

## FINAL REPORT

### STUDY & DEVELOPMENT FELLOWSHIP FOR SESSIONAL LECTURERS

Winter 2017

**'Community-based drum set education development and diversification project'**

**Submitted 15 June, 2017 by Joseph Sorbara**

#### **Fellowship Goals**

My project was designed to:

1. Identify and challenge my orthodoxies and deficits, both as a performer and as an educator; and to
2. Diversify and deepen my pedagogical approach to drum set education, both in terms of study materials and methodology.

#### **Lessons/ Interviews**

As planned, between February and May, 2017, I was able to interview *Dave Clark*, *Nick Fraser*, *Ted Warren*, *Rakesh Tewari*, and *Max Senitt* about their pedagogical practices and to study with each of them in one-on-one lessons. Their unique perspectives on areas of potential improvement in my own instrumental practice were insightful and often unexpected and the opportunity for first-hand experience with five different drum set educators from my community has been invaluable to me as a musician, a drummer, an educator, and as a community member.

*Dave Clark* had a great deal to say about learning styles, about providing students with a positive experience in a lesson based on how they learn best as well as a record of their experience that speaks to their learning style so that they are able to study the material on their own. Dave designed a lesson on the fly that catered to my needs, played the drums *with* as well as *for* me to demonstrate ideas, and had me sit at length and play along with sound recordings until we were both satisfied that I could capture the feel that was appropriate to the music. Our interview and lesson collapsed into one, full-day meeting spent studying New Orleans music and drumming and I have gained not only a greater appreciation for the musical tradition at the root of North American popular music, but a collection of study materials and sound recordings that will sustain me as well as my students for a long time.

From *Nick Fraser*, I gained an understanding of how he offers a drumset education through the jazz department at the University of Toronto—a process that is far less structured than I had imagined (certainly far less than in my studio at Guelph, which I find very interesting). We walked through our mutual understanding of the seemingly myriad approaches to Ted Reed's "Syncopation for the Modern Drummer," a classic in jazz drumset education, playing examples for one another and discussing the implications of each. We talked a great deal about how the standard materials used in drum set study end up having a (perhaps) outsized influence on musical performance itself and about how students can be encouraged to get outside of that box.

Nick also shared a series of recordings, each demonstrating a very specific musical idea. These are very insightful kernels of knowledge and will be helpful in and of themselves but also as a model for me to base my own collection on. Our lesson focussed on how we teach the jazz ride cymbal pattern—the foundational aspect of jazz drumming, and some interesting approaches to the rudiments that Nick has used to develop some aspects of his own playing that I have been particularly taken with lately.

Like Nick, *Ted Warren's* teaching style is a great deal more loose than mine is and Ted's approach is almost entirely derived from intense, detailed listening to recordings. We talked at length about how he approaches a recording he wishes to study. We also spent a good deal of time talking about how to play and teach the brushes, an implement that both Ted and I are particularly invested in that is famously difficult to teach. With Ted, who also teaches at Guelph as the director of the jazz ensemble, I had the opportunity to talk in a very detailed manner about his impressions of my students and their tendencies as evidence of the efficacy of my teaching. Going forward, not only will I be able to tweak some of my lessons to account for Ted's observations, but we will each have another drummer in the department with a more thorough understanding of our methodologies which should allow us to work together toward a better education for our student drummers.

With *Rakesh Tewari*, the main focus of both the interview and lesson was on learning from recordings, and learning not only from other drumset players but from percussionists and hand drummers as well. We spent a great deal of time listening to recordings and talking in detail about what we heard. We looked at my rudimentary hand drumming technique and cleared up some long-hanging questions. I left with a long list of study materials—mostly important recordings to dig into—and a very clearly defined alteration to my course of study at Guelph that brings a greater focus to the practice of learning from recordings than I had used previously, based on ideas I discussed with both Rakesh and Ted.

Finally, with *Max Senitt* I asked that we focus specifically on Afro-Cuban music and drumming. In our interview, we walked through his personal history of discovering, learning about, and playing Afro-Cuban music. He shared the important method books, videos, and recordings that helped him along the way as well as an iPhone application that has significantly changed the way he practices. We spoke about how he used those materials as a student and how he uses them to help his own students. We spent our lesson time dealing with some basic exercises that use key Afro-Cuban rhythms to begin building the interdependence necessary for a drum set player to consolidate the multiple parts normally assigned to an entire ensemble of percussionists into a single drum set performance.

