

THE ORCHESTRAL PERCUSSIONIST: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

BY KEVIN MEYER

The process of becoming an orchestral percussionist and preparing for an audition can be daunting. There are hundreds of years of repertoire to learn, and new compositions are constantly being written. In addition, each orchestra requires different excerpts from the various percussion instruments, including snare drum, marimba, xylophone, bells, tambourine, triangle, etc. Rather than allowing yourself to be overwhelmed by everything at once, focusing on repertoire that is most commonly asked for in auditions can make a seemingly insurmountable task much more attainable.

THE LIST

The following list is a representation of excerpts that are currently being requested and can be considered “standard repertoire.” The data was compiled using 24 percussion audition lists from 2009–2017. This includes lists for principal percussion, section percussion, and assistant timpani/section percussion auditions.

Principal/ Assistant Principal Percussion

San Francisco Symphony (2013)
Orlando Philharmonic (2014)
Detroit Symphony (2014)
North Carolina Symphony (2014)
Fort Worth Symphony (2015)
National Symphony Orchestra (2016)
Louisiana Philharmonic (2016)
Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra (2016)
Calgary Philharmonic (2017)
Charlotte Symphony (2017)
Atlanta Symphony (2017)

Section Percussion

Hong Kong Philharmonic (2011)
Oregon Symphony (2012)
San Diego Symphony (2013)
Utah Symphony (2014)
Cleveland Orchestra (2015)
Indianapolis Symphony (2015)
Northwest Indiana Symphony (2015)
Los Angeles Philharmonic (2016)
Atlanta Symphony (2017)

Timpani/Section Percussion

New York Philharmonic (2009)
Utah Symphony (2013)
Milwaukee Symphony (2016)
Detroit Symphony (2016)

Note: For this article, timpani repertoire has been excluded.

THE REPERTOIRE

The following list is a compilation of the audition repertoire for the above ensembles, from most to least frequently requested. Only pieces requested by at least half of the orchestras is included, with an exception granted in the marimba, vibraphone, bass drum, triangle, and drumset categories due to the relatively small number of excerpts.

Snare Drum

- Rimsky-Korsakov: “Scheherazade” (24 times)
- Prokofiev: “Lt. Kije” (23)
- Rimsky Korsakov: “Capriccio Espagnol” (21)
- Shostakovich: “Symphony No. 10” (19)
- Bartok: “Concerto for Orchestra” (17)
- Schumann: “Symphony No. 3” (14)

Other frequently requested excerpts and etudes include: Delecluse: “Douze Etudes,” Etude 9 (10 times) and the Nielsen “Clarinet Concerto” (10).

Marimba

- Bach: “Fuga from “Violin Sonata No. 1 in G minor” (7 times)
- Bach: “Lute Suite No. 1 in E Minor – Allemande” (5)
- Player’s choice of solo, usually Bach (5)

Xylophone

- Gershwin: “Porgy and Bess” (22 times)
- Copland: “Appalachian Spring” (21)
- Kodaly: “Hary Janos” (17)
- Schumann: “Symphony No. 3” (17)
- Kabalevsky: “Colas Breugnon” (16)
- Stravinsky: “Firebird” (14)
- Gershwin: “An American in Paris” (14)
- Messian: “L’Oiseaux Exotique” (“Exotic Birds”) (13)

Bells

- Respighi: "Pines of Rome" (23 times)
- Dukas: "Sorcerer's Apprentice" (22)
- Mozart: "Magic Flute" (17)
- Debussy: "La Mer" (15)
- Tchaikovsky: "Sleeping Beauty, Op. 66, Waltz" (12)

Vibraphone

- Bernstein: "West Side Story Symphonic Suite" (20 times)
- Williams: "Escapades for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra"

(7)

Bass Drum

- Mahler: "Symphony No. 3" (21 times)
- Stravinsky: "Rite of Spring" (21)
- Stravinsky: "Petrouchka" (1947) (10)

