

Why does my band director want me to play xylophone, glockenspiel and timpani?

This situation is most common in school settings where there is a school concert band or orchestra being run, or when a private music school pushes their drum students towards classical percussion instruments.

I know from personal experience that this is one of the most frustrating things a young drum set student can be confronted with. I regularly see upset, frustrated students on the verge of quitting their music classes because they have put a heap of practice into their instrument (Drum Set) and want to improve their abilities and upon attending band rehearsals they are met with something that feels akin to, "No, your instrument isn't welcome here, you need to start doing something completely different that you're not interested in, one that we think is more useful."

I know this because I went through it myself.

This would be similar to telling a new flute student that they must join the school band, then agreeing and then coming to rehearsal and being told, we're putting you on trombone. Followed by "It's okay, it's easy! You still blow into it."

This situation is made worse when teachers use a phrase like "It's just like drums, you hit it, the targets are just smaller" which makes them feel stupid when they can't do it. The fact is that keyboard percussion (Xylophone and glockenspiel) is not "just like drum set" at all. In the same way that driving a B-double truck is not the same as riding a motorcycle. But the road rules are the same right?

The challenge put in front of the drum student is a lot bigger, and much more challenging than many music teachers realise or understand. And I hate to say it but there are a lot more ways to learn music now days than attending school orchestra / band. And most kids know it, so they're willing to walk away from school music lessons and learn privately and not go through the whole psychological torment of it all. I know this because I almost did.

My first piece of advice goes to music teachers

Firstly, if you have the idea in your head that keyboard percussion instruments and timpani are *just like drum set*, forget it! They aren't. That comparison is simply wrong. It's like comparing harp and guitar or tuba and bass guitar.

1. The techniques, although they look very similar from the outside are actually very different.
2. The way the music is written for the instruments, even down to the use of particular note values is usually different.
3. The way you read and mentally interpret the notes across the page is different.
4. In the case of reading music for keyboard percussion instruments, the targets (notes) are small, and can't be seen or touched when playing, making them very hard to find and play accurately.

There are specific ways to address these issues, but I won't get into them here.

Another thing to consider is that beginning flute or trumpet students tend to just focus on and play only their instrument of choice until they are practiced enough that they can start to experiment with doubling on related instruments.

However a drum set student is commonly expected to double almost immediately. They haven't even gotten their swing or rock feels comfortable yet and they're pushed behind a xylophone, a set of timpani and a pile of auxiliary percussion and told things like *it's easy you just hit it like you do a drum set*. The difference is you are basically asking a beginner student to double from day one. This means the drum

student is in a perpetual state of feeling like a beginner, never being good enough, always making noticeable mistakes, seeming to never reach the level of proficiency that other musicians in the group (who only ever seem play one instrument) get to.

It's inevitable that many drum students get overwhelmed and quit or simply tire of always feeling like they're not improving and end up eventually losing interest.

So how do we fix this issue?

Firstly explain to the student properly that although you know they're passionate about drum set, the problem is that the drum set does not get used that much in the musical setting they're going to be in (concert band, orchestra etc.) and that sadly they are not permitted to just let students stand around doing nothing when not playing drum set. They will basically need to take up another instrument such as keyboard percussion or timpani.

Let them know that it will make them a better musician (because it will) but it will also be difficult and frustrating to have to learn an entirely different skill set while everyone else is perfecting their main one. And that due to this they will make more mistakes than everyone else and that's fine, you just want them to come along and try. And don't jump on them every time they play wrong notes; you are dealing with a beginner remember.

Also get them on drum set regularly so they can feel like they can visit home base. A song or two on drum set can help them reassure themselves that they aren't as useless as they might feel.

Lastly if the student is having lessons in drum set during the week be aware that the teacher may not be able to cover both instruments in one half an hour lesson. In fact depending on who their teacher is, they may not be getting guidance on orchestral instruments at all.

My advice to students.

So now I've spent a good part of this article beating up on the music teachers on your behalf and you're feeling better about it all, This is where your music teacher and band director are right and you should play keyboard percussion and timpani!

Your teacher/s are not deliberately trying to make you frustrated. It isn't that schools think that drum set isn't a real instrument. It's simply that schools have a requirement to teach lots of people all at once and having a large concert band or orchestra allows them do that. Due to the number of people playing in the group the school also needs to allow everyone to be able to take part. if you only have one drum set and five drum students what do the other four drum students do while the drum set is being played. They might as well go and learn some other element of music.

And this is where you're told to go stand behind the xylophone or timpani... YAY for you right?

I will also mention that many music teachers don't really know the first thing about drum set. They are typically piano, brass, woodwind or string players. They maybe be able to sit at a drum set and belt out a basic rock beat and do a little drum fill or two, but ask them to play a swing ride pattern utilizing the left foot hi-hat as well as doing feathered bass drum notes at 120 beats per minute and you'll probably watch them come to a very sudden stop. (There's a reason I have the job I do.) Asking you to have a go at keyboard percussion simply a way to help you learn about music by getting you to play an instrument they understand better and can thus guide you in.

There are some massive benefits to learning a melodic instrument. Many of which you won't believe me about until you've done it, and then you'll think "Okay, he was right."

1. Your ability to read and interpret written music will be better than if you only play drum set.
2. Your sense of pitch will improve, allowing you to know when something is out of key or out of tune.
3. You will use different sticking patterns and gain better control over your hands, a great benefit to drum

set as well.

4. You will start to understand what chords are, why musicians obsess over them and how they work.
5. You will get an understanding of how orchestras work, why there are so many instruments.
6. You will learn how to work with a conductor.
7. You will learn to play with more control and dynamics, you can't just smash on a xylophone, you'll break it!
8. You will get a better understanding of what the other musicians in the group are trying to do.
9. You can play small sections of xylophone or timpani in shows if you ever need to and not feel intimidated.
10. You will have an extra skill set that other drummers don't have that will get you hired.

People have told me I should learn other instruments. Should I? And if so, which one?

Yes, this is a common problem and I have encountered this a lot!

People tend to recommend you learn things that relate to the style of music that they are interested or involved in. If you hang around rock and pop focused musicians they will recommend instruments like guitar, bass, piano and tell you that you should do vocal lessons so you can do backing vocals in a band.

If you hang around jazz musicians they'll tell you should play things like trumpet, saxophone, or vibraphone.

If you hang around classical musicians they will suggest things like keyboard percussion and timpani

And if you hang around sound engineers they'll tell you to buy microphones and build your own recording studio.

My personal advice to students is to try and do four major things.

1. Get good at drum set (obviously)

Learn a variety of music styles and make this your main focus. Learn to read music for drum set and be confident in transcribing music for drum set.

2. Spend a good deal of time learning to play some piano.

Piano is the most powerful tool of all when it comes music education (in my opinion). You'll learn, melody, harmony, chords, rhythm, treble clef, bass clef - almost everything.

3. Learn to play some basic keyboard percussion and some basic timpani.

If you associate with orchestras, concert bands / brass bands, music theatre or schools you will likely find yourself behind a xylophone, glockenspiel or set of timpani with little to no warning and wonder how you got there.

4. Learn the basics of sound engineering.

Basic microphone types, different ways to mic up and record a drum set, basic foldback and monitoring options, what effects are (reverb, delay, chorus.) Just so you can talk to a sound engineer and not feel completely stupid.

Anything more than this is great, but don't feel you need to be able to know everything about every topic related to music. Unless that's your thing, in which case go for it!