

Building a Powerhouse Percussion Program: Part 2

Wisdom from the Panel

By Paul Buyer

Transcribed by Brian Ammons from the PASIC 2007 Panel Discussion

At PASIC 2007 in Columbus, the PAS Education Committee hosted its much anticipated panel discussion, “Building a Powerhouse Percussion Program.” The distinguished panelists were Rich Holly, Professor of Percussion and Associate Dean in the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Northern Illinois University; John Brennan, Associate Director of Bands and Director of Percussion at Plano East Senior High School (Texas); Mark Ford, Coordinator of Percussion at the University of North Texas; Jim Royle, Director of the Jim Royle Drum Studio (Conn.); and John Parks, Assistant Professor of Percussion at The Florida State University.

The purpose of the discussion was to focus on the resources, support, talent, and skills needed in today’s educational climate to build a powerhouse percussion program at both the high school and college levels. The panel members shared their views on leadership, communication, motivation, retention, relationship building, teamwork, administration, collaboration, recruiting, and visibility. Issues such as staffing, equipment, facilities, space, alumni, and grant writing were also discussed, and the panelists offered advice on starting a new program, rebuilding an old one, and implementing change. The following edited transcription represents the best of what was said at PASIC 2007.

Holly: I think that most of us that have been fortunate to have a strong program have had some element of luck involved, meaning we have been lucky to have leadership that “gets it.” At the university level, we have had support from the director of the school of music, the chair, the dean, the provost, and/or the president of our universities. The key question is how many people in administrative posi-

tions above the faculty understand how cool percussion is and how great it can be—not only for you and your students, but the community at large? If you’re lucky, you will have people that already understand that or are at least open to hearing about it and willing to help you make some changes.

The second point is that it is hard work if you don’t have leadership that gets it. In my particular case I have had some of both. For example, in the mid-1980s a new dean came in and didn’t get it, causing us to beat our heads against the wall for a few years. Later on, we got an associate dean that completely got it, so we were able to keep moving forward. We even had a provost who was not a musician but his favorite music was percussion, so he came to every concert and it was a fabulous relationship. He just retired a year or so ago, so we have been very lucky. As I said, there have been times when my administrators didn’t get it, and that presents some challenges, but ultimately some patience plays into it and you can’t give up. You have to find gentle ways to educate them of the importance of the program.

The last thing I will talk about is resources. I don’t know anyone who has unlimited resources. The only unlimited resource that you have is your own ingenuity, so you have to figure out ways to make things happen without someone just handing you a checkbook with a bunch of blank checks. In my particular case the School of Music gives the percussion area a limited budget for guest artists. However, with our proximity to Chicago we will find out who is playing and when, and we will call them and see if they are free on a particular night. We have also been relentless with the student association, which has more than 200 organizations under its umbrella, all of which are funded. It has been interesting, some of the partnerships we have been able to make with those groups. I would say on an annual

“Support from your peers and the people you work with are the biggest aspects of keeping your program successful.”
—John Brennan

basis we have increased our budget significantly, but again it is not given to us and we have to go out and push for this support.

Brennan: I think the people you work with are the key. Speaking from the high school perspective, all the band directors that I am involved with on a daily basis have to be on the same team, but it works both ways: you have to work with them for them to work with you. I hear a lot about young instructors who will have friction with the band director and now are on the other side. Most of my duties now are band director-related, but I still oversee the percussion for our cluster and I can definitely see from a director’s perspective where the problems come in between the percussion instructor and the band director.

I teach at a senior high school that is 11th and 12th grade, so I just see juniors and seniors on a regular basis. Every year, half of my program is new, so vertical alignment is key and I am always in contact with the people who teach the younger students, and I am in constant contact with the band directors. They believe in what I have to do, and I believe they are able to get the work done that needs to get done to keep my program successful.

Most of the students take private lessons, and I think that is huge. If you don’t have a private lessons program in your school, try getting that ball rolling. We are very fortunate to have a strong lesson program. We have really good teachers, and a good 80 percent of the students—not just percussionists, but in

“The only unlimited resource you have is your own ingenuity.”
—Rich Holly

the whole band program—take private lessons. We also have scholarship funding for those in need.

I think aside from that, recruiting is really important. As a lot of you know, marching percussion is big in Texas. More people are going to see you at a Friday night football game than at all your concerts throughout the year. Typically we have 10,000–15,000 people at a game every Friday night who see my kids play, so I feel like that has to be a real strong point of my program. The kids love it, and it's a great recruiting tool.

