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PERCUSSION FROM THE PODIUM: Timpani

The following is excerpted from an article for wind band conductors originally published in the Association of Concert Bands Journal, Vol. 34, No. 3, October 2015. The three-part article is a collection of helpful hints, tips, and insights intended to increase communication and improve the musical relationship between conductors and percussionists. For more information about The Association of Concert Bands visit www.acbands.org.

Timpani Mallets

Timpani mallet selection, as with other percussion implements, should be chosen based on articulation and color, not volume. Timpanists can perform as loud or soft as needed with any mallet, whether hard wood or very soft felt.

If you are looking for a full, round sound with less articulation, ask the timpanist to use a mallet with a round head; however, if you desire increased articulation, disc-shaped mallet heads with less contact area will be best.

If you hear a “tick” of some kind coming from the instruments, it is likely that either the timpanist is using mallets with a washer that needs tightening or that the mallet head has a seam, which should be facing the player so that they will not contact the head and create a “slapping” sound.

Playing Areas

Playing Area: If the timpanist is producing a dull, “thuddy” sound, check to make sure they are striking the instrument in the general playing area, which is one-third of the radius from the edge to the

center. This ratio applies to timpani of all sizes, so it is possible that the drums are simply set up too close to the player, causing them to play towards the center of the head.

Instrument Position: All timpani should be positioned such that the playing areas lie naturally under the player’s mallets as they stand in one place with sticks in the proper playing position and rotate from the waist from side to side.

Timpani Stools: Additionally, a better sound may be produced by using a timpani stool, which will lower the torso and hands (especially players taller than 5’ 7”) so that the mallet shafts are parallel to the heads.

Timpani Technique

Grip: It is relatively easy (especially for novice players) to inadvertently produce a dark, dry sound using German grip (palms down, thumbs on the side of the stick like matched grip), so, while you should tread lightly when asking any instrumentalist to change their playing technique, you may suggest that the timpanist try using French grip (palms facing each other, thumbs on the top of the stick). French grip will likely provide an immediately lighter sound because the rebound of the stick increases due to only the thumb being on top of the stick, whereas the entire hand is on top of the stick in German grip.

Stroke: The problem may also be that the timpanist is playing “into the head” instead of allowing the mallet to rebound naturally or lifting the mallet off of the head after contact.



Finger Cymbals

The best-quality finger cymbals are cast metal discs, not those stamped out from sheet metal, and many percussionists have turned to traditional Middle Eastern and Tibetan finger cymbals because they are larger, heavier, and their sound projects much better than traditional models.

The most consistent way to play finger cymbals is to strike the edges at a perpendicular angle to one another (in a plus sign or X position from the player's point of view), which will alleviate the "whiffed" or missed attacks that often come with other performance methods.

Sleigh Bells

Most holiday concerts are not complete without the sound of sleigh bells, but the instrument is quite troublesome to play for a number of reasons.

First, the small, round bells with metal pea rattles inside constantly create unwanted sounds. Fix this by lining a large vegetable or paint can (with the unsightly labels removed) with a black towel and positioning the sleigh bells vertically within the towel. Percussionists may then pick the instrument up directly into playing position instead of trying to move it silently from a horizontal to vertical position.

Traditionally, sleigh bells are held in one hand while the other hand strikes the handle with an open palm or the outside of the hand; however, if more volume is needed (as is often the case), the instrument can be turned horizontally and played like a shaker (or additional instruments added).

Be aware that there is a brief delay between the moment the player's hand strikes the sleigh bells and when the peas strike the bells. Thus, percussionists need to play slightly ahead of the beat so that their rhythms occur in tempo and at the proper time.

Whips/Slapsticks

While some one-handed spring-loaded whips/slap-sticks are available, larger instruments with hinges and handles produce the most characteristic tone quality. If the player is experiencing painful sounds even with the use of earplugs, suggest that they rotate their head from the neck to find a position at which the sound will move around their ears instead of directly into them.

Ratchets

Like sleigh bells, ratchets are more difficult to play well than most percussionists let on. Mounting the ratchet on a bass drum rim or moving both hands in a circular motion will help create a smooth, sustained sound. If the speed required to produce a smooth sound results in too loud a dynamic, ask the player to lift a half or full set of reeds off of the cog with their fingers.

Anvils and Brake Drums

Blacksmith's anvils are often found in concert music, but actual anvils are impractical because of their extreme weight (and often do not create an appropriate sound). Commercially made bar-type anvils, pieces of I-beam railroad track, or a brake drum played with a hard mallet or ball-peen hammer are terrific and louder substitutes.

Sandpaper Blocks

Though rarely called for, sandpaper blocks are often poorly made and cumbersome to play. Sandpaper blocks can be made by wrapping and securing coarse sandpaper around two wooden blocks with tacks or staples; however, when louder volume is needed (as is most often the case), large sandpaper handles or rasps from a hardware store are best. Rhythms should be performed with brisk swishes while keeping the blocks in contact (not striking the blocks together).

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Wind Chimes, Mark Tree, and Bell Tree

There is often a great deal of confusion when it comes to wind chimes, Mark Trees, and bell trees. Wind chimes are mounted in a circular pattern, whereas Mark Trees are a set of graduated, metal rods arranged side-by-side (the best Mark Trees are made of solid metal, not hollowed-out metal tubes). Bell trees are made of graduated, alarm bell-shaped, metal discs stacked on top of one another played with a sweeping motion using small brass mallets.