## **Integration**

As I will be for a very long time, I am in the process of studying the materials that these great drummers have shared with me toward the goal of incorporating them into my instrumental practice and so into my teaching. I'm energized and inspired by the new learning that's happening in my practice room and very much looking forward to seeing and hearing where it all leads. The material has already begun to seep into my playing in many ways, though, and I have some very

clear learning outcomes that will inform my teaching going forward, some of which are described below.

## **Revisions to my teaching**

Following the interviews and lessons and after a period of concentrated study of the materials and approaches that I've discovered through this project, I have begun the process of revising my four-year course of study for the Applied Music program at the University of Guelph. Taking into account my experience with the existing course plan, my time spent with the new materials and approaches, and incorporating the perspectives offered through my interviews with the five drum set educators involved in this project, the first wave of revisions includes,

- A change in my studio setup to allow me to play *with* my students.
- A renewed dedication to my documentation. To date, I have handed out a full syllabus to each student outlining each year of study, which is being revised, of course, but also lengthened to include more detail. I have also been setting up a google doc accessible by each student and myself that functions as a living document that keeps track of assigned material. This document will be expanded to also act as a practice and listening journal for each student.
- The addition of a New Orleans unit focussing on the performance practices of early jazz drummers as well as drum set adaptations of street beats and the particular swing feel associated with New Orleans music.
- An expanded introduction to Afro-Cuban music that will be studied before the lessons I've been offering until now. This will make those lessons easier to understand and easier to execute and also help students to focus on the feel of the the music before they are exposed to the full complexity indicative of particular styles of Afro-Cuban music.
- A relaxation of my approach to teaching the jazz ride cymbal pattern. I had been considering changing the way I teach this key aspect of jazz drumming before I engaged with this project. My discussions with Nick Fraser and Ted Warren have further validated the idea that students should be encouraged to develop a more personal approach to the ride cymbal earlier in their studies.
- An increased focus on listening to recordings, on talking about the details heard therein, and on studying those details in various ways including both aural and written transcription as well as exercise design. This has always been an important aspect of my course, especially for upper-year students, but a greater focus in this area earlier on as well as some some key changes to my approach will be an improvement.

## Further Outcomes

As I had hoped, I do believe that this project has helped to develop a much improved, more thoroughly informed, and more flexible instructor for the applied music program at the University of Guelph. A more diversified, community-informed course of study for drum set students in the program is taking shape and I am convinced that it will help me to offer an improved educational experience for my students and, ultimately, have a positive effect on the broader musical community.

As expected, I have expanded my collection of drum set education materials to include some new method books as well as books on music history and some academic studies of specific genres and musicians. I have also collected some new videos, audio recordings, and phone/tablet applications. Just as importantly, I have an ever-growing list of approaches to using these materials. I believe that the latter might be something that is publishable at some point, as no such document seems to exist in the field.

I have also begun to think about another piece of writing that will document this experience as well as encourage others to build similar courses of study with their colleagues and friends. Among the key learning experiences of this project is that a mutual respect among colleagues can get in the way of learning from one another in these contexts. What I've learned is that focussing on very specific questions, dealing with particular areas of inquiry—as I did with Dave Clark and Max Senitt, and with the others for shorter periods of time—was a good way of getting a friend or colleague past the discomfort that can come from asking them to critique my practice. I noticed that, unless I pointed out a specific issue, Nick Fraser, Ted Warren, and Rakesh Tewari were less interested in interrogating some aspect of my playing and that my lessons with them tended to continually return to topics about how to learn and how to teach rather than get into anything about how my playing can improve. In the cases of Dave Clark and Max Senitt, though, I went in with very specific, overarching learning goals based on their particular areas of expertise that allowed them to play teacher to my student in a more natural way.

One final outcome that I feel is important to describe here is that this project has really given me the opportunity to recognize that I'm good at this. I have spent the last 9 years developing a course of study that is very well suited to drum students in the music department at the University of Guelph, students who have experiential backgrounds and learning goals that landed them in this department rather than any other, students with particular needs and particular tendencies. I have a new confidence in my teaching that is also fuelling a renewed hunger to get down to work, to study, to practice, to improve, to get better.

I would like to thank the Study and Development Fellowship committee for providing me with the opportunity to carry out this project, the effects of which are really just beginning to unfold. I am most grateful for your support and assistance.