in a practical manner. Western percussionists don't always have the proper context in which to use non-Western skills. I think that's why it's common for Western percussionists to use non-Western percussion instruments in a creative manner outside of the respective traditions. Jazz and modern dance classes are contexts in which non-Western skills can readily be utilized. They provide an accessible and logical context in which to develop your own voice as a musician. That's something that many important improvising percussionists, such as Collin Walcott, Glen Velez, Trilok Gurtu, and Naná Vasconcelos, among others, have spent time doing and benefited from in terms of developing an original voice.

**B. Michael Williams** is Associate Editor for world percussion for *Percussive Notes*. He teaches percussion at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina. PN

## FALL 2003 INTERNSHIP APPLICATIONS

The Percussive Arts Society is seeking applicants for our six-month internship program beginning in July 2003. Many successful candidates for this position have either used internships at PAS as capstone semesters to complete music business degrees or have been recent graduates of such programs. However, all percussion students who wish to gain industry experience as a way of promoting career goals are encouraged to apply.

PAS interns acquire broad industry experience by assisting with a variety of staff projects. The fall 2003 intern will be part of the team that is planning and producing November's international convention in Louisville. The opportunity to work closely with our Director of Event Production and Marketing, Jeff Hartsough, on artist and manufacturer relations and marketing projects will make the fall 2003 internship especially valuable to any young adult who is considering a career in the field of music business.

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- a copy of a paper submitted in an upper division course that includes an evaluation written by the student's professor;
- a list of persons who have agreed to provide academic and work-related recommendations, along with contact information; and
- a cover letter that both describes the applicant's career goals and also discusses (based on a review of the public-access pages of our Web site) how an internship with PAS could help to realistically promote those goals.

Completed applications can be forwarded as e-mail attachments to [museum@pas.org](mailto:museum@pas.org) or may be sent to our postal address: Intern Coordinator, Percussive Arts Society, 701 NW Ferris Avenue, Lawton, OK 73507.

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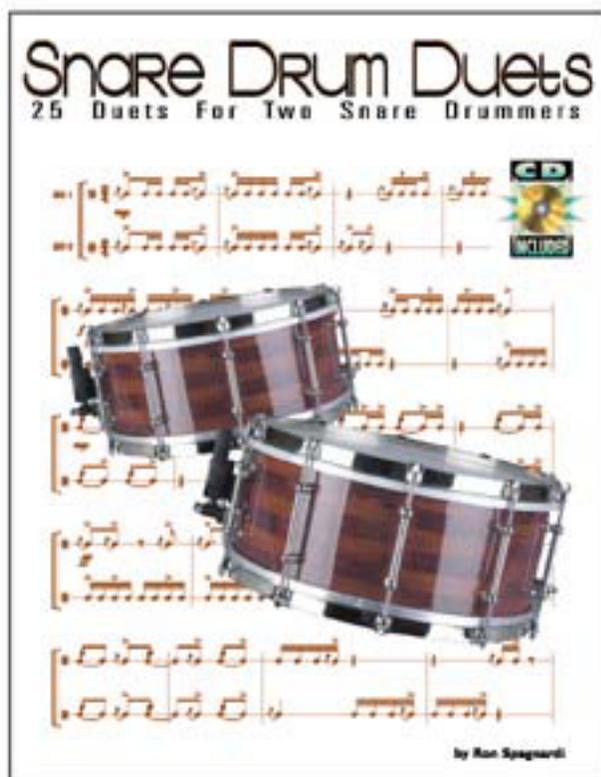
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