Cymbals

- Rachmaninoff: "Piano Concerto No. 2" (24 times)
- Tchaikovsky: "Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture" (23)
- Tchaikovsky: "Symphony No. 4" (22)
- Mussorgsky: "Night on Bald Mountain" (12)

Tambourine

- Dvorak: "Carnival Overture" (21 times)
- Stravinsky: "Petrouchka" (1947) (18)
- Britten: "Four Sea Interludes" from "Peter Grimes" (16)
- Bizet: "Carmen, Suite No. 1: Aragonaise" (13)
- Bizet: "Carmen, Suite No. 2: Danse Boheme" (13)
- Chabrier: "Espana" (12)

Triangle

- Brahms: "Symphony No. 4" (11)
- Bizet: "Carmen Suite no. 2, Danse Boheme" (10)
- Dvorak: "Symphony No. 9 (New World)" (9)
- Liszt: "Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major" (9)

Drumset

- Bernstein: "Symphonic Dances from West Side Story" (3)
- Trading four bars time and four bars solo in various styles

(2)

PREPARATION

Knowing *how* to practice is just as important as knowing *what* to practice. Even though this repertoire list is valuable, it is a long list and the approach to preparing this material is also worthy of discussion.

First, get comfortable playing the notes correctly, with accurate rhythms, appropriate dynamics, and a steady tempo. Start slowly, using a metronome to develop a good sense of time. Try playing with the metronome on beat one of each measure, on beat two of each measure, on beat one of every other measure, or even on upbeats. Rather than being a crutch, the metronome should be a tool to help you develop a good sense of time. Using metronome techniques such as these, you will learn your tempo tendencies for each excerpt and be able to make the appropriate adjustments.

Secondly, listen to numerous recordings of highly regarded orchestras for each excerpt. Tempos for many excerpts will vary, so keep a log of the different recordings with the name of the orchestra, the conductor, and the tempo for the excerpt. For excerpts that have a wide range of tempos, learn how it feels to play at the various speeds logged. This will develop flexibility when preparation begins for specific auditions.

Third, determine the character of sound that is to be created. While listening to each recording, make notes regarding the sound quality and function of the instrument in the context of the ensemble. Decide whether the excerpt is a solo passage or whether it accompanies other instruments. Your notes could include the perceived type of snare drum used, tuning, type of sticks, type of head, muffling, sticking, playing area, etc. While listening to recordings of mallet excerpts, pay attention to the hardness or softness of mallets used, and note that mallet choices may change depending on how the parts are orchestrated. For the accessory percussion instruments, determine the size and weight of cymbals, size of the tambourine and type of jingles (dry, wet, bright, etc.), and the size of triangle and beaters used. To establish an approach for any marimba solo prepared, listen to a large number of original recordings to discover common phrasings, tempos, and an appropriate mallet choice.

Once you have learned the notes and chosen appropriate instruments, mallets, and beaters, the next step is to spend a large amount of time recording yourself playing the excerpts. While listening to your recordings, use a metronome to identify tempo fluctuations. If using recording software, watch the waveforms to see and hear dynamic consistency (or inconsistency). Ask yourself: "Can I hear the orchestra playing while listening to my performance of the excerpt?" If the answer is no, determine why not. Are you playing too loud, too soft, too fast, or with an uneven tempo or inconsistent dynamics?

In addition to recording yourself, play mock auditions for as many people as possible, including non-percussionists, and in several different locations. Try performing on different instru-

ments in diverse environmental conditions (hot, cold, when you are tired, without a warm-up, etc.). Mix up the order of excerpts for different performances. This kind of preparation will help you be ready for a variety of audition scenarios.

RESOURCES

Orchestra auditions are extremely competitive. Listening to excerpts, practicing, and recording yourself are vital components of learning orchestral excerpts, but there is no substitute for studying with a good teacher. If possible, find a teacher who has won a position in an orchestra. Some professionals offer online lessons through Skype, FaceTime, or other video conferencing platforms. An experienced teacher can guide you through the process and help you prepare for the mental aspect of auditioning.

