

Combining Timpani Tuning and Ear Training

By Rob Sanderl

Using the following system, a student can not only enhance their ability to recognize pitch relationships, but also tune timpani and work on their solfege skills as well (movable "DO"). The student will use common solfege syllable relationships to set the pitches.

Step 1.

Tune the 29" drum to A using a tuning fork. Regardless of the tuning configuration that is required on the drums we start with an A-natural since the rest of the group will also tune to this note, that way the timpanist is using the same reference pitch. It also works well because A-natural is at the center of the strongest playing range for the 29" drum (F-C).

Step 2.

Tune Perfect Intervals P4-P5-P8 The human ear hears these intervals easiest.

Step 3.

Tune Major and Minor 2nds and 3rds

Step 4.

Tune Larger Intervals A4-M6-m6-M7-m7

*In reality, a timpanist will be able to set most tuning configurations using steps 1-3. We will "rename" solfege syllables on the drums to offer us the easiest interval to tune. For example:

32"-G 29"-A 26"-D 23"-E
G-A-D-E

Step 1. Tune 29" to A

Step 2. Tune 26" to D (P4) The student can think "sol-do" or "do-fa" (I suggest sol-do because of its cadential properties, and timpanists often reinforce the harmony at cadences)

Step 3. Tune 32" to G (M2) The student will "rename" the A-natural "re", so we have "re-do". Again, we are moving towards the tonic, therefore it should be easier for the student to hear.

Step 4. Tune the 23" to E (M2) The student has already named the D-natural on the 26" drum "do" so there is no need to "rename" it.

Lets Simplify This:

29" - A

29" sol (A) - 26" do (D)

rename 29" re (A) - 32" do (G)

26" do (D) - 23" re (E)

We can also cross check our tuning to make sure the drums are fully in tune, not just with their neighbor.

32" do (G) - 26" sol (D)

29" do (A) - 23" sol (E)

We use the two P5 intervals to reinforce our tuning.

This system can be used for any combination of pitches. Various combinations of solfege syllables can be used as well to find the pitches.