MAINTENANCE OF WOOD BAR MALLET INSTRUMENTS

The bars of xylophones and marimbas, being constructed of wood, undergo structural changes as a result of alterations in atmospheric conditions and natural aging processes. Higher temperatures and humidity cause a drop in pitch, while lower temperatures and humidity cause a rise in pitch. This changing occurs day to day, hour to hour, even in temperature controlled buildings. The finish applied to bars slows this process down but does not stop it. Natural aging also causes constant structural changes in the wood. Honduran rosewood, from which most xylophones and marimbas are made, is kiln dried to 7% moisture content, thus speeding up the natural drying process and causing unresolved tensions in the lumber. To relieve these tensions, the wood should be air dried over a period of years until the lumber reaches, by NATURAL PROCESS, its Equilibrium Moisture Content. The longer the lumber is aged, the more stable it becomes and the longer it will hold its pitch. Older instruments generally hold their pitch. On the other hand, newer instruments, often made from younger trees and suffering from lack of natural aging, are more vulnerable to atmospheric changes and do not hold their pitch as well. A new instrument (well in tune when it left the factory) might be grossly out of tune within six months.

Proper care of any marimba or xylophone involves keeping the instrument in tune—both the fundamentals and the harmonics. Many old instruments have suffered from neglect so long that it is not possible to bring the harmonics to pitch without altering the tonal quality of the bars.

If one can easily hear the "out of tune-ness," the instrument should have been tuned long ago. What isn't noticed at first is the intonation of the harmonics, which may be tested by placing a finger in the center of the bar and striking the node (over the cord) with a mallet. On a marimba, this harmonic should be two octaves above the fundamental; on a xylophone, a 12th higher. (A stroboCom will give a more accurate reading.)

Mallet percussion instruments are delicate and should receive the same care as a fine violin or piano. Don't neglect them.

Information supplied by: Fall Creek Marimbas, 429 Sheldon Rd., Freeville, N.Y. 13068.

Question:

Dear Editor,

In the summer Percussive Notes there was something about antique drums. I have an antique marching (military, side drum) snare and it is in need of repair. Could you send me some information about where I could get custom made raw-hyde heads and cords. Also would it be safe to take sand paper and rub the rough (slightly splintered) edges. Is there anything the snare cords could be replaced with in case I can't get any? Thanks for your cooperation.

Sincerely,
Pam Carter

Answer:

Dear Pam,

We hope we can assist you and others in repairing and finding replacement parts for antique rope tension field drums.

In answer to one of your questions...it would be alright for you to sand the rough edges of the drum and hoops as long as you don't increase the amount of splintering. I would recommend a very light sandpaper for this task.

If you feel the restoration of your drum should be handled by expert hands, at least be sure to let me know who that can do this for you. It's name and address is as follows: Eames Drum Company, 6 Drummer Lane, Wakefield, Mass. 01880, Telephone 617-245-8759.

These people can also supply you with the calfskin heads and cords you need. They have a wide variety of replacement parts on hand including strainers, gut snares, flesh hoops and counter hoops. (Also raw-hyde and finished.) They also have accessories such as slings, calfskin head protectors, mufflers for snare or bass drums, rosewood 3-s drum sticks and practice pads.

We hope we have answered your questions and that you can successfully repair and restore your drum.

Keep on Drumin' Denny Lester

(Ed. Note... We do not intend to "plug" this particular drum company, but it is the only company of that kind that we're aware of. If there are more of you out there please let us know. As you can see, people ARE looking for you.)