

The Second Conductor: A Clinic on Improving Timpani Performance

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Why timpani??: Timpani have often been called the second conductor. They are often responsible for establishing time and articulation for an ensemble. They can also be seen as the “center snare” for a group for much the same reason. Timpani is also one of the most commonly asked for gigging instruments (\$\$\$\$\$\$) alongside drumset.

Set Up: Setup in the middle of the drums and then rotate the upper body with the hands in their playing position. Move the drums until the mallets sit over the correct playing position for each drum. Most students pull the drums in WAAAAYYYYYYYY too far!!!!

Playing Position: You want to find the best “fundamental” sound for each drum. The old general rule is approximately 3” in from the edge but this spot will actually be slightly different for each drum and head. Use your ears to find the best spot! DO NOT play in the center unless it is called for by the composer!!!

Sitting vs. Standing: I recommend sitting whenever possible as it allows the feet to be on or near the pedals for minute changes of pitch as needed to stay with the ensemble. It also allows for taller players to have to be less of a contortionist to get a proper stroke on the drums. However, some solo literature does work better with the increased freedom of movement allowed by standing.

Range: 32” D-A; 29” F-C; 26” Bb-F; 32” D-A; 20” F-C

A good way to remember the tuning is that it is a second inversion Bb major chord. Newer drums might have a wider tuning range. The goal will be to try and keep your pitches in the mid to upper ranges of the drums when possible.

Tuning: Tuning is the aspect of timpani playing that terrifies most players. Few of us have perfect pitch but believe it or not this is not a bad thing. Developing a sense of relative pitch (the ability to find any note off of a given pitch) is a great way to learn to tune. It is important for students who wish to be good at timpani to become active singers, whether at church, in school choirs in sitting down at a piano and practicing to match pitch. Notice I said active.... Not GOOD!!! The goal is to be able to match pitch, not to become Pavarotti!

A) Work on singing specific intervals. The Perfect Fourth and Perfect Fifth are the most commonly used intervals in music because of their relationship to the V and I chords in composition. Become VERY

comfortable with these two intervals first! Then proceed to the major and minor second (these put you into new key areas) and the major and minor thirds (allowing you to start to tune chords as well).

B) Carry a tuning fork around with you daily. Periodically throughout the day play the A on the fork and sing to memorize that pitch. From there practice singing your intervals and arpeggios.

C) A note about pitch pipes: They are the single most annoying sound in the world on a stage!!! AND, the little reeds inside of them can actually be knocked out tune! Use these only in the most desperate of times!

D) Electronic Tuners: These can get a bad rap but can be useful tools for practicing (watching your intonation as you practice to start to hear more accurate pitch relationships) and for helping to clear the timpani heads. They are not overly useful during a performance as they will pick up the sounds of all of the other instruments around you, making its reading of your pitch inconsistent.

E) Tuning Gauges: Tuning gauges are standard on almost all drums now and ARE used by professionals! Think of them this way: they are like the keys of a wind instrument. When the keys are pressed down the player has an idea of what note will come out but they still have to adjust the pitch to fit into the ensemble. The same is true with gauges. They will get you in the ballpark (which sometimes in pieces with a ton of tuning changes is the best thing ever!) but it will still be up to you to listen and be sure the pitch really stays with the group.

F) How to best approach tuning: Get the idea of what the pitch is you need to tune by singing it in your head. Then VERY lightly tap the drum with your mallet (only YOU should hear this) or press into the head with your finger and flick it to activate it. Then slide the pedal up listening to the resonance of the drum until you hear it match the pitch you are singing. DO NOT TAP IT 8000 TIMES!!!! Once should do! If you miss it drop the pedal back down and go again as it is easier to hear pitch from coming from underneath it than from dropping down to it. A good rule of thumb is to not spend over 5 seconds tuning a pitch.

G) Most importantly: It is better to come in at the right time out of tune than to not come in perfectly in tune!!! You can always adjust pitch. You cannot make up a missed entrance!!

Grips: There are 3 main grips utilized on timpani. These are German (like matched grip snare drum); French (thumbs on top); and American (in between – similar to marching tenors). All can and should be used depending on the sounds needed in a piece.

Strokes: As Sal Rabbio (PAS Hall of Famer and former timpanist of the Detroit Symphony) you should be able to make all of the sounds you need by adjusting your hands. The mallet changes just serve to enhance what you can do.