Many additional resources are available to help you become more comfortable playing these excerpts. The following list of websites, books, and dissertations can be helpful. A quick search in the *Percussive Notes* archives will bring up a number of articles related to auditions. The following list is by no means exhaustive but a good place to start.

WEBSITES

www.robknopper.com: Rob Knopper is a percussionist in the Metropolitan Opera. His website contains many resources to help students, including audition tips and practice tips, and helpful techniques.

www.williamjamespercussion.com: William James is the principal percussionist for the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. His series, "The Repertoire," contains performance video and tutorials for standard percussion excerpts.

<https://www.blackswamp.com/>: Black Swamp makes great percussion instruments and they have a lot of educational videos on their website and YouTube channel from some of the top professional percussionists in the world.

<http://vicfirth.com/education-resource-library/>: The Vic Firth Education Resource Library may not contain excerpt specific material, but it does have videos on fundamentals of playing various orchestral percussion instruments.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/FreerPercussion>: Freer Percussion's website contains drumstick and mallet demonstrations as well as performances of various orchestral excerpts to use as reference.

BOOKS

Raynor Carroll Orchestral Repertoire books: This series of books contains complete parts for many of the excerpts listed in this article. Carroll has created a book for snare drum, xylophone, glockenspiel, bass drum, cymbals, tambourine, triangle, and castanets. Every serious orchestral percussionist should have these books in their personal library.

***Modern School for Xylophone, Marimba and Vibraphone* by Morris Goldenberg:** This book contains some of the mallet excerpts. Many percussion lists state that sight-reading may be asked. This book is a great resource to use to improve sight-reading on mallet instruments.

Anthony Cirone's Symphonic Repertoire Series: These books contain complete parts as well as annotations and practice tips for the excerpts.

DISSERTATIONS

Emory Alford, "Identification of Percussion Performance Techniques in the Standard Orchestral Percussion Repertoire," DMA diss., University of Oklahoma, 1983. Dr. Alford lists what is considered standard orchestral repertoire through analyzing audition lists. He also discusses various problems in performing excerpts.

Richard MacDonald, "A Pedagogy for Ten Standard Orchestral Excerpts," DMA diss., University of Northern Colorado, 2000. Dr. MacDonald interviewed professionals in major symphony orchestras regarding performance practices of ten standard excerpts. These professionals include Doug Howard, Ted Atkatz, Fernando Mesa, Brian Mount, John Kinzie, Norm Fickett, Daniel Florio, Jason Arkis, James Ross, and Michael Udow. He discusses five perspectives for each excerpt: 1. Auditory perspective through recordings, 2. Study of the original part, 3. Score Study, 4. Study of published sources, and 5. Observations of professionals' approach. These observations include stickings and other performance techniques for each excerpt.

Richard Puzzo, "Not Just to Win Auditions: Playing Orchestral Percussion Excerpts for Pedagogy and Enrichment," DMA diss., University of Arizona, 2017. Dr. Puzzo analyzed percussion excerpts using the Kodaly song method. "The Orchestral Percussion Excerpt Retrieval System" is an index of more than 100 percussion excerpts derived from 35 audition lists. His database of excerpts includes recommended recordings, internet links, average tempi, and practice tips.

CONCLUSION

This is just the beginning of a journey toward becoming an orchestral percussionist. Once you have learned the most requested excerpts in this article and decide to take an orchestra audition, there may only be a few excerpts you will need to learn from scratch. With the right resources, a good teacher, hard work, and determination, you can become an orchestral percussionist.

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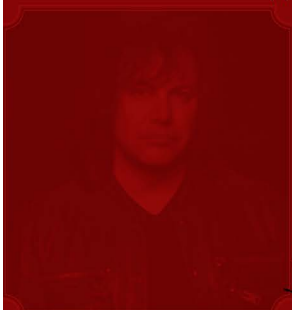


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