



Buckets to Body Percussion

Drumming on a Dime

by Mark Burrows

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Foreword

When I visit with fellow music teachers about percussion in the classroom, there's always tons of excitement.

"The kids *love* to drum."

"Percussion brings so much energy to the classroom."

"It's a great way to teach the fundamentals of rhythm."

But there are also a few perceived obstacles.

"I just don't have the budget for the instruments we'd need."

"Even if I did have the budget, there's not enough space in the class (on the cart) to store all those instruments."

"I love the *idea* of percussion in the classroom—I just don't know where to start."

Buckets to Body Percussion: Drumming on a Dime is all about helping you eliminate as many challenges as possible so you and your students can celebrate all that makes classroom percussion so exciting! Let's clear those obstacles, shall we?

"I just don't have the budget for the instruments we'd need."

Fair enough. Instruments aren't cheap, especially those of high quality. A good djembe alone can cost anywhere from \$200-\$450.* And that could blow your entire year's budget...if you even *have* a budget. But for significantly less than that, you can put together an entire percussion ensemble made of buckets, bins, and found objects.

* I *love* the look and sound of authentic instruments. I appreciate the craft that goes into each instrument as well as the opportunity to explore and celebrate world cultures. The thought of playing an instrument made by someone half a world away is exciting. And the idea that by purchasing the instrument I am doing my part to help that person put food on the table of his or her family, means a great deal to me. My goal is not to create an "Instead Of" resource, but an "In Addition To" resource.

Here's one possibility:

- Plastic 5-Gallon Buckets: The “tenor drums” of the ensemble. Many hardware stores sell ten-packs for less than \$30.
- 32-Gallon Heavy Duty Waste Bin: The bass drum. These sell for around \$35 each. (Note: The ideal beater for a “Big Bin” is a mallet made of a dowel wrapped with a few layers of felt and secured with duct tape.)
- 55-Gallon Blue Plastic Drum: They can be used as bass drums, and are great for Japanese Taiko-style drumming. Prices on these vary widely. I recently got a bunch at a feed store for \$17 a piece!
- 5-Gallon Water Bottles: An empty 5-gallon water bottle sounds SO much like an actual conga it’s amazing! New ones sell for \$7 or less.
- Drumsticks: While you can use dowels or rhythm sticks, I *highly* recommend using actual drumsticks. They are less likely to splinter or shatter. And when a stick shatters...you just don’t know where it’s going to land. One vendor I researched sells drumsticks at \$3 per pair.
- Plastic Bottle Rattles: Take an empty plastic bottle, clean it and dry it. Add a handful or two of plastic beads. Free! Well, except, for the minimal cost of a few plastic beads. By the way, I highly encourage beads over dried rice, beans, or corn kernels. (In a hungry world, there’s no need to use food in our art and music projects.)
- Coffee Cans: The cowbells of the ensemble. Free!

An ensemble of:

10 Buckets

2 32-Gallon Waste Bins

1 55-Gallon Blue Plastic Drum

3 5-Gallon Water Bottles

5 Plastic Bottle Rattles

1 Coffee Can

14 Pairs of Drumsticks (10 pairs to play buckets, 1 to play coffee can and 3 pairs to be played as rhythm sticks)



That’s enough instruments for up to 25 players. Total cost: \$178.50 at *most*. And that’s if you *actually go out and buy* the buckets, bins, and bottles. A lot of these things you can get donated.

As for body percussion...you have an entire symphony of sounds within each student in your classroom. Cost to the budget: \$0.

Buckets

Let's get a few things in place before the students arrive. Clear as much floor space as possible. I like to have the students in rows, so I mark off rows on the floor in masking tape. If I have 25 students, I can make either five rows of five students, or if space permits, four rows of six students, with an additional student on the last row. Make the lines at least three feet apart.



Tip: Get masking tape in different colors and make each row a different color. Here's why: when playing a drumming game, performing a canon, or calling on a single row to play a rhythm, it will be much easier to identify a row by color. If you call out, "Blue row, let's play that $\frac{6}{8}$ rhythm together," the students sitting on the blue line know immediately you're talking to them. This is a lot easier than referring to Row 3, Row 4, and so on—and if you can get buckets in the different colors...even better!