- A) Regular: This is your average Joe, everyday stroke. This stroke uses a moderate stick speed (velocity) that creates a natural rebound off of the head. The “lift” is an enhancement of this natural rebound.
- B) Legato: This stroke is essentially dropping the mallet onto the head with little thought of velocity etc. This gets a very warm and round tone with as little attack sound as possible.
- C) Staccato: This stroke is a very fast stroke with a quick rebound.
- D) Soft Strokes: Soft strokes are played from lower to the head but with more up stroke than down stroke (a glancing blow off of the head).

These strokes allow the performer to influence the tone color and articulation from the drums. The more colors the player can elicit, the less often they have to change mallets but in addition the more MUSICAL options they have available for line and phrasing!

Rolls: Rolls will be single stroke like on mallet instruments except for a few places where an orchestral buzz roll might specifically be called for. The speed of the roll will vary based on the pitch of the drum, the size of the drum and the dynamics of the music. Generally: higher = faster; lower = slower. Spread the mallets a few inches apart on the head to activate more resonance from the drum.

Grace Notes: Grace notes on timpani are also played as single strokes. In general they are wider than on a snare drum. Flams are often played placing the grace note on the beat, similar to how wind players interpret them.

Muffling: Should be done very lightly with the finger tips (not with the full hand and DEFINATLEY not by throwing the entire body onto the drums.... Come on. You've ALL seen it.....). Most students muffle the drums too much and too often. LISTEN to who you are playing with. Things are not always what they look like on the page. Many times you will see a quarter note and hear a half note or whole note. Go with what you hear.

Mallet Selection: Do not get tricked into thinking of mallets as volumes (softer mallet equals softer sound; harder mallets equal louder sound). While this may be true it is often not the CORRECT sound. Think of your mallets instead as articulations. For a very soft yet rhythmic passage you will often use a much harder mallet. For a louder, more resonant passage, you might actually want a softer mallet.

Basic Maintenance: The drums should be round (of course!). Keep them free of dents (these can be hammered out by lightly tapping out the dents with a rubber hammer with a soft cloth placed between the hammer and bowl). Heads should have no rips, tears, dents, crayon markings etc. on them! If these exist on the heads they need to be changed as you will not be able to get a good, true and clear pitch out of them. Heads that are well taken care of can last quite a while. A good rule is to plan to change your timpani heads every 2-3 years in a typical school setting. If the pedal does not work most of the time this is related to the head being dead or the head not being tuned to the correct fundamental pitch. I have MANY times resurrected a "broken" timp by tuning it to the correct pitch. Plan to clear the drums (make sure all lugs are in tune) once a week at a minimum.

Mallet Care: DON'T TOUCH THE MALLET HEADS!!!!!! The felt is very sensitive and the oils in the typical hands can have a negative effect on them (see: timpani mallets in many bands rooms around the world). Keep them in a plastic bag, preferably without the heads touching. A small bag twisted over one head and then the other can be very effective. You should purchase a separate case for just the timpani mallets as well. This keeps them from tumbling around under the bass drum mallets, snare sticks etc. A brief case works well. Frayed mallet heads will lead to an inconsistent sound. Most companies make replacement mallet heads available.

Books

Goodman - Modern Method for Timpani
Carroll-Exercises, Etudes and Solos for the Timpani
Hochrainer-Etuden for Timpani (Vol. 1)
Peters-Fundamental Method for Timpani
Friese-Timpani Method (Friese/Lepak)
Beck-Concepts for Timpani
Tafuya-Working Timpanist's Survival Guide
Hinger-Technique for the Virtuoso Timpanist
Woud-Symphonic Studies for Timpani
Gay-Pedal to the Kettle

Whaley-Musical Studies for the Intermediate Timpanist
Lepak-32 Solos for Timpani
Horner-Tuneful Timpanist
Peyton-Musical Timpanist, The
Firth-Solo Timpanist
Max-Orchestral Excerpts for Timpani (CD)
Arand Weitzl – Timpani Kata
Timp-Tastic – Lalo Davila (CD)

In addition there are numerous books by people like David Herbert, Roland Kohloff, Gerald Karlyss and more dealing with specific works in the orchestral timpani repertoire.