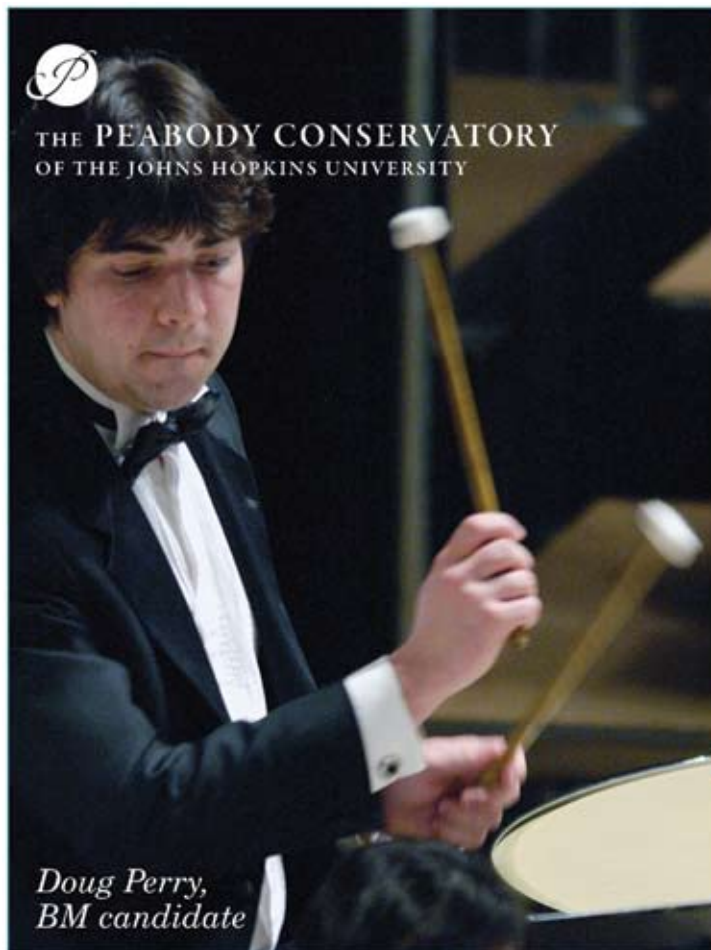
We also push the percussion ensemble heavily, and last year we performed at PASIC. It was great for everybody to see the other side of what we do. Because our principal loves the drumline, she signed the form that allowed our percussion ensemble to submit a tape for PASIC. She ended up coming with us to the convention and also got to see the other side of what we do. We also do two concerts a year and get the younger kids up to see the bigger kids play to show them how much fun we have. To summarize, recruitment, vertical alignment, and support from your peers and the people that you work with are the biggest aspects of keeping your program successful.

Ford: I think when it gets down to it, your personality and vision for your program is reflected in your studio. You can recognize and

see this in other programs as well. As far as what you are going to do with your program, you have to deal with what is inside your heart because your passion and your heartfelt dedication is really what your students are going to take away from you. Now, they may walk out of here having just played a great concert at PASIC, but they may not remember those

tunes in 20 years. What they will remember is that feeling they had and the pride and the opportunity to play that they shared. They will also remember that they did their very best and they had a leader who put them in that position. That type of leadership is what builds a quality program.

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“Your passion and your heartfelt dedication is really what your students are going to take away from you.” —Mark Ford

Rich's roll as an administrator and a great player has given him the ability to see it from both sides. In my position in such a large program, I have to be able to put my administrator hat on as well. Sometimes I hear teachers say, “My administrator does not understand what I'm doing. I can't do this, I can't do that.” Lots of “I can't,” you know? My first question is, have you really talked to your administrator? Have you listened to what his or her goals are for the school? It's like neighbors in the neighborhood; if my lawnmower is broken and I want to borrow a lawnmower from my next-door neighbor, I am going to have to know this guy before I go over there and say, “Hey man, can I borrow your lawnmower?” It is the same thing with your dean or any administrator. You need to know who this person is, not just say, “This is your job to help me.” Ask about his/her vision for the school and how you can be part of that vision. Because your administrator has the final say, he sets the budget, and he makes decisions that will ultimately affect your program. Some of us have administrators that are hands-off. Others may be micromanagers. Either way, you have to understand what their vision is and you have to be able to talk to them. I am trying to help my administrator achieve his goal, and the next time he will help me achieve mine. So we have to be able to work with people and listen to them, but it gets down to that personality, your drive for your music and what your true vision is for your program.

I think students really want to be challenged, and they want to feel like they are on the leading edge of something really new and fresh. Keep your students focused on the music and striving to be the best they can be. It is important not to set the bar too low or too high for student goals. Where that bar is situated again reflects back on your personality and background and how you see your perception of your students. Sometimes you have students who can't play a certain level and you have to slowly stair-step it up, and how you gauge that music up to that high level is really what we are talking about here. Presenting strong musical concepts over a long period of time with incredible results is the cornerstone of an established percussion program. Most importantly, this work and effort will result

in outstanding student musicianship and increase the student's potential for success after graduation.

