Tips for Tuning Tenor Drums

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In my clinics I am asked many questions about all facets of marching percussion. One question that is consistently asked concerns the technique I use in tuning the tenor drums. Everyone has his own preference for tuning schemes, but there are some general guidelines that can help an individual select one that will work for a particular situation.

Factors to Consider in Choosing a Tuning Scheme

1. Relative pitch between each drum. There must be a distinct separation in pitch to insure that each voice has a clear identity.
2. Relationship to other drums in the section. The tenor drums function as the middle voice of the battery. Therefore, the high drum should be lower in pitch than the snares, and the low drum should be higher in pitch than the highest bass drum.
3. Type of music selected to perform. Some music may have an inherent dark or light sound, and this should be reflected in the drum tuning. It can enhance the mood and increase a section's ability to communicate. Head choice also plays a major role in this. For example, when Remo Pinstripe heads are tuned the same way as Remo Legacy heads, the Pinstripe produces a brighter sound, compared to the darker sound made by the Legacy.
4. Performance arena. The amount of concrete used in modern stadiums can amplify low frequencies. This tends to make the lower-tuned drums (such as bass drums) seem "boomy" and garbled. When performing in such arenas it is important to adjust the tuning slightly higher. With the increasing popularity of indoor percussion, some other special considerations and adjustments in tuning must be made. Many of the venues in which contests take place were not designed to handle the volume of sound that a marching percussion ensemble produces. Individuals might consider tuning higher than usual, and employing ying some muf ¡ng techniques as well.

I feel that finding a tuning scheme that functions with the section, music, and arena is not where the problem lies. The problem is with making sure each drum head is in tune with itself, and the intonation between each set of tenors is accurate.

Getting the Drum Head in Tune with Itself

A head that is in tune with itself will ring longer, and aid in projecting a more distinct pitch. The process of tuning is more easily achieved by bringing a head up to pitch. Care must be taken not to overshoot the desired pitch, as bringing a head down to pitch takes considerably more time. To bring the head up, simply tighten the tension rods evenly in

the traditional criss-cross tuning procedure (see Figure 1). When the head is getting close to the desired pitch, tap the edge of the head with a mallet at the point where the tension rods are located (see Figure 2).

Identify the lowest pitch and bring that rod up first. Keep in mind that the tension rod located diagonally across as well as the two rods located immediately to the left and right will in ¿uence somewhat the pitch of the selected rod. Continue in this manner until all rods are relatively the same pitch. Once this is achieved, the head should ring and is now "in tune with itself." When checking the pitch of the drum it is important to strike the head in the beating spot that the player generally strikes (see Figure 3). While tuning tenors it is extremely important to always have the drums facing you. This insures that the pitch you hear is the same one the audience hears. If an individual attempts to tune the tenors from behind the set of drums, the pitch may sound different from what it truly is. Keep repeating the system until the desired pitch is reached. If the desired pitch is overshot slightly, striking the center of the head forcefully with the fist will help bring the pitch down a little.

Intonation between Drums

Intonation between drums is also important. The first step to setting the intonation is to tune up a "model." This set of drums must be used as the reference point for all subsequent sets of drums. Using the ear and the previously mentioned method, get the pitch of the drum as close as possible. The next step is one that many people miss. Strike both drums (the model and the drum being tuned) simultaneously, and use fine tuning to make the drums sound like one pitch. Using this procedure for all drums and using only one set as the model or reference point insures that all drums will be in tune with each other and maximum intonation is achieved.

Conclusion

These steps are not only successful in tuning tenor drums, but also in tuning snare drums. I have spoken to many of my colleagues about their systems for tuning and have been amazed at the variety of procedures. The bottom line is results, and the fact is that there are many ways of achieving this common goal. This is the procedure that has worked for me, and I am quite satisfied with the results.

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