Solos (I = Intermediate; A = Advanced)

Elliott Carter: Eight Pieces for Four Timpani - A
Graham Whettam: Suite for Timpani - A
Beck-Sonata for Timpani-4T - I
Willmarth-Bushido: The Way of the Warrior-T - A
Bergamo-Four Pieces for Timpani-4T - A
Cahn-Six Concert Pieces for Solo Timpani-3-6T – I to A
Cahn – Raga Number 1 - I
Goodman-Ballad for the Dance-4T - I
Zivkovic-Cadenza-5T - A
Kraft-Variations for King George-4T - I
Muczynski-Three Designs for Three Timpani-3T - A
Cohen-Orange Alert-5T - A
Deane-Prelude I for Four Timpani-4T - A
Williams-Variations for Solo Kettledrums-4T - A
Leonard-Canticle-4T - A
Peters-Air and Dance-4T - I
Skidmore-An Argument or a Question?-5T – A
Peters-Tribal Serenade-4T - I
Ukena-No. II Funk-4T - I
Beck-Modulations-4T - I
Williams-Four Grotesques for Timpani-4T - A
Beall-Seven to Queens-4T - A
El Dabh-In Search of Three Goddesses-4T - A
Ichianagi-Rhythm Gradation-4T - A
Walker-Tragedy of a Young Soldier-5T/gong - A
Orfaly-Five Intermediate Pieces-4T - I
Chavez-Partita-6T - A
Beck-Alpine Slide-3T - I
Willmarth-Capture of the U-505-4T - A
Peyton-The Final Precipice (for timpani and tape)-SP/CD enclosed - A
Ridley-Animism (ST)(T)-4T-Tape OS - A
Psathas-Planet Damnation-5T/CD - A
Piche-Steal the Thunder (score w/CD)-4-5T/P/CD - A

Rosauro-Concerto for Timpani and Orchestra (Piano Reduction) - 4T/PN SP - A
Mancini-Suite for Timpani-4T - A

In addition many of the books above have excellent solos for various levels that are great for solo competitions and recitals!

Mallet Brands: JG Percussion; Ron Carlisle (all mallets are custom made!); Innovative Percussion Bamboo Series; Malletech Markus Rhoten Series; Amy Putnam; Black Swamp Carbon Fiber; Grover; Clevelander

Interval Tunes

Minor Second – Jaws; She Will Be Loved (Maroon 5)

Major Second - Silent Night; Friday (Rebecca Black)

Minor Third – So Long, Farewell (Sound of Music); Lullaby (Brahms); Whistle Signal (Hunger Games); Hey Jude; Smoke on the Water; Greensleeves

Major Third – Kumbaya; Some Nights (Fun); Today Was A Fairytale (Taylor Swift); Marine Hymn; Good Night Ladies

Perfect Fourth – Here Comes the Bride; Amazing Grace; My Girl

Tritone – Maria (West Side Story); The Simpsons; YZY

Perfect Fifth – Star Wars; Twinkle Twinkle; Blackbird (Beatles); Flintstones

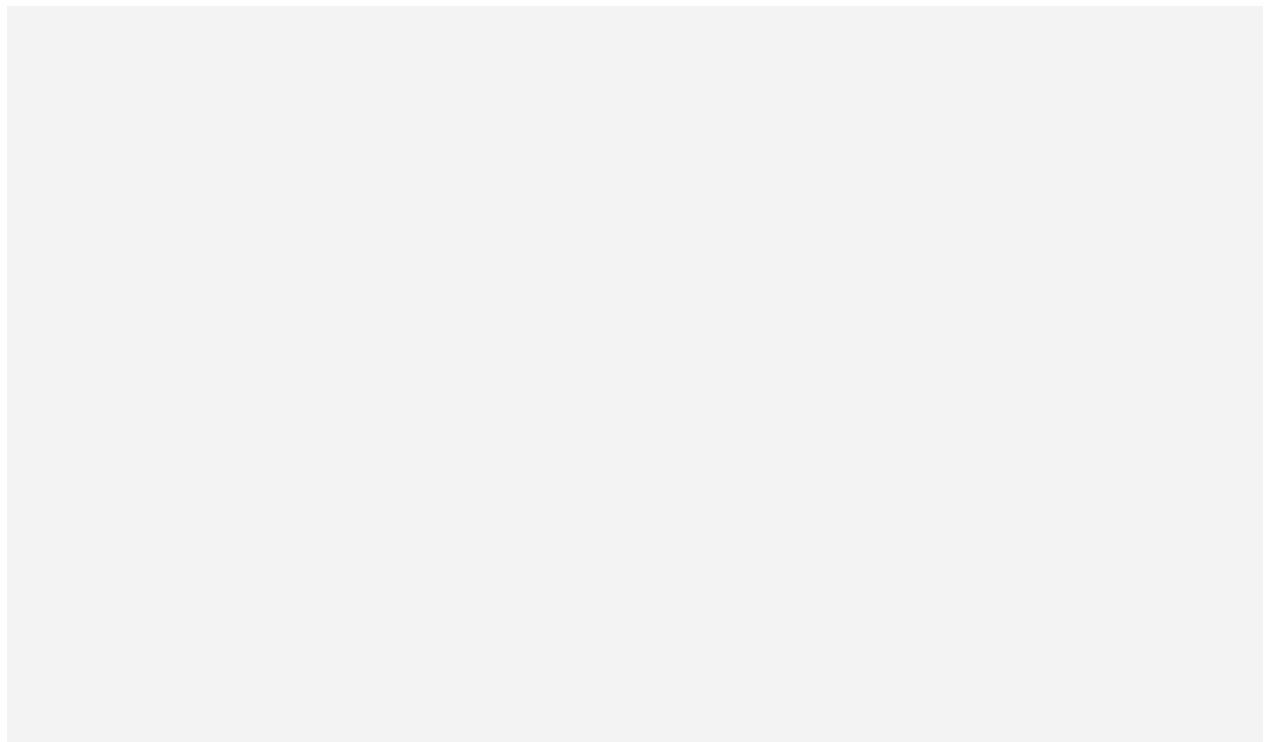
Minor Sixth – Johanna (Sweeney Todd); Love Story Theme

