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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 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.

Timpani Rolls

Characteristic timpani rolls are accomplished with a free-floating base (like keyboard percussion rolls) because the heads are too large and the mallets too soft to utilize bounces.

If a timpanist has uneven rolls, suggest they practice hand-to-hand alternating single-stroke rhythms and gradually speed up to help achieve evenness and control in both hands.

Timpanists should stayed relaxed, utilize the natural rebound of the stick off of head as much as possible, and avoid "muscling" or "digging into" the head when playing rolls.

Timpanists should use higher stick heights and faster roll speeds for louder dynamics and lower stick heights and slower roll speeds for softer dynamics. Additionally, the roll speed should change based on which timpano (meaning one drum) is being played—slower roll speeds on the larger drums and faster roll speeds on the smaller drums (just as roll speeds are faster in the high range and slower in the low range of a xylophone or marimba).

Forte-piano roll technique is often hotly debated because some timpanists prefer to strike a note loudly, allow the head to decrease vibrating, and then softly roll; however, this technique does not reflect musical notation, and no other instrument or voice part performs a forte-piano gesture in this way. Thus, one loud stroke followed immediately by softer strokes starting with the opposite hand is more true to musical notation and blends best with the overall ensemble.

Timpani Dampening

Dampening timpani using the fingers to stop the heads from vibrating to clarify passages should be done only if musically warranted, not necessarily on all rests. As previously mentioned, composers clearly notate the beginnings of percussion sounds, but not their duration, and dampening is rarely indicated by composers. Thus, timpanists and conductors should give attention to when the timpani should be dampened to match the ensemble or achieve various articulations.

Timpani dampening is best accomplished by touching the head lightly, but firmly with the outside three fingers of the hand, which keeps the fulcrum intact so that playing may be resumed quickly. While swiping motions across the head may alleviate the initial attack of the fingers on the head, the motion is inefficient, impractical for rapid passages, and often results in an extraneous sound from timpani heads with a spayed-on coating.

Timpani Tuning

Regarding pitch changes, be sure to allow time for the timpanist to retune when rehearsing various passages in a composition with many pitch changes or when jumping farther ahead or behind in the piece being rehearsed.

If you hear timpani pitches as flat or sharp from the podium, note that the issue is not necessarily bad ear training on the part of the timpanist—the overall ensemble pitch may have wavered or, more often than not, the drums are not in tune with themselves and require some adjustment.

Note that tuning timpani while playing with an ensemble is a difficult technique that requires practice because the timpanist must play, stop, tune while counting rests amidst the distractions of the ensemble, and play again at the correct time. As a result, timpanists must to be able to sing, recognize, and tune pitches and intervals—and do it well.

Tuning changes are not typically notated by composers, thus timpanists should determine where pitch changes need to occur in a part before the first rehearsal so that the tuning changes may be done consistently and accurately.

Timpanists often use the last pitch of a passage as the reference pitch to tune the next required pitch, but most professional timpanists also employ one or more small tuning forks (usually A, and often D or E). These are used for reference pitches because they are inexpensive, accurate, and quiet even

when struck on the knee or elbow. Pitch pipes should be avoided because often the air flow needed to set the reeds into motion results in a loud, unwanted sound that does not blend into the ensemble, and not using enough air may result in an inaccurate pitch because the metal tongue is not set into motion fully.

Tuning gauges may be used if quick tuning changes are required within a passage, but they are not a substitute for a good ear because tuning gauges measure the distance the pedal travels (not actual frequency of pitches), the gauges may not be positioned accurately, and the overall ensemble pitch center can vary during a performance, making gauges "wrong" in context with ensemble.

Timpani Tuning Tips

Tune pitches with the mallet used to play an upcoming passage because using a different mallet or a finger will produce a slightly different sound (especially if a head is not cleared and out of tune with itself).

Tune with the ear close to head by bending at the waist, and play soft enough that striking head will not be heard as part of the composition (this also allows the true fundamental pitch to be more present).

Always move from below a pitch to tune, not from above, because pitches sound clearer when the head is tightened to a pitch instead of loosened to a pitch.

Timpanists, like other musicians, often tune pitches flat because they hear qualities of the intended pitch before the pitch is centered, and they stop moving the pedal because they perceive that the intended pitch has been reached. Timpanists need to be aware that pedals on larger drums must move farther distances than on the smaller drums to tune same interval.

For example, a pedal must move farther to tune up or down a major second on a large 32" drum than on a small 24" drum. This is because the pitches are farther apart in terms of physical distance (as well as pitch frequency) on the larger drum than on the smaller drum.

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