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Regional

Smithiger teaches the magic of percussion

No matter what kind of music is being played – whether by a small garage band or a symphony orchestra – every time musicians get together you can be sure that at least one of them will be a percussionist. Someone who is busy teaching a new generation of percussionists is Dan Smithiger.

Smithiger was born outside of Saigon (or Ho Chi Mihn City), Vietnam. He arrived to the United States at four months old as the adopted child of an American family. He obtained his bachelor's of music education degree from Northern Arizona University, and his master's and doctorate in music from the University of Arizona. Today he teaches percussion and is the director of the basketball band at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Like most all percussionists, Smithiger learned to play a great variety of instruments.

"Membranophones are one type of instrument which include the timpani, snare drums, base drums, any kind of drum, any kind of instrument that has a membrane or a head," Smithiger explained. "And then there are idiophones, instruments which include the xylophone, marimba, bells, instruments that are struck and shaken. Percussion is the act of striking, and percussion instruments include also things which are shaken and rattled. From snare drums, from rumba to timpani, to steel pan, to brake drums, cow bells, sleigh bells, whips. I could keep going."

In fact, many consider the piano a percussion instrument because of the "hammers" that strike the strings. Others that have a similar configuration are the marimba and the vibraphone.

Despite their wide use today, percussion instruments were not incorporated into sophisticated music

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

until rather late. Bach used the timpani, as did the classical composers Mozart, Hayden and Beethoven. "It flourished more overall as a section through different composers in the 19th century and certainly 20th century," said Smithiger.

Despite the variety of instruments they must learn how to play, many percussionists tend to specialize in a few of them. "Yes, there are some percussionists who are, for instance, soloists in recording and making compositions of let's say marimba or timpani," said Smithiger. "But generally percussionists have to have a working knowledge of all of them."

On the question of whether percussion instruments are easier to play than others, such as the violin or the trumpet, Smithiger is reflective. "I have thought about this numerous times," he said. "Percussion is relatively easy to start, at least from a fundamental level of rhythm and larger body movements to be able to hit something. Like everything else as you grow and learn more, percussion becomes more complicated because you go from large body movements like arm movements to more refined movements with finger technique and more versatility. It's not just playing a drum set and it's not just playing a marching snare drum or it's not just playing one thing on a xylophone. It is all of that. It is the totality of everything you are doing." Percussion players, particularly drum performers, tend to be associated with improvisation, a very difficult art to master.

"Some people can do it better just by hearing it and just being able to do

it," Smithiger said. "For improvising you need to be able to hear and to apply and to then comprehend. And then being able to make your own, to synthesize and make your own piece with your own chords and notes." Beyond their ability to improvise, just what makes for a great percussionist?

"For me what I am trying to cultivate in our students here at SIUE and as a teacher in general is an understanding and an appreciation for all of percussion," Smithiger said. "Not just playing in a marching band, playing snare drum in a marching band, or not just this or that or the other, it is all of that. What it takes to be a percussionist, certainly the hard work, certainly those things, but I think it is a level of appreciation and sensitivity to all of it."

Smithiger has been the main force behind making the playing of steel pans very popular among SIUE music students. These instruments evolved from biscuit tins in the 1920s and 1930s in Trinidad, where they would take a round biscuit tin and they would carve it and pound out six to eight notes in the tin. "And they would get tones in these tins," Smithiger explained. "One of the stories is from the mid- to late-1940s after the war, when they had discarded 55-gallon barrels. So they hammered those down and replicated that biscuit tin into these barrels. And now, 60 years later, steel pans are not necessarily made from those 55-gallon barrels but they are from that idea."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



Prof. Dan Smithiger (front) with part of the SIUE steel band.

Shan Lu/SIUE