Major Sixth – NBC; Man in the Mirror (Michael Jackson); My Bonnie Lives Over the Ocean; Music of the Night (Phantom of the Opera); It Came Upon a Midnight Clear; My Way (And NOW part)

Minor Seventh – Somewhere (West Side Story); Original Star Trek Theme; Have You Driven a Ford

Major Seventh – Superman Theme; Take on Me (AHA)

Perfect Octave – Somewhere Over the Rainbow; The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting)



Dr. Tracy Wiggins is Assistant Director of Bands and coordinator of the percussion program at the University of North Alabama. He holds the Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the HARTT School, University of Hartford, the Master's Degree in Percussion Performance from the University of New Mexico, and the Bachelor of Music in Music Education from Oklahoma State University, as well as post-master's work at The Ohio State University.

Dr. Wiggins' varied musical interests are reflected in his performance credits, highlights of which include: orchestral work with the Alabama Symphony Orchestra (extra), The Fayetteville Symphony Orchestra, Florence Symphony Orchestra, Carolina Philharmonic, The New Mexico Symphony Orchestra, the Waterbury (CT) Symphony, the New Britain (CT) Symphony, the Westerville (Ohio) Civic Symphony and as principal percussionist for the Santa Fe Symphony; **solo appearances** at the University of Maryland at College-Park, Tarleton State University, the University of New Mexico's Composers Symposium, Oklahoma State University, Samford University, Henderson State University, The HARTT School, Western Connecticut State University, the University of Alabama-Birmingham, the 2004 and 2009 Percussive Arts Society International Conventions and The Ohio State University; **percussion and drumset work** for "Cathy Rigby is Peter Pan" and the touring Broadway musical "Ragtime" with the Birmingham Broadway Series, The Birmingham Operaworks production of "Trouble in Tahiti," and the Birmingham Theatre production of "Kiss of the Spider Woman"; **concerto appearances** with the HARTT School, University of New Mexico, Oklahoma State University, and The Ohio State University percussion ensembles, the HARTT Contemporary Players, the Oklahoma State University Symphony Orchestra, University of North Carolina at Pembroke Wind Ensemble, and the Samford University Wind Ensemble; **chamber music** performances at the North American Saxophone Alliance Northeastern Conference, with "Performance 20/20," and he has twice performed on the Percussive Arts Society's "New Music" day as a member of the University of New Mexico ensemble; **marching percussion** with the Freelancers and Black Gold Drum and Bugle Corps, as well as instructing the DCI Division III World Championship finalist Delta Brigade and the Northern Aurora Drum and Bugle Corps, and DCA Finalist Carolina Gold; **ethnic percussion** with the HARTT School, Samford University and The Ohio State University steel drum bands, the HARTT Handance Ensemble, and the HARTT and The Ohio State University African Drumming Groups.

Dr. Wiggins' teachers include Johnny Almendra, Tricia Bovenschen, Wayne Bovenschen, Michael Bump, Joe Galeota, Ralph Hardimon, Gregg Koyle, Alexander Lepak, Christopher Shultis, Ben Toth, Glen Velez, and Nancy Zeltsman. He has also performed on masterclasses for Evelyn Glennie, Nebojsa Zivkovic, and Robert Van Sice. Dr. Wiggins has premiered works by composers David Macbride, Thomas DeLio, Daniel Davis, and others.

Dr. Wiggins is an artist/endorser for **Yamaha Percussion, Black Swamp Percussion, Innovative Percussion, Remo Drum Heads,** and **Sabian Cymbals**, and holds current memberships in the Percussive Arts Society, the National Association for Music Education, The College Music Society, Kappa Kappa Psi, and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.

