

ENHANCING STUDENT TIMPANI SKILLS

Steve Hemphill

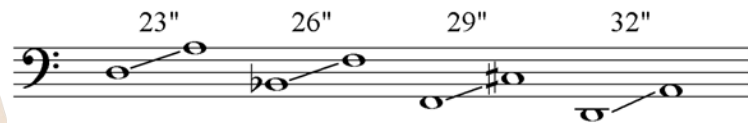
Timpani often serve as the percussive backbone in band and orchestral repertoire, providing dramatic power and musical weight into the sonic landscape. On occasion, percussion students shy away from the tuning requirements associated with timpani performance or defer to the student(s) who have more developed aural skills, thus foregoing the rewarding musical experiences which timpani have to offer in band and orchestra programs. Below are some tips and priorities to aid young percussionists in developing their timpani performance capabilities.

Many professional timpanists advocate for ear training and melodic interval study as a first priority in timpani training. This introduction commonly involves exercises at a piano or other keyboard instrument and becoming familiar with a listing of familiar melodies (see at the end) which aid in interval recall. Becoming acquainted with the drum sizes (for a typical scholastic set of timpani: 23"-26"-29"-32"), leads to learning the intervallic range of each drum, a critical discovery which I often relate to a parallel necessary understanding of scale fingerings for a clarinet student. A common progression for timpani tuning is the use of a percussion keyboard instrument with which to match pitch, then moving toward a chromatic pitch pipe (the F-F circular pipe is common), and finally arriving at the A=440 tuning fork (or Bb for band use) for silent functioning and advancement of "relative" interval training. This progression provides for two purposes: complying with some states' festival/audition rules disallowing the use of keyboards or electronics for timpani tuning and preparing timpanists for the quick-paced expectations of live concerts.

Immediately, the student timpanist should pursue characteristic tone production as a top priority, perhaps developing new habits of technical "lift" as opposed to "down stroke" drumming techniques commonly associated with drum line activity. Teachers can work with students to have them internalize the rebound and lift and be always aware of the quality of sound that is created by that type of stroke. A relaxed, buoyant stroke allows for enhanced timpani resonance (ring) while minimizing acoustic attack, somewhat similar to a bowed string instrument. The playing spots/areas on each drum should be carefully defined, perhaps 3 to 4.5 inches inward from the counterhoop, proportional to each drum size. Appropriate attention must be given to the specific and consistent spatial set-up of the drums in an arced semi-circle, enabling the performer to strike the drums with a high-level consistent placement – without looking at the drums (the performer's sight-line often will be engaged with the print music and conductor). While standing may be a preferred approach to timpani

performance by some, a seated position (using a 30" stool) may help create consistent targeting with a smooth kinesthetic methodology in mind, and will support more advanced pedaling requirements often associated with demanding contemporary repertoire. Additionally, the taller the student then the more likely a stool is required for consistent playing.

Timpani Ranges:



The "Timpani Worksheet" at the end of this article provides a brief development program dedicated solely to five technical aspects of timpani performance. The first line engages the timpanist in the development of a consistently resonant stroke, maintaining equality between hands in all aspects; grip and physical gesture, placement, stroke velocity-height-weight, and tone. The second line addresses lateral (cylindrical) motion, moving across the drums in a consistent and smooth manner, perhaps utilizing the imagery of an upper-torso "cylinder" rotating in front of the drums. The third line approaches two types of common muffling endeavors: the elimination of unwanted "over-ringing" between quarter-notes (achieving clarity of pitch and harmonic implication) and the management of shorter note values and rests. The fourth section provides a quick building sequence for the development of the single-stroke roll, offering a "lead" sticking for each hand. The final exercise presents a technical progression between a *legato* (stroke) rhythmic sequence and a *staccato* rhythmic figure, the latter requiring a quicker stroke, a somewhat firmer grip, and a snapping action of the wrist or fingers.

This one-page worksheet can serve as a very basic exercise program or warm-up for the beginning timpani student. Of course, the progressing student will need to pursue more thorough study utilizing one or more comprehensive timpani method books, of which there are several available. Two final thoughts for beginning timpani study: working with a metronome is essential to all musical study and embracing studies in intervallic tuning should be visited frequently. Once these and other tools are given to a student to improve then a confident timpani performer will be ready for your ensemble. •

Steve Hemphill has been Professor of Percussion and Director of Percussion Studies at Northern Arizona University since 1991, and former Coordinator of Winds and Percussion. He earned the Bachelor of Music and the Master of Music degrees from the Eastman School of Music and the Doctor of Music degree from Florida State University, where he was a University Teaching Fellow. Hemphill has taught at the State University of New York at Geneseo, the University of Rochester (New York), the University of Wyoming (serving as Assistant Director of Bands and percussion instructor), and at Florida State University (as Visiting Professor).