Royle: Mark said a lot of good things, but mostly I am impressed that he mows his own lawn! I come from a completely different sector. I own and direct my own private teaching studio in Connecticut, so we are dealing with a lot of similar but different challenges. My main feeling and expression to my students, in what I call my extended family, is my passion. If I don't exude that, it affects all the students, parents, friends and band directors in the area. I love what I do and it just rolls right through everybody. You need to have 110 percent commitment, not even 100 percent, if you are going to do this on a private level.

My studio was certainly not built overnight. It started when I was in college at the University of Bridgeport in the 1980s and I was under the direction of Howard Swickler. During percussion ensemble class one day he said, “Does anybody want to teach at the local music store? They need a percussion teacher.” I was a freshman and thought to myself, “Yeah, I could do that.” Well, that is where it started, and because of that decision, I found my niche and my passion for how I wanted to teach.

My studio at the store got so big they had to have a separate day of lessons just for me. I realized I needed to teach more than just drumset and snare drum, so I asked if I could have a bigger room. The store remodeled and I got a bigger room, but we were quickly outgrowing the space and I needed to find something to accommodate the growing number of students and instruments.

I decided to buy a house so I could put my studio inside my home, but as it kept building and building, we reached the point where we bought a commercial building and rented out a much larger space. We now have 120 private students and four percussion ensembles from elementary through high school, as well as steel band and drumline. I always try to step into areas that raise the bar. You have to create. Create is a big word. I create constantly and I thrive on that and am passionate about creating. Those are the basic ideas of where the private sector comes from and how it is run.

Make no mistake, I don't do it on my own. There are five of us on staff, and currently ev-

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“People go places to study because they find people they want to be like.” —John Parks

everyone is a former student of mine that went through his career and now is back teaching with us, so they know what I am about, they know the philosophies, and we have a curriculum that we follow with their personalities brought into the picture.

Parks: I am obsessed with my students! I think if there is one thing that I can point to that has been really good for Florida State and for Kansas before that is that I will stop at nothing to put them into contention for whatever it is: high school band jobs, junior high jobs, college jobs, orchestra jobs, graduate school, or working at Belk. Anything I can do I will do, including working 14-hour days. If you are not willing to put in that kind of time, it is going to be tough.

I am ruthless with my recruiting. For me everything starts with the student and it ends with the student. It's not about me and it's not about Florida State. It is about putting them in contention. I don't think anyone would go to North Texas to study with Mark Ford if he didn't have amazing students, right? You see him play and you hear about him all the time. You meet him and he's a great person. That's why people go places to study—because they find people they want to be like, and I've just been really lucky in my career to be around some great teachers that I try to emulate. This is my 11th year of teaching college, it is my third job, and I feel like I am just now starting to figure stuff out.

I think if I could just say two things to everyone, it is all about the students. For me when students come in, I am much more interested in a really great person than an exceptional player. I mean, obviously I want exceptional players and we're in a position now where we have a lot of them who are trying to get into the program. I am more likely to take a lower ability student that has a great attitude than I am to take someone absolutely virtuoso-level right out of undergraduate or even high school if they have attitude problems, because I think the saving grace about our program is that everybody in it is really an amazing person, and I screen for that in the auditions as much as possible.

I have a 24-hour e-mail return rule, where anyone who writes to me will have a response within 24 hours, no matter what. I am shocked when a student comes in and says, “I e-mailed my teacher and they never emailed me back.” Are you kidding me? Fine, I am happy to steal all of those students. All

of them! It's not a negative thing, but if somebody else is not going to take advantage of working with a really terrific student, come on down!

I think if there is anything I can point to, I am obsessed with my students. I am obsessed with them being the best they can be. I am obsessed with them being quality human beings and if it's in percussion, great. If it's not, I am going to use percussion to the best of my ability to make sure they're set up with success with whatever they do and be the best role model I possibly can be.

I attended Dr. Tim's [Lautzenheiser] leadership session yesterday. Every single time I see him I think I have his lecture figured out. I guess I haven't learned anything! Run—don't walk—the next time you have an opportunity to hear him speak. The first thing he did was ask everyone to raise their hands as high as they can. “*Now reach higher!* Why didn't you go higher the first time?” he asks, fully expect-

ing everyone in the room to fall short of what they are truly capable of. For me it's standing on the chair, jumping up and down, and jumping as high as I can, as much as possible. So for me, success is the students. If I can put the students in a position to be successful in anything, whether it is managing a Circle K or auditioning for the New York Philharmonic, that's what my life is about.

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