If you have a couple of extra buckets, they are great for holding all the drumsticks. And if your floor is a hard surface, I highly recommend carpet squares. First and foremost, it will mute the drumming a good bit. Secondly, it helps prevent the buckets from sliding around as they're played.

As the students enter, divide them into groups to go sit on each row. Select one student from each row to get enough buckets for their row and distribute them. Instruct the students to all have their buckets right side up (so that the opening is facing up), and to keep their hands folded in their laps.

You and another student distribute the sticks. Place one pair in each bucket.



Remind the students to continue to keep their hands folded in their laps. Someone will test you on this. Here's how I handle it:

First time: "Remember to keep your hands folded in your laps until it's time to play."

Second time: "I still hear someone drumming. Hands in laps please."

Third time: "If you continue to drum when I've asked you to keep your hands folded, I will have to take your bucket. I don't want to do that if I don't have to."

Fourth time: Remove the bucket from the student.

Don't raise your voice. Remain positive. Remain calm. If you get into the habit of trying to talk over (yell over) bucket drumming, you won't have a voice left. Set the right tone early. And, after a minute or two of drumming, offer the student another chance. "Hey, I really want you to get to drum with the rest of us. Think you can handle it?" (This is always met with an enthusiastic, earnest nod "yes.")

What follows are a few fun and easy bucket games designed to get students familiar with some different bucket techniques...and to help you with classroom management. For these you will also need a bucket and sticks for yourself.

🎯 Game: Buckets!

This is a super-simple game, and the kids love it. I like to start every session with this game.

Students start with all the buckets right-side-up and their hands in their laps.

When you call “Buckets,” the students turn their buckets bottom-side-up and put their sticks in hold position.



Hold position is where the students are holding both sticks in front of them parallel to the floor. The sticks are together, and each hand is holding both sticks. I have the students hold the sticks in front of them about chin high.

Why is hold position such a big deal? When all students are holding both sticks with both hands, they can't drum, but I can see that they are ready and waiting.

Now, flipping a bucket bottom-side up and holding sticks isn't the most elaborate “game” ever, right? Here's what you do: you *time* it. “Okay students, when I call ‘Buckets,’ everyone take the sticks out of your buckets, turn the buckets over, and put your sticks in hold position. I'm going to time it to see how efficient we can be. The time will stop when I can see that everyone has their sticks in hold position. Ready? Buckets!”

🎯 Game: Hold, Ready, Play

Ready position is where the sticks are separated. They are held perpendicular to the floor, one in each hand, and *ready* to play. *Play* is where they actually get to play.

- Call out “Hold” or “Ready” and have the students hold their sticks accordingly.
- Next say, “Now I want you to watch my sticks, and do what I do. If my sticks are in hold position, put your sticks in hold position. If mine are in ready position, get your sticks in ready position. And if I play, you play.”



Notice that before we even start playing I make sure to give the students some visual cues to look for. If all the students are drumming and I say “Hold” or “Ready,” how are they going to hear me?

And when you show “Play,” don't worry that it sounds like a garble of beats. Rhythm isn't the point. This game is about giving you and the students a way of communicating so that they are always *with* you for a given percussion activity.

Each of the following four Call and Response patterns is based on a classic song or rhyme.

Call and Response

Classic Songs and Rhymes

1 Old MacDonald:

Call: Old Mac-Don - ald had a farm.

Response: E - i - e - i - o.

2 Jingle Bells:

Call: Jin - gle bells, jin - gle bells.

Response: (No lyrics shown for response)

3 London Bridge:

Call: Lon - don bridge is fall - ing down.

Response: Jin - gle all the way.

4 Wee Willie Winkie:

Call: Wee Wil - lie Win - kie

Response: Fall - ing down, fall - ing down.

runs through the town.

Up - stairs, down - stairs, in his night - gown.

Each of these could serve as an Intro to a simple percussion groove. Consider playing the Call on one part of the bucket (the rim, for example) and having the students play the Response on a different surface (the head, side, or sticks). As always, you can utilize body percussion in place of buckets.

Body Canon

Body canons are a great way to get students experiencing music in more than one part.