Currently, he performs as principal timpanist with the Flagstaff Symphony Orchestra and as principal percussionist with the "Music in the Mountains" Music Festival in Durango/Purgatory, Colorado, is a member of the Vic Firth Education Team, and endorses Sabian cymbals.

Timpani Tuning: Melodies for Interval Association

ASCENDING

- minor 2nd: *Jaws; Ode to Joy* (Beethoven's 9th Symphony); *White Christmas*; chromatic scale
- Major 2nd: *Do-Re-Mi; Country Roads; Can-Can; Silent Night; London Bridge; Happy Birthday*; major scale
- minor 3rd: *Brahms' Lullaby; Edelweiss; What Child Is This (Greensleeves); Georgia*
- Major 3rd: *Marines' Hymn; When the Saints Go Marching In; Gonna Fly Now (Rocky)*; major triad
- Perfect 4th: *Here Comes The Bride; There's No Business Like Show Business...; Reveille; Taps; Mexican Hat Dance; Oh Taunnumbaum; The Farmer in the Dell; Jeopardy Theme*
- Tritone: *Maria* (West Side Story); *The Simpson's Theme*
- Perfect 5th: *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star; 2001 Space Odyssey; Star Wars Theme*
- minor 6th: *Theme from Love Story; The Entertainer* (notes 3-4)
- Major 6th: *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean; NBC; It Came Upon A Midnight Clear*
- minor 7th: *There's A Place For Us* (West Side Story); *Have You Driven a Ford, Lately?* (TV Commercial);
- Major 7th: *Bali-Hai* (from *South Pacific*; musical, notes 2-3); *Star Trek TV Theme*
- Octave: *Somewhere Over The Rainbow; When You Wish Upon A Star; The Weather Outside Is Frightful* (Let It Snow...); *Take Me Out To The Ball Game*

DESCENDING

- minor 2nd: *Joy To The World; Habenera* (opera *Carmen*); *God Bless America; Für Elise*; chromatic scale
- Major 2nd: *Mary Had A Little Lamb; Three Blind Mice; Mambo* (Westside Story); *Yesterday*
- minor 3rd: *The Star Spangled Banner; "bridge" section from Over The Rainbow; Hey Jude; This Old Man; America the Beautiful*
- Major 3rd: *Swing Low-Sweet Chariot; Beethoven's 5th Symphony* (Opening); *Sentimental Journey; Summer Time; cuckoo clock*
- Perfect 4th: *I've Been Working On The Railroad; Old Mac Donald; Born Free; Oh My Darling; O, Come All Ye Faithful*
- Tritone: *European Siren*
- Perfect 5th: *Feelings; Flintstones* (TV cartoon theme)
- minor 6th: *Theme from Love Story*
- Major 6th: *Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen; Over There; Music of the Night* (Phantom of the Opera)
- minor 7th: *Opening theme from An American in Paris* (George Gershwin); *Hurray For Hollywood*
- Major 7th: *I Love You* (Cole Porter)
- Octave: *Scherzo from Beethoven's 9th Symphony* (or simply invert an ascending octave)

Improve the list with selected melodies that are familiar, specifically, to you. Melodies will only help if you are very familiar with them.

4 Timpani

F
D
A
G

Timpani Worksheet

Developing Fundamental Technique

(Work with a metronome often)

Steve Hemphill

Start: ♩ = 90

STROKES: Relax; Lift; Maintain Evenness with Equal Stick Heights

1

8x R R R R 8x L L L L 8x 8x

MOVING around the drums: consistently play in exact spot on each drum - smooth and even torso rotation (slight)

2

8x R L R L R L R L 8x 3 3

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L

MUFFLING: spread middle-ring-little fingers - place lightly in exact playing spot
(simultaneously muffle most recent quarter-note upon new quarter-note attack)

3

4x R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L

ROLL DEVELOPMENT: full lifting strokes

4

4x R L R L R L R L L R L R L R L L R 6 6 L

4x R

L

STACCATO STROKES: quicken stroke lift with slight pinch between thumb/forefinger

5

4x Relaxed Legato... Quick-stroke Staccato...

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L L R L R