It also helps strengthen their ability to sing canons/rounds better. Think of how many times you tried to get students to sing a canon/round like *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* only to have them all finish at the same time. “Wait. That wasn’t supposed to happen like that.” Body canons have the added elements of visual and physical to give students something concrete to hold onto.

Below is an example of a canon, but honestly, it’s much more fun to make them up on the spot. In any case, the process is basically the same. Notice in the following Body Canon how each measure utilizes a distinct body percussion sound. No two consecutive measures use the same sound. This will greatly help the students keep things straight.

Body Canon

Pat Tummy: Stomp: Clap: Flash Fingers: Pat Lap:

Body $\frac{4}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$

6 Snaps: Lip Pops: Pat Tummy:

Body $\frac{4}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$

Play the first measure and have the students echo. Play the second measure and have the student echo. Continue this process all the way through. Next, say, “Great job echoing me. Now we’re going to make this a true canon. Watch and listen carefully. I will play a measure and you echo me. AND...while you are echoing that measure, I will be playing another. Then you echo that measure. AND...while you’re echoing that measure, I will be playing another. So, you have to do two things at once: echo what I just played *and* watch and listen to me for the next measure to echo. Got it? Let’s give it a try.”

Try being the operative word here. It may take a few times for students to get the canon concept. You might want to go back now and then to straight echo just to build confidence. Then do only four measures of the canon. Celebrate every little victory along the way. They’ll catch on.

For younger students, simply having the body canon be in two parts (you and them) is plenty. For older students, try this: Have everyone stand with you in a circle. Play a measure, and have the student to your right echo as you play the next measure. Then the next student echoes the first student, and so on. See if you can get all eight measures “going around the circle.”

Encourage the students to always look to the one directly to their left. If they look around, or if they all look at you, they’ll get thrown off. But, if you always echo the person directly to your left, it should work.

Bucket Canon

Bucket Canon

$\text{♩} = 108$

Buckets 4/4 Head: Rim: Sticks Together: Sides: Rim:

Buckets 6 Swish Sticks Silently: Sides: Head:

It's a good idea to introduce the canon concept through body percussion before moving to buckets. Body percussion is softer, and there is more to hold onto visually and physically.

But bucket canons, played well, are a TOTAL BLAST!

Divide the students into rows. (Here's where color-coding the rows really comes in handy.) Start the process exactly as with the body canon. Play a measure and have the entire class echo you. Do this for several measures, then have the entire group echo a measure, and while they are echoing, play another measure for them to echo. Play through the entire canon this way.

Notice how, as with the body percussion, no two consecutive measures have the same sound.

Here's where things get fun: Say, "We are going to make a five-part canon (depending on how many rows there are). I will play a measure, and the Yellow Row will echo me (or whichever color row is in front). Then the Red Row will echo the Yellow Row. The Green Row will echo the Red Row. And the Blue Row will echo the Green Row. Just make sure to watch and listen closely to the row right in front of you. That's who you echo. Got it? Here we go."

Play the first measure. Have the Yellow Row echo you, the Red Row echo the Yellow Row, and so on. "Passing back" a one-measure canon feels easy, almost like it's not a canon, but it *is*. It's simply a very short canon.

Next, play the first measure, and while the Yellow Row is echoing you, play the second measure. Now there are two measures being "passed back." And here's where things can get tricky. You may need to reinforce the concept that students are to watch and only echo the row right in front of them. (A lot of students will be watching you and might try to echo you directly, regardless of what row they're on.) Remind students that the only ones who echo you directly are those on the Yellow Row.

Continue this process until you can play through the entire canon. I'll tell you, the first time you make it all the way through an entire canon, it's a thrill! Take time to celebrate. It's a big deal!

Bucket Canons aren't just for the classroom. Consider playing one on a music program. It doesn't have to be long. And if you do a little demonstration beforehand for the audience, they will truly appreciate what an accomplishment it is for the students to play a Bucket Canon.



Note: Canons and rounds sound great and full when everyone is playing. But once the groups exit one by one, canons and rounds can "fizzle out." Here's how to fix that: you, as the leader, continue to play the final measure. Each row will echo whatever the row in front of them plays. After several repetitions, the effect is everyone playing the final measure in unison. Once all the rows are playing the final measure, *crescendo* for four measures, and end.